

Was Paul wrong?

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Date: 20 June 2010

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[0 : 00] Well, my theme this evening is a rather strange one. It's a question, and here's the question. Did Paul get it wrong?

I'd like you, if you will, to turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 2 again, and I'm going to read those words that were read right at the beginning of our service. They're marvellous words, often I think misquoted and not finished.

That is verse 9 and 10, not just verse 9 alone. 1 Corinthians 10 chapter 2, verse 9 and 10.

And my theme, did Paul get it wrong? Verse 9, however, as it is written, no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him, but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

And the great question, my friends, this evening is, what in the first instance is the us? Who is Paul referring to? Did Paul get it wrong?

[1 : 11] Well, what a question. There are a lot of people out there now, in our world, across the spectrum, who would answer quite firmly and quite frankly, yes, he did. Especially in matters of men and women, marriage and sex and so on.

Did Paul get it wrong? Yes, he did, they would say. Let me tell you of one such person who talked like that, since I happened to read something of his biography just last week.

His name was Edward Carpenter. He was the Dean of Westminster Abbey, where the monarchs, of course, are crowned.

And I think he was the Dean there in the late 70s and early 80s. It's a very prestigious job in the Church of England to be a Dean of Westminster.

You can do what you like. You're responsible to the Queen only. It's called a royal peculiar, and in some ways it is very peculiar. Edward Carpenter was a very likable figure, apparently.

[2 : 13] He was very learned. He was perhaps a little eccentric, and certainly very vague. Long before the modern football craze, he had a football put on his coat of arms.

He looked a most un-soccer-like character, I may say, as you saw him riding his bike around London. On Sundays, he would find on Sunday morning that he was booked to preach in two different places, couldn't make up his mind which to go to, and would always arrive late.

He was not an Orthodox Christian believer, as far as I could see. He'd been a member of the modern churchman's union in the early 20th century, and people who belonged there were sceptical about most of the Bible and most of the Christian creeds.

His wife, we're told, was a member of the Baha'i faith, and she greatly influenced her husband.

Dean Carpenter was fond of inviting Commonwealth leaders to the Abbey at their services, and then inviting them to preach about their different religious faiths.

As far as I could see, there was only one upset in the household when the Dalai Lama came to stay at the Dean Way. He caused consternation in that very vegetarian household by demanding for his breakfast bacon and sausage and all the trimmings, what the cafes call the English breakfast, but I gather you eat it here as well.

[3 : 42] Now why do I mention Dean Edward Carpenter? Well, just because when he got up in Westminster Abbey to read a New Testament lesson, and that lesson was a letter from the Apostle Paul, he would conclude his reading, not as sometimes we do, this is the word of the Lord, but with the rather disconcerting comment, St. Paul, of course, got it wrong.

Now, Edward Carpenter was not alone in his generation in thinking that. In the early 20th century, indeed from the late 19th century, there have been famous theological professors who hold that Jesus preached a very simple message, Paul complicated it, and spoiled it.

And a lot of people think that today. It's filtered down. Filtered down to the man in the street. I don't know why we always call him the man in the street. Why not the woman? All right then, filtered down to the woman in the bus and the teenager in the sixth form.

But even more strange, it seems to me, is that some members of Paul's own church in the first century, or rather one of his churches that he planted, thought the same.

Some of the members of the church in Corinth also said, Paul has got it all wrong. I've been studying the letter to the Corinthians, the first letter.

[5 : 11] There are several, as a matter of fact. We've lost some. I've been studying them, and that church certainly was in a mess. In belief, they were in a mess.

They had doubts about the cross and the resurrection. There can't be much of a Christian church with those doubts. They were in a mess in their behavior. There was scandalous sexual immorality in the church, and apparently nobody worried about it.

And there was lots of pride, and a good deal of prejudice amongst a small group at any rate, we don't know how large, against their apostle who had planted the church in the first place. If you turn one page over in your Bible, and I guess it'll be the same with the ESV as it is in my NIV, you'll see in verse 10 some mention of one man at least, who felt Paul had got it wrong.

Paul is always tactful in his letters. He never names people by name, but there's certainly somebody here who is intended to be understood by the reader, the first reader. By the grace of God, sorry, by the grace God has given me, that's Paul, I laid a foundation as an expert builder. And someone else is building on it. Verse 11, no one can lay any other foundation. Verse 12, if anyone builds on this foundation, and then he says different things from the gold with which it started, then that's a bad building.

