

Which wisdom are you going to choose? Human wisdom or God’s wisdom? Human wisdom is constantly competing with itself. God’s wisdom on the other hand unites his people under the cross of Christ. That is the choice the Apostle puts before the Corinthians...and us.

Some people believe Paul’s decision to reject an approach to preaching that emphasizes “*human wisdom*” is the result of his experience in Athens (recorded by Luke in Acts 17). They contend that Paul made an effort in Athens to present a philosophical gospel and it was a failure. They feel this is the background of his decision, once he arrived in Corinth, to know “*nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*” (v. 2). **While this is an oft-repeated interpretation, I don’t think a good case can be made for it, for several reasons.** *First*, all we have in Acts 17 is the introduction of the sermon, and while he does quote one of the pagan poets, Paul moves on to human accountability to God and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Second*, there were new converts in Athens. *But the best reason* to reject this interpretation is that there is no reason to suspect that there was ever a time in his ministry when Paul had the slightest question about his message or the manner in which he delivered it.

A better understanding is that he deliberately decided not to tailor his presentation to satisfy expectations of his hearers in Corinth. Verse 31 of chapter 1 which I included in our reading today clearly shows Paul’s motivation: “*Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.*” Paul knew that the Corinthians loved big words, clever oratory, and complex logic. But Paul decided this would undermine the message that he wanted them to hear. To shape either the message itself or the presentation of that message to please an audience would be wrong.

The desire to succeed and the need for approval from the crowd presents even preachers today with temptations to compromise. Around the time of our graduation a friend and seminary classmate of mine asked this question in all seriousness: “What do people like today?” He didn’t think people went for

“hellfire and brimstone” any longer and he suspected “therapeutic” preaching was on its way out. To be honest, that conversation made me sad. It’s like he wanted me to predict the next preaching fad so he could adapt himself to it. Paul knew exactly what they wanted in Corinth, but he wanted converts, not compliments. His calling was to be a witness, not a performer. Whether teaching a class, training our children, pastoring a church, or talking with a friend, it is important that our manner of life matches our message.

While Paul was not philosophical, there was a shrewdness to his preaching and writing that is well illustrated by his choice of the words: “*I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God*” (v. 1). There are some Greek scholars who say that a better translation for “testimony” is “mystery,” meaning the mystery that God reveals through Christ. Paul took a word that was commonly used by the *mystery religions* that were popular in Greece. They used “mystery” to mean religious secrets known only to an elite group of followers. Paul used the same word and changed the meaning to that which was formerly *unknown* but now was revealed to all believers.

Would you say the gospel is simple or complex? Well, we know it flows from the heart and mind and action of God. **In verse 9 Paul says, it goes beyond anything we have seen or heard or conceived!** What Paul is explaining is that he made a deliberate decision to center his message in Jesus Christ. He was not presenting Christ as a great ethical teacher, or moral example, or even as an inspiring leader, but as Jesus Christ “the crucified”—a contradiction in terms to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. Paul came to them with the *scandal* of the cross and announced to them a salvation that required them to admit their own unworthiness and helplessness before God.

Paul’s reference to his sense of insufficiency in verse 3 puzzles many folks. While his talk of “*weakness with great fear and trembling*” is written to show the contrast between his powerlessness and the gospel’s power, it also reflects what was going on in his life at the time he preached to the Corinthians. It could refer to his poor personal appearance or his unimpressive method of speaking (2

Corinthians 10:10). Perhaps he was suffering the effects of the hostility of the Jews in Thessalonica (recorded in Acts 17). Or he could have been awed by the great wickedness of the city of Corinth. There was some thought of his physical safety since this was the gist of Paul's special vision of the Lord in Acts 18. Paul's point was not so much to focus the attention on his inadequacies but to remind his readers that the power of the gospel did not come from its messenger.

