

A CRISIS OF ARROGANCE

by Doug Goins

In the passage before us there are three key phrases that the apostle Paul opens up for us: "the word of the cross" (verse 18), "the wisdom of the world" (verse 20), and "the wisdom of God" (verse 24).

This passage, beginning in verse 10 and continuing through the paragraph we'll look at here, has an odd tone. There is an edginess in the way Paul expresses his ideas that makes us a bit uncomfortable. Paul's mind is almost running ahead of the words as he writes; words tumble over themselves. It's difficult to untangle it grammatically. I found a helpful analysis of what I sensed in Paul's writing by Joseph Parker, an English Congregationalist minister who served in the London area from 1853 to 1892. He wrote:

"What is termed a whole body of theology might be gathered from this first chapter. Here we find God, Christ, the Church, the mystery of the Cross, and the fact of redemption. Why does the Apostle gather all these great doctrines around him, so [comprehensively] and [with such severity]? What is his business? We have not seen him in this urgent mood before; usually he has taken time to his work, but he is in it before we imagine he has begun it. He is excited. The excitement of love is upon him, and that is the keenest excitement of all. His charity is offended, his excellence of heart is annoyed, his sense of right is assailed. He has heard that the people in the Church at Corinth are setting up parties, cultivating small bigotries, multiplying contemptible sects. This the Apostle will never consent to. He says, This is wrong, this is contrary to the spirit of the Cross; sectarianism and Christ cannot live together; party spirit and the Crucifixion are as opposed to one another as darkness is to light. So he gathers all his thunders and lightnings, all his majestic conceptions of God, humanity, truth, destiny; he will not attempt to overthrow this by some wind of contempt, he will come down upon it as from eternity and destroy it in the name of the Lord."

In verses 10-17 we saw that the Corinthian Christians were boasting of party slogans. It was a clear indication that they over-valued human wisdom and human leadership. They misunderstood the nature of the gospel. They were quarreling over what Paul referred to as "cleverness of speech," or words of human wisdom. So now Paul is going to explain the difference between human and divine wisdom. Our paragraph today shows that the gospel of Jesus Christ is absolutely not a class of human philosophy, because it involves such a reversal of human expectations. Who could have imagined that God would work through the scandal of a Roman execution device? That would be like proclaiming salvation through the electric chair. Only God could demonstrate his power through a dying, powerless criminal of the state. It undermines all human arrogance.

The word of the cross

Look at the first phrase, "the word of the cross," in verses 18-19:

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

**"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
And the cleverness of the clever I will set aside."**

In contrast to the slogans that we examined in verse 12-"I am of Paul," "I am of Apollos," "I am of Cephas," "I am of Christ"-Paul says that the message of the cross is the only legitimate slogan. He immediately puts the

message in stark terms. The way he talks about those who are perishing and those who are being saved makes it clear that our eternal destiny hinges on the meaning of the cross. But our deliverance from causes of dissensions in the body of Christ is also dependent on the cross of Christ. The Corinthians' misunderstanding and the resulting division are not trivial. They are major departures from the message of the cross.

This phrase, "the word of the cross," means a couple of things in the New Testament. First, it refers to the historical fact of the crucifixion of Jesus. That event teaches us that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died a death wherein the penalty of our sin was placed on him, making it possible for salvation to be extended to those who believe in him. But in our passage, "the word of the cross" suggests the judgment the cross makes on human efforts to be righteous and wise. Paul will later refer to this as the offense of the cross. The cross is offensive because our highest aspirations, our tremendous human potential, our best motivations, our human wisdom, our good intentions, all pale in comparison to the beautiful life of sinless perfection of Jesus Christ. Christ was the wisest man who ever lived. Yet he was placed under the judgment of God and suffered a horrible, shameful death. And that is judgment on every one of us, from the brightest and best to the dullest and worst. As Christians we can never forget the judgment of the cross on our loyalty to human leaders, our pride, our false wisdom. The cross has to be a powerfully controlling image for the life and health of the Christian community. We all stand on level ground at the foot of the cross.

