Some background on 1 Corinthians (in addition to that given in the Bible Dictionary): The Church at Corinth was founded by Paul in AD 51, and this letter was probably written in the early spring of 57. Corinth had a reputation for debauchery in the ancient world, and it had that reputation in a world that was tolerant of sexual promiscuity of all kinds. Paul is responding to two things. He first takes up (1 Corinthians 1–6) reports from Chloe, a prominent sister in the congregation, about what is happening in Corinth. Then in 1 Corinthians 7–15 he responds to a letter that the Corinthian members have written and sent to him with Stephanas (1 Corinthians 16:17), asking him questions about marriage, eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, how women should conduct themselves in Church, and so on.

Paul has learned that three, or perhaps four, factions have arisen among the members of the Corinthian Church:

(1) One of the factions has made a hero of Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria (and, therefore, a Hellenized Jewish convert). He is well educated and eloquent and seems to have impressed a significant number, though a minority, in the Corinthian congregation. (But he is with Paul at Ephesus when Paul writes this epistle to the Corinthians; the scriptures do not portray him as
a usurper or competitor with Paul. See Acts 18:24–28; 1 Corinthians 3:4–6; 4:6; 16:12.) In fact, some believe that Apollos rather than Paul was the author of Hebrews, perhaps writing what he had heard Paul teach.

(2) There appear also to be Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who have created a faction by questioning Paul’s authority and arguing, once again, for the necessity of keeping the Mosaic law.

(3) A third faction, apparently the majority and probably made up mostly of poor freedmen and slaves, have rejected the other two factions and boast that they follow Paul.

(4) It is disputed, but there may have been yet a fourth faction, those who claimed a special relation to or special knowledge of Christ. (The end of 1 Corinthians 1:12 suggests this possibility.)

With that background in mind, ask yourself whether we see anything like this in the Church today. What causes our divisions? Why aren’t those divisions relatively harmless? (Compare Doctrine and Covenants 98:76–101.) Is it relevant that the word heresy comes from a Greek word that means “division”?

If we don’t have such divisions, must we all be exactly alike? What is the difference between a difference between us and a division among us?

Since the concept of Christian wisdom is central to both parts of the letter, these questions will focus on Paul’s ex-
licit discussion of that topic (1:17–31) but will also include discussion of other verses.

1 Corinthians 1

**Verse 4:** The word *grace* translates the Greek word *charis*, which means “favor” or “gift.” For what is Paul expressing thanks in this verse? Is that relevant to understanding what he means when, in various places, he teaches that we are saved by grace?

**Verses 5–7:** Is this something else for which Paul is thankful (“I am thankful for the grace that God has given you through Jesus Christ, and I am thankful that your utterance and your knowledge are enriched by him”), or is this how God has given the Corinthian Saints a gift through Jesus Christ?

Do verses 6–7 help answer that question?

**Verse 17:** Why might Paul have said that he wasn’t called to baptize? Remembering that the Greek word translated *sent* is closely related to the Greek word translated *apostle* may give you an idea.

What does it mean to preach the gospel? What is one preaching when one preaches that?

What does he mean when he says that he was sent “to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words [or speaking]”? What is the wisdom of words? What other wisdom can there be?

What does Paul mean by “the cross of Christ”? 

361
Why would the cross be of “no effect” if Paul were to teach by the wisdom of words? Does it help to know that “should be made of no effect” translates a phrase that means “might not be emptied”?

**Verse 18:** Whom is Paul speaking of when he refers to “them that perish”?

What does it mean to preach the cross? Why do you think Paul puts such focus on the cross rather than on the resurrection or on the suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane?

Why is the cross foolishness to some? To whom in Paul’s world? To whom is it foolishness today? Do we ever make it foolishness?

How is the cross the power of God to those who are saved?

**Verse 19:** Paul quotes the Greek version of Isaiah 29:14, which is slightly different from the version we use: “the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding [or prudence] of their prudent men shall be hid.” Look at the Isaiah passage to see its context. Does that context tell us anything about what Paul is saying here?

Is Isaiah speaking of two groups, the wise on the one hand and the prudent on the other, or is he using a parallelism to speak of one group, those who are wise or prudent? Does Paul use this to speak of two different groups, the wise and those who need a sign (verse 22)?

**Verse 20:** Compare Isaiah 33:18. What does Paul mean when he asks, rhetorically, whether God hasn’t made the wisdom of the world into foolishness?
What might those in Corinth who laud Apollos have thought wisdom to be? What did the Judaizers understand to be wisdom? How has the wisdom exhibited through the cross turned each of those kinds of wisdom into foolishness?

Could “the wise” refer to Greek philosophy (the word philosophy means “love of wisdom”) and “the scribes” refer to Jewish wisdom?

The Greek word translated disputer can also be translated “debater.” What could “disputer of this world” or “this world’s debater” mean?

The word translated world is also often translated age. It usually refers to a segment of time. It less often refers to a spatial world. To what age might Paul be referring?

**Verse 21:** The first part of this verse is difficult to read. Here is the translation of the New Jerusalem Bible, which may help you understand what Paul is saying: “Since in the wisdom of God the world was unable to recognize God through wisdom,” though that is also not easy to understand. Put what Paul is saying into your own words, or figure out how you might explain that clause to someone else.

