

ATTACKING ARROGANCE

by Steve Zeisler

One of today's prime growth industries, it seems, is the business of the professional commentator. Technology has made it possible for us to use more words, both spoken and printed, than any previous generation. Can you imagine what the ancients would say if they could hear the thousands of people who are employed today making comments about everything under the sun?

Commentators are a strange breed. They are not held accountable for what they say. No one will burden them with following up on what they advocate. Yet they appear on our television screens, and in print, offering expert advice on everything from politics to sports. Movie critics and literary critics, most of whom have never produced an original work themselves, make a living by critiquing the latest movies and books. Pollsters inquire into the thoughts and feelings of various groups of people, without any responsibility to act on what they deliver. Thus the commentary industry grows apace, seemingly accepted by all as a legitimate arm of our modern media.

The reason for this, it seems to me, is that people have a deep hunger for wisdom. Everybody wants to know what the experts think, what the learned and knowledgeable have to say about current events, whether they be politics, religion, ethics, health, whatever. Thus there is a ready acceptance on all sides for any morsel of worldly wisdom from the media philosophers.

In his first Corinthian letter, the apostle Paul has much to say about this kind of wisdom. Worldly assumptions about what is true about life in all of its manifestations are described by Paul as "the wisdom of the world." In the passage from this letter which we will look at this morning, we will look at the apostle's profound insight and direction as to how to view what passes for wisdom today, and for what will supplant it tomorrow and the day after.

The Corinth of Paul's day, as we have already seen, was a fiercely competitive, immoral, high-energy place. The church which had been established in Corinth, unfortunately, began to take on many of the negative characteristics that were true of the culture around. That is so often the case with many churches today: they don't look or act very different than the society in which they are planted. The Corinthian Christians, as a result, were often competitive, immoral, and sensually-minded. Paul's corrective letter to the church at Corinth therefore is very valuable for Christians today.

Christians in many lands in this twentieth century consider it a joy to be called to suffer for the sake of the gospel. For them, being truth-sayers, and suffering persecution as a result, is very much a part of their Christian experience. The Corinthians had very few problems in this regard; nor, I would venture to say, do we California Christians. The books of Hebrews and First Peter, among others, were written to Christians who were undergoing persecution. But the Corinthian letters were addressed to people who were in danger of being co-opted, not persecuted, by the world. Far from being models of how Christians should live in a decadent society, they were infected with worldliness themselves. We who live in a culture that in many ways mirrors the Corinth of the first century--competitive, immoral and high-energy--will find that this letter seems particularly applicable.

We pick up the apostle's thoughts in verse 18 of chapter 1. He opens with a word on the cross of Jesus Christ.

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.

In verse 17, the apostle admonished that nothing he ever did or said should be used to void the cross of Christ of its central place in the Christian experience. The cross is the clearest demonstration of the justice, love, power and wisdom of God. On the cross, the Son of God--God incarnate--freely gave his life for those whom he would save. That is why the cross, and later the resurrection of Jesus, is the very heart of Christianity. No wonder the apostle declares in verse 18 that the "word of the cross"--bold statements of truth about the cross and the resurrection-- have such such a profound effect on humanity. He will go on to detail just what that effect is.

Notice, first, however, that the apostle in verse 18 divides the human race into two categories, namely, "those who are perishing," and, "us who are being saved." The ultimate issue confronting every human being is whether he or she is on a path that leads to destruction and death, or whether they are on the path that leads to abundance and life. Those are the only two categories of people that matter; all other divisions and classifications are secondary and trite by comparison.

Furthermore, note that this is a process; it is not totally settled yet. "Those who are perishing" are involved in a process, making daily choices that will lead them ultimately to that state. Thus it is impossible to judge by appearances whether someone is involved in the process of perishing. Likewise, it is equally impossible to determine whether one is in the process of "being saved." They have not yet been glorified; they are in process. Yet there is an incredible difference, a clear line of demarcation between those two categories of people. Although that is not obvious by outward appearances, the fact remains that, according to Scripture, there are only two kinds of people.

What produces the divergence, the break in the road that sends people on different ways, is the preaching of the message of the cross, the message of God's love for mankind in Christ, the dastardliness of sin, the certainty of death and judgment, and then, miraculously and mercifully, God's substitution of himself to atone for our wickedness. That is the "word of the cross," and that is what produces the responses Paul has outlined: eternal death or eternal life.

