

A CRISIS OF TRUSTING WORLDLY WISDOM

by Doug Goins

I was in elementary school when a college student named Jim Elliott wrote these words in his journal: "He is no fool who would choose to give the things he cannot keep to buy what he can never lose." I remember the impact in 1952 when he and Nate Saint and some other young men who were trying to reach the Auca Indians in Ecuador were martyred. What he wrote as a very young man, many people live their entire lives without ever understanding.

The church of Jesus Christ in Corinth struggled greatly to understand how substituting human wisdom for God's wisdom reversed what was of value and what was not of value in their lives.

It's important to remember that the apostle Paul was excited about this church. He loved these people. He was their spiritual father, having planted the church. It was a dynamic, gifted spiritual community. But their effectiveness in impacting the Corinthian culture and in ministering to one another was being undermined by jealousy, factions, intellectual arrogance, and selfish ambition.

In many ways, in these first four chapters, Paul is trying to get them to confront the seriousness of their problems. We've already seen that behind the crisis of division was a commitment to human wisdom and pride in their own ability to solve their problems. Paul has already contrasted God's wisdom with human wisdom several times in these first three chapters. We saw in the last message (Discovery Paper 4514) that if we still choose to embrace human wisdom after we've become Christians, if that's the basis of our investment in people's lives and our contribution to the church of Christ, then Paul says that we'll end up building with wood, hay, and stubble instead of the imperishable things of gold, silver, and precious stones.

In 1 Corinthians 3:18-23 Paul continues to challenge his Corinthian brothers and sisters in Christ about their love of human wisdom. Paul carefully contrasts the wisdom of this world in verses 18-20 with the wisdom of God in verses 21-23. What these Corinthian Christians have done in pretending to be wise by the standards of the world is show themselves to be foolish in the eyes of God. Paul says, "You must stop exalting men, put an end to divisions, deny any wisdom that you think you have, and instead embrace God's wisdom and the tremendous riches and blessings and resources that God gives." Verses 18-20:

Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, "He is the one who catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless."

SELF-DECEPTION

In these first three verses Paul warns them not to be deceived by what appears to be wisdom but really isn't. There are three sobering realities, one in each verse, about worldly wisdom. The first point that Paul makes in verse 18 is that worldly wisdom leads to self-deception: "If any man thinks that he is wise in this age..." Imagine how much conflict in our church could be avoided if each of us was not so impressed with his own wisdom. It's self-deception, Paul says, to believe that we are wise in terms of any contemporary human wisdom. C.K. Barrett writes, "Self-deception is the common fate of those who mistakenly fancy themselves wise; deluded in this, they are deluded in many other matters...They estimate wisdom by the wrong standards. Such men need to take new standards and reverse their judgments." That reversal of judgment is the point Paul makes in the clause "...Let him become foolish..." That means that we are to repent of intellectual pride, to recognize that human wisdom, including our own, is foolishness apart from God. As long as we consider

ourselves wise in terms of prevailing standards, it's impossible to become wise in God's ways.

In the last message we defined worldly wisdom as common sense, as the theories of natural man, as fleshly speculation or competing opinions about truth and lies, about reality and fantasy. It's only after repentance that we can be open to the new spiritual wisdom that God wants to give us by the Holy Spirit. Listen to what John Stott writes about this clause "...Let him become foolish...." in his book *The Preacher's Portrait*:

"To God's revealed message men must humbly submit.... I believe that this 'let him become a fool' is one of the hardest words of Scripture to the proud hearts and minds of men. Like the brilliant intellectuals of ancient Greece our contemporaries have unbounded confidence in...human reason. They want to think their way to God by themselves, and to gain credit for discovering God by their own effort. But God resists such swellings of pride on the part of the finite creature. Of course men have been given minds to use, and they are never to stifle or smother them, but they must humble them reverently before the revelation of God, becoming in Paul's word 'fools' and in Christ's word 'babes'. It is only babes to whom God reveals himself, and only fools whom he makes wise." (1)

How can we recognize the self-deceived, self-important wisdom of this age where it has crept into our church? We see it in people who feel the need to express their opinion on virtually everything, and in those who aren't happy unless they stand in opposition to the majority. Intellectual pride isn't content to listen gratefully and appreciatively. It always needs to criticize. Its very nature requires it to win on any issue. It can't stand opposition or contradiction. It responds to disagreement with condescension. Do you wonder how I know all this? Because I've struggled with intellectual arrogance most of my life. I'm talking about myself, and you may recognize yourself as well. Strip away the exterior of the wisdom of this age, and you'll always find pride.

