

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Corinthians 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Paul opens his first letter to the Corinthian church with a greeting, a thanksgiving, and then an immediate, urgent confrontation of the report he has received from Chloe's people: the congregation is fracturing along lines of allegiance to human teachers — Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or Christ as a party banner. Paul's response is not merely pastoral correction; it escalates into a theological argument about the nature of the gospel itself. The cross, Paul insists, does not operate on the terms the world uses to evaluate wisdom and power. It is not sophisticated argumentation that saves; it is the proclamation of Christ crucified. And this message, which looks like foolishness by every human metric, is in fact the power and wisdom of God. The chapter closes with the theological punchline: God has deliberately chosen what is low, despised, and nothing in order to nullify what is considered something — so that no human being may boast before Him. The only legitimate boasting is in the Lord.

This Text — Intent:

God is confronting His people's instinctive drift toward evaluating the gospel by categories of human prestige, intellectual sophistication, and social currency — and calling them back to the scandalous, status-inverting logic of the cross. The intent is not merely to correct factionalism but to reorient the Corinthians' (and every reader's) entire framework for what counts as wisdom, power, and worth. God is seeking to break the reader's confidence in human credentials and human wisdom as the basis for spiritual standing, and to establish Christ crucified as the one non-negotiable foundation — both for how the church is built and for how the believer relates to God.

Subject Sentence: The cross overturns every human standard of wisdom and power, establishing Christ alone as the ground of the church's unity and the believer's boasting.

Primary Claim: God is confronting the church's captivity to worldly status-categories and summoning her to find her identity, unity, and confidence entirely in the crucified Christ — because the cross is not an embarrassment to be supplemented with wisdom but is itself the power and wisdom of God.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Factionalism Question — Symptom or Disease? A common reading, particularly in Baptist and broadly evangelical traditions, treats the factionalism (vv. 10–12) as the chapter’s main subject, with the theology of the cross (vv. 17–31) serving as supporting material. This reading inverts Paul’s argument. The factionalism is the presenting problem, but Paul diagnoses it as a symptom of a deeper disease: the church has imported the world’s evaluative framework — its criteria for wisdom, status, and prestige — into its assessment of the gospel itself. The divisions are not primarily personality conflicts; they are evidence that the Corinthians are operating with a worldly epistemology. Paul’s pivot in v. 17 (“not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power”) is the turning point where the true subject emerges. The Reformed reading rightly treats the theology of the cross as the chapter’s primary claim, with the factionalism as its occasion.

The “Wisdom” Question — Charismatic and Pentecostal Readings: Some Pentecostal and charismatic interpreters read Paul’s critique of “eloquent wisdom” (v. 17) as targeted at cold intellectualism, and propose that the Spirit’s power — including signs and demonstration — is the proper alternative. This partially holds (Paul will return to the Spirit’s power in chapter 2), but misreads the chapter’s own argument. Paul contrasts the cross’s foolishness not with Spirit-empowered demonstration but with the *message of the cross itself* as God’s power (v. 18). The “power of God” in this chapter is not a reference to miraculous gifts but to the saving efficacy of the gospel proclamation. Qualify: the charismatic instinct that bare intellectualism is insufficient is not wrong, but the answer Paul offers here is not more spiritual experience — it is deeper confidence in the content of the crucified Christ.

The “Calling” of Low and Despised — Social Gospel and Liberation Readings: Some liberation theology and social gospel readings see vv. 26–29 (“not many were wise... not many were powerful... not many were of noble birth”) as a mandate for the church to align structurally with the poor and marginalized as a matter of justice. This overreads the text’s intent. Paul is making a theological argument about divine methodology — God chose the lowly *to shame the wise and strong*, and *to nullify what is*, so that no flesh may boast. The point is theological: God’s elective purposes invert human hierarchies to secure the glory of His grace. The sociological composition of the Corinthian church is evidence for Paul’s theological claim, not its direct subject. Refute: turning v. 26 into a social program makes Paul’s argument about ecclesiology or justice, when it is about the basis of boasting and the logic of divine election in grace.

The Rhetorical Renunciation — Does Paul Reject All Intellect? A misreading common in anti-intellectual strands of evangelicalism takes Paul’s renunciation of “eloquent wisdom” (v. 17) and “lofty speech or wisdom” as a rejection of intellectual rigor, theological education, or careful argument in preaching. This ignores both the literary sophistication of Paul’s own argument in this chapter and his later distinction (2:6) between the world’s wisdom and a wisdom spoken among the mature. Refute: Paul is not anti-intellectual; he is anti-*sophist*. His target is the rhetorical performance culture of first-century Corinth, where

oratorical skill and philosophical pedigree determined a speaker's worth. Paul refuses to allow those criteria to govern the presentation of the gospel, because doing so would subtly transfer confidence from the content of the message to the eloquence of the messenger — and empty the cross of its power.

