

THE WISDOM OF THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

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INTRODUCTION

Being an adult has many downsides: aches and pains, bills and pressures. But one of the great benefits of maturity is that it often opens our eyes to wisdom. We are able to see things clearly that we could never have seen in our youth.

What is true about maturity in the natural realm is also true in the spiritual realm. In this passage, the apostle Paul spoke about a wisdom that is only for those who are spiritually mature. It is a wisdom that comes from God and opposes the foolishness of a sinful world. Sadly, it is a wisdom that many in Corinth lacked, and a wisdom that many in the modern church still lack. Like the Corinthians, many of us today think that we can be wise without being mature. Or, we consider ourselves more mature than we really are. We think that we can make biblical decisions, but we don't realize that we lack the spiritual maturity necessary to recognize the biblical alternatives.

The radical contrast Paul set up between human wisdom and his Christian message (1:18-2:5) could have led to the misconception that the Christian Faith actually is foolishness. Paul carefully explained, however, that the gospel is a very special kind of wisdom that can be discerned only by the spiritually mature.

WISDOM FOR THE MATURE

Paul distinguished his message as wisdom for the mature in order to rebuke the Corinthians for seeking wisdom elsewhere. He pointed out that the wisdom they sought was actually less reliable than the wisdom Christ offered. By prizing human wisdom, the Corinthians were thinking in the world's terms, opposing the very gospel they professed to believe. He hoped by this course of argumentation to turn them away from worldly wisdom and back to the deep wisdom of the gospel so that they would abandon their divisions and be reconciled to one another.

2:6. Paul firmly asserted that he proclaimed **a message of wisdom among the mature**. In his view, those who have the seasoned outlooks of adulthood see that the gospel is indeed wisdom. This does not mean, however, that one must be a physical adult to believe the wisdom of the gospel, or that all physical adults have this wisdom. Rather, spiritual maturity is in mind. The contrast is between Christian wisdom and the wisdom of the world. Christian wisdom is the gospel, while the so-called **wisdom of the age and the rulers of this age** is the worldviews, sophistries, and belief systems which fail to recognize the gospel. Thus, all who believe the gospel and recognize it as true

wisdom qualify as “mature,” while those who follow the immature standards of this present evil age (1 Cor. 3:18; 2 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 1:4) do not accept the gospel as wisdom.

Paul mentioned the **rulers** (i.e. political leaders and the powerful) because they seem so successful and wise. Yet, if they do not accept the gospel of Christ and base their lives on it, then they are actually foolish. When Christ returns, all of their accomplishments will come **to nothing**. Although powerful people seem to have all they desire, they will one day suffer the judgment of God because they have rejected the true wisdom of God in Christ.

This verse reinforces the idea of 1 Corinthians 1:24-25 that God's wisdom far surpasses the world's wisdom. The metaphor of maturity points out that the world's wisdom is so defective that it compares to the simplistic thoughts of children (compare 13:11). By this argument, Paul let the Corinthian church know that their pursuit of human wisdom made them look like immature children who didn't even recognize what truth and wisdom were. By their boasting (1:31) and dividing (1:10) according to the folly of the world, they lived and thought like immature children.

2:7. If the wise and the rulers of this age do not accept the wisdom of the gospel, then what kind of wisdom is it? Paul first described it as **God's secret wisdom ... that has been hidden**. The wisdom of Christ's crucifixion was first fully revealed when Jesus ministered on the earth, but it had been hidden in the secret counsels of God **before time began**. Beyond this, God's eternal wisdom was **destined for our glory** (“predestined before the ages to our glory” NASB), unlike the wisdom of this age which is earthly, temporal, and brings destruction (2:6). The wisdom of the gospel is divine, eternal, and brings the glory of eternal life to those who believe.

