

Two Kinds of Wisdom

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Nearly all of us are familiar with Romans 12:2. Paul's appeal to reject the world and be transformed by the renewing of our minds is a familiar weapon in most preachers' arsenals. However, even though we know what it says, I fear that we don't give enough thought to what it means. The language of renewal and transformation is powerful and uncompromising. We are not merely to think a little differently than the world around us does. We are to think entirely differently, with attitudes, values, and goals that are nonsensical to outsiders. Nowhere in the Bible is this more evident than in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, where Paul condemns the Corinthian church for not having made this transformation. The topic is no less pertinent for us today. Let's look, then, at two kinds of wisdom.

Unity in Christ

The first section of this book contains Paul's plea for unity in Christ. As with every other Pauline epistle, with the possible exception of Hebrews, this one begins with a **GREETING**. Read with me from 1 Corinthians 1:1-3. This provides us first of all with an opportunity to re-acquaint ourselves with our long-ago brethren in Corinth. The city of Corinth itself was a famous port. As with all major ports, it was a cosmopolitan place where people from all across the Roman Empire mingled. It was also a famously wicked city, filled with all the vices which even sailors today are fond of practicing.

Both of these things had their impact on the Corinthian church. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians make clear that he is dealing with people with a wide variety of religious backgrounds. Some Corinthian Christians were ascetics, rejecting even the rightful relations between husband and wife. Others practiced gross immorality. Some were Jews; others were former members of various Roman mystery cults.

Not surprisingly, Christians with these varied backgrounds said and did things that horrified Paul and still horrify us. They cavorted with prostitutes. They got drunk during the Lord's Supper. They misused the gifts of the Holy Spirit to establish their personal prestige. Women tried to take over the assemblies.

And yet, despite Paul's often stark criticism of their behavior, look how he describes them here. This is the church of God. Its members are sanctified in Jesus. They are called as saints. Their spiritual immaturity and spiritual struggles did not make them any less disciples of Christ.

Today, when we deal with Christians whose behavior is less than it should be, we need to remember this. We are not Christians because we are perfect. We are Christians because we needed to be perfected. We are not Christians because we were righteous. We are Christians because we hungered and thirsted for a righteousness we did not possess. Even now, none of us show a full measure of these things. Let us deal gently, then, with our brethren whose behavior shows they don't have a full measure of them either.

Next, Paul details **GOD'S BLESSINGS** upon the church in Corinth. Consider with me 1 Corinthians 1:4-9. As is often the case when he's not upset about something, Paul's language here is strikingly beautiful. The Corinthians received all measure of spiritual gifts from Paul; indeed, I suspect that Paul's bestowal of these gifts was the "sign of a true apostle" that he mentions in 2 Corinthians 12. Nobody but an apostle could pass on these gifts. Paul says that these gifts confirmed his testimony about Christ, so that the Corinthians could be certain that Christ would confirm them to the end. Why? Because God is faithful. God wasn't going to let His people in Corinth down. He was going to give them what they needed.

Thankfully, God hasn't changed any in the past 2000 years. He is every bit as faithful today as He was then. He will always provide His people with what we need to carry out His work. We have the confirmed testimony about Jesus within the pages of His word. We have all the non-miraculous spiritual gifts that He shares so freely with His people. We even have the right to approach Him in prayer, so that we can ask for and receive everything that is lacking. God has given us all the tools we need to glorify Him.

Of course, this is no guarantee of success. Even though the Corinthians had been enriched in Christ with all speech and all knowledge, they went wrong in a dozen different ways. Knowing is one thing; understanding and living is something completely different. I suppose that all of us who have been Christians long enough have witnessed the sorry spectacle of brethren who knew better behaving with disgraceful ungodliness. It can happen to us. God is faithful, but that's not enough. We must be faithful too.

Next, we come to the first of a long, long list of negative things Paul has to say to the Corinthians. He condemns the **DIVISION** that existed in the church. Let's read together from 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. Paul tells them first of all what they should be doing. Just as Jesus prayed in John 17, the Corinthians are to be one as the Father and the Son are one: of one mind, of one judgment, agreeing in everything, and without division. What a beautiful concept! This, Paul says, is the way that Christians are supposed to be, working harmoniously together to glorify God. This must be our goal, no less than the goal of the Corinthians.

Sadly, the Corinthians weren't anywhere near this. There were various factions within the Corinthian church, and they aligned themselves with various spiritual teachers, all of whom but Jesus would have rejected the idea that they should have disciples. Paul points out that only the name and power of Jesus matter.

This is a text that we often use to condemn the denominational practice of naming themselves after men or of venerating men. Certainly, no man is worthy of that kind of honor, but as quick as we are to criticize others, we must be equally quick to examine ourselves. I've never heard a Christian say, "I am of Blank", except as a joke, but that doesn't mean that we have gotten rid of the disease of faction. Indeed, the history of the Lord's people since the Restoration is rife with faction and schism.

I'm afraid that in the case of many of those long-ago controversies, the ship has sailed. There's nothing we can do to heal those breaches today. However, we must make sure that we do not repeat history in our own churches. Disagreements within a local church are inevitable, but we must make sure that they do not become disasters. Over and over again, the Scriptures emphasize the importance of forbearance, humility, patience, and love in our dealings with our brethren. We must practice these virtues, especially when they are hardest to practice. Simply because Brother So-and-So sees things differently than we do does not mean that he is either a villain or a fool. He is our brother, and brethren need to work things out.

