

# Imperfect Church - Perfect Saviour (5): Intellectual Humility

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good evening to everybody. Welcome again to our service. Welcome again if you're online or dialing in. And I see one or two faces that I don't know so well, so it's good to have you as well. And as I've said before I started to pray, if you keep your Bible open at what we read in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and chapter 2, and the particular bits, that I want to look at is chapter 2 from verses 1 to 6. But first, and I do like to do this, but first a bit of context. And I know we've been working through these passages in previous weeks, but I think a bit of context is useful here because we've kind of alluded to it, talked about it, but not really specifically dealt with some of the things that I think are particularly relevant here and what I want to say later. Corinth itself, it was an important place. It was a Greek city.

It was a very large city. It was a port city. It was also a military base for the Roman Empire at the time. And all those things put together brought a lot of things. With trade, there's clearly prosperity. prosperity. But often, as you see, with prosperity comes an influx of people, be them wealthy or poor, looking for work or looking for an opportunity. And the end result of that was it was a really diverse, diverse, it was an eclectic mix of people with different nationalities, different religions, people of no religion at all.

It had many different cultural practices and customs. And we will come back to it in detail later on. But there's a particularly strong influence drawing on Greek philosophy that influenced the way that the people thought and their attitudes towards their spiritual life, towards their own bodies. And you only have to read 1 Corinthians to know what I mean by that. But also, their social context as well. And it's the environment that Paul established the church there.

[ 2 : 35 ] And if you want details of that, well, then go back. It's probably quite good if you have time tonight when you go home. Go back and read Acts chapter 18. And in many ways, it was quite a happy time for Paul because he stayed there, it tells us, for about 18 months. But as Colin and David before him have alluded, this is not a happy church in many ways.

This is not a church without its problems. I think Colin refers to it as an imperfect church, and that title fits it really very well. There were factions. There was sectarianism.

There was lawsuits. There was poor church practice, and I could go on and on. And as a result of that, there was constant dialogue between Paul and the church itself.

We have this letter, 1 Corinthians. And if you go to chapter 5, it refers to a previous letter, which we don't have. And at the very start of chapter 1, Paul lets the people know that he's had an update from the house of Chloe, expressing concerns about what was going into the church.

And the dialogue between them continues after that. There's clearly 2 Corinthians. There's references to visits that Paul has made. And in all of them, Paul has this continual problem of dealing with issues that the church was having.

[ 4 : 10 ] And Paul being Paul, he does it in all sorts of different ways. He shows his love. He gives his guidance. He rebukes. He uses some fairly blunt talk to get his message across.

And if I was to capture, maybe in a very simplistic way, the underlying issue that the church was having was that these strong cultural influences from the city in which they lived, that they had got into the church and they were doing damage.

And in previous weeks, we've touched on that and we've looked at the contrast between a Christian view of the world and compared that in some ways with the cultural norms and the outlooks of the people in that society and some of the people in that church.

And that takes me to where I want to look at tonight, which is how the Bible should be taught in that particular situation and what drives a response to it. And if you, and read with me or follow with me the first verse of chapter 2 where it says, And when I came to you, brothers, and I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech and wisdom. And which I have to be honest, it really doesn't strike me as the first comment that makes a good impression.

[ 5 : 50 ] Because it's kind of like saying I've made a conscious decision not to be remotely interesting in what I say and not to share anything helpful as I'm saying it.

And dare I say when I really got into this and was doing my studying over the last couple of weeks, there was a laugh out loud moment for me when we're speaking about lack of wisdom and lack of fine speech that I was deemed to be the person who was most suitable to talk about it.

But anyway, but before I look at it, the first thing I think you need to do is understand what Paul is referring to by excellence of speech and wisdom.

And to do that, I want to give you a very brief and extremely high-level overview of Greek philosophy and political thought and the way that filtered down into society and even into the church.

And to do that, I do speak with some authority because I've got a degree in this stuff. And to do that, I had to dust down my university days. I had to revise some of my learnings from that time.

[ 7 : 06 ] I even got some of my old textbooks from back in the day. And there was many, many hours spent looking at this stuff over several years.

