

Fragments on 1 Corinthians

Origen of Alexandria

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Translated by Steve Harris.

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Fragments 5 – 11

(Jenkins, p.234 ↓)

Fragment 5.

"I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you... for Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ be emptied." (1:14, 17)

It is greater to preach the gospel than to baptize. After Paul had recalled he set apart some for baptism, he gives thanks that he possesses a higher calling than to baptize. The Acts of the Apostles relates some of the apostles' deeds. There, Philip baptized and yet Philip did not minister the Spirit to those he baptized, but Peter laid hands on those baptized by him and the Spirit came on them. While Philip baptized in water those "reborn of water" and the Holy "Spirit" (John 3:5), Peter baptized them in the Spirit.

(Jenkins, p.235 ↓)

There is not so great a need for the word (λόγου) as there is for power (δυνάμεως). Therefore it is written, "The Lord gives a word (ῥῆμα) to those preaching the gospel in a great force (δυνάμει), the King of the forces of the beloved" (Ps. 68:12-13 LXX). "Therefore, Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in wisdom of words," not, that is, in an explanation of phrases (ἐν τρανώσει λέξεως). For if I did this, and I wanted to deliver the word in this way, the power of Christ would not descend to the soul of the hearers and I would empty out and wash clean the gift (χάρις) of his power.

Fragment 6.

"For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1:18)

The name of the cross is thought to be a stumbling block. But if someone opens his ears to the word of God and to grace, he will see that "this" too is "a great mystery" (Eph. 5:32). Even the

Gentiles hand on traditions that severe plagues or heavy rains or droughts often ceased when a person sacrificed himself for the sake of the community. Why, then, does it cause amazement that, when the whole world was suffering a plague of error, it was “necessary for one man to die” (John 18:14) for the sake of a plague of truth, in order to end this plague of ignorance, darkness, and destruction? But who could undergo this sacrifice? Not a prophet, not an apostle, not any other righteous person. It was necessary for a divine power to descend from heaven, a power capable of undertaking “to die on behalf of all” (2 Cor. 5:15) in a way that involved public shame, so that through that death a trophy of victory over the devil should arise. And in fact worldly victors who lead their enemies in triumphal procession (see Col. 2:14-18) are accustomed to set up trophies of victory over the defeated in the form of a cross. The cross, then, is a trophy of victory over Satan.

For this reason Paul says: “May I never boast of anything except the cross” (Gal. 6:14), since he recognizes what the power of the cross is—that I was set free from evil because he died in order to rescue me from death. “Except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). It is a great good that “the world has been crucified to me.” Through what has this good come to me? “Through the cross of Christ.” It is a great good for me that “I have been crucified to the world.” For if I have died to the world, I have been crucified with Christ “to the world.” But if I live in sin, I have not yet been deemed worthy of the good that follows upon the cross. At the same time let us also prepare ourselves against temptations and be ready for martyrdom, knowing that “whoever denies” (Matt. 10:33) does not possess salvation.

(Jenkins, p.236 ↓)

Fragment 7.

“For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the understanding of the understanding I will set aside. Where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Hasn’t God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world in its wisdom did not know God, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.’” (1:19-21)

It is not the same thing to be wise, and to be wise “in this age.” For without this addition, the true wisdom would be included as well. And so, understanding and foolishness would become the same thing. Foolishness is not the same as foolishness in this age. For whatever is without the addition of “in this age” is truly foolish. And we, therefore, who believe in the words of wisdom are commanded to become fools in this age. For we are thought by people to be fools, we who believe in Christ Jesus crucified, and believe in the resurrection of the dead, and believe that we will not only live now on the earth and then in heaven, but even that if we sin, we will be given over to eternal fire. Such is what we are deemed to be by those people.

Fragment 8.

“But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the nations foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God... For consider your calling, brothers, that not many of you are wise according to the flesh, not many of you are powerful, not many of you are noble. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the ignoble and the contemptible and the things that are not, in order to nullify the things that are, so that no flesh may boast before God. And of him we are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and justification, sanctification and redemption, so that just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” (1:23-31)

We received power from believing in Jesus Christ crucified. And insofar as we remain in this faith, to that degree we remain empowered (ἐν τῇ δυνάμει) to bear in ourselves those things which are from God. And if you wish to understand what it means when it says, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the understanding of the understanding I will set aside,” you will understand it to be totally apt for heretical words, for example, those of Marcion and Basilides, who seeking power for their heretical words are not in any way able to lend support to them.

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Then you will understand this saying, which is quite true: “He made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:6), since we also reveal all those things to be foolishness of which those who were deceived were persuaded. Therefore, their wisdom is destroyed, and not the wisdom of those who are wise: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Solomon. What they consider wisdom is destroyed, but not the true wisdom.

Now how should it be taken when it says, “In the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through its wisdom” (1:21)? “The wisdom of God” is in the law and the prophets. The world did not know the crucified Christ in the law and the prophets. For this reason, “At the culmination of the ages” he sent Jesus Christ to be crucified for those born of the human race, in order that those who believe may believe in the foolishness of what was preached, in Jesus Christ crucified.