2:8. To contrast earthly and divine wisdom even further, Paul noted that none of the powerful of the world (**the rulers of this age**), such as Pilate and Herod (Acts 4:27-28), **understood** the true wisdom of God. On the surface it may have seemed that earth's leaders had discovered the wisdom of God. They were successful in earthly terms. Yet, as proof to the contrary, their wisdom led them to crucify **the Lord of glory**. Jesus' death at the hands of Jewish and Roman leaders symbolized the antagonism between Christ and the earthly leaders who relied on human wisdom. The antagonism of these prominent political and religious leaders toward Christ should have made it clear that they had no wisdom at all. By pointing out this folly, the apostle disclosed that the pretense of human wisdom has no place in the Christian community.

Paul also dealt the Corinthians' pride a severe blow by telling them that their pursuit of human wisdom not only opposed the gospel and made them look like unbelievers, but placed them in the same company as the very people who **crucified the Lord** the Corinthians claimed to worship. Further, by mentioning that Christ is **the Lord of glory**, who possesses glory himself and is able to give it those who believe in him, Paul made sure the Corinthians realized that the glory they sought through association with particular church leaders (1:12) could never come to them through the means they were employing. For the Corinthians actually to receive glory, they needed

to repent of their human wisdom and to return to the pure gospel. They had to receive glory through Christ.

2:9-10a. Paul here contrasted (**however**) the belief that the rulers of this world understood wisdom (2:8) with the reality that they lacked wisdom. To draw out this contrast, the apostle alluded to Isaiah 64:4, and added elements from Isaiah 52:15; 65:17 and Jeremiah 3:16 (see also Deut. 29:4). Paul combined these passages to make his viewpoint clear. He pointed out how the prophets occasionally indicated that the wise plan of God remained hidden from all but those who loved him. The ordinary ways of understanding (**eye, ear, mind**) cannot perceive the mysteries of God. The rulers of the world (2:8) are adept at these means of perception, but these senses cannot discern the wisdom of God. God must reveal wisdom in a special way.

To drive home his main point, Paul applied the prophetic word directly to the Corinthians. Although the world cannot perceive the wisdom of God, **God has revealed it**. It has come in a supernatural way directly from God. Moreover, this word came not to the world but **“to us,”** that is, to Paul and other followers of Christ.

The propensity of many in Corinth to rely on pretentious human reason in their struggles within the church caused Paul to remind them that they did not perceive the gospel of Christ by human ingenuity. It could not be taught or learned by ordinary means. It had been foolish for the Corinthian believers to turn to human insight when they had discovered the ways of Christ through divine revelation **by the Spirit**. Paul affirmed as before that the wisdom of God comes through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church (1:4-5,18,21,30; 2:4,11-14).

THE SPIRIT OF WISDOM

Having mentioned that the Corinthians received the wisdom of God through the work of the Spirit (2:10a), Paul then explained how the Holy Spirit possesses and imparts true wisdom to the mature. Through this argument, Paul undermined the Corinthians' claim to spirituality — another source of their wrongful pride and divisions (14:37) — suggesting that true spirituality would not have led to their human wisdom. If they wanted to be truly spiritual, and truly to embrace the gospel, they had to turn from human wisdom to the pure wisdom of the gospel.

2:10b. He began with a bold statement, proclaiming that the **Spirit searches** not only **all things** of this world, but also fathoms **the deep things of God**. Nothing is hidden from the Spirit of God; he shares in the divine attribute of omniscience. Although an infinite number of things about God will always remain hidden from the human mind (Deut. 29:29), even these hidden thoughts of God are evident to the Holy Spirit. For this reason, he is the utterly reliable source of all human insight into the wisdom of God. None of this insight comes through the human wisdom of which the Corinthians boasted and over which they divided, so their divisions and quarrels were completely unjustified.

2:11. To lend support (**for**) to his assertion, Paul drew upon an analogy between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit. He began by acknowledging that many things about a person's thoughts remain hidden to other people. Yet, the person's own **spirit** knows these thoughts. No one can get inside the minds of other people as deeply as they can understand themselves.