And when I do stuff like this, I really fear that I've got maybe a minute or two to talk about this and I've got to come up with some general things that I'm sure people can pick holes in if they really want to.

But please don't do that. Because when you try and describe Greek philosophical thought, it was not made up of a whole bunch of people who agreed on everything.

It's not made up of a bunch of people who had a common view and perspective. It had many strands. It had many flavors. Often opposed to each other. And often looking to catch each other out.

But I think it's safe enough to come up with one or two general themes. We start with ancient Greek philosophy. And while, as I say, this is very general, one of the things that they did was that there was a move away or a rejection from the acceptance of Greek mythology as fact.

[ 8 : 23 ] And they moved towards other things. They used reason. They used analysis. It had elements of science. It used debate. It used discourse. And it dipped into things like mathematics, cosmology.

To give it a modern term, it was big into its sociology. And there's many other things that it looked at. And in some of that, you got some good stuff that came out of that.

There's hardly a day goes by in our house at the minute where Pythagoras theorem doesn't come out of the equation. And some of you will use it for your school. Some of you will use it in your work. At the moment, I'm using it to work out how big a piece of wood I need for my slanted roof and my new shed that I want to build. So there was good stuff that came out of it. But there was also a lot of bad stuff.

And to use the political word of the month, there's quite a lot of it which is just plain weird. But one of the features of that ancient Greek philosophy was it encouraged a study.

[ 9 : 28 ] It encouraged a debate. It encouraged a questioning. But the other thing was that it was really restricted to the intellectual elite. Roll on a couple of hundred years, and you get to the classical phase of Greek philosophy and all the people that you'll know about.

Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, people like that. And various other movements whose words and thoughts have crept into our language like cynicism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and all this sort of stuff.

I'm not going to go into them. I'm not going to give you a lesson in what they believed. But one of the things that came out of that classical phase was it took all this intellectual thought, it took it out of the intellectual elite and put it into the lives of everyday people.

And often in a way that was accompanied by underlying assumptions. Socrates, for example, he's really hard to pin down. It's not easy to say what Socrates believed because he was just there to dialogue and debate and catch people out all the time.

But I think you could say that with him, he attributed people's bad choices to ignorance and maybe lack of education rather than sinfulness.

[10:49] We had Plato, for example, who argued that justice was only possible under a philosopher king and where everybody was working towards a common good.

But one of the things that came out of that was the style of development attributed to Socrates. And in very simple terms, a topic came up. And those beliefs and views were tested by the listener, by debate and by dialogue, by question and answer, and with the general intention of getting to the truth.

And there was consequences of this. As I said, it crept from the intellectual elite into the ordinary person's lives. And some of the consequences of this were there was a tendency to not really believe anything at all because what you're trying to do was catch out the other person by proving that you were cleverer than them.

There was, to be good at it, you had to be very nimble, both verbally and intellectually. So to win, you had to be seriously impressive because there were some serious people that you were up against.

The other thing about it was, and probably more relevant today than those things, was that it was all about power and influence because those who were good at this in this society became powerful.

[12:17] So the skill, it was sought after, it was valued and sometimes feared. And sometimes that power, or often that power, was horribly abused by people who had it and used in the most wicked of ways.

And I'm not going to go into it tonight, but maybe when you go home, after you've finished Acts verse 18, read about why Socrates was executed and you'll understand about the abuse of power in those situations.

It was also very competitive. It was a battle. And I think that the best comparison I could come up with is like Prime Minister's Question Time where the leader of the opposition, they ask questions. And the reason for doing it is to expose or trip up the Prime Minister without offering any alternative themselves. And because it's competitive in this way, there's a desire to win.

There's the desire to be the preeminent, the main man or woman. And as a result of that, it's very divisive because someone wins. Someone loses.

[13:26] Someone's good at it. Someone's bad at it. So it's divisive. And remember those things. It's about being intellectually nimble.

It's about power. It's about winning. And the reason for talking all of that through because I've labored it a bit is just to highlight the type of environment that Paul was in and that this Corinthian church was in.

And this sort of thing was common and it was clearly in the church and influencing it this type of attitude. And it was creating an expectation of how the church should be and how the teaching of the Bible should be done.