To the words “not many of you were wise”, Paul adds, “according to the flesh”, since he knows that there are different sorts of wise people, and some are wise according to the flesh and some are wise according to the Spirit. The wise according to the flesh are those who are concerned with mere niceties of style and who can embellish anything at all to make it seem true, even though it is not. Nevertheless, even these words of Paul do not exclude the wise according to the flesh from the faith. For he did not say that ‘no’ person who is wise according to the flesh comes to the Word, but ‘very few.’ The “powerful according to the flesh” are those who have authority. But you will understand the meaning of “powerful according to the Spirit” if you observe how the Savior was not “powerful according to the flesh.” For he was handed over and “crucified in weakness” (2 Cor. 13:4). But he was powerful according to the Spirit,

“healing every disease and every infirmity among the people” (Matt. 4:23). In the same way consider the lives of the apostles, and see how they were powerful according to the Spirit. Anyone who lives by the Spirit and who “by the Spirit” puts to death “the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13) is also powerful according to the Spirit. The same interpretation applies to those of noble birth. “Those of noble birth, according to the flesh”, are those who come of wealthy and famous fathers. But those of noble birth according to the Spirit are “sons of God” (Rom 8:13), concerning whom it is written: “To those who received him, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12).

What things, then, did “God choose” (v. 27)? Not “what is foolish” without qualification but “what is foolish in the world.” We who believe are foolish in the sight of the world. They ridicule us as fools, saying: “The Christians believe that there is a resurrection of the dead and that we live after death and that Jesus whom the Jews crucified was born from a virgin,” and other such things. Let them ridicule us and call us fools. “But the natural person does not take in the things which are from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him” (1 Cor 2:14).

Therefore, “God chose the foolish things of the world, in order that he may shame the wise” (1:27)—not those who are wise full-stop, but those who are so in the world’s estimation. He says, “God choose the foolish things of the world, in order that he may shame the wise” of the world. For the wise of the world are truly shamed when they pray to idols, and “the unlettered and simple” (Acts 4:13) would die so as to not worship these idols.

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“And God chose the ignoble of the world, and the contemptible” (1:28a). Here again with the addition, “of the world.” For what is more noble than a soul abandoning the idols and saying, “Our fathers acquired idols in deception, and there is no salvation in them.” Therefore, “God choose the ignoble of the world” and the noble of God. Only let us keep on the path which leads to God, so we will not be dishonoured, concerning which it is written, “The one who acts wickedly is dishonoured before him” (Ps. 15:4).

“And the things that are not, in order to nullify the things that are” (1:28b). “The things that are not” he calls the foolish things of the world, the weak, the ignoble, the contemptible. “The things that are”—these are the noble things of the world. For they are in the world, but we are not, and so are subdued (καταπονούμενοι) and disdained (καταφρονούμενοι) by all. But now “God has chosen the things that are not, in order to nullify the things that are,” so that no flesh may boast and say, “I was chosen because I am noble.”

“And of him we are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and justification, sanctification and redemption” (1:30). For Christ is all these things to us, in order that what is written should hold: “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1:31). For if the one who boasts should boast in wisdom, and Christ is wisdom, then it is obvious that the one who boasts does boast in Christ. And so too with the others, with sanctification and justification.

Fragment 9.

“And my words and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power, in order that your faith may not be in human wisdom but in the power of God. But we do speak a wisdom to the mature, but a wisdom not of this world nor of the rulers of this world which is coming to nought. But we speak the hidden wisdom of God in a mystery, which God predestined before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” (2:4-7)

“Now, since he brought demonstrations of faith in power and in the Spirit, he has not brought any wisdom, but this is ‘the mystery of godliness’ (1 Tim. 3:16), only believing and not any promise of wisdom in it.” To avoid anyone saying this, Paul continues on and says, “But we do speak a wisdom to the mature, but a wisdom not of this world nor of the rulers of this world which is coming to nought” (2:6). For it is one thing to lead people to faith; it is another thing to reveal the wisdom of God. Therefore, we do not disclose the wisdom of God to those who are just being introduced, nor to those who are only beginning, nor to those who have not yet given evidence of a sound life. But when a person has “trained,” in the necessary way, “their faculties to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14)

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and becomes capable of hearing wisdom, then “we do speak a wisdom to the mature, but a wisdom,” I mean, “not of this world nor” alike to the wisdom “of the rulers of this world” (2:6-7). But now we have made clear that this knowledge which is brought before others is not of human origin in its principles (κατὰ τὴν ἀρχὴν), but of unseen powers which are coming to nought. I would want to say that creative wisdom is “of this age,” and so too rhetorical wisdom, and even the wisdom that is promised to speak of heaven and earth and the administration of the whole. Therefore if “we do speak a wisdom” and we speak it “to the mature,” we do not speak a wisdom “of this age.” For then it would be through creatures, or some such art.

“But we speak wisdom in a mystery,” which was not understood by “the rulers of this age” (2:7, 8), by those utilising “the wisdom of the wise” of this age (1 Cor. 1:19). In this way, they did not understand. They plotted against our Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ, and crucified him. For if they understood, they “would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (2:8). Therefore, wisdom is to be sought even in words, but with faith, and with the body (πολιτεία), just as it is written, “Let him who desires wisdom observe the commandments” (Sir. 1:26).