FOOLISH AND DANGEROUS "WISDOM"

In verse 19 Paul makes the point that worldly wisdom has been judged by God to be spiritually foolish. The Greek word is *moria*, which is the root of our word "moron." It tries to sound impressive, and it may radiate optimism, but it has an overblown opinion of itself. Paul has already talked about that several times in these chapters. In 1:20 he asks four rhetorical questions: "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?" He is making the point that worldly wisdom provides no standing on ultimate truth.

The descriptive titles "wise man," "scribe," and "debater" would ring true with the people in Corinth. A wise man was somebody who thought that they had all the answers. A scribe was a Jewish figure that corresponds in our day to people of academia, scholarship, and research. A debater was somebody who presented the ideas that they believed would solve society's problems. We would identify these figures today as specialists, critics, pollsters, commentators, consultants, the people who write on the opinion-editorial pages of our newspapers. Remember, Corinth loved intellectualism. It was full of dogmas, ideas, and doctrines of men. They gathered in the public squares of Corinth and discussed the great philosophers of Greece's golden age, even though that age had been over for several centuries.

The Christians of the city had assumed that this wisdom of the world could be blended into their life and witness. They didn't understand that the only witness of lasting value comes from God alone.

Paul tells us something else about this wisdom in verse 19. He quotes Job 5:13: "He is the one who catches the wise in their craftiness." It's not just foolish, it's also dangerous. Craftiness means sneakiness, plotting. It looks wise, but it has a hidden agenda. The good news in that quote from Job is that God can see through it. God can thwart the plans of the crafty wise men of the world who have hidden agendas at work. Again, C.K. Barrett writes, "The wise are like cunning beasts of prey for whom the hunter is nevertheless too clever."

INADEQUATE TO BRING US TO GOD'S HEART

Paul goes on to point out another sobering reality about worldly wisdom in verse 20. It's totally inadequate to

bring us to God, not just initially in salvation, but in understanding God's heart and mind, God's design for human relationships and how we're to live life. The quote, "The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless," is from Psalm 94:11. In the context of that verse the psalmist thunders against the intellectually elite and politically powerful. He calls these people who pride themselves on their intellectual prowess "stupid" and "senseless." He says, "The Lord knows their reasonings." The Greek word for reasonings that Paul uses in his paraphrase is *dialogismos*, from which we get the word dialogue. The wisdom of the world can be very dialogical or conversational; it can sound very reasonable. But God says at the end of verse 20 that it ends up being useless. The Hebrew word for useless in Psalm 94 means a puff of air, a little wisp of wind that dissipates. The wisdom of the world won't endure the test of time.

How are we in the body of Christ influenced and deceived by foolish and dangerous worldly wisdom? Let me give you an example. I recently read a book review in the *San Jose Mercury News* of a new work by a sociology professor at a major university who has been studying family systems for thirty years. Her book addresses the debate that has gone on in our society during those thirty years over what is more important in child rearing, quality time or quantity of time. Back in the 1960's sociologists told us that none of us can give kids the quantity of time they need, so what we've got to do is focus on quality. The kind of creativity and stimulation we provide our children is more important. In large measure, the church bought into that. When I was working at Mt. Hermon twenty-five years ago, we had a family conference in which a church leader offered a workshop on quality time with children. His rationale was basically that you can't get quantity anymore, so go for quality.

What does the eternal wisdom of the Scriptures tell us about child-rearing? It uses vivid images. Proverbs 22:6 says,

**"Train up a child in the way he should go,
Even when he is old he will not depart from it."**

That really means that each child must be treated as a unique individual who requires shaping and molding and attention and investment. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to child-rearing. And it takes a lot of time to pay attention to your kids.

We studied Psalm 127 in our pastors' staff meeting last week. Its imagery portrays children as arrows in the hand of a warrior. Ancient warriors made their own arrows. It took lots of time and attention to detail to shape the arrowhead so the shaft would fly true and straight. We are preparing our children to be "shot" into the next generation, and there aren't any shortcuts; it takes time.

