1 Corinthians Lesson 16

1 Corinthians 2:14-16

Introduction and Contextual Review

Verses 10 through 13 traced a single line from God to the hearer. God revealed the things of God to the Apostles by the Spirit, and the Apostles spoke those things in words taught by the Spirit. Verses 14 through 16 stand at the end of that line and take up the hearer. The same words reach two men. One does not accept them, and the other examines all things by them. The passage states the reason in each case, and it states it in its own terms.

> *But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:14-16)*

Three matters are settled from the text: what the natural man does with the things of the Spirit, why he cannot know them, and why the one who is spiritual examines all things.

Exposition

Verse 14: "But a Natural Man"

The word is ψυχικός psuchikos, built on ψυχή psuchē, soul or life. It modifies ἄνθρωπος anthrōpos without the article, so it describes a kind of man rather than pointing to a particular one. The word occurs six times in the New Testament, and the meaning is very clear.

In 15:44-46 the body that is sown is a "natural body," and the text ties the word to Adam: "The first man, Adam, became a living soul." The natural is what belongs to the life received from Adam.

Jude 18-19 supplies the only definition Scripture gives: "These are the ones who cause divisions, worldly-minded, devoid of the Spirit." "Worldly-minded" translates this same word, and the context explains it. The natural man is the man as he comes from Adam, without the Spirit. He is the unbeliever, one of "those who are perishing" (1:18).

James 3:14-16 uses the word of a wisdom rather than a man: "This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic." "Natural" is again the same word ψυχικός psuchikos. James is written to brethren, and the wisdom is marked by jealousy (ζῆλος zēlos), the word used of the Corinthians in 3:3.

The natural man, then, is the unbeliever. His kind of wisdom, however, can be taken up by believers, as 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 shows.

"Does Not Accept"

The verb is δέχομαι dechomai, in the present indicative with the simple negative. The first statement about the natural man is a statement of what he does. It reads "does not," not "cannot."

This is a different verb from the λαμβάνω lambanō of verse 12. δέχομαι dechomai is to welcome, as one welcomes a guest, and it is the standard verb for receiving the word. “You accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). “In humility receive the word implanted” (James 1:21). The same verb is used of those who perish, and there the refusal is stated as the cause: “because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved” (2 Thessalonians 2:10).

Acts 17:11-12 sets both verbs of verse 14, to welcome and to examine, in one sentence: “they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. Therefore, many of them believed.” The Bereans welcomed the word and examined the Scriptures, and their believing is recorded afterward.

“The Things of the Spirit of God”

The object the natural man does not welcome has been in view since verse 10, and the English translation obscures that. The NASB moves among “thoughts,” “things,” and “words.” The Greek does not.

Verse 11 reads “the things of the man” and “the things of God;” the NASB supplies “thoughts.” Verse 12 reads “the things freely given to us by God.” Verse 13 picks these up with a relative pronoun, “which things,” and then, “spiritual things”; the NASB supplies “spiritual thoughts.” Verse 14 returns to the construction of verse 11: “the things of the Spirit of God.” No Greek word for “thoughts” stands anywhere in verses 11 through 13.

Verse 14 carries forward what verses 10–13 have just shown: the Holy Spirit revealed the things and taught the words in which they are spoken.

The things are one body of content, named from several sides. It is the wisdom of God (2:7), the things God prepared (2:9), drawn from the depths of God that the Spirit searches (2:10), the things freely given (2:12), and now spoken in words taught by the Spirit (2:13). What the natural man does not welcome is therefore not an inner experience that he lacks. It is the Apostolic message, spoken to him in words. He has heard it, but he has not welcomed it; to him it is foolishness.

“For They Are Foolishness to Him”

The γάρ gar gives the ground of the first statement. He does not welcome the things because of how he rates them. The word is μωρία mōria, foolishness, which occurs five times in the New Testament and only in this letter (1:18, 21, 23; 2:14; 3:19).

“To him” indicates it is the natural man’s judgment: in his estimation. Foolishness is a verdict, and a verdict is returned on something heard. A man does not call a message foolish until he has grasped enough of it to rate it. The natural man has understood what is being claimed, and he has ruled on it. This is “Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness” (1:23).

Festus returned this verdict on Paul's message. He had followed the defense through the prophets and Moses, the suffering of the Christ, and the resurrection from the dead, and he answered, "Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad" (Acts 26:24). He did not say that he could not understand it. He said it was madness. The answer Paul gave was that these were "words of sober truth" (Acts 26:25).

The Old Testament records the same verdict and names its cause:

The prophet is a fool, the inspired man is demented, because of the grossness of your iniquity, and because your hostility is so great. (Hosea 9:7)

"The inspired man" is literally "the man of the spirit." Israel judged the man who spoke by the Spirit to be a fool, and the text gives the reason: iniquity and hostility. The rulers of 1 Corinthians 2:8, who had the Scriptures read to them every Sabbath, returned the same verdict at the cross.

