

## 1 Corinthians 1:10 – 2:2

### Historical and Cultural Background

#### *Greek and Roman orators*

- In the absence of newspapers and rock stars, Greeks and Romans loved listening to speeches or public debates, and would often turn out in large crowds.<sup>1</sup> Dio Chrysostom (born around 40 AD), a Greek Stoic philosopher, orator, and historian, visited Corinth during the Isthmian Games and saw, ‘Crowds of wretched sophists around Poseidon’s temple shouting and reviling one another, and their disciples, as they were called, fighting with one another, many writers reading aloud their stupid works, many poets reciting their poems while others applauded them, many jugglers showing their tricks, many fortune-tellers interpreting fortunes, lawyers innumerable perverting judgment, and peddlers not a few peddling whatever they happened to have.’<sup>2</sup>
- Paul’s ‘hymn of the cross’ (1:17 – 2:2) flips on its head the traditional Greek funeral oration, especially the most famous one, Pericles’ oration at the funeral of those Athenians who had died to save Athens from Sparta. Pericles gave that speech in 430 BC, the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War. Plato says of the classic Greek funeral oration, ‘Death in battle is certainly in many respects a noble thing. The dead man gets a fine and costly funeral... and an elaborate speech is made over him by a wise man who has long ago prepared what he has to say... The speakers praise him for what he has done and what he has not done – that is the beauty of them – and they steal away our souls with their embellished words... and they praise those who die in war, and all our ancestors who went before us; and they praise ourselves also who are still alive, until I feel quite elevated by their laudations,... and I become enchanted by them, and all in a moment I imagine myself to have become a greater and nobler and finer man than I was before... This consciousness of dignity lasts me more than three days, and not until the fourth or fifth day do I come to my senses and know where I am; in the meantime I have been living in the land of the blest. Such is the art of our rhetoricians, and in such manner does the sound of their words keep ringing in my ears.’<sup>3</sup>
- Paul also engages his Jewish Christian audience. He patterns the hymn from a famous passage in Isaiah which is also a double chiasm (like 1 Cor.1:17 – 2:2) with the same themes of rejection and vindication of God’s Servant along with the humiliation and self-defeat of his enemies (Isa.50:5 – 11), quotes twice from the Hebrew Scriptures (Isa.29:14 in v.12 and Jer.9:24 in v.31) to punctuate his case against human wisdom and power, and deploys a popular *Semitic* poetry style (7 syllable lines with rhyming endings) *in the Greek language* in the very center of his poem (1 Cor.1:23):<sup>4</sup>

He-meis de ke-rus-so-men	we preach
Chris-ton es-tou-ro-men-on	Christ crucified,
Iou-dai-ois men skan-da-lon	to Jews a stumbling block
Eth-ne-sin de mo-ri-an	and to Gentiles foolishness

#### *Christian preaching, baptism, and mission*

- The Corinthian church began as a mixed group of Jews, Greeks, and Romans (Acts 18:1 – 18). Paul was the first to proclaim Jesus there. Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in Jesus as did everyone in his household. Titius Justus, a Gentile ‘God-fearer’ who had attended the synagogue, also believed and

<sup>1</sup> Next to military fame, oration was the skill cultivated by ambitious Romans. By the time of Cicero, Roman oratory divided into two factions – Asiatic and Attic – representing the use or avoidance, respectively, of the more emotional, exaggerated Greek-style rhetoric. Sometimes the subject would be philosophical, as the Epicureans and Stoics agreed that the body was inferior to the soul, but they differed on various points, and competed for a hearing. Sometimes the subject would be political. Homer exalted oration as a skill for warriors (e.g. Phoenix’s speech in *Iliad* bk.9, lines 437 – 445), and the Athenian general Pericles was a great orator. Roman courts and republican government afforded many opportunities for the skilled orator to sway juries or assemblies or become a quaestor, praetor, or consul (the three graded magistrates).