Secondly, notice in verse 18 Paul's reference to the "power of God." "The word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness,..." says the apostle. It seems ridiculous and embarrassing to preach that a man who was crucified and who died in dishonor holds the keys to life and death. What an apparently fallible concept to stake your life on! Yet Paul maintains that this very message of the cross is "to us who are being saved...the power of God." "The power of God." Paul is not speaking of religion but of power. We have manifestations of religion all around us--religious sentiment, images, rhythms, entertainment, activity, programs, and so forth--but Paul is not referring to these human expressions of the spiritual side of life. He is speaking of the touch of God, a personal, life-giving encounter with God himself. "The word of the cross," according to Paul, is the "power of God." He is talking, not about weakness or foolishness, but power--power that can change people; not ideas, not history, not memories of people who knew God, but the actual presence and power of God himself. That is "the word of the cross." And through the preaching of that word, God gains entry into some people's lives and changes them utterly; or else God's word is rejected by them as foolishness, with the result that they perish.

In verses 19 through 25, Paul turns his attention to those who are in the process of perishing; and in verses 26 through verse 5 of chapter 2, he will speak about "us who are being saved."

First, "those who are perishing":

For it is written,

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

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, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 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, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

God, said the prophet Isaiah, is committed to the destruction of the "wisdom of the wise." According to the prophet, God will destroy everything than man can do through his own strength and abilities--build great buildings, produce great works of art, express profound thoughts, manipulate nature to serve his own purposes. That is the ultimate fate of anything which the "wisdom of the wise," operating without the touch of God, brings about on this earth. History proves the accuracy of these words. One civilization replaces another, promising better things ahead, only to be relentlessly replaced in its time. That too will be the fate of our own twentieth century civilization. The wisdom of contemporary commentators, their prognostications, their promises, will, in time, seem like so much babbling. Everything that does not have as its center "Jesus Christ and Him crucified," will be destroyed, either by the next civilization, or at the coming again of the Lord. "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside."

Having quoted Isaiah, Paul goes on to ask, "Where is the wise man?" To put the apostle's question in modern terms, "Where is the expert, the commentator, the insider?" Paul asks, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" Don't you see, he is asking, that even as the wise man speaks, even before events and history reveal it, that what the worldly wise are saying lacks substance, that their words do not lead to life; that in the long run, as verse 21 charges, their words do not lead to knowledge of God?

Last week as I read my newspaper, I was struck by the growing number of people who are refusing to believe the experts' analysis of the AIDS crisis. People are beginning to say to the framers of opinion--the politicians, the medical community and others--with regard to AIDS, "I don't believe you anymore." Doctors are accusing legislators of not doing what they should, and giving their opinion as to what should be done in the face of this crisis. But the people are beginning to respond, "You say you are experts, but we doubt you have the power to do what we are calling upon you to do." Those who used to worship medical technology are now hearing the dread words, "We don't have any answers to this epidemic. There is no quick fix in sight." It is becoming apparent that "the wisdom of the world" has been found lacking in this instance.

Others advocate that AIDS victims be quarantined. Some even suggest doing away with them. They want no part of the process of "suffering with those who suffer" and "weeping with those who weep." But these shrill voices will not carry the day either. Like their counterparts on the other side, they too have come under suspicion, they too are hearing the indictment, "You're not giving me the whole picture." How apt is Paul's question in this context: "Where is the wise man?" What is the wisdom of the world doing with regard to this deadly crisis? People are becoming restive, sensing that the answers they are getting are inadequate, perhaps even deliberately misleading.

Another kind of "expert" who has been taking his lumps recently is the one who trades on sexual expression, the practitioners who maintain there are no absolutes and no guidelines in this area. For them, consent is the magic word. As long as adults consent, they maintain, then there is no basis for talking about what is right or wrong, what is moral and what is not. But again, people are beginning to say, "Wait a minute. You're not giving me the whole picture."

We can even imagine one of those doubting people musing over what is going on around him and finally coming to the conclusion that the only commentator who ever told him the truth up front years ago was his own Christian grandmother. She had talked frankly with him about these things. She had counseled him that saying "no" at times was OK; that just because he wanted to do something was no reason for doing it; that it was healthy to deny himself sexual expression until he could do so in the proper context, that of marriage and commitment. She had told him that sex was meant to serve in creating oneness; that it was not an end in itself; that it was an expression of love between husband and wife; that it used to be called "making love," not "having sex." She had told him that the spiritual implications of sex were much more profound than the physical. And her compassion for sufferers was genuine and active. Perhaps this is why we hear of people today beginning to doubt the experts. Instead, they are paying more attention to godly models from their past--and their present--people who are in the process of "being saved," and thus are ministering in the "power

of God."