"And He Cannot Understand Them"

A second statement is now made about the same man. The verb is δύναμαι dunamai, to be able, negated, with γινώσκω ginōskō, the verb of knowing carried through the paragraph from verse 8 and verse 11. He is not able to know them.

The inability is real and it is stated clearly. The text does not, however, leave the kind of inability to speculation. It gives the reason in the next clause.

"Because They Are Spiritually Appraised"

The conjunction is ὅτι hoti, "because." Verse 14 makes two statements about the natural man, and each has its own ground. He does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. He cannot know them, because they are spiritually examined.

The adverb is πνευματικῶς pneumatikōs, "spiritually," found only here and in Revelation 11:8. It is an adverb of manner. It tells how the things are examined. The things of God are examined spiritually, not according to the wisdom of this world.

The meaning of "spiritually examined" is given in the sentence before it. Verse 13 used the adjective "spiritual" twice, directly after defining it: words "taught by the Spirit," set against words "taught by human wisdom." To be spiritually examined is to be examined by what the Spirit taught. The natural man examines the message by the other standard named in verse 13, human wisdom. By that standard a crucified Christ fails every test (1:22-23). The things can be known only when they are examined on the Spirit's terms, and he examines them on the world's.

Reformed Theology reads the adverb as an inward enabling. Westminster describes effectual calling as God "enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God" (Westminster Confession 10.1). On that reading the clause states that the natural man lacks a

faculty which must be given to him before he can understand. The passage has supplied the meaning of "spiritually" one sentence earlier, and that meaning is a standard of examination.

What is the Inability?

Four things stand in the text itself.

First, the opening statement is "does not accept." It describes an act.

Second, the ground of that act is a verdict, "foolishness to him," and a verdict means the message was heard and examined.

Third, the ground of "cannot" is an adverb of manner. The text does not say "because he does not have the Spirit." It says the things are examined spiritually, and he is examining them another way.

Fourth, the answer in verse 16 is something possessed: "we have the mind of Christ." It is content held: information, not an ability.

Put plainly, the natural man is not missing a part that must be installed before he can understand. He has heard the message, judged it by the wisdom of men, and does not welcome it.

The letter uses the same verb of inability in the very next paragraph, of people who have the Spirit (3:16; 6:19). "I could not speak to you as to spiritual men." "You were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?" (3:1-3). An inability is stated of believers, and its cause is how they were walking. In this context "not able" describes the way a hearer is operating. The relation of the natural, the spiritual, and the fleshly belongs to 3:1-4 and is taken up there.

The Verb of Examination

Verse 14 ends on the verb that verse 15 uses twice more: ἀνακρίνω anakrinō. It occurs sixteen times in the New Testament, ten of them in this letter. The NASB renders it "appraised" in chapter 2, "examined" in 4:3-4 and 9:3, "asking questions" in 10:25 and 27, and "called to account" in 14:24. It is one verb throughout.

The word comes from the courtroom. It is the hearing that precedes the ruling. Pilate uses it: "having examined Him before you, I have found no guilt in this man" (Luke 23:14). It is used of Peter and John before the council (Acts 4:9), of the guards questioned by Herod (Acts 12:19), and of the hearings in Acts 24:8 and 28:18. It is distinct from κρίνω krinō, the ruling itself. 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 uses both and keeps them apart: the Apostle is examined by the Lord, and the Corinthians are told not to go on "passing judgment before the time."

The objects of the verb in the New Testament show its range. The Scriptures are examined (Acts 17:11). The apostle is examined by the Corinthians (4:3; 9:3). The unbeliever is examined by the

word spoken in the assembly: "he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed" (14:24-25).

The verb is never a command in the New Testament. In 2:15 it is a present indicative. Of the natural man the text says "cannot." Of the one who is spiritual it says that he examines. The verse states what he does. The command to examine is given elsewhere and by another verb, and it is addressed later in this lesson.

Verse 15: "But He Who Is Spiritual Appraises All Things"

The word is πνευματικός pneumatikos, now with the article: the spiritual one. Verses 13 and 14 have defined the term. He is the one who examines on the Spirit's terms, by the things the Spirit revealed in the words the Spirit taught.

Every believer has the Spirit and holds those words. Yet 3:1 will say to believers, "I could not speak to you as to spiritual men." The term in this paragraph therefore describes the believer as he examines by the things of the Spirit, in the way that τέλειος teleios in 2:6 named a manner of thinking and not a rank.

He examines "all things." This is not a claim to know everything. Verse 10 said that the Spirit searches all things. The one who holds what the Spirit revealed holds the standard by which anything set before him can be tried.