<sup>2</sup> Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 8.5, quoted in Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), p.100 quoted also in Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), p.77

<sup>3</sup> Plato, ‘Menexenus’, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), 2:775, quoted in Bailey, p.94

<sup>4</sup> See Bailey, p.87 – 93

opened up his home for believers to meet. Erastus was the city treasurer and became a believer by the time Paul wrote Romans from Corinth in the winter of 57 AD (Rom.16:23). So there was a base of Jewish Christians and people familiar with the Jewish Scriptures anchoring this community. They continued to engage the sizable and well-organized Jewish synagogue community through the Scriptures (Acts 18:14 – 17, 28).

- Paul, Apollos, and Cephas were friends and colleagues as leaders in the Jesus movement. Apollos was with Paul when he wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus (between 53 – 57 AD), and Paul even encouraged Apollos to visit Corinth again (16:12)! Their difference was not theological. Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, Egypt, ‘an eloquent man... mighty in the Scriptures’ (Acts 18:24), who visited Corinth after Paul (Acts 18:27 – 28; 1 Cor.3:6). Paul was apparently not physically impressive, nor a great public speaker in the sense of theatrical style or presentation (2 Cor.10:10). ‘Cephas’ probably refers to Simon Peter since Cephas is Peter’s name in Aramaic, and some might have thought of him as the most important apostle. Possibly, Peter and his wife had visited Corinth after both Paul and Apollos (1 Cor.9:5). Paul saw the issue as about different personal gifts/skills (12:1 – 14:40) and maybe cultural competency (9:19 – 22).
- ‘The gospel’ (*euangelion*, ‘good news’) was a term used by both Romans and Jews prior to Jesus. The Romans used the term as the proclamation of a new Roman Emperor being born or ascending the throne, because Emperor Augustus ‘saved’ the Republic from the civil wars and enforced the Pax Romana. Jews used the term to speak of the reign of Israel’s God on earth (e.g. Isa.52:7) via His return to His holy temple, which they expected would mean the defeat of the Romans. Christians used it to refer to the resurrected Jesus reigning from his heavenly throne and being the new, human temple of God, spreading his reign over human beings from within them. Thus, the Christians were confronting both Jews and Romans.
- Christian baptism symbolized that person’s rebirth and cleansing to become part of God’s true humanity. It was patterned after a literary theme in Scripture. God brings His beloved human beings through water: Adam and Eve after the water of creation, Noah through the water of the flood, and Israel through the water of the Red Sea. Jesus was baptized in water (Mt.3:13 – 17), which symbolized his own commitment to cleansing his humanity from the corruption of sin that had infected human nature. Then he actually died and rose to finish the job. He healed human nature, first in himself, and then in us when we receive him as God’s gift of a new humanity. So sinking below the water of Christian baptism and then rising up symbolizes dying and rising with Jesus. When Paul speaks of ‘the cross’ (1:17, 18) or ‘Christ crucified’ (1:23; 2:2), he is certainly including Jesus’ resurrection (15:1 – 28; Acts 17:3, 18, 31) for he speaks of Jesus as living and sending him (1:17). However, Paul is stressing Jesus’ cleansing of the corruption of human sinfulness within himself, which continues now in Jesus’ followers by his Spirit.