The comparison with the Holy Spirit is evident. We are not able to peer into the mind of God from the outside by human wisdom. In this sense, **no one knows the thoughts of God**. At the same time, however, **the Spirit of God** knows and can reveal the wisdom of God to us. The Corinthians, of course, took credit for their understanding of the gospel and other spiritual things, thinking they had attained them through human wisdom. By correcting this error, Paul removed the basis for the quarrels and divisions that existed among them.

2:12. The importance of Paul's analogy becomes clear in his affirmation that he and the Corinthian believers had not come to Christ under the influence **of the spirit of the world**. No mere earthly wisdom brought the Corinthians to the gospel of Christ. **The Spirit who is from God** did this for them. The Spirit of God comes upon all who believe in Christ (Rom. 8:9) and reveals to them the mind of God (2:10,16).

For what purpose (**that**) does the Spirit of God come to those who believe? He comes in order that they **may understand what God has freely given**. Christians cannot understand the wonder of all they have received from God by observing things with their natural eyes. God freely gives the salvation that culminates in their blessings with Christ in the New Heavens and New Earth. The Holy Spirit enables them to see the wonder of this gift as well as the wisdom that leads to it.

SPIRITUAL AND UNSPIRITUAL PEOPLE

Having explained that wisdom is for the mature and comes from the Spirit of God (2:6-12), Paul next turned his attention to the kind of people who are able to receive the revelation of truth by God's Spirit. The truth of Christ revealed by the Spirit of God comes only to those who depend on the teaching of the Spirit. Because wisdom comes only by dependence on the Spirit, those who do not have the Spirit cannot judge the wisdom of those who do. More importantly for Paul's argument, even those who have the Spirit can resist his illumination and disqualify their own judgments. Thus, even though the believers in Corinth had the Spirit, those among them who pursued human wisdom instead of God's wisdom had no authority to quarrel or to divide the church.

2:13. The message Paul and the other apostles spoke was not an ordinary, natural message. **Human wisdom** (i.e. eloquent human reasoning) could not find the **words** to express it. Instead, it came through **words taught by the Spirit** who expresses **spiritual truths in spiritual words**. This final phrase may also be translated "interpreting spiritual truths to spiritual men" (NIV margin) or "combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*" (NASB). Whatever the case, Paul's main idea is evident:

the Holy Spirit gives a revelation that is very special and that cannot be discerned or communicated by ordinary means.

The word “spiritual” appears frequently in this context. It is important to remember that Paul did not use the term “spiritual” as contemporary English often does. Paul used this word to indicate that something or someone “has to do with the Holy Spirit.” In this passage he pointed out that the Christian gospel that he had brought to the Corinthians was from the Holy Spirit and was taught by the Holy Spirit alone. It could not be learned or communicated by human wisdom, as the Corinthians would have preferred.

2:14. The Spirit's role in bringing the message of the gospel raised an important issue for Paul: people **without the Spirit** are not able to **accept the things that come from the Spirit**. Only those who are under the influence of the Holy Spirit can receive Christian instruction with open hearts. The Christian message appears to be **foolishness** to people without the Spirit. They **cannot understand** the teachings of the Spirit. Of course, Paul did not mean that unbelievers have absolutely no understanding of the Christian gospel and instruction. It is evident that unbelievers can exceed the abilities of believers in many ways. In fact, Jesus' parable of the sower and the seeds indicates that unspiritual people can even grasp the gospel of Christ to varying degrees (Matt. 13:3-7). Indeed, Paul himself occasionally affirmed that unbelievers understand some truths (Rom. 1:18-21,32; 2:14-15). Paul simply meant that unbelievers cannot lay hold of or deeply appropriate the Christian message. People without the Spirit are severely impaired in their ability to understand and accept the instructions of the Spirit because their orientation in life is so contrary to the Spirit.