And I'm sure you've all seen where I'm going with this because it was precisely this type of fancy talk and wisdom that Paul was referring to when he mentioned it in verse 1.

So really, the next thing I want to do is well, what did Paul do about this? Well, I think before I come to that in the work of the church, we should never change our message but we adapt the way that we deliver it to suit the circumstances that we're in.

[14:42] And there's a valid way that that's done. So for example, we're big at the moment in terms of the rural church but the way the rural church works is very different from the way an urban church works.

Even a church that's predominantly full of students is very different from a church in the suburbs. It's probably not. And I was reading last week about the church in Mongolia and it's entirely different from the church in Scotland.

So we do adapt our message undoubtedly. And I think if you were writing a job description for Paul, the way that you would write it would probably be along the following lines to fit in with the community in which he was living and working in.

We were looking for somebody who had experience of working in the inner city. We were looking for somebody who had the ability to engage with these cultural traditions and philosophical and political thought.

Somebody who could mix it with them. Somebody who could debate them at their own game and take them on at their own level. You would have wanted somebody who had the ability to mix it with authorities, stand up for himself and do it.

[16:06] We wanted somebody who was fearless and take anything on. And we wanted somebody who could work in difficult situations because this was a broken church.

So you need somebody who got on with people, who could get alongside them, but somebody who could be tough enough to deal with all these situations.

And when you look at Paul, he pretty much ticked all these boxes. And he was probably head and shoulders above anyone else. But what I'm highlighting here is that there's a tendency to promote the message in the way that the environment expects it to be done.

So they were expecting, this church was expecting Paul to be a debater, a dialoguer, a philosopher. And Paul didn't do any of that.

But what Paul did in many ways was the exact opposite of that. he admitted he was scared.

[17:18] Don't ever associate Paul with being scared. But he admitted he was scared. He admitted he was weak. And remember, if you go back to Acts chapter 18 tonight, we'll look back a couple of chapters to Acts 16, where we find he had been stuck in prison in Philippi and he had been treated very badly there.

And he had moved on from place to place, not stayed very long. got into arguments and debates wherever he went. And here he was in this big city, all alone.

And he admitted he was scared. He also made a conscious decision not to engage in the style of discourse or expounding any personal wisdom that he had.

in short. That seemed very strange because in that society, that ability, as I said earlier, was a real source of power.

It would have been the thing that many in the church would have said, or I assume many in the church were saying, that would have given him an edge or an advantage or give success to his work of evangelizing and teaching and building up that church in Corinth.

[18:34] But what that passage tells us is that using this worldly wisdom and fancy chat is nothing more than a fool's errand.

It's, at best, it's a waste of time. At worst, it's totally destructive. And look at the big picture and you understand why. This tradition of Greek philosophy had been going on for about 600 years by this stage.

the best minds of that culture and of that society had been working all that time to make sense of life and to develop solutions to all the problems that they had.

And what had they achieved? Absolutely nothing. Socrates, probably the best known of them all, we use his method in so many different ways.

But the one thing that he's quoted as saying that the only thing he was aware of was his own ignorance. Plato, in his Republic, and I've read it and I don't recommend it, has a goal with describing the perfect society which delivered perfect justice but at the same time recognizes that his perfect society is likely impossible to achieve.

[19:52] and even worse, the application of this worldly wisdom rather than enhance the understanding can even blur it a little bit.

And turn with me very quickly to Acts chapter 16 and verse 18. And this is somewhere between the weird and the bizarre. But anyway, sorry, that's not the right...

Sorry, it's chapter 17 and verse 18. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with them.

That's Paul. And some said, what does this blabber wish to say? That's what their best wisdom delivered because this is bizarre.

Epicureans, pleasure seekers, sorry, I'm generalizing vastly there. Pleasure seekers, Stoics, stiff upper lip in the same conversation with Paul and both of them saying, what does this blabber wish to say?

[21:07] Because that is what wisdom does. It blocks the message of God if you apply your own wisdom. And you could see how that sort of culture and that sort of thought was impacting the church and how it had got in amongst them and it was doing damage because it was divided.

It was full of self-interest. There was an underlying desire to have their way because they were right and have their own needs met even at the expense of others.