That is the thrust of Paul's argument in this section. In every age the experts, the framers of social thought, the avant garde hold forth with their opinions. But a careful listener will think to himself, "Wait a minute. 'Where is the wise man?' I'm not getting the whole truth here."

The problem with the wisdom of the world, as verse 21 so clearly declares, is that it does not lead to a knowledge of God. It does not have power to direct one who is perishing from the path leading to death to the path that leads to righteousness and life. And the reason it fails to do so is that it ignores God, the source of all life, wisdom and truth. No matter how knowledgeable are the sages and opinion-makers, failure to deal with the source of all knowledge is a recipe for failure. Stanford University is about to embark on a billion-dollar fundraiser. We can be certain that among all the energies expended on that enterprise there is not one word being said about the fact that what people need to do is learn in humility to acknowledge the Living God and his Son Jesus Christ. Can you imagine how little money they would collect if they adopted Paul's words, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men," as their slogan? But that is not at the heart of their concerns.

Failure to deal with the "foolishness of God," however, says Paul, is what is lacking in the wisdom of the world. How can man possibly hold that wisdom which does not lead to a knowledge of God is wisdom at all, or that it will avail anything in the long run? It is a false wisdom, a wisdom that is wise only to "those who are perishing."

The two groups, the "Jews [who] ask for signs," and the "Greeks [who] search for wisdom" demand those things in preference to what God is offering. Those (whether Jews or not) who "ask for signs" are really asking the question, "What's the bottom line?" In other words, "Do you get results?" The Jews who challenged Paul sought a demonstration of power to authenticate what one was saying. Yahweh had delivered them from Egypt by opening the Red Sea for them and then drowning their pursuers. Their God was a God of demonstrated power and accomplishment. They find their counterpart today in those who would say, "Results are what I want, not theories or emotions. Well-meaning failures need not apply." To such, the message of Christ crucified is a "stumbling block."

The second group Paul highlights are the seekers after wisdom, those who pursue intellectual artfulness and the ability to gather up and make sense of various philosophical theories. Whether anything productive derives from their pursuits is beside the point. The precision of the thought-making process is sufficient for them. To those who held that view, of course, the story of Jesus' life and death was so much nonsense. An enigmatic rabbi, surrounded by his uneducated followers, preaching a message of trust and humility, was something no educated Greek could abide. It was, as Paul says, "foolishness." How could such a message possibly compare or even find a place in the grand scope of man's discoveries? they asked.

So the message of the cross, a crucified Messiah, was a stumbling block to the Jews who sought signs, and foolishness to the Greeks who worshiped at the shrine of wisdom and intellectualism. But that very message of the cross was what Paul was offering to both Jews and Gentiles dying of a terminal disease. The cross of Christ was the power of God to rescue them if they would but believe in him, says Paul, "because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." God had found a way in Christ to rescue man from his own wisdom.

Next, Paul turns his attention to those who "are being saved." He refers, first, in 1: 26, to the experience of the Corinthian Christians, saying, "consider your calling," and then, second, to his own experience (2:1), in the phrase "when I came to you." Here, then, the apostle reflects on the church in Corinth, helping those "who are being saved" think through their own experience; and then telling them a few facts about Christian leadership, what was going through his mind as he preached the message of Christ crucified, the foolishness of the cross.

Verse 26:

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame

the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Paul is telling the Corinthians that when they came to Christ, not many of them were impressive according to the standards of the world. Not one among them was an automatic first place finisher in any endeavor. They were not particularly wise by worldly standards; they were not impressive and mighty. "Ordinary people," is what we would call them today. They did not take their seats on the boards of major corporations; they did not wield great power in the market-place. Paul may even be saying, by extension, to those among us who may be impressive, those of us who may have the right credentials according to the world, that it was not those successes which led us to Christ. On the contrary, it was our periods of failure, the acknowledgement of our own inadequacy that finally brought us to repentance and to faith. "Consider your calling, brethren," says Paul, "you are not a community that has any right to be impressed with yourselves. It was your failure, not your success, that brought you to Christ."

The whole thrust of Paul's argument that is centered in verses 29 through 31, of course, is that there is no room for boasting. No man can boast before God. It is God's doing that we are in Christ Jesus. Therefore, says Paul, quoting the prophet Jeremiah, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." If you feel like waving the flag, if you feel like beating the drum for anyone, the Lord is the one you should boast in.

