



A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

Lesson 2...I Hear There Are Divisions... 1 Corinthians 1:1-31

Now the last time we met, we began a discussion of the background and setting of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. What we learned together was that Corinth was a very important city in the Paul's day. Now the principal reason Corinth was such an important city was its extraordinary location.

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It was located on a narrow four and half mile wide isthmus on the trip between Asia Minor and Rome...in modern terms...between Turkey and Italy. That was important because winter navigation of the southern tip of Greece was particularly treacherous...and though it was only two hundred miles...sailing around the tip pf Greece added an extra two months to one's journey.

As a result, Corinth became a sort of Panama Canal crossing, only without the canal...and the passage of so many goods and people across the narrow strip insured that Corinth became a very, very wealthy city¹.

And because of that wealth, entertainments were supplied...there were athletic contests and theaters. There were plenty of bars and there were countless outlets for the pursuit of the erotic. In fact, Corinth was notorious in the ancient world for its fixation with sexual self-indulgence. That fact led Aristophanes, a famous Greek playwright, to coin the word "korinthiazo"²...to act like a Corinthian as a euphemism for "committing fornication".

So Corinth was a bustling, thriving raucous sort of seaport Las Vegas...but it was also, and this might seem strange to us today, a very religious city. There were multiple temples and places of worship to all of the gods of Rome and to all of the mysterious gods of the near east. In fact, a man could find just about whatever he wanted in Corinth.

And that may have had an impact on Paul's decision to visit Corinth near the end of his second missionary journey. Paul, you see, would have known all about Corinth...he would have known about how the visitors to Corinth passed through Corinth on their way to the most remote reaches of the Roman empire... and he would have known intuitively that whatever he preached in Corinth would have been heard and disseminated widely.³

Anyway, Paul visited Corinth on his second missionary journey and when he did he came into contact there with Priscilla and Aquila, a Jewish couple that had been recently expelled from Rome during the reign of the emperor Claudius.⁴

What followed over the next eighteen months was an extraordinary thing...in the midst of pagan idolatry and extraordinary licentiousness, the Spirit of God began to cause people to respond to Paul's preaching...and many, many people were converted. In fact, Paul's success caused the Jewish synagogue leaders to

begin to persecute Paul. If you'll turn to Acts 18...you can get a sense of what I am talking about.

^{ESV} **Acts 18:11**...And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. ¹² ¶ But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, ¹³ saying, "This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law." ¹⁴ But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. ¹⁵ But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things." ¹⁶ And he drove them from the tribunal. ¹⁷ And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this. ¹⁸ After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.

Now in the time after Paul left Corinth, Apollos followed him in ministry there.

^{ESV} **Acts 18:24**...Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately. ²⁷ And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, ²⁸ for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Now last time, I pointed out that Paul had written a letter to the Corinthians prior to the letter we know today as 1 Corinthians. We don't know the full content of the letter but we do know that it had something to do with the discipline of a particularly notorious individual in the congregation at Corinth.

Apparently, the Corinthians disregarded Paul's advice (at least, some of them did) and the result was that a spirit of division arose in the church at Corinth.

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After that, the various people in the church chose up sides and began to dispute among themselves. Paul received a report of that dispute from a woman named Chloe and at the same time received a letter from the church at Corinth with a number of questions about particular topics which led Paul to write 1 Corinthians.

Last time I pointed out that the book was structured like this.

The first nine verses of the letter form a short introduction and then Paul moves straight into the issue of the divisions that had arisen at Corinth.

Now with that in mind let's look finally at the text of 1 Corinthians.

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If you would, open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 1. Let's look for a minute at the first nine verses.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:1**...Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: ³ ¶ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all

speech and all knowledge-- ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you-- ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now the first thing I want you to notice is that the introduction is fairly short and to the point. I want you to notice that it follows the standard form of introduction that is used in so many of Paul's letters except that Paul points out right off that he is apostle of Jesus (a special appointed emissary) not by the will of man or even by his own will but rather by the will God. I think Paul made that point primarily because there were men at Corinth calling into question his authority.

Secondly I want you to notice that Paul is accompanied by a man named Sosthenes...most commentators think that it is the exact same man mentioned in Acts...the man who had been the head of the synagogue at Corinth and had brought charges against Paul before the civil government at Corinth...and who when he failed to sustain a conviction against Paul was beaten by an angry mob.

If he is indeed the same individual, then Paul may be making the point that God himself has already overcome one of the most serious opponents Paul faced in Corinth and has caused him to be aligned with Paul as a helper.