There was a lack of self-control. Self-control wasn't viewed as a virtue by some in that church. Immorality was strong and relationships both within the church and marriage were being destroyed as a result of the application of this worldly wisdom and fancy chat.

So what did Paul do? He saw it for what it was and he rejected it altogether. And whoever is talking about the next passage from verse 7 onwards will go into this in more detail.

But Paul, he didn't reject wisdom. He didn't reject good sermon preparation. He didn't reject a clear exposition of the Bible and all that it says.

[ 22 : 32 ] But what he did reject was anything that comes from worldly wisdom because of all the damage that it's done. And the lesson for us here is that to evangelize and teach well, we take everything out that comes from ourself.

We have nothing to add. We do nothing other than teach that Christ died for our sins to satisfy the wrath of God against our sins.

We do nothing else other than say that this is the only way that God's wrath can be satisfied. Paul realized, and we should realize as well, that we must understand that the gospel of Christ crucified, it's just too profound.

It's too deep for any amount of worldly wisdom to be used from this pulpit or anywhere else to persuade men and women to give their lives to God and express that in a slightly different way.

It's too profound and it's too deep and it's too against the grain for any man or woman to use their own wisdom to think their way to God either. Because if we try to do that, we've already said, it just acts as a barrier, gets in the way.

[ 23 : 56 ] So what do we do? we reject all these things. We reject these things that feel strong and give us our advantage and embrace our weakness.

We put all our attempts to persuade aside and we leave it to the power of the Holy Spirit. We leave it to the Holy Spirit to work in people's lives.

We leave it to Him to let them see that they need to submit to God, recognizing that they have a total inability to contribute anything to their salvation.

We admit our weakness and that weakness is entirely consistent with the gospel message that we have. Our Lord, at least if you apply worldly logic, made Himself weak.

He took on a human form. He lived not in the fancy palaces but in the family of a poor man. He faced the rejection of His people and the utter humiliation of giving up His heavenly home and His seat beside His Father to live amongst us, to be beaten, to be mocked and ultimately to be placed on the cross for things that He had not done.

[ 25 : 21 ] But what that weakness shows us is an all-powerful God who could do all these things, who could become sin and death and yet defeat them all through His resurrection from the dead.

Only in weakness can this church or any church be strong. And to close, just as an aside, this approach was entirely right.

If you read Acts chapter 18 and you refer it and you compare it to Acts chapter 17, Acts chapter 16 and 17, the church went under the radar because Paul wasn't engaging in the way.

He wasn't engaging in this way and the church went under the radar and a hostile environment that could be very damaging to it because Paul did it a different way.

He did it in the right way. The church was left alone, relatively speaking, in comparison to others. It was allowed to grow. It was allowed to develop largely in peace. His message also emphasized that Christian life is one of weakness and service and that was the antidote to all the problems that this church had because a lot of these problems were about me first, about doing things that pleased you and getting the upper hand in those things and it was getting in the way.

[ 26 : 52 ] It was damaging the church and it was stunting the church and Paul's message of weakness was exactly what it needed to make it strong. But I want to end with a slightly negative point, a postscript, if you like, because not everybody in this church listened to the message that Paul has.

Turn with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 13 verses 2 and 3. I warned those who sinned before and all the others and I warn them now while absent as I did when present on my second visit that if I come again I will not spare them since you seek proof that Christ is speaking to me.

He is not weak in dealing with you but is powerful among you. And then look at verse 10 as well.

For this reason I write these things while I am away from you that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

And the reason for saying that some didn't listen to the message that weakness is strength. Some held on to their worldly wisdom and fancy talk and all the consequences of that.

And what was the impact of that? Well they couldn't see God and they couldn't see the strength of his work in that church. Effectiveness and I'll close with this effectiveness in our evangelism in our teaching in our witness has nothing to do with us.

[ 28 : 41 ] It's not about what we bring to the table and our witness and teaching will be at its most effective when we realize that and leave everything we bring to the table.

Leave it all behind. Leave it outside the door. Leave it wherever you want. Just leave it behind and throw ourselves on the power and the spirit of God who will bless and who will not let us down and who will deliver a perfect salvation that none of our wisdom can remotely bring.

Amen.