Notice the two contradictory evaluations made of the cross of Christ: To those who are perishing it's foolishness, and to those who are being saved it's powerful. That word foolishness is the Greek word *moria*, from which we get our English word moron. *Moria* had two different meanings. It could mean being illogical, irrational, inconsistent. Or it could mean being feeble-minded, mentally deficient. In this context *moria* has the former meaning. To individuals who are on their way to eternal destruction, excluded from God's kingdom, it is absurd that at the center of God's redemptive activity lies death by crucifixion.

Have you ever tried to share the gospel with a non-Christian who is completely self-sufficient, somebody who has an impressive record of achievement, who has known nothing but success in life? That kind of person is offended by the message that all of our self-effort, human wisdom, and skill are wasted before the cross of Christ. We have a young friend who visited PBC a few weeks ago and heard the gospel presented clearly. He said after the experience, "That was very interesting, but it didn't apply to me. I'm a good person, not a sinner. I don't need a savior." He was gracious about it, but the point was, it was foolishness-what is all this sound and fury about sin and salvation and redemption?

The contrasting viewpoint is held by those who are in the process of being saved. That includes the Corinthian Christians and all of us who have a personal relationship with Christ as our Savior and Lord. We see the cross for what it displays, the power of God. That power is at work in us who have been born again, in the process of salvation described by the apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14: "...God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." This lifelong process, which is also called sanctification, is one of transformation. It includes God's healing work in our hearts. It includes our deliverance from the reign of sin, with its insecurity and competitiveness and self-aggrandizement. And it includes a growing experience of peace and joy and wholeness in Christ. In Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 1:9, we are learning to "not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead."

The cross is an inescapable part of the process of salvation, and there are really only two responses: Either you're going to trust God and the salvation he offers, or you're going to trust yourself and your own resources. Thus the cross divides humanity.

In verse 19 Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14 to prove that this contrast between choosing to trust God and choosing to trust human wisdom is nothing new. Indeed, human-centered wisdom will be overthrown by God, it's always the way he works. God is never dependent on human ingenuity. The historical context for Isaiah 29 is the time when Judah was under siege by the Assyrian armies under Sennacherib. King Hezekiah called in the political and military leaders to discuss the crisis. Human wisdom said that the only way the nation was going to survive was to enter into a mutual defense treaty with the pagan superpower to the south, Egypt. Hezekiah listened to the counselors. The problem with that strategy was that it left God, their defender and protector, out of the picture. The people of the nation were not wholehearted in their confidence in godly wisdom, either, and

so they too trusted the advice of the military-political alliance.

Isaiah 29:14 was God's response through the prophet Isaiah to this political-military brain trust and to the people who believed in it: He would deliver the nation on his own terms without any help from the so-called intellectuals. Second Kings 17 tells us that God did exactly what he said he would do. He needed no human help. He set aside the cleverness of the wise. Paul illustrates the word of the cross with this story from the history of the Hebrew people of how God works, especially in terms of human redemption.

The wisdom of the world

The next phrase, "the wisdom of the world," is in verses 20-21a. We'll see three characteristics of worldly wisdom.

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God...

Paul asks three rhetorical questions at the beginning of verse 20. They basically suggest that the wisdom of the world has no standing on "true truth," as Francis Schaeffer would say. Paul loves these rhetorical questions. They echo the questions the prophet Isaiah asked the intellectuals of his day (29:16):

**"Shall the potter be considered as equal with the clay,
That what is made should say to its maker, 'He did not make me';
Or what is formed say to him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'?"**

Behind those questions Isaiah was saying, "Assyria is coming, and Egypt is nowhere in sight. Where is the wise counsel you got? How effective is this counsel going to be to save you?" What Paul does is refocus Isaiah's questions for his Corinthian brothers and sisters, because they too were enamored with human wisdom and counsel. We saw in the last study that they loved speech, knowledge, and wise words.

The Corinthians would have understood the three kinds of people Paul lists in verse 20. The wise man would be a general term for those who thought they had all the answers to the problems of life. The scribe was a Jewish figure that would correspond in our day to scholars, academicians, researchers. The debater was a Greek term for those who verbally presented the ideas that they believed would solve all society's problems. We can identify them today as social critics, pollsters, specialists, commentators. Remember that Corinth as a city loved intellectualism. It was full of dogmas, ideas, and doctrines of men who followed the great philosophers from the golden age of Greece. Even though that golden age was in the past, the Corinthians still loved to gather and discuss the great philosophical theories in the public squares.