Secondly, I want you to notice that Paul says the church at Corinth is God's church...you can see that in verse 2. Now the reason Paul makes that point, I think, is to counter the question that will come up a little bit later about whether it is Paul's church or Peter's church or even Apollos' church. Paul is starting the letter with the recognition that the church at Corinth belongs to God.

Finally, in verse 5 and 6, Paul makes the point that the individuals at Corinth are all richly gifted and lacking no spiritual gift as far as teaching or speaking is concerned. I think that may have been a gentle way for Paul to say, "It is not the intellectual understanding or spiritual gifts you lack. Rather, it is the disciplined obedience and love for each other that you lack."

That follows I think based upon what Paul says next in verse 10, when he moves directly into the first major section of the book...when he moves into the discussion of the party spirit at Corinth...and by "party spirit" I mean the "spirit of factionalism". Look at what he says in verse 10.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:10**...I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."

Now apparently, the church at Corinth had divided into various quarters ...each group with its own particular perspective and preferences...and those groups labeled themselves after noteworthy individuals in the church. And what Paul says, "Lose all that...instead be united...perfectly united in mind and thought."

And after that Paul's give the reason why they should be united. He does that by asking a question.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:13**...Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize

but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Paul goes so far as to say that he is glad that he did not baptize very many of the Corinthians. It is not that he is denigrating baptism in any manner but rather is glad that he did not baptize many of them because he did not want them to be confused about his ministry. Besides, Paul argues, he was not sent to baptize but to preach the gospel. And that preaching was commanded by Christ to be done in a certain way. It was preaching to be done, without cleverness of speech. But the translation fails us here and it hides the connection with what Paul is about to say in verse 18. That phrase translated “cleverness of speech” is quite literally “in words of wisdom”. Paul’s concern was that if he hid the gospel in “words of wisdom” it would invalidate the power of the cross.

Now, I would like for us to meditate on that for a moment. It is certainly a concern for any of us that ever have the opportunity to speak publicly. There is something intrinsic to the heart of man that so longs for acceptance that we will focus more on the approval of the audience than on the approval of God. We will spend hours on the turn of a phrase and only minutes making sure that we are clear. I am reminded of the quote that I heard Larry use dozens of times in the twenty years I worked with him...a quote he picked up from James Denney...

No man can at the same time show himself to be clever and Jesus as mighty to save.

Now, I am not a proponent of sloppiness with regard to preparation, but what we are seeing in the world today is an all out concession on the part of the church to worldly wisdom. This is how James Montgomery Boice put it:

And as a result or consequence of that lack of a well-defined theology, we find evangelicals buying into all of the world's ways of doing things. I sometimes say what you've got in the evangelical church today is what a generation ago the liberal church was guilty of. They were guilty of pursuing the world's theology, the world's wisdom, the world's agenda, and the world's methods.⁵

That's a stinging indictment, but I think it's worth looking at. Let me show something someone gave me a few years back. It is an advertisement for a new exciting church. Now, I am not against the church using modern technology. I know that there are many churches who are categorically opposed to things like pianos, or organs, or overheads. What I am opposed to is the clouding of the message in order to attract the interest of the world. That is, I think, an act of subterfuge. It is almost as if we are trying to slip an offensive message past an unsuspecting audience. Let me show you an example of what I mean.

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Now, the pastor of this church is a good man and he is full of integrity. I think he is genuinely interested in serving God well. But he has adopted a different tack than the one Paul is espousing here in Corinthians. Look at how they are trying to appeal to world. First, they start off with an obvious play on the word "entertainment" but the change it to "innertainment" trying to catch the interest of their mailing list with the cleverness of the phrase. But they go on to say it is "innertainment for the heart". There is something about the appeal to that word and all the emotions that it stirs that has made it such an important part of the culture. It sounds much like what author Gene Veith described when he said:

The language of rational assent is replaced by the language of aesthetics. Instead of saying "I agree with what that church teaches," people say, "I like that church." Instead of saying, "I believe in Jesus," people say, "I like Jesus." Of course, they

usually do not "like" the Bible's teachings on sin, Hell, and judgment. What they do not like, they do not believe. Truth gives way to pleasure; the intellect is replaced by the will. When people exclude truth, basing their faith on what they enjoy and what they desire, they can believe in literally anything.⁶

Now, returning to our tract for a moment, it says:

"Our church has been featured on Good Morning America where it received a 5-star rating by ABC Television. It is a contemporary church setting new traditions by communicating the Bible in a creative, compelling, and relevant way."

