Introduction and Contextual Review

Seven lessons have taken us through 1 Corinthians 2:6–3:4 word by word. Before other readings are set beside it, the passage needs to be held in view as a whole. Its argument moves in four steps.

The wisdom spoken (2:6–9). The text affirms that wisdom is spoken, fences it off from the wisdom of this age and its rulers, and assigns it to God: "God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory" (2:7). It is spoken among the mature, τέλειος teleios, a word that names a manner of thinking and not a rank or an inner circle. The wisdom was hidden, not because God withheld it (the prophets spoke of a suffering Servant), but because the rulers of this age would not see it, and their ignorance was culpable: "for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (2:8). What God prepared for those who love Him is glory, and "those who love Him" is one more name for those who believe.

The wisdom revealed (2:10–13). "For to us God revealed them through the Spirit" (2:10). The "us" is the apostolic community, and the revealing is a completed act. As only a man's spirit knows the thoughts of the man, only the Spirit of God knows the thoughts of God (2:11). The apostles received the Spirit who is from God so that they might know the things freely given (2:12), and they spoke those things in words taught by the Spirit (2:13). The things of God now exist in words, spoken and written.

Two men before the same words (2:14–16). The natural man, ψυχικός psuchikos, does not accept the things of the Spirit of God. To him they are foolishness, and he cannot know them "because they are spiritually appraised" (2:14). His inability lies in the standard by which he examines, not in missing equipment. He weighs God's words by the wisdom of men and rejects them. The spiritual one, πνευματικός pneumatikos, examines all things by what the Spirit revealed, and "we have the mind of Christ" (2:16), held in what is written.

Believers examining like mere men (3:1–4). The Corinthians were brethren and infants in Christ, yet the Apostle could not speak to them as to spiritual men. They were fleshly, σαρκικός sarkikos, walking according to man. The evidence was jealousy and strife, and the proof was "I am of Paul ... I am of Apollos." The word ὡς hōs, "as to," describes the level at which they could be taught, not a class of person. Scripture gives two kinds of men, those without the Spirit and those with Him, and a believer who examines the things of God by man's measure is fleshly. The remedy is growth, from milk to solid food: the same content taken in at greater depth.

Every theological system that handles this passage answers four questions, whether it states them or not: what the hidden wisdom is, who receives it, what the Spirit does in a believer's understanding, and what the fleshly believer is. Roman Catholicism, Reformed Theology, and the teaching of Lewis Sperry Chafer answer those questions in three different ways. The first two

are set out briefly so that each system can be seen whole. Chafer's teaching is then set beside the text point by point, because it is the reading most of us have been taught.

Roman Catholicism

The hidden wisdom. Rome reads the mystery of 2:7 through the Latin Church's vocabulary. The Catechism explains that the Greek μυστήριον mustērion "was translated into Latin by two terms: *mysterium* and *sacramentum*," and that the second came to emphasize the visible sign of the hidden reality of salvation (Catechism 774). The hidden wisdom is made present in the Church and in her sacraments.

Who receives it. The mature of 2:6 become a stage of the spiritual life. Thomas Aquinas divides charity into three degrees, "beginning, progress, and perfection," and assigns beginners, the proficient, and the perfect to them (*Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 24, a. 9). The perfect are those who have advanced furthest.

What the Spirit does. The Spirit moves the individual to believe: "the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind" (Dei Verbum 5). The interpretation of what is believed belongs to an office. "The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church" (Dei Verbum 10). Rome has applied 2:15 to that office directly. In the bull *Unam Sanctam* (1302), Boniface VIII taught that the highest spiritual power "can be judged not by man but by God only," and cited the verse as proof: "He which is spiritual judges all things but he himself is judged of no man." The spiritual man of 2:15 becomes the teaching authority of the Church.

The fleshly believer. The Catechism measures the believer by the state of grace. Mortal sin "results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace" (Catechism 1861), and it is restored ordinarily through the sacrament of reconciliation. Venial sin "does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace" (Catechism 1863). On this reading the Corinthians, quarreling over teachers, are beginners in charity whose sins have wounded but not destroyed their standing.