## Questions

1. What is the immediate problem going on in Corinth, according to 1:10 – 16?
  - a. It seems like Apollos was a better public speaker than Paul, at least in some people's opinion. And maybe Simon Peter was regarded as the most important apostle. Paul was a brilliant thinker but did not have the best speaking voice, and he was chronologically last to be appointed as an apostle.
  - b. This is not a doctrinal problem per se. If it were, Paul would give a different kind of response. Just a game of 'who is your favorite preacher?' taken to a very unhealthy level.
  - c. People were taking a natural tendency to favor one speaker over another, and ignoring the actual content of what they were saying.
  - d. How does this relate to how we 'build community' back then and now?
    - i. Around key personalities, ideas, or causes
    - ii. Do we tend to gather around 'alpha males' or certain strong personalities?
    - iii. Do we imitate some attitude or trend out there in the world?
    - iv. We have a longing for community and connection, and we do it by personality or culture.
  - e. Application: For example, Christians do it around worship styles! In Christian circles, most worship songs and worship leaders are not doctrinally different in a way that we can tell. Yet, why do Kirk Franklin and Fred Hammond appeal to African-American Christians, with the focus on keyboard and drums and minor 7ths? And why do Matt Redman, Jesus Culture, Darlene Zschech and Hillsong appeal to younger white Americans, with their acoustic guitars and simple chords? Why do the more melodic of those songs appeal to Asian-Americans? Why do hymns appeal to older white Americans, with lots of words, musical focus on the voices, and lack of instruments? And so on. Preferences are fine. I'm glad we have preferences, because different styles of music reach different people and reflect different people (Martin Luther took the melody of a German bar song for his hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God!*). But let's not be content with our own style. Let's try to learn why there is appeal and where our preferences come from. What is this worship leader or musical style doing that others don't? How can I learn from that?
  - f. That's probably the closest parallel issue that we have to how the Corinthians received Paul, Apollos, and Simon Peter.
2. What does Paul's very poetic response about the cross in 1:17 – 2:2 tell us? Let's talk about his style first.
  - a. That Paul is a brilliant and poetic thinker, as we can see from the structure of his letter, and in the way he flips the Greek funeral speech tradition on its head. Kenneth Bailey lists points of connection,<sup>5</sup> which I've consolidated here to the most important points:
    - i. Paul is not being anti-intellectual or dismissing culture.
    - ii. Jesus died to save people, as in Pericles' speech where Athenians died to save Athens. But Jesus died a criminal's death, not a noble warrior's death. The blunt 'Christ crucified' (clearly the main point, at the beginning, middle, and end) comes as a sobering reminder. The cross (a foolish thing) shames the wise and powerful because Jesus was innocent (they killed him unjustly), and was the very incarnation of God saving human nature in himself (and they rejected him).
    - iii. Paul did not study to be a Greek orator, drawing attention to himself. He was sent by Christ (1:17), and came to Corinth (2:1). He did not create a message in his own mind, but rather explained God's work in real history.
    - iv. Greek funeral speeches are supposed to say, 'The dead hero is great, and he died because we're great.' The speech praised those of noble birth, people of nurture and education, and people of noble actions. Paul flips that around. He says, 'Jesus died because we suck.' He humbles the noble/wise and praises the weak/foolishness. Even though among the Corinthian Christians were Crispus, former leader of the Jewish synagogue, and his household (Acts 18:8) and maybe Erastus, the city treasurer (Rom. 16:23)!
    - v. Greek funeral speeches are supposed to praise worldly power. Pericles praised the military, ethical, and cultural power of Athens. Paul praises the power of God and challenges the power of human beings, and points out how rulers and authorities were ignorant in 2:8.

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<sup>5</sup> Bailey, p.95 – 99

- vi. Application: The use of art, style, technology, and power by Christians must ultimately point beyond itself, to Jesus, and embrace the ugly, the disenfranchised, the poor, and the weak in the process. It would be a bit like Bruce Hornsby's 1986 song *The Way It Is*, about the man in the silk suit mocking a woman in the welfare line and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 not changing hiring, or Tupac's 1992 song which samples the melody and quotes from Hornsby, *Changes*. Or maybe Michael Jackson's 1988 song *Man in the Mirror* would also be a good example.
  - vii. Leader: Describe a song, theatrical performance, or something you've done artistically or intellectually (or you've seen someone else do) that meant a lot to you because it pointed beyond itself and onto Jesus, and his love for the unloved.
- b. That Paul is drawing from the Jewish Scriptures to confront Greco-Roman culture. The Scriptures are Paul's anchor because they were Jesus' anchor.
- i. Isaiah 50:5 – 11 is the third of four Servant Songs in Isaiah (42:1 – 4; 49:1 – 8; 50:4 – 11; and 52:13 – 53:12), but the first that speaks of the Servant's suffering. These passages were well known and well studied in second Temple Judaism, as evidenced by the preponderance of Isaiah scrolls in the Dead Sea Scroll collection, as well as the ample rabbinical commentary on them. The Servant would be the agent through whom God would bring Israel back from exile. This passage has an introduction (50:4) and a double chiasm (50:5 – 11), shown below. Both in structure and in content, Paul seems to have been drawing from this passage to craft his 'hymn of the cross.'

