

THE WISDOM OF THE GOSPEL 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

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INTRODUCTION

In this passage, Paul addressed those who claimed to be wise in the church at Corinth. They used their “wisdom” to divide the church and to promote themselves. These people valued and took pride in the human “wisdom” of the world. They had not trusted worldly, human wisdom for their salvation initially, but they had subsequently begun to emphasize such wisdom over the gospel itself. In their pursuit of wisdom, they became arrogant, wise guys.

Paul went to great lengths to show these people that their so-called wisdom was worthless. It could not save anyone; it could not further the cause of Christ. All it did was destroy. The wisdom the Corinthians were so proud of was actually contrary to the gospel.

In the last verse of the preceding section, Paul had touched on the fact that he had not allowed human eloquence and wisdom to obscure the power of the cross (1:17). In this section, he expanded on this theme by explaining why this approach to preaching was so important. Paul perceived arrogance and pride in human wisdom as a source of division in the Corinthian church, but this privileging of human wisdom would never do in the Christian faith.

To make this point clear, he focused this passage on three major issues: First, the gospel itself is utterly contrary to the kind of worldly wisdom that the Corinthians admired so much (1:18-25). Second, Paul also pointed out that the Corinthians’ own original experience of receiving the gospel contradicted their pride and in human wisdom (1:26-31). Third, the apostle reminded his readers that the message he preached was entirely devoid of human wisdom (2:1-5).

WORLDLY WISDOM AND THE WISDOM OF THE GOSPEL (1:18-1:25).

In this section, Paul established that the worldly human wisdom cherished by unbelievers opposes the wisdom of God revealed in the truth of the gospel. By basing their divisions in the church on human wisdom, the Corinthian Christians revealed that they had forgotten this basic antithesis.

1:18. Paul began by explaining (**for**) his straightforward manner of preaching (1:17) in terms of the ways believers and unbelievers view the gospel. On the one hand, **those who are perishing** (unbelievers) live according to the standards of sinful

human wisdom, and therefore wrongly conclude that the **message of the cross is foolishness**.

It is easy for those who have been believers for some time to forget how absurd the cross of Christ seems to the world. Christians soon grow accustomed to thinking of Christ's death as precious and wondrous, but unbelievers do not share that opinion. The central message of the Christian faith is that salvation comes only through the death of the Son of Man on a Roman cross, and this message is nothing short of foolishness to those who do not have saving faith.

On the other hand, the Holy Spirit brings a radical change of perspective to those **who are being saved** because they follow Christ. They rightly perceive that the Cross is not foolishness, but is **the power of God** which brings salvation from sin and death.

Paul pressed this radical antithesis between the outlooks of believers and unbelievers in order to help the Corinthians remember that the way of Christ is opposed to relying on sinful human wisdom. By this means, he pointed out that they thought and acted like unbelievers when they divided on the grounds of human arrogance and pride.

1:19. To support (**for**) his claim, the apostle appealed to Isaiah 29:14. In this Old Testament passage, the prophet rebuked Israel for trying to challenge God by relying on **the wisdom of the wise** and **the intelligence of the intelligent**. The Israelites to whom Isaiah spoke had trusted their own outlooks and understanding rather than the word of God. In times of trouble, they relied on their own wisdom instead of on God's wisdom. James described this kind of wisdom as "earthly" wisdom (James 3:15).

Isaiah, the prophet warned Judah that God would **destroy** human wisdom. He would do things to **frustrate** the intelligent, philosophical, and religious outlooks humans raised against his revelation. Paul employed this Old Testament quotation to demonstrate to the Corinthians that a fundamental antithesis exists between the true wisdom of God and that which the world considers to be wise.