Fragment 10.

“But just as it is written, ‘What eye has not seen, and ear not heard, and what has not entered into the human heart—such has God prepared for those who love him. But God has revealed it to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches out all things, even the deep things of God. For

who knows the things of a person except the spirit of that person in them? So too no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.” (2:9-11)

Scripture conveys a difference between the one who loves God and the one who fears God. And it says that those who love are much superior to those who fear. God has, therefore, prepared something even for those who fear. Nevertheless, he has prepared, alongside what is prepared for those who fear, even greater things for those who love.

“For the Spirit searches out all things, even the deep things of God” (2:10). It is the Spirit who is able to search out all things. The human soul (ψυχή; cf. ψυχικός, ‘natural’) is not able to search out all things; rather, it is necessary for the Spirit to become stronger in us, in order that he, while “searching out all things” in us, “even the deep things of God” (2:10), may combine energies with us (ἀνακραθέντος τε ἡμῖν), and we may search out all things together with him, even the deep things of God.

Fragment 11.

“And we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, in order that we may know the things which God has given to us. We speak these things not in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught of the Spirit, interpreting spiritual realities to the spiritual. But the natural (ψυχικός) person does not take in the things which are from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he is not able to understand them, because they are spiritually examined. And the spiritual person examines everything, but is himself examined by no one.” (2:12-15)

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We may apprehend “the things which God has given to us” (2:12). For unless “the Spirit who is from God” teaches us within (διδάσκον ἡμᾶς ἐν ἡμῖν), we cannot say we know the things which God has given to us, for “no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God” (2:11).

“We speak these things,” he says, “not in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught of the Spirit,” etc. (2:13). All the wisdoms of this world (2:6) are words taught by men, the teachings of various rational systems (ἃ μανθάνει τις καθ’ ἕκαστον τῶν λογικῶν τεχνῶν). But Paul does not teach the things taught by the Spirit. One cannot say that the teacher teaches them, because he has been taught the substance of what he teaches by the Spirit. The Spirit that is in him shines upon him as he seeks and finds the truth, and thus “by the renewal of his mind” (Rom 12:2) he always discovers what he has not learned from human beings. For this reason the Saviour says, “Do not seek a teacher on earth; for you have one teacher, your Father who is in heaven, or again, you have one master, Christ” (cf. Matt 23:8-10). A human teacher suggests a few things, for example, when Paul teaches Timothy. And Timothy, taking this as his starting point, comes himself to the spring to which his teacher Paul had come, and he draws from it and becomes equal to Paul.

How is it that someone is taught by the Spirit, apprehending the apostolic words? For “he interprets spiritual realities to the spiritual” (2:13) through examining together with us the message which is in this message (τῷ συνεξετάζειν τήνδε τὴν λέξιν τῇδε τῇ λέξει), and bringing similar things together, so that the mind of the Scripture is even revealed. For in this way I perceive “the things of God” and come to be “taught of the Spirit” (2:11, 13). Not only by having learned “the things of the Spirit” which moved Isaiah (2:14), but also by bearing that same Spirit who closed and sealed up the words of Isaiah. For unless the Spirit opens up the words of the prophets, no one can open what is closed up.

And since Paul has said this, he necessarily adds that there are some people who do not receive “the things of the Spirit of God” (2:14), not because of the nature of the matter, as the heterodox imagine, but rather because they still need to be prepared. For “the natural person does not take in the things which are from the Spirit of God” (2:14), for he is natural. But when a person turns to godliness and receives the Spirit, he becomes spiritual.

The natural person “is not able to understand them, because they are spiritually examined” (2:14). For this reason, he does not know that what he hears is “spiritually examined,” and “God’s power, when put to the test, shames those without understanding” (Wis. 1:3), such as when someone is taught by the Spirit—taught, that is, by his power—and the hearer, putting his power to the test, considers it and does not find agreement with it,

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then “his power, when put to the test, shames those without understanding.” For it is not so much that the person rejects the word as that the word rejects him. For “wisdom will not enter a crafty soul, nor dwell in a body indebted to sin” (Wis. 1:4).

“And the spiritual person examines everything, but is himself examined by no one” (2:15). “He no longer walks according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:1), and ever growing in this pursuit and “rekindling the gift of God” more and more (2 Tim. 1:6), in himself he prepares to become spiritual. So he becomes able “to examine everything,” whether things Greek or barbarian, of the wise or the senseless. But he is himself incapable of being examined by anyone on account of the greatness of his understanding and arguments. If you should want to recognize the spiritual person, then “by their fruits you will recognize them” (Matt. 7:20). Now what are the fruits of the Spirit on the basis of which one ought to perceive who is spiritual? Hear the apostle speaking: “And the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). Where you find these, there is the Spirit, and there is the spiritual person (ὅπου ταῦτα, ἐκεῖ τὸ πνεῦμα, ἐκεῖνος πνευματικός). Yet where any of these is lacking, that person is not yet spiritual.