The teachings of the Spirit are foolish and cannot be understood **because they are spiritually discerned**. People without the Spirit cannot deeply grasp the revelation of God's wisdom because they hold to wrong standards of judgment. In one way or another, they employ the standards of human wisdom to judge the truth claims of Christ. The revelation of the Spirit, however, is properly evaluated only by the Spirit's work in the heart and mind of a person.

Paul laid out this perspective on unbelievers to prepare his Corinthian readers for a point he was about to make. They had the Spirit in their lives because they were believers, but they still had to evaluate whether or not they depended on the Spirit (see 3:1). They had to reassess their own habit of turning from the Spirit to the false wisdom of the world.

2:15. In contrast (**but**) to unspiritual people (2:14), the **spiritual man** is able to make proper judgments. Spiritual people are those under the influence of the Holy Spirit's power. They can see matters rightly. Paul said that spiritual people make **judgments about all things**, (i.e. all kinds of things). The insight afforded by the Spirit of God equips spiritual people to have wisdom in all kinds of areas of life.

Moreover, the insights of those taught by the Spirit are beyond **any man's judgment**. In other words, the wisdom of the world is not able to critique or scrutinize the revelation and wisdom of God. Without a doubt, Paul realized that the world often criticizes believers. He also knew that Christians often deserve severe criticism from human wisdom when they fail to live consistently with the revelation of the Spirit. Yet, as believers walk according to the teachings of the Spirit, they hold fast to outlooks and practices far superior to the ways of the world.

Though Paul knew the Corinthians were spiritual in the sense that they believed the gospel and had the Holy Spirit (2:16), he would soon criticize them for acting as if these things were not true (3:1). Their ability to have wisdom depended upon submission to the Holy Spirit's revelation (2:10). By this argument, Paul prepared to disarm those who would resist correction, and defended his own authority to speak to their problems (compare 14:37). He also destroyed the foundation for the arguments of those who caused divisions and quarrels, those who prized human wisdom. Their preference for human wisdom over God's wisdom disqualified them from judging rightly.

2:16. To support (**for**) his belief that the revelation of the Holy Spirit is beyond legitimate critique from those who rely on the world's wisdom, the apostle turned to Isaiah 40:13. In a context exalting the supremacy of God over all humans (Isa. 40:1-31), Isaiah insisted that God's mind is beyond human instruction. No mere human can **instruct him**.

This principle was relevant to the apostle's outlook because he and other people taught by the Spirit (**we**) had **the mind of Christ**. The Holy Spirit knows the mind of God and reveals it to his people through the teaching of the apostles (2:10-12). As believers' minds are influenced by the Spirit, they themselves take on the **mind of Christ**. They think as he thinks; they evaluate life as he evaluates it. Consequently, insofar as believers follow the teaching of the Spirit, they are beyond the criticisms and instruction of mere human wisdom. Those taught by the Spirit do not follow their own faulty reasoning; they learn from the Spirit who judges all other ways of so-called wisdom.

APPLICATION

Paul's words here challenge us to ask ourselves if we are firmly committed to God's wisdom revealed in Christ, or if we compromise with the wisdom of the world. We should consider this passage carefully, making certain that we base our own life choices on God's true wisdom. If we fail to do so, our best intentions and efforts may take us terribly far astray. As Francis Bacon wrote, "The lame man who keeps the right

road outstrips the runner who takes a wrong one. Nay, it is obvious that when a man runs the wrong way, the more active and swift he is the further he will go astray.”¹

In this passage Paul vindicated the wisdom of the gospel. He contested that the gospel is actually superior, mature, spiritual wisdom, while the world’s wisdom is inferior, immature, and unspiritual. This outlook has many practical implications for believers today. We will mention two important ways it applies to our lives.