1:20. Paul continued to point out God's opposition to worldly wisdom in four questions, the first two of which alluded to the book of Isaiah. 1) **Where is the wise man?** Isaiah spoke similar words in Isaiah 19:12 to mock the Egyptian wise men who could not comprehend the ways of God. 2) **Where is the scholar** (*grammateus*)? Isaiah also ridiculed the Assyrians for their arrogance in assuming they would be victorious over the God of Israel (Isaiah 33:18; compare 2 Kgs. 25:19; Jer. 52:25 LXX). 3) **Where is the philosopher** ("debater" NASB, NRSV) **of this age?** Here Paul focused more on the situation at hand. He associated the wisdom of words (1:17) with those whose boasting God opposes (1 Cor. 1:11-12). 4) Paul ended his series of questions with a question to which he expected a positive response. He asked if it were not true that God had **made foolish the wisdom of the world**. God had certainly done so in the days of Isaiah by defeating the Egyptians and the Assyrians. But Paul's idea was

greater than this. God had also demonstrated the folly of human wisdom in Christ in that human wisdom would never lead anyone think that God would crucify his Son to save man. By acting in a way that human wisdom would label “foolish,” God frustrated highly prized human wisdom.

1:21. How has God rendered worldly wisdom foolish? Paul explained (“for since” NASB, NRSV) that the world’s wisdom was unable to succeed in finding ultimate reality, namely God Himself. As hard as they tried to raise themselves to heights of wisdom, the greatest religious leaders and philosophers of the world **did not know** [God].

In saying this, Paul did not mean to indicate that unbelievers were entirely unable to know truths about God. God has revealed himself to all people in general revelation in creation (Rom. 1:18-20). Moreover, many unbelieving Jews understood much in the Scriptures. Instead, Paul was saying that the religious leaders and philosophers had not come to know God intimately, in a saving way, through their human wisdom.

In opposition to the efforts of sinful humanity, **God was pleased** to choose another way of salvation for **those who believe**. In the world’s terms, the way of salvation through the gospel is viewed as **the foolishness of what was preached**. Here Paul contended that God’s sovereign pleasure was to choose something that the wise of this world would consider foolish, namely the crucified savior. By ordaining this seemingly foolish means of salvation, God brought to naught all the world’s claims to wisdom. In a word, he made their so-called wisdom to be foolishness.

1:22. Paul expanded (“For indeed” NASB) on his assertion of 1:21 by pointing out particular ways in which the world’s wisdom had been foiled by the preaching of Christ. First, he described the standards of human wisdom that were endorsed by two groups: Jews and Gentiles. 1) **Jews demand miraculous signs**. The gospels record that the Jews repeatedly requested signs from Jesus to prove he was from God (Matt 12:38-39; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 11:16; John 2:18; 6:30). Yet, even the miracles he did perform did not satisfy them because he would not perform at their bidding. They reasoned that the true messiah would provide whatever proof the Jews required. For this reason, many Jews rejected Jesus. 2) **Greeks look for wisdom**. By and large, the Greeks (many Corinthian believers were Greek) did not demand miracles to corroborate the gospel. Instead, they exalted the standards of their pagan philosophies and poets. Ancient Greece was well known as the seat of many influential philosophers, and the Greeks took great pride in their philosophical sophistication. Their loyalties were not primarily to the empirical, but to that which was rational according to their own fallen standards. Many Greeks also rejected the gospel because it did not meet their standards of human wisdom.

1:23. In contrast to the standards of judgment used by Jews and Greeks, the apostle said he simply preached **Christ crucified**. Paul constantly used the Cross to represent the entire redemptive work of Christ. He was under direction from God not to reduce the Christian message to something acceptable to Jews or Greeks. In fact, the

gospel of the cross was a **stumbling block** to Jewish listeners and **foolishness** to Gentiles.

The Jews understood the cross of Christ as a demonstration that Christ was cursed of God (see Deut. 21:23), not blessed as they expected the messiah to be. Most Jews believed that the Cross provided evidence that Jesus was not the messiah.

Many Gentiles, in turn, could hardly have imagined a more ridiculous religion than one proclaiming salvation through the death of one man on a Roman cross. A God who could not overcome his human enemies and who died at their hands like a common thief was not a God one should reasonably trust for salvation. After all, if Jesus could not even save himself, how could he possibly save anyone else?