The Wisdom of God

From here, Paul moves into a discussion of the wisdom of God. This begins with his description of **THE FOOLISH MESSAGE** he preaches. Read with me from 1 Corinthians 1:18-21. At first glance, this seems like an odd place for Paul to go. How is this a solution to the Corinthians' unity problems? In order to understand Paul's logic, I think we must also understand what he is implying about the source of disunity. In dividing up into factions, the Corinthians are following the wisdom of the world. In every corner of the globe, human beings are a factious lot. Division and strife are as universal as, and caused by, selfishness.

In contrast to the self-centeredness of earthly wisdom, Paul presents the gospel of the cross, and a cross-centered viewpoint is fundamentally different from a self-centered viewpoint. To see this, let's try to understand the cross in the terms of worldly wisdom. The gospel asks us to believe that even though Jesus was enthroned in heaven with God, He voluntarily left that behind to come to earth, live as a peasant, and die in place of a whole bunch of people who actually deserve to die. To that story, the wisdom of the world makes two replies. First of all, no way would God ever do that for peons like us, and second, if God did do that, He must be an idiot! From the worldly perspective, the cross is a symbol of foolishness.

The gospel makes no sense to the selfish, but when we consider it from the perspective of spiritual wisdom, from the perspective of love and self-sacrifice, it becomes the most powerful and beautiful story ever told. No, it didn't benefit Jesus to suffer and die in our place, but He suffered and died regardless, because He loved us and desired to do whatever He could to help us.

Mercy like that baffles the wisdom of the world. Indeed, I believe that one of the biggest logical holes in the theory of evolution is its inability to explain human altruism. The law of the jungle rewards selfishness, not selflessness. If we are the products of the law of the jungle, why are we ever selfless?

In reality, we are not the products of the law of the jungle. We are the creation of a God who is *agape* love, and our acts of selflessness are echoes of the selflessness of Him who purposed before the foundation of the world to give His only begotten Son. As Christians, the spiritual wisdom of love, not the earthly wisdom of selfishness, is to be our guiding light. That, Paul implies, is where the Corinthians went wrong.

Paul then describes the way that this foolish message becomes **A STUMBLING BLOCK** for many. Look at 1 Corinthians 1:22-25. Today, we may think that we're experts in getting the gospel thrown back in our face, but Paul was and is the real expert in rejection. None of us has ever had a lynch mob after us, but that happened to Paul with dreary regularity. Here, we hear the voice of experience speaking.

He reveals that most Jews rejected the gospel because they found the message of a crucified Messiah to be a stumbling block. The Jews expected Jesus to lead them to victory over the Romans, not submit to a criminal's death. Likewise, they expected Him to be the Savior of the Jewish nation, not the Savior of everybody, and when they heard Paul and others preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, they were outraged.

Similarly, the Greeks thought the gospel was foolishness. Their gods were selfishness personified. No Greek god would ever be caught dead on a cross, so to speak. Similarly, many educated Greeks were materialists. They didn't believe in an immortal soul or life after death. When Paul preached the resurrection of the dead on Mars Hill, most of his Greek audience rejected him and his gospel out of hand.

Today, the gospel meets with much the same reaction. Just as the Jews did, many religious people of our day stumble over the teachings of the Bible. They can't accept the necessity of baptism for forgiveness of sins any more than the Jews could accept a crucified Christ. On that point, they are Scripture-proof.

Likewise, there are millions in our country who count the gospel as foolishness. Many of the most educated people in our society are materialists too. If they can't see it, they won't believe in it. Because the gospel doesn't fit the assumptions that they have made about reality, they too reject it out of hand.

Because of this predominantly negative reception, Paul observes that the gospel has caused a kind of **SOCIAL INVERSION**. Let's look together at 1 Corinthians 1:26-31. The Pharisees and the Jewish religious elite didn't accept the gospel. The Greek secular elite didn't accept it either, though of course there were exceptions to both rules. When the haves turned their back on the truth, that left only the have-nots, and indeed, Paul observes, it was mostly the poor, the forgotten, the overlooked who became Christians. Indeed, he reveals, it was always God's plan for things to turn out that way. God didn't want people who were interested in glorifying themselves. He wanted those who were interested in glorifying Him.

There are a couple of lessons in this for us. First of all, it tells us where we are going to have the most success with the gospel today. It isn't going to be with people who think they have everything figured out. We might think that our next-door neighbor, who goes to a denominational church every week and is chairman of the church's landscaping board, would be a great target for the gospel. Not so. He believes he's in a right relationship with God already

, and he's not going to be interested in anything that will upset that certainty, even if the thing that challenges him is the truth. Likewise, we might think that our scientist co-worker, with his great intellect and quick mind, will readily grasp the truth of the gospel. Sadly, he has most likely used his great intellect and quick mind to construct his own version of the cosmos, a cosmos that doesn't leave room for God. Now, there are exceptions to these rules, and we should never write anybody off because of his position in life, but usually, people like this are going to disappoint us.

Instead, those who will most readily hear the gospel are those who sense that something is missing from their lives, who don't think they've got it all under control or figured out. In short, people who are looking for a change are those most likely to change. These probably aren't going to be the most prosperous, prominent members of society, any more than the Corinthians were, but they will have an open heart.

Second, we need to use this stick to measure ourselves too. Do we take pride in our earthly accomplishments and social position? Do we think that we've got our lives pretty much under control? Or, instead, do we wake up each morning with a hunger in our souls that only God can fill?

We might be tempted to exempt ourselves from this analysis because we think that we've already found God in the truth of His word. However, we must remember that the gospel is always a call for radical transformation, and this is no less true for the disciple than it is for the unbeliever. None of us ever have the right to be satisfied with where we are. Instead, every day, Christ calls us upward. He wants us to become people we never dreamed we could be, all for His sake, so that all the glory will belong to Him.