In that difficult clause, what does “in the wisdom of God” mean? Does it mean that the world had been given God’s wisdom but didn’t use it to recognize God? Or does it mean something like “surrounded by God’s wisdom, the world didn’t recognize him”? Perhaps it means “God wisely made it so that the world could not recognize him through its own wisdom.” Which of these makes the most sense, or is there another alternative?
What does “the foolishness of preaching” mean? How does God preach to us? How can preaching be salvific?

What does Paul say is the problem with the wisdom of the world? What is the wisdom of the world in our day? If, as the First Presidency has said, God has inspired many thinkers and religious leaders, then not everything said by someone outside of scripture or the prophets is “the wisdom of the world.” A significant portion of what is said by those outside the Church is inspired (just as, we assume, a significant portion of what is said by those inside the Church is not inspired). In that case, how do we recognize the wisdom of the world as such?

What does God do in response to the problem of the wisdom of the world? Is Paul condemning worldly knowledge? If not, what is he doing?

Who are “those who believe”? Believe what?

Verses 22–25: What sign or signs did the Jews seek? (Compare Matthew 12:38 and John 4:48; 6:30–31.) What wisdom did the Greeks seek? How does the preaching of the gospel compare to signs and wisdom?

How was Christ’s crucifixion a stumbling block to the Jews? What made it foolishness to the Greeks? Seeking a sign on the one hand and wisdom on the other, what do they both require that God refuses to give?

Is Paul criticizing the Jews and the Greeks, or is he simply describing the world as it is?

Create a paraphrase of verses 23–24. Explain what Paul is saying.
Verse 24 tells us what Christ crucified means to those who have been called. How do the power of God and the wisdom of God compare to the signs and wisdom sought (verse 24)? If God doesn’t have foolishness or weakness, how can Paul say what he does in verse 25?

Verses 26–29: Compare Doctrine and Covenants 1:19. Why does God seldom call “wise men after the flesh,” or powerful (mighty) people or well-born (noble) people as his leaders? Why do the wise and the mighty need to be confounded?

What do you make of the fact that Paul begins verse 26 with a phrase that means essentially “Think about your own calling, brethren, and you will see”? What is he saying to those in Corinth? Is that an insult or a criticism? If we think about our callings, do we see the same thing?

Notice that verses 27–28 correlate the groups in verse 26 that he introduces:

Wise — Foolish
Mighty — Weak
Noble — Base and despised (i.e., low born)

The word base translates a Greek word that literally means “unborn,” in other words, those whose status at birth means nothing. Those on the left of that list are what Paul refers to when he speaks of “things that are” (verse 28), while those on the right are the “things that are not” (verse 28).

Whom might Paul have had in mind as the weak? Who would have been despised by the Jews (verse 28)? By the
Greeks? In other words, who are these “things that are not”—supposedly nonentities (see Romans 9:24–26)—who Paul says will overcome “things that [supposedly] are,” in other words the wise, mighty, and wellborn?

The term glory that appears in verses 29 and 31 could also be translated boast or brag. How has the criticism of bragging become part of the discussion? What has it to do with the wisdom of the world?

How does the Lord’s way of working, using those who are supposedly nothing to do his work, make it impossible for anyone to boast?

Why is boasting in the presence of God something he wishes to prevent? (See Doctrine and Covenants 29:36 and Moses 4:1.)

**Verses 30–31:** I would translate the first part of verse 30 as “But through him you are in Christ Jesus.”

John reports that Jesus used the preposition in to describe the relationship of the Son to the Father (John 14:10–11). Like Paul, he also used it to describe our relationship to the Son (John 2:24). Peter uses it (1 Peter 5:14) and so does Alma (Alma 5:44), though Alma’s usage may have a slightly different meaning than the other instances. We see in used both to describe the Son’s relationship to the Father and our relationship to the Son in modern scripture, for example in Doctrine and Covenants 50:43. Clearly those uses of the word in aren’t unique to Paul, though that isn’t a way of speaking common to contemporary Latter-day Saints. But Paul describes our relationship to Jesus that way more than anyone else, by my count thirty-nine times! The phrase is
obviously an important one to him, the person responsible for more of the New Testament than any other.

Obviously Paul is not speaking in spatial terms. *In* doesn’t mean “inside” as Paul is using it. So what does it mean to be “in Christ Jesus”?

Verse 30 says that Christ is made wisdom, righteousness (in other words, his justice), sanctification, and redemption to us. What does that mean? Paul says that a *person*, Jesus Christ, is wisdom, righteousness, and so on, though we usually think of these things as principles rather than people. What does his usage mean?

How does that confound the Jews of his time? The Greeks? When we understand it, does it confound the wisdom of the contemporary world?

In verse 31 Paul quotes Jeremiah 9:24 (the Greek version) to tell us that if we glory or boast we should glory in God. By *God*, does he mean “the Father”? Does it matter?

1 Corinthians 3

Finally consider a frequently quoted scripture from this letter, 1 Corinthians 3:16–17: “Ye are the temple of God.” The Greek word translated *ye* in these verses is plural rather than singular. What does that suggest about what he is saying? What is he comparing to the temple of God?

How does 1 Corinthians 6:19 fit with this verse? (*Ye* is also plural in that verse.)

How is that image of the temple of God a response to the problems that Paul is dealing with?