1:24. Although most Jews and Gentiles rejected the true gospel because it did not meet their standards of judgment, one group of people joyfully accepted the gospel of the Cross. Those Jews and Gentiles **whom God** had **called** to himself by the power of his Spirit were enabled to believe the gospel message.

When God's grace touched their lives, their old standards of judgment fell to the side. They saw with new eyes and understood that the gospel of the crucified Christ was **the power of God** to rescue them from the dominion of sin and to bring them salvation from divine judgment (see 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2:5; Rom 1:16; compare Eph. 3:20; Phil. 3:10; 2 Tim. 1:8; 1 Thess. 1:5). Moreover, the message of Christ crucified is also **the wisdom of God** which enlightens all who believe. The Christian gospel of salvation through the substitutionary death of Christ represents the wisdom of God in opposition to the pretenses of unbelieving Jews and Gentiles.

1:25. Paul closed this paragraph by explaining how one could accept the way of salvation in Christ as wise when most people considered it foolish. Believers have come to recognize something about the gospel of the crucified Christ. In reverse order of the expressions in 1:24 (first "power," then "wisdom"), Paul said that the gospel is **wiser than man's wisdom**. In other words, the message of Christ peers into reality in ways that far exceed any human wisdom.

Moreover, the gospel is **stronger than man's strength**. People cannot by their own power rescue themselves from bondage to sin, or from its punishment. This fact is evidenced in the inability of human wisdom to conquer "**the wages of sin**," that is, death (Rom. 6:23). Even so, the good news of Christ is able to rescue and deliver. It is so powerful that it can overcome even death (1 Cor. 15:54-57 ; 2 Tim. 1:10). Those who believe the gospel of Christ know the reality of its wisdom and power. For this reason, they stand opposed to exalting anything else above Christ and his saving work.

WORLDLY WISDOM AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE GOSPEL (1:26-1:31)

Having just mentioned how those called by God receive the gospel as God's wisdom and power (1:24), the apostle invited the Corinthians to remember their condition when God first called them. From a worldly point of view, they were utterly foolish to believe in Christ as the way of salvation.

1:26. The Corinthians needed to remember something about their status in the world when they **were called**. Showing his affection for them by calling them "**brothers**" (see also 1:10,11; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 7:24,29; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,31,50,58; 16:15), Paul reminded the Corinthians of several facts from the past which they had to acknowledge.

When they had first received the gospel, most of them were not **wise by human standards**. They were not **influential** ("powerful" NRSV), nor were many of them **of noble birth**. Some of the Corinthian Christians were prominent figures: Stephanas (1:16; 16:17), Sosthenes and Crispus (1:1,14), and Erastus (Rom 16:23). Nevertheless, most of the believers at Corinth were not affluent or powerful people. This fact stood in opposition to those who asserted themselves by means of human sophistication and power. When they were called, they had no basis from which to assert superiority over one another (1 Cor. 1:12) or to boast (1 Cor. 1:31) because they had no wisdom, no status, and no power. And yet, when God called them to himself, they believed the simple gospel. Unfortunately, many of the Corinthians had forgotten this experience and had appealed to human wisdom to find reasons to exalt themselves and to divide from one another.

1:27-28a. The Corinthian experience of the gospel made clear God's outlook on the world's wisdom. **God chose** people whom the world did not respect to be his people. The majority of Corinthian believers represented the **foolish, weak, lowly, and things that are not** (i.e. count for nothing) in the eyes **of the world**. Paul described the majority of believers at Corinth as **things** in order to indicate how little the world thought of their condition.

Even so, Paul also made clear that there was a divine purpose in all of this. God planned **to shame the wise** according to worldly standards, and **to shame the strong** in worldly terms. Although the Corinthians appeared foolish and weak to the unbelieving world when they trusted in Christ, they were not actually foolish for believing the gospel. Rather, the world was shown to be foolish and weak instead.