[6 : 40] So someone is building on the foundation that Paul has laid, but doing it in a way which Paul does not approve. And if you look across to chapter 4, verse 14, there's an almost rather pathetic statement, I think.

Verse 14 of chapter 4, I'm not writing this to shame you, but to warn you as my dear children. He still loves them, even if they don't love him. Even though you have 10,000 guardians in Christ, even though you listen to everybody else, you do not have many fathers.

For in Christ Jesus, I became your father through the gospel. Well, that's a serious matter. Here's a church in the first century, founded by Paul, got itself far away in belief and behavior within about four or five years to the grief of the apostle, and he's not going to let go.

He's very determined. And in chapter 4, verse 19, you'll see what he has to say, which must have made them sit up and realize that they've got to change their ways. Verse 18, chapter 4, some of you become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you, but I will come very soon, if the Lord is willing. And then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?

[8 : 02] That's serious talk, isn't it? Well, yes, my friends, it is a very serious matter if Paul got it wrong, because 13 of the 21 letters of the New Testament were written by Paul.

And therefore, if he got it wrong, half the letters of the New Testament and more are wrong, and you better not read them and you better not obey them. So why are we Christian believers?

Why am I? Why are you? So sure that Paul got it right. Well, in a sentence, this is the answer.

Because we know that the Holy Spirit at work in Paul, the third person of the Blessed Trinity, was Paul's teacher.

That's the reason. No man taught him. He tells us that in one of his letters. No other apostles taught him, though they also were taught by the Spirit.

And of course, he was not taught like the other apostles by the Lord Jesus and his earthly ministry. So how was he taught? Who was his tutor? Well, the answer is the Spirit of God.

[9 : 12] And you'll see that he's mentioned five times in this chapter. So back then to chapter 2, verse 10, God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things.

Verse 11, at the end, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Verse 12, the Spirit from God.

Verse 13, words taught by the Spirit. Verse 14, the man without the Spirit. And so on. Very remarkable. Emphasis, underlining.

Who is responsible then for teaching the apostle? Answer, the third person of the Blessed Trinity, God the Holy Spirit. God taught him. Now, for a moment, I want you to put Paul out of your mind

and I want you to forget the work of the Holy Spirit.

I want to back off a bit. And I want to ask this question, how do we learn new things today? How are mysterious problems solved and worked out today?

[10:16] For example, in science, where there must be lots of problems still to be solved, medicine, the same history. So in my mind, I'm imagining a great medical breakthrough.

I'm imagining that someone has made a cure for a horrible disease that is widespread in different parts of the world. This wonderful new cure is the discovery of a very brilliant scientific doctor. I'm going to call him Professor Egghead because that is what the TV calls him, isn't it? Right. How does this professor then, this brilliant man, discover the cure that nobody else has been able to discover?

I take it, inevitably, there will be four stages. Try to follow me closely on these four because they really are quite important. First, a brilliant doctor would engage in research.

He would go to the libraries and the dusty books. He'd go to the laboratories. He'd go to the anatomy room, I take it. He would start a worldwide correspondence.

[11:27] He would communicate with medical leaders and scientists throughout the world. He would look at endless medical records, tucked away, going back years, and so on.

In other words, he would become, say for a year or two, a researcher, searching out the answer to this problem. The second stage in discovery would be that at last he would come to comprehend, to know, and to understand the answer.

His researches would yield a wonderful result. and one morning, perhaps in a laboratory, perhaps in a dusty library, he would suddenly say to himself, Eureka, I found it.

I've solved the problem. It's a mystery no longer. And what an exciting day that would be. He'd get out his black brick and he'd phone his wife from some remote place in the world where he's working and he'd say to her, Darling, I've got it at last.

I'm coming home. I found the clue and I found it in the accident and emergency place in Timbuktu General Hospital or somewhere like that.

[12:35] All right? So here are the first two stages in discovering this marvelous answer. First, he turns away from us and does research. Finally, he understands where that leads him and discovers the answer.

What is the third stage? Well, our brilliant doctor, of course, will now reveal his findings and his discovery to the whole world. He will tell people of his breakthrough.

He will write learned papers in the Lancet. He will publish documents worldwide for other doctors and professors and scientists to read. And even the local papers will get a whiff of it and there'll be a headline on your morning paper, perhaps on at the weekend.

Marvelous medical discovery. Hope for thousands. Doctor defeats disease. And in one of the more rag-like papers, just Doctor Miracle!

Exclamation mark. He will research until he understands. Then he will turn to the world that is waiting and release his findings and publish them widely.