"Yet He Himself Is Appraised by No One"

The clause does not place the believer beyond all examination. The letter has the prophets judged by the others (14:29) and those within the church judged by the church (5:12). The Apostle himself is examined: "the one who examines me is the Lord" (4:4). The extent of "no one" is given by the verse that follows.

Verse 16: "For Who Has Known the Mind of the Lord"

The γάρ gar is explanatory. Verse 16 grounds both halves of verse 15, and it takes them in reverse order. The quotation grounds "he himself is appraised by no one." The closing statement grounds "he who is spiritual appraises all things."

The quotation is from Isaiah 40:13, which reads in the Hebrew text, "Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him?" The Greek Old Testament renders "Spirit" there by νοῦς nous, mind, and that is the form cited here. The mind of the Lord in verse 16 is what verses 10 and 11 said the Spirit alone knows.

The connection to verse 15 lies in the second line of the quotation: "that he will instruct Him." The verb is συμβιβάζω sumbibazō, to instruct, the word the Greek Old Testament uses of God instructing His servants (Exodus 4:12; Psalm 32:8). An examiner takes a position over what he

examines. What the natural man put on trial in verse 14 was the content, the things of the Spirit of God, and he ruled them foolishness. That content is the mind of the Lord. To sit in examination over it and overrule it, a man would have to know the Lord's mind well enough to correct Him. No one does.

The "no one" of verse 15 is therefore the "who" of Isaiah: anyone who does not have that mind. 4:3 sets examination "by you" beside examination "by any human court" and counts both a very small thing. The matter is the standard used, whoever uses it.

The clause has a limit. It covers the believer as the holder of what was revealed. It does not cover his opinions or his conduct, which this letter examines at length.

"But We Have the Mind of Christ"

The pronoun ἡμεῖς hēmeis is placed first in the sentence, as in verse 12. It is the Apostolic "we" of verses 10, 12, and 13: those to whom God revealed, who received, and who speak. What they had they spoke and wrote, and the believer has it in their words.

"Christ" stands where the quotation had "Lord." The Lord of Isaiah 40 whose mind no one has known is Christ.

The mind (νοῦς nous) is content: what He thinks, His counsel and His evaluation, disclosed. The verb is ἔχω echō, to have, in the present tense. The mind of Christ is held as something received, not discovered.

Isaiah's question has two parts, and verse 16 answers only one. "Who has known the mind of the Lord" is answered: we have it. "That he will instruct Him" is left standing, because no one instructs Him. Romans 11:33-34 uses the same quotation for what remains beyond search: "How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?" We have His mind as far as He has revealed it.

This is the mind the letter called for at its opening: "that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1:10).

The believer's understanding of the things of God does not come by a faculty placed within him. It comes by reading and accepting the things of the Spirit of God. The Spirit is not set aside; He is the source of every word.

The Witness of the Rest of Scripture

The reading given above does not rest on this passage alone.

The refusal is charged to the one who refuses. "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (John 5:39-40).

They "did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer" (Romans 1:28) and are "darkened in their understanding … because of the hardness of their heart" (Ephesians 4:18). Israel's case is the same: they have closed their eyes (Matthew 13:15).

The word is the means God uses with the unbeliever. "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). "These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). "God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1:21). The message the natural man calls foolishness is the message through which men believe.

The believer understands by attending to the word. "The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple" (Psalm 119:130). "Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything" (2 Timothy 2:7). "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). Understanding is given by the Lord through an examination of the text, and it is given to the one who considers what is written.

Summary / Application

The natural man is the man without the Spirit. He does not welcome the things of the Spirit of God, the one body of content traced from verse 7 through verse 13, because he has heard them and ruled them foolishness. He cannot know them, and the text gives the reason: they are examined on the Spirit's terms, and he examines them by the wisdom of men.

The one who is spiritual examines all things, because he holds what the Spirit revealed. No one holding another standard can sit in examination over that content, because it is the mind of the Lord, and no one instructs Him. That mind was revealed to the apostles and spoken in words taught by the Spirit. We have the mind of Christ, and we have it in what is written.

Examine everything by the word. Verse 15 states what the spiritual one does. The command is given in 1 Thessalonians 5:21: "But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good." 1 John 4:1 says the same: "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God." The Bereans are the pattern, "examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." The believer has the mind of Christ in the Scriptures, and every teaching, claim, and impression is to be brought to it.

Examine by the right standard. The wisdom of this world examines the messenger, and the Corinthians followed suit (4:3, 9:3), measuring the Apostle by the standards of the age. The natural man's wisdom can be taken up by a believer (James 3:15), and when it is, the believer examines as the natural man does. The proper standard is what is written in Scripture.