The Christians of the city had assumed that this wisdom of the world could be added to the message of the cross. They didn't understand that the only wisdom of any value is cross-centered. The wisdom of the world has no standing on truth, and its own true nature is foolishness. That's really the point of the last rhetorical question in verse 20: "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" The world says the cross is foolish. But God says, "No, it's your wisdom that is ultimately moronic." And God is a better judge of that than mankind is. In essence he is asking what the true nature of human wisdom is, and the answer is that it's ridiculous. It tries to sound impressive, and it may radiate all kinds of optimism, but has an overblown opinion of itself.

A few years ago I found an article by a secular journalist in *Time* magazine that addresses this issue:

"The truth is that modern man is overimpressed by his own achievements. To put a rocket into an orbit that is more than a hundred miles from the surface of the earth takes a great deal of joint thought and effort, but we tend to overstate the case. Though men who ride a few miles above the earth are called astronauts, this is clearly a misnomer. Men will not be astronauts until they ride among the stars, and it is important to remember that most of the stars are thousands of light-years away. The Russians are even more unrestrained in their

overstatements, calling their men cosmonauts. Someone needs to say, 'Little man, don't take yourself quite so seriously.'"

Now, Paul is not against knowledge. God created us to be inquisitive, to investigate, to gather knowledge. The problem with fallen humanity apart from Jesus is that we still don't have a clue with the knowledge we obtain. The problem isn't with knowledge but with the wisdom that interprets and applies the knowledge to concerns and struggles.

The first half of verse 21 says that the major fault of the wisdom of the world is that it doesn't know God. Despite the greatest scholarship and all kinds of pretentious claims to have discovered the secrets of the cosmos; the wise man, the scribe, and the debater have all failed to discover and acknowledge the most important reality of all, God himself. No one can truly understand the natural sciences, the history of our race, or human psychology if they don't "come to know God"-not just the God of our minds or our common experience, but the God who is self-disclosing in the pages of Scripture. The influence of the wisdom of the world is always ultimately degenerative, destructive, disappointing, because in the words of the apostle James, it is the wisdom from below, not wisdom from above. It is the expression of sinful humanity apart from Christ, and therefore its influence and effect will always be disastrous. Isaiah 29:21 lists the destructive influences at work in the wisdom of the world: ruthlessness, scorn, evil, perjury, fraud. Those are the charges that Isaiah brings against the learned people of his generation.

Lambert Dolphin has written a wonderful definition of *cosmos*, the word that Paul uses here, in a distillation of this point:

*"The Greek word **kosmos**, meaning 'ornament, decoration, arrangement' gives us our English word 'cosmetics.' Hence a concern for external appearances more than inner content and quality. As used in the New Testament, the word does not refer to nature, but to the world-system, to society and human culture. The world system is outwardly religious, scientific, cultured, and elegant. Inwardly it seethes with national and commercial rivalries.*

The general characteristics of "the world" as the term is used in the Bible when referring to the fallen "world system" may be described roughly as follows. The world:

*Produces conformity to cultural norms or traditions and stifles individuality.
Makes use of force, greed, ambition and warfare to accomplish objectives.
Offers financial reward at the cost of one's soul.
Cares nothing for the worth of the individual or his uniqueness.
Promotes myths and illusions which appeal to human vanity and pride.
Diverts attention from spiritual values by appeals to pursue pleasure, pride or power.
Permissive sexual, moral and ethical values to encourage self-indulgence.
Superficiality of life and appeal to immediate pleasure rather than long-term goals.
Ignores eternal values and invisible realities.
Offers false philosophies and value systems to support its goals. The root problem is pride.
Exalts man, his abilities and his supposed "progress"--e.g. through the myth of social evolution.
Glosses over and hides suffering, death, poverty, the depravity of man, and accountability to God.
Seeks to unify mankind under an atheistic, humanistic or pantheistic banner.
Emphasizes pluralism and denies biblical absolutes.
Teaches human progress and advancement through better education or social welfare."*

The wisdom of God

In verse 21b God provides a wonderful solution to this influence of the wisdom of the world. God wades right into the middle of the mess with a message, and his wisdom is much more powerful than all this destructive influence. And it brings us right back to the power of the cross. Two big questions are addressed in these last few verses: How does God answer the world, and (in verse 25) what is God's nature?