Paul did not use these unflattering descriptions of the Corinthians to belittle them, but to remind them that they initially had no basis for boasting (1 Cor. 1:31). When the Corinthians first experienced the gospel in their lives, they did not feel superior to one another and they were not divided. From God's perspective, nothing had changed between that time and the time Paul wrote — they still had no reason to boast, divide, or quarrel. Paul reminded them of this so that they would abandon those

things external to the gospel which caused them to treat one another disdainfully (1 Cor. 1:10-12).

1:28b-29. Next, Paul clarified the divine strategy behind God's choices even further. Why did God not choose the finest people on earth to be his own? He selected lowly people for a remarkable reason: to **nullify the things that are** (i.e. amount to a lot). In other words, God filled the church at Corinth with people who amounted to very little by human standards to demonstrate that these standards of value were terribly wrong. He defeated the false confidence of the self-important unbelieving world. The goal of this demonstration was plain. God wanted to make certain **that no one** might **boast before him**. The wise, powerful, and sophisticated of the world tend to boast that they became Christians because they deserved in their own right to be the people of God. The elect become elite in their own minds. In the same way, the Corinthians' boasts of being "of Paul" or "of Apollos," the source of the divisions in the church, demonstrated forgetfulness that their salvation never depended upon their own merit. But the lowly of the earth understand clearly that they have nothing in themselves of which to boast. They know well that they do not deserve to be in Christ's kingdom. Therefore, God chooses these kinds of people **so that no one may boast before him**. Throughout the Bible it is evident that people are to glorify God and not themselves (see 1 Cor. 10:31). God assured that this would be the case by choosing the lowly of the human race.

1:30. To dispel any remnant of pride that may have remained in the Corinthians at this point, Paul reminded them why they believed in the gospel. It was not because they were wise or powerful enough to receive salvation. It was **because of God** that they were **in Christ Jesus**. God himself is the ultimate force behind the salvation of those who believe. Although salvation is "by grace through faith," even faith itself is "a gift from God" (Eph 2:8-9). No credit whatsoever belongs to the humans who have come to Christ. All credit for this wondrous salvation belongs to God.

Paul described salvation in poignant terms here. He said that believers are **in Christ**. This expression appears 73 times in Paul's epistles (including Rom. 6:11; 8:1,39; 16:3,7,9,10; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 1:22; 5:6). Simply put, the phrase describes the saving relationship that all believers have with Christ. Believers are joined to him in baptism and become members of his body. For this reason, the judgment that Christ bore on the cross applies to all who are in him. Moreover, believers share in his resurrection life both now and in the final resurrection of their bodies (Rom. 6:3-8). Again, Paul emphasized this unity in Christ to reconcile the divided factions of the Corinthian church. [See also *Deeper Discoveries* under 1 Corinthians 1:1-17.]

Beyond this, Paul applied the wonder of salvation in Christ to the situation at hand. Because of believers' union with Christ, Christ has become **wisdom from God** to them. Paul reminded the Corinthians that their union with Christ had raised him in their estimation to the status of the greatest wisdom of all. They needed not to follow the

wisdom of the world, for they recognized that Christ embodied divine wisdom. His way for life is the way of wisdom.

Finally, the apostle delineated (**that is**) the nature of this wisdom which believers identify with Christ. It/he is **our righteousness, holiness and redemption**. 1)

Righteousness: Christ is the one who bore the sins of his people on the cross so that they might receive his right standing before God (Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9). 2)

Holiness: In Paul's vocabulary "holiness" or "sanctification," generally describes the purity which should characterize the daily lifestyles of believers (Rom. 6:19,22; 1 Thess. 4:3,4,7; 1 Tim. 2:15). The Corinthians had seen their practical lives changed by the power of the gospel of Christ. He had become the source of their holiness. 3)

Redemption: Christ purchased believers with the price of his own blood (Rom. 3:24-25). All believers have been "bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20). By piling up these terms, Paul reminded the Corinthians that Christ had become the most important thing in their lives. They owed to him every dimension of their salvation.