<sup>4</sup> The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples,  
That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.  
He awakens Me morning by morning,  
He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple.

<sup>5</sup> The Lord GOD has opened My ear;  
And I was not disobedient  
Nor did I turn back.

<sup>6</sup> I gave My back to those who strike Me,  
And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard;  
I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting.

<sup>7</sup> For the Lord GOD helps Me,  
Therefore, I am not disgraced;

Therefore, I have set My face like flint,

And I know that I will not be ashamed.  
<sup>8</sup> He who vindicates Me is near;

Who will contend with Me?  
Let us stand up to each other;  
Who has a case against Me?  
Let him draw near to Me.

<sup>9</sup> Behold, the Lord GOD helps Me;  
Who is he who condemns Me?

Behold, they will all wear out like a garment;  
The moth will eat them.

<sup>10</sup> Who is among you that fears the LORD,  
That obeys the voice of His servant,  
That walks in darkness and has no light?  
Let him trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.

<sup>11</sup> Behold, all you who kindle a fire,  
Who encircle yourselves with firebrands,  
Walk in the light of your fire  
And among the brands you have set ablaze.  
This you will have from My hand:  
You will lie down in torment.

## Introduction: The Servant

### A. Persecutors torment the Servant

### B. Servant helped, not disgraced

### C. Parable of flint

### B. Servant will be vindicated

### A. Persecutors confronted

### B. Servant helped, not condemned

### C. Parable of moth/garment

### B. Servant obeys

### A. Persecutors are self-defeated

- ii. 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.' (Isaiah 29:14 in v.19) comes from a vision of Isaiah of the new Temple (Isa.28:16 – 29:24). Paul will expand on that theme later in 1 Corinthians (3:16 – 17 and 6:19 – 20), so he is starting to weave a thread into his great tapestry here, which will emerge with great color and power later. Jesus quoted from Isaiah 29:13 when he critiqued the Jerusalem Temple and the devotion of his fellow Jews to it (Mt.15:8). Isaiah seems to be critiquing the 'wise' Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.
- iii. 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord' (Jeremiah 9:24 in v.31) also flows out of God's warning that Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins as God executes His judgment on

*both Jews and Gentiles for being uncircumcised of heart* (9:11 – 26). The Jewish reader would know that this is part of Paul's point. So this quotation comes from Jeremiah and is directed at the whole world.