[13:47] And fourthly, yes, there's one more stage. Our brilliant doctor will be called to teach what he now knows. He will teach by lectures and seminars and tutorials.

Everyone is eager to learn from the professors down to the students. And they need to hear it from his lips. And they want him to give exact information.

Have they really understood him? What does he really mean? Let him tell them exactly what this cure is. Well now, I hope you're clear. Four important stages are involved.

We were beginning to sort these stages out in my workshop which we had in this corner during the conference for young ministers last week. And we got some distance, I think, in sorting out these four stages.

Now, then we'll go back to our Bibles. and we'll find that these four stages are carried through by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God. First then, the Holy Spirit searches, he does research.

[14:54] And you'll find that in verse 10b. I always am moved when I read this sentence. Chapter 2, verse 10b. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.

That is things that are entirely beyond the human mind, immeasurably beyond the human mind, that we couldn't even begin to grasp or question about. These deep things of God are searched out by the Spirit of God.

What's the second stage? The Spirit who searches them then comes to understand and comprehend and know what he has discovered in the deep things of God. And you'll find that in verse 11.

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? I don't know what you're thinking at the moment and you don't know what I'm thinking as I go home tonight. We have our own thoughts, our own knowledge, which we keep secretly to ourselves at times.

So in the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. So the Spirit does this marvellous search into the deep things of Almighty God and now he understands and knows the very thoughts of God.

[16:17] Isn't that marvellous? You will have heard many, many times these words, As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts are near your thoughts.

But to the Holy Spirit they're all open. What is the third stage? The Spirit has searched, the Spirit understands, well now of course the Spirit must reveal and publish this truth to the world that is eager to know about the things of God and this is in verse 9 and 10 that we read and I'm going to read it again.

What no eye has seen, nobody has ever seen, seen or researched this amazing knowledge, what no eye has seen or no ear has heard, what no human mind has even conceived as possible, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us by his Spirit.

Who is the us? Well of course in the first place the us is the same as the we throughout the passage. That is the apostle and his fellow apostles. You'll notice it's all in the plural right the way through from verse 6 to 16.

And he says that very openly in some of his letters. Let me read you, no need to turn to it but you can if you want of course, Ephesians 3 verses 2 and 5. And listen if you will very carefully to what he says here about the privilege that was his and is not ours.

[17:53] verse 2 of Ephesians 3. Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you.

That is the mystery made known to me by revelation as I've already written briefly. In reading this then you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles sorry I'm catching the summer cough that's everywhere.

I'll read verse 5 again. Which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. So the us in verse 10 in the first place of course we benefit from it in the end but the us in verse 10 is the same as the we in verse 6 the we in verse 7 the we in verse 12 the we in verse 13 and the we in verse 16.

It is the apostles. Those specially chosen men. And that's why Paul can say so boldly in verse 6 we do however speak a message of wisdom among the material that is amongst the Christians who have grown up but not the wisdom of this age not the philosophy of this age or the rulers of this age who are coming to nothing.

No, we speak of God's secret wisdom. Something that is that was hidden down the ages God has now revealed but revealed it to a special group of people the apostles and prophets of whom of course Paul is a major figure.

[19:42] Without that knowledge without that revelation without God publishing to the world the truth no one would ever know. And there's something very sad and pathetic about verse 8 isn't there?

None of the rulers of this age understood it. If they had they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. Of course not. Just imagine if the Jews of that day had known whom Jesus was indeed if the Jew of today know whose Jesus is if the Roman governor had known that as he sentenced Jesus he himself would stand before Jesus on the last day if they had any idea of that would they have crucified the Lord of glory?

Of course not. They were so ignorant and maybe that's why the Lord prayed for them on the cross Father forgive them for they know not what they do.

So the Spirit of God searches the deep things of God. He then comprehends them. He knows the heart of God. He knows the things of God. He knows the deepest and secret truths of God.

And then he reveals and publishes them to the world by revealing them to this apostolic band. But my friends there is still one very important stage we mustn't forget and leave out.

[21 : 06] What is revealed must now be taught to the listeners who are eager to learn. So let's read verses 12 and 13 which are very exciting verses really.

We have not received the Spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we that is the apostolic band and especially himself this is what we speak not in words taught by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit expressing spiritual truth and then there's a difference of translation either expressing spiritual truth in spiritual words or to spiritual people.

And if you're a skilled Greek scholar you must make up your own mind as to what that is. I think I prefer expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

But it may be the other as well. Here writes John Stott in his little book Calling Christian Leaders Here is an unambiguous claim on the part of the Apostle for verbal inspiration.