1:31. The purpose ("**therefore**" NIV; "in order that" NRSV) of Christ's exclusive role as the wisdom of God bringing salvation is that all boasting be done to the glory of God. Here Paul paraphrased Jeremiah 9:24. In his day Jeremiah warned Judah not to boast in their own wisdom and ability. They were to put their confidence entirely in the Lord to deliver them from trouble.

Paul recalled this verse in order to apply this Old Testament principle to his readers. Those who understand rightly will not be so foolish as to boast in themselves or in any other human being. They will only take confidence in and give credit to the Lord himself. Paul hoped that when the Corinthians ceased to boast in themselves they would be reconciled to one another.

WORLDLY WISDOM AND THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL (2:1-5).

So far in this section, Paul had asserted the antithesis of God's wisdom and the wisdom of the world by focusing on the content of the gospel (1:18-25) and the experience of believing the gospel (1:26-31). At this point, he turned to the manner in which he preached the gospel (2:1-5). Paul argued that he had not even presented the gospel according to the world's wisdom. Instead of employing worldly logic and rhetoric, he had focused his attention on the central message of Christ's death.

2:1. Once again, Paul affectionately called the Corinthians "**brothers**" (see also 1:10,11,26; 3:1; 4:6; 7:24,29; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,31,50,58; 16:15), and then reminded them that he had first come to them preaching without **eloquence or superior wisdom**. Earlier he had asserted that God had not sent him to preach "with words of human wisdom" (1:17). Here in 2:1 he affirmed that he had fulfilled this divine design.

Contrary to the practices of those who had divided the Corinthian church on the basis of human arrogance and eloquence, Paul had led with a different focus. He simply announced the **testimony about God** (some ancient manuscripts read “the mystery of God”). Paul had testified to what God had done in Christ. In his view, to preach the gospel was simply to make plain what God had done by sending his Son into the world. If Paul had presented the gospel eloquently and sophisticatedly, converts might merely have been swayed by his rhetoric and sophistry, and not by the Holy Spirit.

2:2. Paul explained (**for**) how he avoided human wisdom and sophistication as he preached in Corinth. He had determined to **know nothing except Jesus Christ**. In other words, he had consciously decided simply to make Jesus the center of his teaching while at Corinth. He chose not to involve himself in the practices of sophistry so prevalent in the cities of Greece at that time. He made the simplicity of his message even clearer in the qualification that he added: **Jesus Christ and him crucified** (compare 1:23). The crucifixion as the way of salvation was the most offensive dimension of the gospel. It stood in direct opposition to human arrogance, both from the Jews and Gentiles (1:23). But it was nevertheless the power of God unto salvation (1:24; 2:4).

Paul personalized his recollection for the Corinthians’ by the phrase “**while I was with you.**” The Corinthian church could not deny that they had come to Christ through a gospel that did not employ human wisdom.

2:3. Paul continued to focus on the manner in which he ministered earlier in Corinth (see 2:1-2). He had come with **weakness, fear, and much trembling**. In all likelihood, the **weakness** of which he spoke was his physical ailments. Paul had suffered physical abuse because of his faith in Christ (2 Cor. 11:23-28; 12:7). He also had difficulties with his sight (Gal. 4:15; 6:11), and perhaps other illnesses as well (2 Cor. 12:7-10). The expression **fear** and **trembling** was one of Paul’s favorite descriptions of apprehension in difficult circumstances (2 Cor. 7:15; Eph. 6:5; Phil. 2:12). The apostle did not come to Corinth asserting himself with human strength as the factions in the Corinthian church had begun to do. He came as a weak person — and in his weakness he brought the wisdom of God to the Corinthians.

2:4. Paul’s proclamation of the gospel at Corinth accorded with his physical and emotional state. He did not preach **with wise and persuasive words**. It was common in Greek cities of that day for philosophers and pagan religious leaders to gather followers through powerful rhetoric and philosophical sophistication. But Paul’s gathering of Corinthian believers to Christ did not rely on human powers. Instead, his human weakness made it evident that he relied on the **demonstration of the Spirit’s power**. The term **demonstration** was a technical legal term in Paul’s day describing irrefutable evidence offered in court (compare Acts 25:7). Paul’s preaching had the irrefutable support of the Holy Spirit’s transforming power in the Corinthians’ lives.

