

THE GOSPEL IS GOD'S WISDOM – A MEDITATION ON 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

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For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, 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; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher 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 know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's Wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as is written: "let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

About two hundred years after Paul wrote these words, a pagan stood before a wall in Rome to draw some graffiti. He scratched down the sentence, "Alexamenos worships his god," and illustrated it with a picture. On the left we see Alexamenos standing with his hand upraised to hail his god. What he faces as he performs this act of worship can be seen on the right: a figure stretched out on a cross. But the most striking thing about the drawing is that the human figure stretched out on the cross does not have the head of a man but rather the head of a donkey.

With that blasphemous drawing, the graffiti artist showed what he thought of Christianity. You might as well worship a donkey as believe in a crucified Jesus as your Savior! Unwittingly he illustrated the truth Paul expounds in this portion of 1 Corinthians. The gospel of Christ crucified is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The gospel is God's wisdom. We sense that whenever we ponder the astonishing salvation God has brought to our ears and rooted in our hearts. We sense it whenever we gaze upon a crucifix and find ourselves moved to adoration of the God whose yearning love for us is so inexpressibly great. But the special contribution of this text from 1 Corinthians is to unfold for us what it really means to say that the gospel is God's wisdom. Paul makes it clear that the gospel is not a refinement of this-worldly wisdom. It is not the emergence of philosophy or religious instinct into a more advanced stage of development. It couldn't be that, for the gospel sprang solely from the mind of God, and it stands in utter contrast to all the best that the human spirit has achieved or found noble. The contrast is so great that Paul almost sounds blasphemous himself as he momentarily views God's gospel wisdom from a human perspective and speaks of it as "the foolishness of what was preached."

Paul is not alone among the holy men of God in perceiving that contrast. The prophets who were stoned or put to the sword could tell us something of the contradiction God's wisdom suffers at the hands of human wisdom. The ministry of Jesus dramatizes that opposition in every debate with the Pharisees and Sadducees and underscores it with every drop of blood that fell from his wounded flesh. His opponents preferred killing Jesus to hearing his heavenly wisdom.

It's all there in Bible history. It's also there to be read in such sayings of Jesus as, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Mt 11:25). But in case we might miss the full importance of the huge chasm separating human wisdom from God's gospel wisdom, God had Paul set it down in writing with resounding emphasis and far-reaching assertions. Beyond a doubt, God's saving wisdom in Christ crucified is a gospel that defies our natural sense of values and propriety and logic.

That puts us on our knees in gratitude for being favored with the gospel and with faith to receive it. That also puts us on our knees beside our true peers—not our counterparts in the secular academic world, but the ragged collection of have-nots whom God in defiance of the world's standards of power and wisdom has chosen to be his own precious saints. "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."

Of the many ways to apply this text, one stands out for this special assembly of WELS educators. It is a paradox of sorts. Here we are, men and women who know that the gospel of Jesus Christ and nothing else is the wisdom of God, the One Thing Needful. More than that: we are men and women who have been called to serve as ministers of the gospel. Since that is our special calling, woe to us if the One Thing Needful does not receive its due from us.

And there—of course, is the paradox. We are called as ministers of God's gospel wisdom, but most of us spend most of our time acquainting our students with the nuts and bolts of human wisdom. I teach Latin. You teach geometry, or music, or history. But no one will be brought one inch closer to the kingdom of God by Latin subjunctive verbs or isosceles triangles or four-part harmony or red-letter dates in the Civil War. Any of the secular disciplines we teach is capable of occupying an eager mind for a lifetime, and any of them can serve as a whetstone for talent and an avenue for achieving excellence and personal fulfillment and recognition. But if that is all we are doing in our classrooms, we are leading our students on the way of human wisdom, while our calling is to promote an utterly different wisdom that comes down from above.

That is the paradox; and I think we are agreed on how to resolve it. We most certainly do not try to pass our secular subjects off as some kind of spiritual supplement that makes good Christians even better and more spiritual. On the other hand, neither do we tell our students that our secular subjects are pure claptrap, useless for Christians and unworthy of their attention. Nor do we conduct a masquerade by, let us say, advertising a course in Shakespearean drama and then running the course in such a way that the students read plenty of Scripture and little Shakespeare. No, we teach honest courses in secular subjects because they are useful for Christian service in general and for the gospel ministry in particular.

That means that we use these courses as opportunities to model Christian values and to exercise Christian judgment, putting everything under the authority of God's Word. It means also that we throw ourselves into mastering our subjects, teach them with enthusiasm and spend our classroom time on our assigned disciplines so that our students have an opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills that will be valuable in the ministry. But it also means that the moments we really live for are those moments, perhaps a small fraction of the time we spend with our students, when we can communicate to them through word and example that the gospel with its invitation to be found in Christ and his righteousness means far more to us than American literature or quantum physics or any other subject we have happily spent long years and small fortunes to master. Somehow we want to find a way to communicate our sense of priorities so that the gospel receives its due in our classrooms, if not in time, at least in emphasis. We want our students to see that first things come first and second things second.

I think we are agreed on that much. We are also agreed on the single most important step toward improving our communication of the gospel's supremacy. If we take the Holy Spirit's words into our own hearts in abundance, those words will surely overflow at our mouths. Paul here calls the gospel not just the wisdom of God but also the power of God. That power will turn mere professors into confessors.

Let us remember, too, that zeal for the inspired Scriptures does not lead us to despise the faithful testimony to the Word which we can hear at second hand from fellow Christians. I say that because there is a great deal to be learned from someone like Luther in just this matter of communicating a proper sense of priorities in Christian education. No one since the days of the apostles understood more clearly than Luther the contrast between human wisdom and God's gospel wisdom. No one was more determined to subject human wisdom to the judgment of God's Word and to denounce every presumptuous step taken in the name of reason or learning. But no one I know of speaks more warmly in praise of learning and the arts for their value in the secular estate and especially in the ministry of the gospel. And yet, as warmly as he praises those facets of an education, he never leaves you in the least doubt that the wisdom of God in the gospel is his heart's crown and treasure.

That knack of cultivating secular learning as a noble and useful gift of God without letting the utter difference and absolute supremacy of the gospel be lost from sight is still alive in the church that bears Luther's name. I know from my student days that we have teachers with the same understanding of Christian education that Luther had; some of them are present among us today. It is my hope that one of the fruits of this conference will be that in each of our classrooms, no matter what subject we teach or how enthusiastically we teach it, our students will nevertheless see more and more clearly that everything finally serves the gospel, the one and only saving wisdom of God.