The inspiration of God the working of God not only in the thoughts of the Apostles but the expression of those thoughts in actual words. Because you can't make sense to people unless you choose the right exact accurate words.

[22 : 45] Paul dares to say here in the most astonishing language that he did not get it wrong. But that he and his fellow apostles spoke not in words taught by human wisdom not by anybody else certainly not by philosophy Paul wanted to keep philosophy out of the pulpit but in words taught by God's Spirit which is why of course we pay such very close attention to them.

We can trust him. He doesn't get things wrong. He's been taught by God and then he teaches us. I'm very fond of the summary statement in verse 16.

I'm going to read it to you. I think it's worthwhile actually looking up the reference because when Paul makes the quotation I always look up the Old Testament. It usually fills it out in an illuminating way.

Let me read it in verse 16 first and then we'll look it up in Isaiah 40. For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct the Lord? But we have the mind of the Lord.

We have the mind of Christ. You see the contrast? Who has known the mind of the Lord? Well the answer to that is nobody. But we, we apostles, have the mind of Christ.

[24 : 03] We have the mind of the Lord. I'll just turn back for a moment if you will, if you're still with me, to Acts 40 where there's one of the grandest passages I think in the whole of Isaiah and that's saying something where God asks these marvelous questions which of course have no answer.

I'll start at verse 12 but really the ones that matter are verse 13 and 14. Verse 12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?

All the oceans in the hollow of God's hand. or with the breath of his hand marked off the heavens with a stroke made the wonderful glory of the heavens above us?

Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket or weighed the mountains like Everest on the scales or the hills in a balance? Isn't that a wonderful picture? All the hills of the world in a scale measured by God.

Verse 12 verse 13 I love this verse Who has understood the mind of the Lord or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him and who taught him the right way?

[25 : 22] Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? Did God call in a consultant? Did God have a tutor?

Was there someone who knew more than God who imparted this knowledge to God? These are absurd questions aren't they? It's the kind of thing that Richard Dawkins deals with. It's just foolishness. Whom did the Lord consult?

Who has understood the mind of the Lord? Let's go back to 1 Corinthians and look again at that remarkable conjunction sentences.

Who has known the mind of the Lord to teach him? Well of course there's no man on earth who's known the mind of the Lord and yet boldly Paul can see dogmatically that we because of what the Holy Spirit has done for us we have the mind of the Lord.

This then is the source of the church's proclamation. That's what we from the pulpits of the church have to pass on. In a derivative sense we Christians can say we begin to know the mind of the Christ but it's through the apostles.

[26 : 35] Unfortunately when you go over the chapter of vision and I expect it's open in front of you you find a great disappointment. Knowing the mind of Christ with all this knowledge of God to pass on Paul has to say to the Corinthians my dear brothers I couldn't address you as spiritual people but

really you're just like men and women of the world mere babies in Christ.

Isn't that a disappointing word? And all the way through this first letter to Corinth Paul talks of their babyishness how they haven't grown up how they're childish.

He calls on them again and again to put away childish things. Well that's sad enough when there are churches everywhere and you know there are churches everywhere I'm sure there are in Glasgow as there are in London where people have grown up where the people in the pew are still babyish.

Their understanding is limited. They have not drunk at the deep wells of scripture. They have not listened to the apostles. That's very sad. But what's a greater tragedy is when the churches and denominations of our country cease humbly to sit at the apostles' feet themselves in order to be able to teach the unsearchable riches of Christ.

When the churches and the Church of England is certainly guilty of this as a denomination today as is the Church of Scotland as you know, when the churches, when the older denominations begin to say at their great assemblies, Paul got it wrong, then we know that light is being turned into darkness and that God's judgment is hovering on the edge of our church and society.

[28 : 16] However, cheer up. Look at verse 16. Again, the mind of the Lord is closed to mankind. It is open to us for our delight and for our learning that we may grow up to be mature Christians.

Yes, by God's grace, we may learn from Paul. Paul got it right. Let's pray. We bless and thank you, our Heavenly Father, that by the power and working of your Holy Spirit, the truth is made known to the apostles and prophets.

We thank you that now we have this open book. We thank you that these great spiritual truths are made known to us by words taught by the Holy Spirit.

We ask that you will make us all eager students of those words, that we may understand their thoughts and come to a deeper knowledge of you yourself, our Heavenly Father.

We think of those people we prayed for already today. We pray that they may spread this light in the darkness of the city and that some may receive that light and that truth and pass it on to others.

[29 : 40] We ask all those things that Christ our Lord may be glorified. Amen.