When the Corinthians believed in Christ, they received many powerful demonstrations of the Spirit's work among them (see 2:13-15; 12:7).

These powerful displays of the Spirit's work in the lives of the Corinthian believers accompanied Paul's preaching. He relied on these demonstrations rather than on human strength and wisdom. Even though Paul's preaching lacked sophistication and human wisdom, the fact that the Spirit manifested himself through his preaching proved that it did not lack power.

2:5. Why (**so that**) did Paul come to Corinth in this manner? He came with the message of the cross (2:2), in human weakness (2:3) and relying on the Spirit (2:4) so that the Corinthians' **faith might not rest on men's wisdom**. Greek culture tended to build its life on the worldly wisdom of its philosophers and rhetoricians. At this time, the Corinthian believers had begun to return to this cultural standard by exerting themselves in the church through human wisdom. In response, Paul pointed out that one of his central goals in his earlier preaching among them had been that they build their lives on a new foundation, not on **men's wisdom, but on God's power**. The power of the gospel (1 Cor. 1:18,24; 2:4) brought through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (2:4) was the foundation of the Corinthians' Christian faith, and it stood opposed to their reliance on human wisdom.

LIFE APPLICATION

This passage tells us that human wisdom will never support our Christian lives. When things go bad, we almost naturally begin to prop up our lives with human wisdom. We even try to make our church run smoothly with human wisdom. Some of us seek our own ways, rather than the glory of Christ, by using our intelligence and skills of persuasion. Others of us submit ourselves blindly to gifted and talented leaders in the church who lead us in ways that please them. But Paul made it plain in this passage that relying on human ingenuity and wisdom is like building a house on the sand. In the body of Christ we are to rely solely on Christ's wisdom revealed in the gospel. God's wisdom in sending Christ to bring salvation through his death displays the folly of relying on human wisdom. Just like the Corinthians, we did not begin this way in our faith. Nor did we receive Christ because someone was clever or eloquent. We need to get back to the sure foundation of our faith: the wisdom of exalting Christ above all others.

When reading a passage like this one, we gladly rejoice over its defense of the gospel, proclaiming its wisdom and power and disparaging all other belief systems as foolishness. This is a legitimate application of this passage, and Christians should take heart from it. We should be assured that God's wisdom is far superior to the musings of modern atheism which would counsel us that belief in God and Christ cannot be defended intelligently. God's wisdom in Christ far exceeds the attempts of his creatures to rebel against his revelation and work.

Even so, we are often tempted to prop up our lives and our faith with the wisdom of this world. Following this direction will be destructive to our personal lives and to the unity of the church. Therefore, we must find a way to overcome the temptation to follow human wisdom. Paul's remedy for this temptation was to remind us of three truths that we must never forget.

First, he made it clear to the Corinthians that what we believe as Christians is fundamentally opposed to the world's beliefs. Our values and standards stand in antithesis to the ways of human wisdom apart from Christ. In many modern cultures that have been significantly influenced by the Christian religion, it is sometimes difficult to see this antithesis. We tend to become used to the ways in which the world around us looks at life. Moral and ethical standards of our cultures become our own standards, and we don't even realize it. Then, just like the Corinthians, we begin to mix human wisdom with our Christian faith. In our modern world, mixing human wisdom in the forms of contemporary philosophy and science sometimes even leads us to deny the basic truths of the Christians faith, such as the resurrection of Christ and the authority of Scripture. One way to avoid this temptation is to remind ourselves of Paul's perspective here. We must always be aware that Christian faith is based on the wisdom of God in Christ. This wisdom seems foolish to the world, but it is in truth the wisdom of God himself.