Reformed Reading: The Reformed reading that best accounts for the whole chapter reads vv. 10–17 (factionalism) as the occasion, vv. 18–25 (theology of the cross as counter-epistemology) as the argument, and vv. 26–31 (divine election of the lowly; boasting in the Lord alone) as the conclusion. The chapter's governing logic is: the gospel operates by the foolishness of the cross, and this foolishness is deliberate — God has structured salvation to exclude all human boasting and to direct all glory to Himself. This reading connects directly to the Reformed insistence on *sola gratia* and *solī Deo gloria* as not merely doctrinal positions but as the operating logic of the cross itself.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 29:14** — *“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart”* — quoted by Paul in v. 19; the prophetic precedent for God's consistent pattern of overturning human wisdom.
 - **Jeremiah 9:23–24** — *“Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom... but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me”* — cited in v. 31; the Old Testament root of Paul's “boast in the Lord” principle, establishing that this is not a new Pauline idea but the pattern of covenant religion throughout.
 - **Isaiah 53:1–3** — The Servant described as one from whom people hid their faces, despised and rejected — the prophetic anticipation of a Messiah whose appearance would offend every human criterion for greatness, making the cross's “foolishness” a fulfillment of pattern, not a deviation from it.
 - **Romans 1:16–17** — *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation”* — Paul's parallel claim that the gospel's power resides in its content, not in its cultural respectability; canonical confirmation that the Corinthian argument is not situational but central to Paul's theology.
 - **2 Corinthians 4:7** — *“We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us”* — the same theological logic applied to apostolic ministry itself; the weakness of the vessel magnifies the power of the content, exactly as the “foolishness” of the cross magnifies the wisdom of God.
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Aim: To confront every reader's residual confidence in human wisdom, status, and credential as the ground of spiritual standing, and to reestablish the crucified Christ as the sufficient, non-supplementable foundation for the church's unity and the believer's boasting.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Apostolic greeting: Paul, called by God’s will, to the church of God in Corinth, called to be saints; grace and peace	“Called” (κλητός) appears in Paul’s self-description (v.1) and the church’s description (v.2) — the calling motif introduced early, foundational to vv. 26–29
4–9	Thanksgiving: God’s grace in Christ has enriched the Corinthians in speech and knowledge; they are not lacking any gift; God who called them is faithful	Thanksgiving is not ironic — the gifts are real; but they will become part of the problem. “Faithful is he who called you” (v.9) grounds the entire argument in divine initiative
10–12	Urgent appeal: I urge you by the name of Christ — no divisions; be united in mind and judgment. Report from Chloe’s people: “I follow Paul... Apollos... Cephas... Christ”	First use of “I urge” (παρακαλῶ) — strong appeal, not mild suggestion. Four parties; the “Christ party” may be as factious as the others
13–16	Paul’s response: Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into Paul’s name? Paul minimizes his own baptizing role	Rhetorical questions expose the absurdity of personalizing the gospel. Paul’s near-relief at not baptizing more people in Corinth is wry but pointed
17	Pivot: Christ sent me not to baptize but to preach — and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power	Key structural hinge. The chapter’s true subject now emerges: the relationship between rhetorical sophistication and the power of the cross
18	The word of the cross is folly to those perishing; to those being saved it is the power of God	Two responses, two communities, one message. “Those perishing / those being saved” — present-tense participial; these are ongoing statuses

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		determined by response to the cross
19–20	Isaiah 29:14 quoted: God will destroy human wisdom. Where is the wise man? The scribe? The debater? God has made foolish the wisdom of the world	Three representative figures of Hellenistic and Jewish intellectual culture — all rendered obsolete
21	The world did not know God through wisdom — it pleased God through the folly of preaching to save those who believe	The epistemological failure of human wisdom: it cannot find God. The folly of proclamation is the chosen alternative
22–23	Jews demand signs; Greeks seek wisdom; we preach Christ crucified — a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles	The cross offends both audiences on their own terms: wrong kind of Messiah (Jews); wrong kind of wisdom (Greeks)
24–25	But to those called — Jews and Greeks — Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God; God’s foolishness is wiser than men; God’s weakness stronger	“Called” reappears (connecting to vv. 1–2, 9); the cross is not actually foolish — it only appears so to those outside. Its apparent weakness is actual power
26–28	Look at your calling: not many wise, powerful, or noble. God chose the foolish, weak, low, despised, even the things that are not	The sociological composition of the Corinthian church is itself an argument for the theology just stated. Three contrasting pairs: wise/foolish, powerful/weak, noble/despised
29	So that no human being might boast in the presence of God	The explicit purpose clause: divine election of the lowly serves the elimination of human boasting
30–31	From him you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom, righteousness,	Christ is now named as the content of all four categories of divine gift. All boasting is