- c. Paul is also drawing from Semitic poetry because he knows that there are people of Jewish background in his audience. 'The creation of two lines with seven syllables per line was a well-known ancient Semitic poetic meter. Ephraim the Syrian used this meter extensively in the fourth century A.D. It is amazing to find this classical Semitic meter in a Greek text. In the hymn at large, Paul not only presents seven cameos which he matches in reverse, he also manages to state his climax in the center with seven syllables per line – and the lines rhyme at the end. But of course, he has no 'lofty words' or 'wise words' in this hymn!'<sup>6</sup>
- d. For both Jew and Greek, Paul honors the stylistic tastes of his audience!
  - i. If we transplanted him into the U.S. today, he would most certainly make the effort to know all the different worship styles, develop cultural fluency, and understand what was important to different people, and why.
  - ii. Paul is continuing in the pattern of the incarnation and Pentecost. Incarnation: Jesus took on human flesh and entered into the Jewish world. Pentecost: The Spirit descended to empower the disciples to speak other languages and enter other cultures.
  - iii. Illus: Dr. Lamin Sanneh's testimony. He is now a professor of history at Yale University and also professor of missions and world Christianity at Yale Divinity School. But he was born in Gambia into a high status Muslim family. He had memorized the Qur'an by the time he was 14 years old. But he came to Jesus because he felt the Christian message was truly for everyone. You didn't have to speak Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic (unlike in Islam, where you really should speak Arabic), nor do you have to go to Jerusalem or Judea (unlike in Islam, where you should go to Mecca in Saudi Arabia). Its mission was internally consistent with its methods. He is now one of the leading scholars of both Islam and Christianity in Africa.
  - iv. This is a point of validation of my claim that Jesus wants to heal and transform not only individuals, but *cultures*, understood biblically as related to every *ethne* (people group). Christian faith gathers up what is best and noble about every culture, and either heals or challenges what is not. Ideally, every culture should have its own expression of Christian faith.
- e. Why would 'cleverness of speech' make void 'the cross of Christ' in 1:17, 1:23, and 2:2? Isn't Paul being very 'clever' here?
  - i. Partly because 'cleverness of speech' in the original cultural context is about entertainment and flattery. It focuses on the speaker and flatters the audience. The cross of Christ focuses us beyond the speaker and does not flatter us. It focuses on what Jesus did to defeat sin in himself first, and then in each of us, to make relationships healthy.
  - ii. Also, because 'cleverness of speech' in the Greek sense divides people, either because the speaker is arguing with someone else, or because the issue is the speaker's style. The cross of Christ is about the *content* of the Christian message. It affirms every person because God loves every person. Hence, Paul affirms the weak and the poor. And it calls for our transformation, because Jesus calls us to die and rise with him, so that we can love and serve others like Christ did. So Jesus brings about true community, and he models that in his death.
  - iii. Illus: Healthy food or good exercise sometimes feels like 'dying' to yourself. But it is 'life' to you if you want to lose weight or be healthier.
3. Why do Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom? Is Christ crucified not a sign and not wisdom?
  - a. Analogy: It's like standing out on campus. Most people want to just get skills so they can graduate and get a job. Others want a really good party. But if you say, 'I have the truth about ultimate stuff,' most people won't listen to you.
  - b. Jews asked for miracles and Jesus did some. In fact, the apostles did some. But the particular signs that Paul is referring to also have to do with the idea of the military messiah – the cleansing of the Jerusalem Temple, the ousting of the Romans, the freedom of God's people from their occupiers.

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<sup>6</sup> Bailey, p.88

- c. Greeks search for wisdom in terms of elite knowledge and practical, day to day life. It's not just mystical secrets, although that was also involved. We covered some of this last time with the introduction and summary of ch.15. Stoics (pantheists who believed that stability was everything, the body and its desires are impure) vs. Epicureans (who thought the body was unimportant and therefore to be indulged)
  - d. But Jesus shows us how to please God by defeating sin – he did it in himself by killing the corruption of sin within himself. And Paul's emphasis here is that God shows us how to purify human nature through Jesus' death. We are called to walk in that way of life, by the Spirit of Jesus now living in us.
4. Why is God's foolishness and weakness wiser and stronger than men (v.25)?
- a. Because God made Himself known to men (v.26), but the world in its 'wisdom' did not come to know God. It just makes people focus on themselves. And then people will reach very wrong conclusions about God, too!
  - b. Application: Even today, all the intelligence of people working really hard to know God from a standpoint that is not Jesus will run amok. This is what I wrote to a friend who was becoming someone who 'saw God everywhere' and thought it was wiser than looking just at Jesus:

'On how God communicates, I think the relevance of that question to me hit when I was in high school and my parents were getting a divorce. I thought, maybe 'god' is everywhere (pantheism). Then, my immediate question was whether some 'god' out there was causing this to get my attention. So the first question has to do with whether God participates in human evil and is actively or passively complicit with it. Because that would make him evil (or both good and evil, or neither). And then, if we are supposed to read God through nature, I can see intelligence in nature because I'm an engineer and I get how order is the product of intelligence. But I'm not sure what else to read from nature. I get that the earth looks beautiful when viewed from far away, but nature up close is vicious, 'red in tooth and claw' as the poet said. And if the universe is winding down, running out of heat and light, going towards zero degrees Kelvin, and if that's the end of the story, then it's ultimately futile. That would make God evil (or mostly evil since the momentary universe would seem like a big tease). If that is not going to be the end of the story, then we would need to know what will be, and how we know such a radical claim that stands outside nature itself. If we don't have a way of knowing that which is internally consistent and disciplined, then we would be drawn back rather quickly into the gravitational pull of pantheism. So if everything discloses God, then the God being disclosed is going to be... mostly evil. And if we're separating God from both human history and nature to some degree (transcendence), then the questions are to what degree, and then how do we know him? So I just think those are huge issues, and I'm wondering how you sort through them.'