Second, the appeal of human arrogance can be resisted when we remember our own condition according to the world's standards. Although some followers of Christ are very intelligent and successful even by the measurements of unbelievers, most of us are not. Paul reminded the Corinthians of this fact in their day, and we need to remember it now. The vast majority of Christ's disciples are not successful, sophisticated, famous, wealthy, intellectual, or beautiful. When we look at the body of Christ, the people whom God loves as the apple of his eye, we have to admit that God's standards oppose the standards of the world. An honest assessment of the body of Christ may embarrass us because we have often accepted the world's values. Yet, when we realize that we are God's special people, we can see how we need to adjust our standards to match God's. Wisdom is found in Christ, not in the world.

Third, Paul discouraged attachment to human arrogance by reminding the Corinthians of his preaching style. He was very simple and straightforward, not eloquent and manipulative, yet they had received salvation in this simple message about the cross of Christ. Isn't the same true for most of us today? Many people become followers of Christ at a very young age or at a time when they are not very sophisticated in their understanding about religious and philosophical issues. We come to Christ as young children, simply trusting him with all of our hearts. As the years go by, however, childlike trust often gives way to more intellectual and sophisticated thinking. Now, there is nothing wrong with deepening our understanding of theology, but sometimes we lose sight of the childlike devotion that must always undergird our lives. Return to the days when you first believed, and you will see how the simple gospel of John 3:16 will protect you and the church from the encroachment of destructively arrogant human wisdom.

DIGGING DEEPER

Power (1:18; 2:4-5)

Paul used the Greek word for “power” (*dynamis*) in a variety of ways. In 1:18, he described the “message of the cross” as the “power of God.” In 1:24, the “power” is Christ himself. In 2:4 it is that which Paul demonstrated when preaching, and in 2:5 it is that on which faith depends. Unlike *sophia* and *sophos* (see below), however, these different uses can be categorized fairly easily and explained by common usage.

Primarily, *dynamis* means “strength, force, might,” and related to this it may also mean “ability or capability.” *Dynamis* also has a variety of secondary meanings, including “meaning,” “supernatural spirit,” “wealth or resources,” and, most importantly for understanding the current passage, “deed of power, miracle or wonder.” This last definition seems to be the one Paul used most consistently throughout this passage.

Seen in this light, the gospel is the power (strength) of God because God converts people to Christ through the simple means of preaching. Paul did not spell this out here, but he did in Romans 10:17: **“faith comes from hearing the message.”** Christ himself is God’s power because he embodies God’s strength, and because he manifests God’s deeds of power, particularly in his death and resurrection.

1 Corinthians 2:5 has some ambiguity, perhaps referring to that deed which produces faith, namely the Spirit’s active regeneration of the believer. Paul also may have been thinking of the Spirit’s own strength by which he regenerates. Alternatively, the demonstration may be of charismatic gifts (1 Cor. 1:7; 1 Cor. 12-14), in which case “power” refers again to deeds or acts.

Wisdom (1:19)

The antithesis between the world’s wisdom (*sophia*) and God’s wisdom is central to this passage. But determining the exact nature of the types of wisdom is difficult to do. In the Old Testament, which no doubt contributed to Paul’s conception of wisdom, wisdom (*hacmah*) had quite a broad range of meaning, often incorporating ideas of prudence and practicality relating to the mastery of life and its problems. It also referred to learned skill or experience, and to ethical behavior. In both Greek and Hebrew thought, wisdom could indicate not only intellectual perspective or content, but also action and mode of life. Proverbs even personifies wisdom (Prov. 1:20-33; 8:1-36) and attributes to it a role in the creation of the cosmos (Prov. 3:19). This gives precedent and a framework of understanding to Paul’s insistence that Jesus himself is the wisdom of God.

Paul himself employed the word group *sophia/sophos/sophizo* rather frequently throughout his writings, with most of the uses appearing in 1 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, and Colossians. Interestingly, of Paul’s 45 uses of these words, 28 occur in

1 Corinthians, and 15 of those 28 occurrences are found in 1:18-2:5. Fully one third of Paul's uses of these words are found in this passage. Generally, throughout Paul, "wisdom" seems to denote true insight and understanding, and carries nuances of typical Old Testament usage.