Psalm 128 envisions children as olive shoots around our table, little plants that need to be nurtured and cared for so that when they're big and strong enough they can be transplanted to grow on their own. We're preparing our children for that.

That's God's wisdom. But the wisdom of the world thirty years ago tried to tell us that we can take shortcuts and substitute quality for quantity of time. Now, the point of the book by this secular sociologist is that it was a lie—you cannot have quality without quantity. That deception has been unmasked even by the secular world. It's spiritually foolish and dangerous, even though it sounds reasonable. It undermines the quality of our family lives. And it never brought us to God's heart of love for parents and children. That's an example of how the church was influenced and deceived by the wisdom of the world, which is spiritually foolish, dangerous, and totally inadequate to bring us into God's design for us.

DISPLACED CONFIDENCE IN HUMAN LEADERS

In verses 21-23 Paul draws a wonderful contrast showing what life can be like in the church, in the family, and in interpersonal relationships when we choose the wisdom, purposes, and ways of God. There are three principles that we need to understand God's heart for us. The first one is found in the first half of verse 21:

So then let no one boast in men.

The point is that if we give ultimate authority to any human being in our lives, even someone who is spiritually sensitive, trustworthy, and mature, we're being much too limiting. We are to no longer place our confidence in the impact that human beings can have on us. Paul is touching on this in three different ways. We've already talked about the danger of trusting our own judgment too much. We've talked about the secular wisdom of the age represented by wise men and scribes and debaters. But he's also referring to the confidence we put in good Christian teachers, pastors, and leaders.

In the next verse he is going to mention the influence of himself, Apollos, and Cephas, through whom God gave wonderful spiritual leadership to the life of that church. But the problem was that the Corinthians had gotten distracted by these leaders' individual styles, personalities, and emphases, instead of hearing the unified voice, the common understanding of the message that they preached. Their loyalty to the men had become divisive in the life of the church. Don't exalt any kind of human leaders, Christian or non-Christian. Paul has already said in 1:31, quoting the prophet Jeremiah, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." To elevate people the way the Corinthians were doing was to give the creature loyalty that only the Creator deserved.

ALL THINGS BELONG TO US

Why would we want to be so limited to the wisdom of men, when we have at our disposal the wisdom and resources of God himself? That's the point of the long sentence beginning in the middle of verse 21:

For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.

Twice he makes the powerful statement, "...All things belong to you...." Either this is some exaggerated religious cliché or it's literally true. And in fact we have riches that we don't understand or take advantage of. We sell them much too short. We're willing to give them up to follow some human leadership or some human opinion or theory. In the New Testament there is a consistent pattern of emphasis on the truth that because we have life in Jesus Christ, we have everything. Paul writes in Romans 8:16-17, "...We are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ...." He also says in 8:32, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how will he not also with him freely give us all things?" There is no limitation on what will give us a life of health and wholeness. God has given us every resource that we can imagine in this inheritance with Jesus Christ.

Paul mentions six resources that we have in verse 22. These are positive things, and they are priceless in terms of value, and yet each one of them becomes problematic for us. They are things that we struggle with and are fearful of. Yet God has given them to us as enrichment.

Paul first mentions these three spiritual leaders-himself, Apollos, Cephas. We should rejoice in and profit from the spiritual leaders God puts in our life. But we should never allow any human spiritual leadership to take the place of the Lord Jesus himself in directing us. Teachers, pastors, and evangelists are great gifts to the body of Christ, but they can never approach the greatness of God himself, the giver of life. Whatever truth I have to share is not original with me. The Lord himself is the author of it. And it's the Holy Spirit who interprets it and brings it to life in your heart.

Second, he says we have the world, which is the word *kosmos*. It means the physical universe. This whole planet is available to us as fellow-heirs with Christ. The entire physical universe is a possession of God's people. Our heavenly Father made it for us. It's not a perfect world yet, it's still in the grip of the evil one, but it belongs to us with all its wonders and glories. It is a good gift even with all its imperfections and disappointments. And we as Christians can appreciate the natural world in ways that non-believers don't have a chance to.