The mystery becomes sacrament, the mature become an advanced degree, and the spiritual man becomes the Church's teaching office. Each answer moves the passage from a message received in words to an institution that dispenses it.

Reformed Theology

The hidden wisdom. Reformed Theology identifies the wisdom of 2:7 as Christ crucified, the gospel itself. On this point there is broad agreement.

Who receives it. Only the regenerate elect. Reformed Theology reads the natural man of 2:14 as a man who lacks the capacity to understand until God supplies it, and reads the spiritual man as the regenerate man to whom it has been supplied.

What the Spirit does. The Spirit supplies a faculty. The Canons of Dort borrow the wording of 2:14 itself: God "enlightens their minds powerfully by the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God" (Third and Fourth Heads, Article 11). Westminster describes effectual calling as God "enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God" (10.1), and holds that "the inward illumination of the Spirit of God" is "necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word" (1.6). We have seen previously that "spiritually appraised" names a standard of examination. Reformed Theology reads it as an inward enabling that must come first.

The fleshly believer. Reformed Theology does not build its case from 3:1–4. Its answer comes from the doctrine of perseverance. Westminster states that those whom God has effectually called "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved" (17.1). It allows that true believers may "fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein" (17.3). The words "for a time" carry the weight. Because perseverance is certain, sin that does not give way is taken as evidence that the person was never effectually called. A fleshly walk that persists becomes proof of an unregenerate heart.

B. B. Warfield applied this directly when he reviewed Chafer's book in 1919. He agreed that Scripture knows one kind of believer, but he made the outcome certain:

> You may find Christians at every stage of this process, for it is a process through which all must pass; but you will find none who will not in God's own good time and way pass through every stage of it. There are not two kinds of Christians, although there are Christians at every conceivable stage of advancement towards the one goal to which all are bound and at which all shall arrive.

The rejection of a second class of Christian is correct. The guarantee attached to it is the system speaking, not the passage.

The natural man lacks a faculty, the Spirit supplies it, and the believer's growth is assured. On this reading, a believer who remains fleshly is not a believer.

Lewis Sperry Chafer

Chafer founded Dallas Theological Seminary and taught grace with great clarity. Many of us have learned much from him and from those who followed him. *He That Is Spiritual*, first published in 1918, opens with these very verses, and its first chapter is titled "Three Classes of Men." Each of the four questions is taken in turn, Chafer's answer first and then the text.

The Hidden Wisdom

Chafer treats the things revealed in 2:9–13 as a distinct body of truth that only some believers can enter:

> The Apostle Paul, by the Spirit, has divided the whole human family into three groups: (1) The "natural man," who is unregenerate, or unchanged spiritually; (2) the "carnal man," who is a "babe in Christ," and walks "as a man"; and (3) the "spiritual" man. These groups are classified by the Apostle according to their ability to understand and receive a certain body of Truth, which is of things "revealed" unto us by the Spirit. (p. 15)

The text does not set aside a reserved body of truth. We have already traced the things of God as one body of content named from several sides: God's wisdom (2:7), what He prepared (2:9), the depths of God (2:10), what He freely gave (2:12), now spoken in words (2:13). The verb in 2:10 is a completed act: God revealed them to us. Nothing in the passage holds part of that content back from any believer.

The Apostle himself shows that the message is one. Among the Corinthians he "determined to know nothing ... except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (2:2), and that was the milk. The wisdom spoken among the mature is the same Christ crucified, understood in greater depth. Milk and solid food differ in the capacity of the hearer to take them in, not in which truths have been made available.

Who Receives It

Chafer answers that the spiritual Christian alone receives it. Commenting on 3:1–2, he writes that "such truth is revealed by the Spirit only to spiritual Christians" (pp. 55–56), and of the Corinthians, "Though born again and possessing the Spirit, their carnality of life precludes them from understanding, or progressing in, the 'deep things of God'" (p. 56). In his first chapter the conclusion is stated plainly: "There are, however, two classifications of the saved" (p. 19).

The text answers with three words.