Look at verse 21b. God uses foolishness to bring salvation:

...God was well pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

God has judged human wisdom because of its failure to achieve the highest good, to lead people into relationship with him. As a consequence, God saves us by a message that insults human wisdom and human pride. This message will have nothing of man's logic or his works. C. K. Barrett writes, "The wisdom of God is not a plan that humans would ever have thought of, because it operates through Christian preaching which, since it is focused on the cross, will inevitably be judged by worldly standards to be not wisdom but foolishness."

There were two groups in Corinth who struggled especially with the apparent scandal and foolishness of the message of the cross. They are described in verses 22-23:

For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness....

The Jews were demanding signs and wonders. They expected a Messiah who would come in obvious power, doing miraculous deeds. What did they see in Jesus? Somebody who was so weak that his enemies were able to kill him. Gordon Fee writes, "To the Jew, a crucified Messiah was an impossible contradiction, like 'cooked ice'!" The Jews demanded that God certify his activity by means of supernatural acts.

The Greeks looked for wisdom. As we've seen before, their delight was in clever, cunning logic, delivered with a soaring persuasiveness. So the idea that God's redemptive plan for the world was a Jewish peasant's dying as a convicted criminal was just too silly to even imagine.

But to accept the wisdom of God is to accept that people are weak, sinful, and helpless before God. It's to accept that we can't understand God on our own, we can't devise ways to reach him by ourselves. We have to trust God, not our human wisdom or power. This is a stumbling block to most people in our world. The Greek word was *skandalon*, from which we get the word scandal.

Jesus' crucifixion proved that he could not be God to the Jews, according to Deuteronomy 21:23, which said anyone whose body was left hanging on a tree was cursed by God. He would have been a suffering, dying, cursed Messiah. That was outside first-century Jewish expectations. Both the idea of incarnation and the idea of crucifixion were totally unexpected. The Greek religion could not handle a God who took human form and entered human experience, let alone a God who suffered at the hands of humanity and died.

The incarnation, from the cradle to the grave to the open tomb, proves that we can't reach God via the path of wisdom and human reason. God had to come to us and enter into our experience to save us. So the only response we can make is to believe in what God has already accomplished through the life and death and resurrection of Christ. Verses 23-24 are a summary statement of what salvation is all about:

...But we preach Christ crucified...to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Those whom the Spirit of God convicts, from whatever ethnic background ("Jews and Greeks" covers the whole earthly population), will find in the cross both godly wisdom and the power to transform their lives. In fact, the crucified Christ is truly the sign that the Jews craved because he is the power of God to change lives. He is the ultimate truth desired by the Greeks, the wisdom of God. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

The second question addressed in these verses, that of the nature of God, is summarized in verse 25:

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger

than men.

If we take the sum total of human intellectual horsepower, all the brilliance and wisdom from human history, we can't even get close to God's dazzling wisdom. If we lump together all the power we have to effect change, we can't even get near God's power. Paul is saying, "What an awesome God this is!" This is a statement of praise and worship. He bows down before the majesty of this astonishing God, because what man can't do, God accomplishes by this simple word about the crucifixion of Jesus and his judgment on the wisdom of man. I hope that if nothing else affects us from this study, we'll understand the greatness of God as well as the foolishness of the wisdom of the world, which can't hold a candle to the revelation of the truth of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. When we take the Bible seriously enough to study and learn it, then we hear what God says about life, because in the Scriptures we're dealing with absolute reality that strips away illusions, deceits, and the modern mythologies of our secular age.

Communicating the wisdom of God

Let me make a couple of points of application for us from verses 18-25. The first one has to do with the kind of evangelistic impact we can expect to have on our nonbelieving friends in the community. We're in a good season now at PBC. I've heard of more folks coming to faith in Jesus Christ than in a long time, because of people's witness and faithfulness and love. I had the joy of leading three people to Christ a few Sundays ago after services. I praise God for all of that. But this paragraph is a reality check, because it reminds us that we can't expect all or perhaps even most people to respond positively to the gospel. And these verses put apologetics in its proper place. We do need to formulate compelling arguments for our faith, but it's only going to be the convicting work of the Holy Spirit that brings people to Christ. And in neither evangelism nor apologetics is the scandal of the cross an excuse for putting unnecessary hindrances, such as lovelessness or insensitivity or tactlessness, before people whom we desire to win to Christ. The message may have its offense, but we can never justify being offensive ourselves in relationship to people.