Many people come to church because they want to hob-nob. They are on the look-out for people who are wealthy, powerful, charming, good-looking, whatever, and they gravitate towards such in an effort to advance themselves and feel more important. They have no thought for the value of being part of a body of believers. They are more interested in power, influence, and popularity. But Paul is saying here that if one is really a Christian, there should be no one in the body who is more attractive and impressive than any other. We have just seen that he has told the Corinthians that not many of them were wise, mighty, or noble, and that even if a few among them were some of those things at one point, they had since come to the realization that that was a hindrance, if anything, rather than a help unto repentance and faith. If we seek out other Christians because their company will reflect well on ourselves, then we are losing our way; we are missing out. That is not why we meet together as a body. "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

I would like to point out here that when Paul says that the wisdom of the world is faulty and failing, he is definitely not suggesting that Christians should not think for themselves. There is a misconception abroad that Christians are ignorant people and that they revel in it. They don't ever think for themselves, come up with an original thought, travel anywhere so as to learn, goes this theory, but remain rigid, uptight and anti-intellectual. That is not at all what Paul is saying here. Rather, he is referring to a wisdom that is arrogant, a wisdom that refuses to "boast in the Lord," one that exalts human efforts and accomplishments to the exclusion of God. Far from being against all wisdom, Paul even says in 2:6 of this letter, "Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age..." There are many things in this world which can engage the minds of Christians. God expects us to use our minds to pursue learning and adventure. Having said that, however, what the apostle is at pains to remind us is that we should not boast in ourselves and our wisdom to the exclusion of God.

Having asked his readers in Corinth to consider their calling, the apostle now goes on in this closing section to speak of his own experience.

Chapter 2:

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of

wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

What a great passage this is for preachers! As I worked on this message last week, I felt embarrassed over the amount of time and effort I sometimes expend in order to sound good; not to clearly expound the truth with honesty and hope, but to look and sound good while I was doing it. But that is the very thing Paul says he was determined not to do. He made a mental note to himself to resist trying to persuade people of the truth of the gospel by rhetoric, style of speaking or visual imagery. And he did this, of course, because he did not want their assent to the truth to be based on anything but the Spirit; not on the human instrument, not on the manner of delivery.

Paul confesses that he is not a great orator, that he did not "come with superiority of speech or of wisdom." He did not generate enthusiasm among his hearers by his powers of speech. On the contrary, he confesses he spoke in "weakness and in fear and in much trembling." He had arrived in Corinth because he had been beaten and kicked out of several other cities. He didn't want a repeat of those experiences, so he went around the city, as he says, "in fear and in much trembling." How can we say it any better than the words of Paul himself, "My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God"?

Let me conclude by suggesting some implications found in these verses. First, the gospel will never win rave reviews among those who are perishing. Christians, as a result, should not spend a whole lot of time and energy trying to convince reluctant listeners to like what they won't believe. For them, the message has an inherently objectionable and ridiculous quality about it. If that is their stance, no amount of words or argument will convince them otherwise.

Also, as Christians we should "Consider [our] calling, brethren..." What were the circumstances that surrounded your coming to Christ? Where and when do you most often meet with the Lord? Is it when you make a big sale? Or when people think most highly of you and your accomplishments? Is it then you find intimacy with God? Or is it when you find yourself at your most inadequate and needy that you discover the touch of God in your life?

Then, how do you treat others in the body of Christ? Do you seek out the high-born, the popular and the attractive for fellowship? Or do you have a sense that you are part of a needy and inadequate group of believers who worship a great Lord?

Next, I suggest you examine Christian leaders for evidence of Paul's approach to ministry. Do they, with Paul, "determine to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified"? Or is their ministry based on human ability, impressive appearance, and rhetorical style? What is it that propels leaders into leadership? What ought to propel them is their willingness to know Jesus Christ and proclaim him crucified in weakness and humility. That is the type of leader you may safely allow to influence and mold your thinking.

Finally, we must, like Paul, determine to do these things. It will never be easy to live in this world and yet reject the wisdom of the world. We will always face temptation to gain the approval of others, to not be considered foolish and backward. But Paul "determined to know nothing...except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." He prepared his mind in advance to not sell out for the sake of popularity or for any other wrong reason. I urge all of us to follow the apostle's example. Let us determine afresh to boast only in the Lord in all of our actions. Let us resist the temptation to seek the acclaim of men and instead embrace the "foolishness of the message preached"--the power of God and the wisdom of God.

October 4, 1987

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.