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	sanctification, and redemption — so that “let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord”	redirected to the Lord — Jeremiah 9:23–24 quoted

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–9	Foundation: Called by Grace, Enriched in Christ
2	10–17	Occasion: Division as Misunderstanding of the Gospel
3	18–25	Argument: The Cross as God’s Counter-Epistemology
4	26–31	Conclusion: Divine Election, Human Boasting Excluded, Christ Alone

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The cross overturns every human standard of wisdom and power, establishing Christ alone as the ground of the church’s unity and the believer’s boasting.

Primary Claim: God is confronting the church’s captivity to worldly status-categories and summoning her to find her identity, unity, and confidence entirely in the crucified Christ — because the cross is not an embarrassment to be supplemented with wisdom but is itself the power and wisdom of God.

Applications (Five)

1. (*Mind/Belief*) Examine what you actually believe qualifies someone to speak for God. The Corinthians divided over teachers because they were using worldly criteria — oratorical brilliance, intellectual pedigree, personal charisma — to evaluate spiritual authority. Ask yourself honestly: what makes you trust a preacher? Credentials, eloquence, cultural savviness, social capital? The cross requires you to evaluate Christian teaching by fidelity to the crucified Christ, not by the sophistication of its delivery. A polished sermon

that subtly relocates confidence from Christ to the messenger has, in Paul's terms, emptied the cross of its power.

2. (Affections/Worship) Let the deliberate “foolishness” of the cross produce in you a specific gratitude — that God saved you by grace in a way that leaves no room for your merit. Paul says God chose the lowly *specifically to exclude boasting*. This is not a cold logical point — it is a mercy. If God saved through wisdom and power and noble birth, then those without wisdom, power, and status would have no access. The gospel comes in the form of weakness so that weakness is no barrier to receiving it. Every time you feel the gospel is too simple, too crude, too unimpressive — receive that feeling as an invitation to worship the God whose foolishness is wiser than your wisdom.

3. (Will/Behavior) Stop explaining away or dressing up the cross when sharing the gospel with people you want to impress. There is a version of apologetics and cultural engagement that is so anxious to make the gospel respectable that the cross gets buried beneath layers of intellectual credibility-building. Paul's warning is direct: adding rhetorical sophistication to make the cross palatable is not a communication strategy — it empties the cross of its power. This week, in whatever conversations you have about faith, resist the impulse to lead with your intellectual credentials and let the message of the crucified Christ carry its own weight.

4. (Mind/Belief) Reframe what you mean when you call Christ your “wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption” (v. 30) — these are not abstract gifts; they are persons. Paul does not say Christ gave you wisdom and righteousness; he says Christ *became* these things for you. This is a profound distinction. Wisdom is not a quality distributed to you; it is a Person you are united to. Righteousness is not a status transferred to your account in an abstract ledger; it is the standing of the One you are now “in.” This means every spiritual resource you need is not something to be acquired by effort or learning but Someone to be received by union. Ground your confidence not in your spiritual progress but in what Christ *is* for you.

5. (Affections/Worship) Let the unity the cross demands produce in you a specific grief over the factionalism you participate in. Paul does not merely argue against factionalism; he finds it theologically incoherent — “Is Christ divided?” The question is meant to land as absurd. When you align yourself with a theological tribe, a denominational culture, a favored communicator, or an intellectual tradition in a way that diminishes your fellowship with other believers in Christ, you are acting as though Christ is divided. Grieve this. The cross is the one thing that every believer holds in common, and it is more than enough to ground a unity that no personality preference or secondary conviction can provide.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: This chapter makes one of Scripture's most concentrated arguments for what might be called the *epistemological sovereignty of the cross* — the