Candy and I spent a week at North Shore Tahoe in June. We went hiking and biking. We enjoyed the grandeur of the lake itself and the crystal blue skies, white clouds, and snow-capped mountains. I remember sitting on the porch outside of our cabin by myself for about an hour one afternoon, watching the sun go down over the crest of the mountains in the west. I heard six different birds singing, the wind in the trees. Beauty was

everywhere. And what struck me was that I knew who had made it and gifted me with it. In love the heavenly Father, the Creator, created it for me.

*"This is my Father's world,
and to my listening ears
all nature sings and round me rings
The music of the spheres." (2)*

Our response is a sense of awe, wonder, amazement, and gratitude that we have this world.

Third, we have life, Paul says. That means new, spiritual, eternal life in Jesus Christ; God's own life in us. Through the Lord Jesus' death and resurrection, he inhabits us. He lives with us and in us. The apostle Peter makes it even more intense in 2 Peter 1:3-4. He says that God actually gives us his nature: "...His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature...." The power of God and the nature of God both have been given to us because we have the life of Christ through salvation.

The fourth thing Paul says we own is death. That's interesting, isn't it? Have you ever thought that you owned death? It feels more like it's the other way around, doesn't it? Death is something to be feared, something that we will become victim to. But the point that Paul is making (which he'll expand in 1 Corinthians 15) is that death is really a servant that delivers us to our Savior. That's all it can do. So we really do own death, because Christ conquered it, and so we've conquered it. There is nothing to be afraid of.

I was with Mary Kimball yesterday afternoon. Mary is in her eighties. She suffered a stroke awhile ago and is severely limited. Yet she talked about joy. The experiential joys have closed in a bit, but she spoke of the joy of knowing that she doesn't have to be afraid of death, because she knows that she's going to go to heaven with the Lord.

Paul says the fifth thing that belongs to us is "things present." That refers to everything we experience in this physical life. It includes the good things and the bad, the pleasant and the painful, the joy and the sorrow, the health and the sickness, the contentment and the disappointment. In God's providential care for us, all of life's circumstances serve us and spiritually enrich us. There is a purpose to them.

That was another thing that Mary Kimball was certain of. It's not enjoyable being house-bound, but she said, "I know God is at work through it." For one thing, it allows her to focus and pray without distraction. She prays for her family and for us at PBC. God is working that out through her limitation.

Mary is also not afraid of the future. That's the sixth thing Paul lists here, "things to come." That's the hope that we have of heaven. We have only a glimpse of it now, but it promises greater blessings than we can imagine.

This list, as I said, starts very narrowly with individual people God puts us in our lives to lead us, teach us, and bless us. But it gets broader and broader until it includes the vistas of eternity. We're looking into heaven itself. That's the breadth that Paul says the wisdom of God will give us. We don't have to have a limited, narrow perspective. We also don't have to live in fear of any of those six things. We were created spiritually to have dominion over all of them. Yet we struggle in all six of those areas.

God gives us spiritual leadership to enrich us, to lead us, teach us. Yet we are frequently in bondage to spiritual leadership. We end up in a tug-of-war, either willing to give far too much influence to spiritual leaders, to sell out totally and give them complete authority in our lives, or we're willing to cut them out of the loop, denying them the authority they should rightfully have. God says, "They belong to me, and you belong to me. They're there for your blessing, but they're never to take my place."

We aren't grateful enough for the tremendous physical world that we live in. Yes, it's fallen and very problematic, but ultimately it's a wonderful gift from the Lord.

We struggle with tremendous insecurity in our relationship to Christ. I had lunch with two dear brothers this week who are leaders in this church, and we talked about struggles in our spiritual life. We want our lives to count for Jesus Christ, but we live with a degree of insecurity about how we're going to do it, the impact that we'll have.

I've said that we don't need to be afraid of death, but we're all going to walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and we all struggle with it at one level or another. Charlie Tucker just finished a three-week series on the valley of the shadow of death in the Marriage Builders class. This group of young couples is really interested in it for themselves, their parents, and their grandparents. Paul says that we've been liberated from bondage to death.

Our circumstances and struggles do get us down, even though we say we believe Romans 8:28 that all things work together for good. We struggle with disappointments, like Mary Kimball's loss of physical mobility and freedom.