First, we need to admit that Paul’s antithetical outlook is so radical that it is difficult to maintain on a daily basis. We live in a world where the truth of Christian faith is questioned and mocked every day. Television, books, magazines, ordinary conversations – you name it – we find that people whom we rightfully respect for their learning and skills scoff at the claims of Christ. As a result, we begin to think that *Christian* perspectives are inferior, immature, and unspiritual.

At times, this misapprehension is evident in the quarrels and divisions of modern churches just as it was in Corinth. Quarrels fueled by human arrogance are certain take place in the church today. But more often, we exhibit this loss of Paul’s antithetical thinking by compromising with the world. For instance, dishonesty in the business place is considered par for the course. “Greed is good” becomes our slogan as well.

Losing Paul’s radical outlook also leads many Christians to look for ways to make the gospel of Christ more acceptable to the unbelieving world. We fear appearing foolish to the world, and give up on vitally important Christian doctrines such as the resurrection of Christ and the authority of Scripture. We can avoid these tendencies only by reaffirming Paul’s outlook: Christian faith is true wisdom.

As we think about this passage in the context of our own lives, we should take heart that the wisdom of the world cannot match the wisdom of God. When science tells us that God cannot exist, and when philosophers dispute the coherence of our beliefs, we should find encouragement in the knowledge that their intellectual powers will never penetrate God’s wisdom. Because the Holy Spirit teaches us, we have greater wisdom than they. We know the truth of the matter, even if we lack the training to defend it properly.

Second, we need to take a deeper look into the causes of divisions and quarreling in our churches today. Every congregation goes through times of bickering and strife. Many causes lie behind these difficulties, but at the heart of most strife lie pride and arrogance. We may not cast our arguments in terms of philosophical sophistication as the Corinthians did, but we struggle with each other nonetheless because of a reliance on human wisdom.

¹ Bacon, Francis. *Novum Organum*, 61. From Witherspoon, Alexander M. and Frank J. Warnke, eds. *Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry*, p. 57. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1982.

To be sure, there are times when the essential doctrines of our faith are in question. At such times, we must take a stand. But more often than not, essential doctrines are not at stake. Rather, we use our natural reasoning abilities to develop dogmatic and divisive outlooks on issues that are more matters of opinion and preference. What color should the church carpet be? What kind of music should we have in worship? What time should the services begin? Who should be in charge of this program or that? In such matters, wisdom does not reside in our natural processes. It comes only as we base our outlooks and decisions on the gospel of Christ. The Spirit of God creates an attitude of humility and service. The words of James put the matter nicely: “If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in you hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil... But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (James 3:14-17).

We should rejoice that God has chosen to bless all of his people with the Spirit of wisdom so that we might be like-minded. He has given us the basis for like-mindedness in Christ, and the ability to be like-minded through the Holy Spirit's teaching. Rather than quarreling and causing strife like the Corinthians by relying on our own understanding, we must submit to the Spirit's teaching. Whenever we fall into divisions and disputes, at least some of us, and perhaps all of us, have ceased submitting to the Holy Spirit's teaching. Divisions usually cause us to dig in our heels and defend our positions. But our first reaction to division should always be to reevaluate our own position, making certain that it lines up with the gospel. We need to remain humble and teachable so that we don't mistake our errors for truth, so that we don't cause undue strife in the church, and so that we receive the blessings and glory offered us in the gospel (2:7,9).

DIGGING DEEPER

Secret (2:7)

The Greek word translated “secret” (*mysterion*) in the NIV may also be translated “in a mystery” (NASB) or “secret and hidden” (NRSV). In Paul's writings and in the New Testament in general, *mysterion* seems generally to refer to things that are beyond human ability to determine. In this sense, it corresponds closely to God's foolishness (1:18,21,23,25; 2:14). It does not primarily refer to things that are necessarily still unknown by humans. For instance, Jesus used this word to tell the disciples that it had been granted to them to know the “secrets” of the kingdom of heaven (compare Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10). Likewise, Paul wrote of the “mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known” (Rom. 16:25-26). This same idea appears in Paul's reference to “the testimony (*mysterion*) about God” (1 Cor. 2:1).