principle that God's saving action in the crucified Christ does not operate by, and cannot be evaluated by, the world's categories of wisdom, power, and status. This is not a peripheral pastoral point but a claim about the nature of divine revelation itself: the cross is *designed* to be foolishness to the unbeliever, because its power is accessible only through faith, not through intellectual achievement or social positioning. The passage also establishes that God's elective purposes are structured specifically to exclude human boasting — the lowliness of what God chooses is not incidental but intentional, serving the end that all glory returns to Him. Finally, the chapter presents Christ as the comprehensive sufficiency for every category of human need: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption are all found in Him — not distributed from Him, but located *in* Him, so that union with Christ is itself the fulfillment of every spiritual deficit.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: First Corinthians 1 is one of the most exegetically grounded bases for the Reformed understanding of *sola gratia* and *solī Deo gloria* — not as doctrinal propositions abstracted from the text but as conclusions embedded in Paul's argument itself. The explicit purpose clause of v. 29 ("so that no human being might boast in the presence of God") names what the Reformed tradition has consistently argued is the governing telos of the entire salvation economy: the elimination of human merit and the concentration of all glory in God. The passage also provides the theological foundation for the Reformed resistance to confusing the gospel's *power* with the human *presentation* of the gospel — a distinction that underlies Reformed commitments to expository preaching and theological sobriety over rhetorical performance. Furthermore, Paul's identification of Christ as wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption grounds the Reformed doctrine of union with Christ as the structural center of soteriology: justification, sanctification, and redemption are not sequential transactions but aspects of the one gift of the person of Christ, received through union with Him. The cross as God's counter-wisdom also anticipates the Reformation's theology of the cross (*theologia crucis* over *theologia gloriae*) — the insistence that God is known truly not in glory and power as the world defines them but in the weakness and foolishness of the crucified Christ.

Main Takeaway

The cross is not the embarrassing opening act before the real, respectable presentation of Christianity begins — it is the whole thing. God structured salvation through a crucified Messiah *deliberately*, to exclude every human credential and make room for only one boast: the Lord. Stop trying to make the gospel more impressive. Stop dividing over teachers as though their credentials are the point. The crucified Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God — and He is enough.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the factionalism as the chapter's main subject.** It is the occasion, not the argument. A sermon that spends most of its time on “stop following personalities and be unified” has identified the symptom without diagnosing the disease. The factionalism is a consequence of a deeper problem: the Corinthians are applying worldly evaluative criteria to the gospel. The chapter's primary work is the theology of the cross in vv. 18–31; the factionalism section (vv. 10–17) is the doorway into it, not the room itself.
- **Reading Paul's renunciation of “eloquent wisdom” as anti-intellectualism.** Paul is not condemning careful thought, theological precision, or rigorous exposition. He is condemning the rhetorical performance culture that transferred confidence from the *content* of the message to the *skill* of the messenger. The irony that Paul makes this argument with extraordinary intellectual sophistication should itself serve as a corrective. Preachers who use this passage to justify lazy preparation or theological superficiality have badly misread their text.
- **Preaching v. 26 (“not many were wise, powerful, noble”) as a sociological program.** This verse is often treated as a mandate for the church to organize structurally around the poor and marginalized. That application is not wrong in itself, but it is not what the verse is doing. Paul's point is theological: the composition of the Corinthian church is evidence that God saves by grace through the foolishness of the cross, not through human merit — *so that no flesh may boast*. The sociological observation serves an argument about divine methodology, not a program for social alignment.
- **Failing to preach v. 30 with enough precision.** “Christ became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” is one of the New Testament's most concentrated statements about what union with Christ means. Preachers frequently move past it quickly as though it is summary material. It is actually the chapter's constructive payoff — all the negative argument about what the cross is not (not worldly wisdom, not human power) arrives here at what the cross *is*: the person of Christ, who is Himself the believer's entire spiritual inheritance. Slow down here.
- **Treating “boast in the Lord” (v. 31) as a mild piety point.** The Jeremiah 9 quotation is the chapter's concluding statement and carries enormous theological weight. It names the governing telos of the entire argument: all human boasting is excluded so that the one permitted boast — in the Lord — becomes the total ground of identity and confidence. Preaching that ends with “be humble” has flattened this into a virtue lesson. The point is not modesty; it is the structural reorientation of the entire self around Christ as the one sufficient ground.

- **Losing the eschatological edge of v. 18.** “The word of the cross is folly to those who are *perishing*, but to us who are *being saved* it is the power of God.” The present-tense participles are not merely descriptive — they are urgent. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that their factionalism and their flirtation with worldly wisdom is not just aesthetically unfortunate; it is playing with the categories of death rather than life. Preachers who soften this into a general observation about how different people receive the gospel miss the warning edge: the church at Corinth is in danger of behaving like those who are perishing.