We aren't always certain of things to come. But Mary says she knows she's going to heaven. You can be absolutely convinced of that because of your relationship with Jesus Christ.

A VISION OF GOD'S GREATNESS

Paul says, "...All things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God." The truth is, we have all the resources and wisdom of God at our disposal. We are co-heirs with Christ in all things. Our birthright makes us spiritually rich in resources for living life to the fullest, and we are heirs of them through our relationship with Jesus Christ. We were created to live triumphantly. In the face of that kind of amazing truth, it's really foolish to settle for any lesser wisdom and authority.

My son Micah, who is sixteen, just got back from a two-week stay in Mexico. It was his idea to go and spend two weeks working in the prison ministry, Fundacion Immanuel, in Mexico City. As I was working through this material last week, I was interested in how many of these principles are beginning to come to life for Micah because of his personal experience with the Lord who designed it all.

Think about the wisdom of the world, what it would have said about a sixteen-year-old Anglo kid who hardly speaks Spanish going to Mexico City by himself to spend time in the prison system with hardened adult murderers. That's nuts! There's no common-sense value to that, is there?

But here are some of the things I've heard Micah say about the experience. He talked about the influence that Jaime Guerrero and Alberto Azevedo have had in his life. I am so thankful that Micah's experience of spiritual authority is not limited to me, or pastors at Peninsula Bible Church. In Paul's words, they all belong to him. I'm grateful for the years that Micah has had here and for the pastors who have built into his life. I'm glad that he has a dad who works here. But Alberto and Jaime have taught and modeled things for him that I can't. I don't even agree with them about every theological nuance of the church and spiritual life. But I'm so grateful for what we do agree on, and that Micah has seen authenticity in their lives and their relationship to Christ.

Micah is learning that all things do belong to him as a follower of Jesus Christ. He talked about how very quickly he felt at home in Mexico. I realized that he is becoming a world citizen, which we're all supposed to be, because of Christ whom he shares with the folks in the ministry there.

He talked about how God used him, his sense of the life of Christ being expressed through him, speaking through translators, speaking broken Spanish with folks in the ministry there.

He told someone who asked if he had been afraid on this trip that no, he really wasn't. He wasn't afraid to fly by himself, to go into the prisons, or to meet with street children in the barrios. He had a sense that God was in charge of life and of death. He said that God used him when he was tired, when he was badly sunburned, when he was homesick, when he was struggling with culture shock. He said, "Dad, over and over again, I would say, 'Lord, you're the only one who can help me. You've got to work.' You know what? He'd do it!"

God would give him the energy and morale to keep going.

I'm so glad that Micah has a new understanding of the richness of Christ's resources, the vastness of God. I'm glad that his horizons are being pushed out farther and farther. It is so easy for us to live with a limited, confined, self-focused horizon around what is problematic, around our loss and limitation. God wants to astonish us with his resources and greatness.

The following powerful quotation from John Stott's book *Essays in Evangelical Ethics* captures the kind of vision that the apostle wants for the Corinthians, and that he would want for us today. It is the vision of who God is, the breadth of his plan for us, his wisdom, the expansive view of how we ought to live life:

"The vision we need is the vision of God himself; the God of the whole biblical revelation; the God of creation who made all things fair and good, and made man male and female to bear his image and subdue his world; the God of the covenant of grace who in spite of human rebellion has been calling out a people for himself; the God of compassion and justice who hates oppression and loves the oppressed; the God of the incarnation who made himself weak, small, limited and vulnerable, and entered our pain and alienation; the God of resurrection, ascension and Pentecost, and so of universal authority and power; the God of the church or the kingdom community to whom he has committed himself for ever, and whom he sends into the world to live, serve, suffer and die; the God of history who is working according to a plan and towards a conclusion; the God of the eschaton, who one day will make all things new.

There is no room for pessimism here, or for apathy either. There is room only for worship, for expectant faith, and for practical obedience in witness and service. For once we have seen something of the glory of our God, and of the greatness of his commission, we can only respond, 'I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.'" (3)

Notes:

1. Stott, John R.W. *The Preacher's Portrait*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961, p. 99.
2. *This is My Father's World*, text by Maltbie D. Babcock.
3. Stott, John R.W. *Essays in Evangelical Ethics*. Exeter, England: Paternoster, 1978, p. 182.

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