There are those societal buzzwords, "creative, compelling, relevant". It is difficult to tell whether they are talking about church or about the latest episode of "Oprah". But the problem of contextualizing the gospel is not a new one, it is something that has been coming like a slow moving freight train for a long time.

Over fifty years ago, the visionary A.W. Tozer wrote:

Thanks to our splendid Bible societies and to other effective agencies for the dissemination of the Word, there are today many millions of people who hold 'right opinions,' probably more than ever before in the history of the church. Yet I wonder if there was ever a time when true spiritual worship was at a lower ebb. To great sections of the church the art of worship has been lost entirely, and in its place has come that strange and foreign thing called the 'program.' This word has been borrowed from the stage and applied with sad wisdom to the type of public service which now passes for worship among us.

Whether you agree that such approaches are problematic, you cannot help but agree that it is not the way Paul did it. Paul did not rely on "**words of wisdom**", in cleverness of speech, or in the power of personality. In contrast, Paul says that he emptied himself of "**words of wisdom**". Instead, he looks to another word, a word that is radically different in its content and character. Let's look at verse 18.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:18**...For 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.

Paul's word is not a "word of wisdom"; it is the "word of the cross". He goes on to explain why he preaches the "word of the cross" instead of "words of wisdom". To do that he uses a wonderful Old Testament quote from Isaiah 29:14:

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:19**...For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."
He then proceeds to ask them three more questions.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:20**...Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world

Now, "Where is the wise man?" probably refers to Gentiles in general as we shall see in a moment. "Where is the scribe?" almost certainly refers to Jewish teachers and rabbis. Most scholars consider the last question, "Where is the debater (philosopher) of this age?" to refer to the Corinthians themselves. Regardless of who they refer to, Paul comes up with a startling conclusion which he states in the form of a question.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:20**... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world

You see, Paul is saying not that God has made the wisdom of this world to *appear* foolish. He has, instead, actually made the wisdom of this world *to be* foolish. He goes on to clarify why that is true. In verse 21, Paul writes:

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:21**...For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

Paul is saying that the world through its wisdom did not come to know God. This is true for two reasons: (1) the wisdom of the world is defective, and (2) God in His wisdom had no attention of allowing the world to come to know Him through its own applied wisdom because He intended to reveal Himself through the foolishness of a preached message. Now it is not that the message is foolish, far from it, but God has chosen the ridiculous to communicate the sublime.

He then goes to explain why the “word of the cross” is so absolutely foreign to the people that he encounters.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:22**...For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,

Look how Paul argues, “the Jews ask for signs, and the Greeks search for wisdom”. I want you to think about how that translates into the modern evangelicalism of our day. Think about the phrases you hear in describing so many of our churches, “powerful, compelling, relevant, practical, useful, insightful”. What I want to submit to you is that the church today is distracted by the importance of two ideas, power and relevance. We are lured with the prospect of seeing the power of God revealed in the lengthening of legs, or the healing of physical maladies, or the dysfunction of our families. Or we are lured with the prospect of learning 5 new steps to overcoming fear, or anger, or depression. But the content of Paul’s preaching is different, much different because he is proclaiming something which seems foolish to world. Paul is sticking with a different message,

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:23**...but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,

Now, Paul knew how such a message would be received. He had experienced firsthand the anger of the Jews and the derision of the Gentiles. That's why he could write that "Christ crucified" was

NIV 1 Corinthians 1:23... a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,

We get a sense of the Jews quest for signs and power from passages like Acts 19:11.

ESV Acts 19:11...And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, ¹² so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. ¹³ Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." ¹⁴ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵ But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" ¹⁶ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

We get a picture of how the message was received among the Gentiles from passages like Acts 17:16.

ESV Acts 17:16...Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babblers wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"--because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

At this point Paul preached Christ to the Athenians and look at their response in verse 32.

^{ESV} **Acts 17:32**...Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this."

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In fact, the Greeks or Gentiles viewed the whole idea as utter foolishness. I don't think that any picture better explains just how the ancient world felt about a crucified God than a piece of graffiti found on a wall on the Palatine Hill in Rome. The words say "Alexamenos worships his God". But look at the idea that was being communicated. The picture is of a man hanging on a cross, but the man has the head of a donkey. Some modern scholars have said that the ancient Greeks were confused about Christianity and thought that it was the worship of a God who was part animal and part man. But if you read any ancient literature at all, you find out quickly that they used the idea of a donkey the same way we do. They thought the man was a fool.