"Mature." The τέλειος teleios of 2:6 names a manner of thinking, not a rank. The letter defines it: "Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature" (14:20). The mature are believers who think as grown men. Its opposite in 3:1 is νήπιος nēpios, an infant. An infant and a grown man are the same kind of person at different points of growth.

"As to." The particle ὡς hōs stands before each description in 3:1: as to spiritual men, as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. It describes the level at which the Apostle had to speak to them. The verse does not say "you are carnal men," as though naming a class. It says he spoke to them as he would to infants, because that was what they could receive.

"Brethren ... in Christ." The rebuke opens with "brethren" and closes with "in Christ." Both name the standing of 1:2 and 1:30, and the rebuke does not reach it. The text knows one standing for every believer, and the Corinthians held it.

What the Spirit Does

Chafer separates the natural man's inability from his responsibility: "In this passage the natural man is not blamed for his inability. It is simply an accurate statement of the fact of his limitations" (p. 17). Of the carnal believer he writes, "They are unable to receive 'meat' because of carnality, rather than ignorance" (p. 19). Most importantly, he removes growth from the question altogether:

> Christian growth and the deeper knowledge of the Truth are to be distinguished from spirituality. It is possible to be filled with the Spirit when immature in growth, experience and understanding. Christian growth is largely conditioned on the study of the Word, prayer, and service; while spirituality does not wait on these things but is conditioned upon immediate adjustments to the Spirit. (p. 56)

On this reading, the barrier to solid food is an adjustment to the Spirit, made in a moment, and it has nothing to do with maturity.

The text sets the barrier exactly where Chafer says it is not.

The natural man is accountable. We have already found that he "does not accept" the things of the Spirit, and that "foolishness to him" is a verdict returned on a message heard and weighed. Festus called it madness. Hosea 9:7 names the cause of Israel's verdict: iniquity and hostility. The "cannot" of 2:14 is grounded in the standard he examines by, and that standard is his own choice.

The Corinthians' inability is infancy. The words of 3:1–2 are words of growth: infants, milk, solid food, "not yet able." The word οὔπω oupō, "not yet," expects that the ability will come. When they first believed, infancy was no fault. The rebuke is that time had passed and they were still on milk: "Indeed, even now you are not yet able" (3:2). Hebrews uses the same picture and names the remedy: "But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (Hebrews 5:14). Capacity is built by use. The cure for "not yet able" is the very thing Chafer separated from spirituality: growth.

The letter kept speaking. The Apostle gave them milk, and he went on to write thirteen more chapters to these same people, teaching them about the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, the resurrection, and much else. If carnality shut off the ability to understand, the letter itself could not have been received. The limit was how much they could take in, not whether God's word could reach them.

What the Fleshly Believer Is

For Chafer, the fleshly believer is a second kind of Christian, and he becomes the first kind through a second experience. "There are two great spiritual changes which are possible to human experience": the change from the natural man to the saved man, and "the change from the 'carnal' man to the 'spiritual' man. The former is divinely accomplished when there is a real faith in Christ; the latter is accomplished when there is a real adjustment to the Spirit" (p. 22).

Until that adjustment is made, the carnal Christian "is in a state upon which no divine favor can rest" (p. 66). The adjustment begins with sin: "the divine offer and condition of cure for the effects of sin in the Christian's life is crystallized into one word, 'confess'" (p. 72). The victory itself is then taken hold of: "Salvation from the power of sin must be claimed by faith" (p. 138).

The text answers each part of this.

The cause named is method, not unconfessed sin. The evidence of 3:3–4 is jealousy and strife, expressed in ranking God's servants: "I am of Paul," "I am of Apollos." They were "walking like mere men," literally walking according to man. These are not sins of morality. They come from evaluating by the world's measure, the very wisdom chapters 1 and 2 set against the wisdom of God. The Gospels record the same rebuke given to Peter: "you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's" (Matthew 16:23). Peter had not stumbled into some sin he had failed to name. He weighed the Messiah by a human measure.

The standing is not in question. The Corinthians did not lose God's favor while they were fleshly. The same letter opens, "I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus," and promises that He "will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:4, 8). Those words were written to the believers who were saying "I am of Paul."