5. Application: How do you tend to boast about yourself or your culture?
- a. To boast in this context means to find one's identity in your inherited status or your abilities. It also means a negation of other people or cultures. Jewish scribes were a powerful guild in the Second Temple period of Judaism. Greek philosophers also were drawn from the noble class. Aristotle said that noble birth was important to being a scholar,<sup>7</sup> not least because they had slaves to do their manual work for them. But you needed Jesus to come and die for you to be made new. You needed Jesus to become who God originally created you to be.
  - b. Illus: My conversion story, involving being in Mexicali, Mexico and serving people who were very poor and not educated. From the angle of my educated, elitist perspective, I really struggled with what I was doing there. But I also saw that I had very little love and no meaning. Giving my life to Jesus eventually led to living among Mexican immigrant families in northern CA (East Palo Alto) and learning from them and serving them, while I was being mentored by Jose and Jennifer Espinosa.
  - c. Illus: Hobbits (in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*) were 'the weak things of the world.' Yet Sauron was defeated through them.
6. Application: How do we tend to form community?
- a. Is it like the scene from the movie *Mean Girls*, when Lindsay Lohan's character is in the high school cafeteria? She's being told which kids sit at which table: jocks, geeks, racial groups, etc. (from youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=callwCi6JCC>)

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, 1.3 – 5, quoted in Bailey, p.83 – 84

- b. What is right and wrong? Good and evil? Philosopher David Hume gave his famous ‘is-ought distinction’: We can describe what *is*. We cannot describe what *ought to be*. On our own, that is.
  - c. Leader: Share an illustration from your own life about a time that a friendship went sour, or community broke down.
    - i. When a love triangle formed in an already exclusive group of friends...
    - ii. When someone played favorites...
    - iii. When I was only interested in befriending good looking girls...
  - d. Eventually, human beings trying to form community using our own strengths is self-defeating. It’s like anarchists trying to form a political party. Margot Adler, who was quite a good radio journalist on NPR for over three decades, and an outspoken Wiccan priestess who was trying to recover the worship of the Greek Pagan gods, wrote about Wiccans in America trying to form community and how it didn’t really happen.
  - e. Christians do not actually ‘create community.’ We *discover* it. Like siblings who are separated from birth by some accident of life. We come together and we get to know each other because of Jesus. We partner together because of Jesus. Jesus has loved every person, as shown by his death on the cross. And he also levels the playing field by showing that every person needs to come to him, and reflect on the corruption in their human nature that made it necessary for Jesus to go to the cross.
  - f. Leader: Share an illustration of how Jesus has helped you with your own jealousy, anger, gossip, busyness, etc. (some sin) to make deeper friendship and community possible.
7. Application: What are the positive gifts and strengths in other Christians whom you tend \*not\* to admire, or notice, at least right away?
- a. Illus: When I observed worship services among older Japanese-American people in my parents’ generation, I experienced it as ‘not emotionally expressive’ and a bit ‘ritualistic.’ But there were positive things in that community as well, like the desire to seek the genuine good of others, and to treat other people’s emotional lives with cautious respect at least in the service (those are very deeply held traditional Japanese values). If a person comes from a different culture, remind yourself Jesus wants to heal and transform culture, and then turn culture into an asset in outreach. We are never ‘culture-free.’ So actually we are challenged by Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19 – 22 to ‘become all things to all people.’
  - b. Illus: I’ve underestimated the shy, kind of nerdy person before. It turned out that a few people who presented themselves that way were actually quite good evangelists! They were good listeners, sincere and personal when they spoke, and they were good at inviting other people to take steps to explore Jesus. We need to receive one another’s individual gifts and strengths in the context of Jesus’ mission as well (12:1 – 14:40).
  - c. So when we see anyone else in the body of Christ, we can appreciate that God loves them individually. We can also appreciate who they are effective in reaching and serving, and even learn from them.