And Paul, himself, seems to admit that the message is indeed foolish to the world. But he adds,

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:24**...but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God

Notice, he says "to those who are called" it is the power and wisdom of God. This is an important fact to keep in mind as we evangelize. Acceptance of the gospel is not up to us, and that's a good thing, it is dependent upon a merciful

God to call sinners to repentance. We should polish our presentations not with cleverness but with prayer, and humility, and the truth.

We should be clear in our presentation of the gospel. Men need Christ not to resolve their inward anxieties but to allay the wrath of a Holy and Righteous God. Paul then reminds the Corinthians that if they really look around, if they really want to navel-gaze they should realize that,

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:25**...For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. ²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Paul is saying, "You guys want wisdom? Look around. How many of you are really wise according to this world? How many of you are powerful, or high-born? Paul says, "God has chosen the really goofy things of this world, the really low things, the really foolish things, namely you, to confound the wise." He goes on to say, "God has done this because He wants to remove any justification for boasting." In fact, Paul says "It is by His doing that we are Christ Jesus, so what reason do we have to boast."

This was an important step for Paul's argument to the Corinthians, because they were racked with divisiveness. He had gotten a report from Chloe's people that the church was splitting into factions and so Paul was cutting to the very heart of

the issue. The problem with the Corinthians, indeed the problem within Christianity today, is that we tend to think of our infinite worth in and of ourselves as opposed to our infinite worth in Christ. We are plagued with the outworking of our own egos and it happens both in the pew and in leadership. We, who are in the pew, occasionally come to brilliant and biblically sound insights, but do those insights come from our own wisdom or as gifts from God? What do we have that we were not given? That is a humbling way to look at ourselves.

And leaders in the church have been given charge over doctrine and practice but is that because they have some inherent wisdom that is intrinsic to themselves? The answer is, I think, no. Leaders possess no wisdom, no power that they were not given. This too is a humbling thought.

So if I could make an application it would be this. Keep the perspective of the cross in your dealings with brothers and sisters in the church. If God gives you an insight into His word, share it with humility recognizing that He has scoured heaven and earth to find the leadership he has put you under. Be gracious, be humble, try to maintain a sense of humor and go ahead and speak the truth,

If you are in leadership, remember God has scoured heaven and earth for those people He has entrusted to your care. Listen to what they have to say. To think that because you are in leadership, God will only communicate truth through you is extraordinary folly. Do not refuse the message because you do not like the messenger. Listen first for content, then evaluate the motives of the speaker.

Lastly, for both groups laity and leadership, keep in mind the perspective of the cross. There is nothing we have that we were not given. It is really not about us; it is about Christ and Him crucified. That should remove all our vanity and self-importance.

In closing, I am reminded of a story that I heard Dr. Criswell, the former pastor of First Baptist Dallas, tell. He was traveling with his wife in a rural part of New Mexico. It was a Sunday night and they were looking for a place to go to church when they stumbled on a Southern Baptist church located in a dilapidated old adobe building. Dr. Criswell entered a few minutes before the evening service started and the pastor recognized him immediately. The pastor became so agitated because of the presence of this great man of God that he finally came to Dr. Criswell in tears.

“Dr. Criswell,” he sobbed. “I just cannot preach with you here. I am so self-conscious about my inadequacies. Won’t you take the pulpit. It would be such a blessing to the people to hear a great preacher.”

Dr. Criswell said his heart was melted.

“Brother”, he asked, “how long have you been the minister here?”

The man looked around at the 10 or 15 people sitting in ancient chairs and swallowed and said, “I’ve been here almost forty years.”

Dr. Criswell choking back tears said, **“Brother, It isn’t me and it isn’t you. It is the Christ that we preach that is great. Of course, it would be an honor to**

preach for your people, but the real honor would be for me to hear one of God's faithful servants stand up with tears and humility of heart and proclaim the gospel that has kept him going all these years."

Dr. Criswell said the man regained his composure and went up before the people to preach one of the best messages he had ever heard. Later Dr. Criswell invited him to First Baptist to preach to his own congregation. Imagine preaching to 10 or 15 people one week and 10 or 15 thousand the next. But you know it isn't really about the numbers, or even about us, it is about Christ and Him crucified.

¹ C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Harper & Row Publishers: New York, 1968), 1. The term "wealthy Corinth" appears as early as Homer.

² Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1987), 2.

³ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1975), 17.

⁴ ^{NIV} **Acts 18:1**...After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.

See also: Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* translated by Robert Graves and edited by Michael Grant (Penquin Books: New York, 1989), 202 or section 25. "Because the Jews of Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the city."

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace? Rediscovering the Doctrines that Shook the World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001), pp. 20-29.

⁶http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID561416%7CCIID1415424,00.html