Conversely, if Christianity becomes too popular, we'd better check to make sure that we haven't diluted it so that the offense of the cross has been removed. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor says, "Any attempt to make the Gospel palatable by bringing it into line with the tastes of those to whom it is preached distorts it, because in this case, the criterion is made the expectations of fallen humanity." When that happens the gospel loses its power.

A second point of application has to do with the issue of communicating this word of the cross, this wisdom of God, without getting it confused with the wisdom of the world. The Corinthian Christians had come dangerously close, in their claims of religious wisdom, to the wisdom that is in fact the domain of fallen humanity. They had become like the people of Israel, trusting the counsel of the politicians and military strategists. Secular advice, which is really false religion, especially if it masquerades as Christianity, is as empty as utter secularism, and it's more dangerous because it hides its true colors. Paul stopped short of accusing the Corinthian Christians of a complete sell-out, since they were indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but this paragraph offers a stern reminder that, in the words of John Polhill, "The cross stands as the final negation of all human attempts to attain God. Its truth cannot be achieved through the best of human intellect and strength, but must be received as a gift in the humble submission of faith and trust."

Our call as Christians now is to keep all of our counseling and witnessing and teaching and preaching cross-centered. That's hard to do in this age. Churches today tend to be seeker-sensitive. Felt needs are paramount. "User-friendly" techniques are advocated for any kind of church growth, and all of that subtle pressure does affect the substance of the message that is preached. Many people have rejected the idea of human sin and personal accountability for evil actions in favor of passing the blame to societal influences. These are the people among us who desperately need to hear the true meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The power of positive thinking or possibility thinking can in no way substitute for deep, personal repentance and the initiation of a relationship of trust with Jesus Christ, which transforms our identity and will continue to transform our self-image for the rest of our lives.

I have friends within the evangelical church who would disagree with me, who think that I'm being too narrow and rigid. They would call it foolishness. Secular and liberal-minded religious scholars as well as self-taught

philosophers and gurus stand at the forefront of the crowds that consistently mock Biblical Christianity. Anti-discrimination campaigns tolerate every bizarre and immoral ideology conceivable, but exclude born-again Christians. We shouldn't be surprised at this, but we ought to avoid the constant peril of trying to imitate secular standards of wisdom in order to find social acceptance or credibility.

I received a copy of an article in the *Stanford Report* entitled "Believers Become More Vocal." It included a series of interviews with various religious leaders at Stanford. It was an argument for religious pluralism in which all of these faith communities from around the globe would come together to share, to influence each other, to build each other up in a wonderful, positive way. Nowhere in the article was anyone who was committed to absolute Biblical Christianity represented, which amazed me, because the heading over the article was a quote from Job 28:12: "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" The answer the article gave was the collective awareness of these different faith communities that come together-man defining God, basically.

There was a quote toward the end of the article from the dean of the chapel at Stanford. He was rejoicing in a new awareness of religious issues. He talked about *God: The Biography* by Jack Miles, a Jesuit; *A History of God* by a former nun, Karen Armstrong; and Bill Moyers' PBS series on Genesis. None of these avenues would advocate Biblical Christianity as we're convinced of it at all. The article went on to say, "Add to that the Benedictine homepage, Jewish seminars and novel theologies that have sprung up on the Internet-*Time* magazine calls it 'a vast cathedral of the mind, a place where ideas about God and religion can resonate, where faith can be shaped and defined by a collective spirit.'" That is the spirit of the age-the collective wisdom trying to define the God who has revealed himself absolutely in the Scriptures. That is the wisdom of the world that we are not to associate with.

We've seen illustrated the danger of imitating the wisdom of the world. In each case something else replaces a frank admission of our spiritual impotence apart from the crucified and resurrected Christ's expressing his life through us, empowering us to live a life of wisdom that is built on the word of the cross. But God's power is real power that transforms lives. It is not of men, but it is offered to men. All we are called to do is be receptive.

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