“Secret” also does not refer to something that should not be told to others. In fact, when it refers to the gospel (God's wisdom), it must be told to others: **“Pray also**

for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery (*mysterion*) of the gospel” (Eph. 6:19).

Freely Given (2:12)

What does it mean that the things God gives us are “**freely given**”? The Greek verb for this idea (*charizomai*) generally conveys the thought of giving without regard to merit. That is, God does not give the blessings of salvation and spiritual gifts because people earn or deserve them, but simply because it pleases him to do so. He is not obligated to give them, but gives them freely (compare Luke 7:21; Acts 27:24; Rom. 8:32; Gal. 3:18; Phil. 1:29; Philem. 1:22). This idea is also reflected when *charizomai* means “forgive” (Luke 7:42,43; 2 Cor. 2:7,10; 12:13; Eph. 4:32; Col. 2:13; 3:13).

Spiritual (2:13-15)

Paul contrasted the man **without the Spirit** (“natural” NASB) (*psychikos*) with the **spiritual** (*pneumatikos*) **man**. Generally, Paul contrasted *pneuma* (spirit) with *sarx* (flesh) (Rom. 7:14; 8:4-6,9,13; Gal. 3:3; 5:16-17; 6:8; Phil. 3:3), not with *psyche* (soul, nature). In fact, only in 1 Corinthians did he draw this contrast (2:14; 15:44-46). Some speculate that this was due to a special understanding the Corinthians had regarding these terms in tandem. Very frequently, *psyche* and *pneuma* are used synonymously, and neither term normally carries a negative connotation. Because of the rarity of this word pair in contrast, we need to be careful to inform the meaning of the individual words with Paul’s usage of the contrast in 1 Corinthians.

In 1 Corinthians 15:44-46, Paul related *pneuma* to Jesus and *psyche* to Adam, contrasting the two men in much the same way as he did in Romans 5:15-19. He also compared *psyche* to that which is perishable, dishonorable, weak and earthly, while he compared *pneuma* to the imperishable, glorious, powerful and heavenly. In 2:14-15 *psyche* describes those who do not have the Spirit, while *pneuma* refers to those who do. Clearly, *psyche* carries a negative force in 1 Corinthians when contrasted with *pneuma*. Some have argued that *psyche* describes those people who have a soul, but not a spirit, and that *pneuma* refers to those in whom the spirit has replaced the soul. No sufficient justification for this position seems available, though. Neither is there ample data to demonstrate a trichotomist reading of Paul. The most prudent course is to understand that *psyche*, when contrasted with *pneuma* in 1 Corinthians, identifies the corruptible, fallen condition, and that *pneuma* identifies the condition of salvation — and to press the words no further.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. Examine the various oppositions Paul set up in this passage, whether explicit or implicit (such as the explicit word “mature” versus the implicit word “immature”). How did Paul characterize the gospel and those receiving it? How did he characterize

the Corinthians? How and why were the Corinthians acting, thinking, and feeling inappropriately?

2. Do you personally think it is greater to attain wisdom by your own effort (showing personal achievement), or to be granted wisdom by God (apart from human effort)? Why? Does your own life reflect your answer, or do you act, think, and feel contrarily to the way you should?
3. What are the things that God has freely given us? Which of these things can we figure out on our own, and which of these do we need the Holy Spirit in order to understand?
4. If men without the Spirit do not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, how can they be saved? Doesn't the gospel come from the Spirit of God?
5. How did the Corinthians oppose the goals of the gospel? What does this say about their understanding of the gospel? How did they forget such important things? Have you forgotten anything important about the gospel? If not, do you think, act, or feel as if you have forgotten anything important about the gospel?
6. Do you have the mind of Christ? How do you know? How does this affect the way you think?
7. How should this passage of Scripture have helped solve the Corinthians' problems of divisions?