The remedy is not confession. 1 John 1:9 has its own context, and it is not the subject of this passage. What 3:1–2 sets out is infancy and maturity, milk and solid food. Confession of sin is a good thing to do, but no confession turns an infant into a grown man. The cure for arrested growth is growth, built a portion at a time on what has already been received.

Scripture gives two kinds of men: those without the Spirit and those with Him. A believer can examine the things of God by the natural man's standard, and when he does, he is fleshly. That is not a third kind of man. It is a believer walking according to man.

Chafer's Teaching Applied

Chafer's reading did not stay in his book. Two applications are familiar to many.

The first is the booklet Bill Bright wrote for Campus Crusade for Christ, *Have You Made the Wonderful Discovery of the Spirit-Filled Life?* It draws three circles, each with a throne. The natural person has not received Christ. The spiritual person is directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The carnal person has received Christ, but self is on the throne, and he lives in defeat. The verses beneath the three circles are 1 Corinthians 2:14, 2:15–16, and 3:1–3. The way out is a set of steps:
You can appropriate the filling of the Holy Spirit right now if you:

1. Sincerely desire to be directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 5:6; John 7:37-39).

2. Confess your sins. By faith thank God that He has forgiven all of your sins – past, present and future – because Christ died for you (Colossians 2:13-15; 1 John 1; 2:1-3; Hebrews 10:1-17).

3. Present every area of your life to God (Romans 12:1, 2).

4. By faith claim the fullness of the Holy Spirit, according to:

    - **His Command:** Be filled with the Spirit. "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18).

    - **His Promise:** He will always answer when we pray according to His will. "And this is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked of Him" (1 John 5:14, 15).

    How to pray in faith to be filled with the Holy Spirit

    - We are filled with the Holy Spirit by faith alone. However, true prayer is one way of expressing your faith. The following is a suggested prayer:

    - *"Dear Father, I need You. I acknowledge that I have been directing my own life and that, as a result, I have sinned against You. I thank You that You have forgiven my sins through Christ's death on the cross for me. I now invite Christ to again take His place on the throne of my life. Fill me with the Holy Spirit as You commanded me to be filled, and as You promised in Your Word that You would do if I asked in faith. I now thank You for directing my life and for filling me with the Holy Spirit."*

Chafer's three classes, his conditions, and his claiming by faith are all there.

The second is the teaching of R. B. Thieme Jr. Building on Chafer, Thieme taught that a believer who sins passes out of fellowship and loses the filling of the Spirit, that while out of fellowship he cannot learn doctrine, and that he is restored by naming his sins to God under 1 John 1:9. He called this rebound. Here the separation Chafer made becomes a daily mechanism: understanding the Word depends on the most recent confession.

Both applications place the believer's ability to receive Scripture in an experience, a filling made in a moment and lost in a moment. The passage places it in what the believer has taken in and the standard by which he examines it.

Summary

Each system adds something to the passage. Roman Catholicism adds an office: the mystery becomes a sacrament, and the spiritual man becomes the Church's teaching authority. Reformed

Theology adds an infused faculty and a guaranteed outcome: the natural man lacks the capacity, the Spirit supplies it, and a believer who does not grow is not a believer. Chafer adds a second class of Christian and a second experience: the carnal believer cannot understand until a confession and an adjustment restore him.

The text needs none of these additions. The wisdom of God was revealed to the apostles and spoken in words. The natural man hears it and rejects it, judging it by the wisdom of men. The believer has it, in Christ, and holds the mind of Christ in what is written. When a believer measures the things of God by the measure of the age, he is fleshly, and he remains an infant on milk. His standing is not touched. His capacity is built the same way it is built in every believer: from milk to solid food, by taking in the word, one portion upon another.

Solid food is not handed to the mature as a reward for some other achievement. The mature are those whose faculties have been trained by practice in the word. The believer takes in what he can, works it through, returns to it, and handles it again, and by that repeated use he becomes able to take in more. This is not automatic. Hebrews describes believers who had the word and had become dull. Practice is a choice the believer makes, again and again.