The real proof of the power of the gospel is in changed lives. What authenticated Paul's ministry was "*a demonstration of the Spirit's power*" (v. 4). The gospel's most powerful argument is not in great sermons preached but in the change it brings about in people's lives. I remember studying all the rational arguments for *immortality* in a philosophy class I once took. We studied how the great minds of many cultures through the centuries dealt with questions related to death and the afterlife. I thought that after I became a pastor all this knowledge would help me to deal with people who were facing death. When I first sat in the hospital room with a woman who was told by her doctors that she was dying and there was nothing they could do, I realized how useless all the human theories about death and dying really are. But when I watched this Christian woman draw upon the resources of her faith in our Risen Lord to face death without fear, I realized the best argument for *immortality* is any Christian man or woman who has found **meaning in life and hope in death through the power of the gospel.**

Paul made a strong case in verses 1-5 that the gospel owes nothing to human wisdom. Moreover, both the message and the messenger are despised by the rulers of this age. But then he seems to be aware that people might take what he has written to mean that any kind of wisdom is bad. So, in the following verses he emphasizes the kind of wisdom that is good—God's wisdom. He teaches that there is such a thing as Christian wisdom. It is not to be confused with the world's wisdom. It is anchored in God's plan of redemption as revealed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. This wisdom is not understood or appreciated by "*the spirit of the world.*" "***But the Spirit who is from God***" unites all believers.

Paul writes this section because he did not want to create a kind of intellectual anarchy among Christians. The balance Paul was seeking is still needed in the church today. **There are parts of the church today that have a deep-seated anti-intellectualism.** Yet it's also true that in parts of the church, **learning is respected and “loving God with all your mind” is taken very seriously.** But too often, in discussions that affect us all, the church acts like a frightened, insecure institution, instead of like people of all education levels who come together because they want to **worship and serve the God of all true wisdom.**

Let's be clear. Paul did not believe that it was an act of intellectual suicide to become a follower of Jesus Christ. Instead, he focused every fiber of his being on understanding what he called in verse 7 *“God's wisdom.”* Because his preaching was purposely focused on the cross, his enemies accused him of being too elementary, of dealing only with the ABC's of Christianity. Paul answers that accusation and continues laying the foundation for dealing with the divisions in the church by presenting God's wisdom. He previously denied that divisions have been caused by either his message or his manner, so now he strongly hints that the root of the problem is a reliance on *“the wisdom of this age”* (v. 6) that makes it utterly incapable of understanding God's wisdom.

In verses 6&7 Paul uses a phrase that defines his thinking but it needs a word of explanation. He says, *“We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature...a mystery that has been hidden.”* One thing that makes studying the Bible interesting and challenging is that not only was it written in another language, but also in a different culture. Therefore, one writer will often use the same word to mean different things in different contexts. The word *“mature”* comes from a Greek word which translated literally means *“perfect.”* But it does not really mean those who are without flaws as it does those whose lives are being fully developed. He is contrasting *the mature* with the *“mere infants in Christ”* that he addresses in the next chapter (3:1). The real problem is not that the Apostle lacks wisdom, but that the church members are not at the place in their spiritual development that allows them to understand. Rick Warren once said: *“As a pastor I think about the spiritual maturity of my congregation all the*

time. I grew up in church as a pastor's son. I knew people who were in church all their lives and were still spiritually immature. They were self-righteous, critical, unloving, and jealous. They were taught the Bible all of their lives, and it hadn't changed their lives." It seems, our own society has created a mentality that says, "Amuse me and entertain me, but don't make me THINK and don't force me to GROW." This attitude creates a situation in which people never seem to get out of spiritual kindergarten.

When Paul speaks of "*a mystery that has been hidden*" Paul means *everything* that was hidden in the past but has now been made known by the revelation of Jesus Christ. Paul reminds the Corinthians that the gospel seems like spiritual nonsense to people who rely on human wisdom to work their way out of the messes we create for ourselves. Paul summarizes part of the solution to these messes and the people who create them in verses 9-10. He says, "*What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.*"

From a human point of view, what God has arranged for his dearly loved children is so *unfathomable* that it often remains *unimaginable* and *inaccessible* to us. People will not grasp the gospel unless they hear it from us and unless God reveals it to them. **We have seen, heard, and imagined it only because God's Spirit has shown it to us.** In the same vein, none of us will bear fruit for God's kingdom unless the Spirit empowers us to hear, understand and believe the gospel of God's grace. It is the job of us preachers to not get in the way of the Holy Spirit to convey *the wisdom of God* in the simple gospel.

This morning we have an opportunity to recognize Jesus as Lord of our lives. **In the simple gospel we can discover the wisdom of God that unites us all.** God could have withheld from this dying world his only Son and his Holy Spirit who gives us life. But God refused to abandon us. Thankfully, God sent us his Son and his Spirit to show us the wisdom of accepting God's amazing grace. Bless the Lord! Bless his holy name! Amen.