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, however, presents some special difficulties. In particular, it would seem that in 1:19-20 and 2:2-4 wisdom probably designates a particular eloquence of language, or even sophistry. This was a common meaning given to the word centuries earlier by the sophists, and Paul appears to have resurrected this connotation of sophistry in this passage. In Greek culture contemporary to Paul, the Stoics had influenced the meaning of *sophia* so that it came to be perceived somewhat as the ethical behavior of a wise man. But in the passage in question, the wisdom of the world appears to be the actual knowable content (1:22; compare 2:6). Chapter 1, verse 21 is rather ambiguous, being perhaps referring either to knowledge itself, or to a system by which knowledge may be gained.

When Paul spoke of God's wisdom, his meaning may have paralleled that of the Old Testament (1:21,25), particular in his references to power (1:24; 2:5) and Christ (1 Cor. 1:24,30; compare Prov. 1:20-33; 8:1-36). Therefore, in interpreting the words *sophia* and *sophos*, modern readers need to take great care to avoid oversimplifying the words' complexities, and need to consider each occurrence in light of the aforementioned data.

Scholar (1:20)

Grammateus, the word translated "scholar," is frequently also translated "scribe." It often refers to an expert in Jewish law, so Paul may have intended this verse to challenge those who would interpret the Scriptures contrarily to the gospel. Such people, primarily Jews, opposed him in nearly every city in which he preached the gospel (Acts 9:22-23; 13:45; 14:2; 17:5,13; 18:6; 19:9).

Boasting (1:29,31)

Another important concept in this section of Scripture is the one which presented the immediate cause of division: boasting (*kauchaomai*). Contrary to our modern use of the term "boast," *kauchaomai* may be used positively as well as negatively. In this sense it is more similar to the idea of being "proud" rather than to that of being "prideful." For example, men may boast appropriately when taking pride in their God, and in his works and laws (Rom. 2:17; 2:23; 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17; Gal. 6:14; James 1:9). They may also boast appropriately in something truly meritorious which they (1 Cor. 9:15; Gal 6:4; Phil. 2:16) or others (2 Cor. 5:12; 9:3; Phil. 1:26) have done. But when they wrongly take pride in themselves for things for which they do not deserve credit, their boasting cannot be justified (1 Cor. 3:21; 4:7; 5:6; 9:16). At times, boasting

is rather neutral, seeming to refer merely to the act of relating favorable truths (2 Cor. 11:30; 12:1).

Clearly, the boasting which Paul saw in Corinth was sinful, causing quarrels and divisions (1 Cor. 1:10-11). But readers need to take care not to condemn all boasting. Paul said, "**Let him who boasts boast in the Lord**" (1 Cor. 1:31).

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. What makes the message of the gospel foolish in the world's eyes? What makes it wise in God's eyes?
2. Why did God ordain a gospel that the world would find foolish, and that would stumble the Jews? How does the gospel stumble the Jews?
3. If everyone thinks the gospel is foolish or a stumbling block, how does anyone come to faith?
4. Since the Corinthians had been converted by a foolish gospel preached in a foolish manner, why do you suppose they came to reject such "foolishness" in favor of the world's wisdom?
5. Does knowing that people naturally reject the gospel affect your confidence in evangelizing? How does knowing that the gospel is the power of God help counteract any lack of confidence you may have? Do you think you will look for more opportunities to present the gospel in the future?
6. Are you proud of your church? Are you proud of your church's particular theology and/or tradition? Are you proud of your Christian leaders? Does your pride in these things prevent you from uniting with other believers? Do you think that if you were as proud in the Lord as you are in these other things that you would find greater unity with other Christians?
7. What type of power do you expect to accompany the preaching of the gospel today? How do you understand the relationship between this power and the faith that rests on it?
8. How do you think this portion of Paul's letter relates to the portions that immediately precede and follow it? What is the flow of Paul's argument?