

God's Wisdom
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
February 28, 2021-PM Service
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1 Corinthians 2:6-3:4

Tonight we open 1 Corinthians to a passage in the middle of a letter from Paul to a church he'd started a couple of years earlier. And preparing to open God's Word with you tonight was an experience for me in humility, because I was reminded again that the questions we bring into conversation with God's Word are not always the questions that he's especially interested in answering.

Over the past challenging year, as a church, we've been asking God to show us the way of wisdom through a pandemic. In our families, we've been asking God to show us the way of wisdom as we navigate differing perspectives and try to mend relationships that were easier and more joyful in other times. I am—perhaps we all are—especially motivated to seek the wisdom of God when the swirl of the world is unsettled.

So as I opened 1 Corinthians and sought to study God's wisdom, words from the first chapter of James were ringing in my mind: "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."

And yet, as I looked at this letter from Paul and what *he* means by wisdom in this passage, I found my assumptions about wisdom shifting. How did my assumptions shift?

Well: one of the first rules of faithful Bible reading is that we look at passages of Scripture in their wider context. And that takes some spadework, because here we are, two thousand years from the time of Paul. We're opening God's Word to one side of a conversation, halfway through a letter to particular people at a particular place and time, and to a situation quite different from ours. So, let's start there. What do we know about the situation in Corinth, and in the Corinthian church?

Corinth in Paul's time was a major Roman colony and a commercial center of the ancient world. Think of a city like New York or Chicago. It was on a narrow isthmus connecting mainland Greece with the Peloponnesian Peninsula, and it had seaports on both sides. It connected the trade route between Italy and the province of Asia, where Turkey is today.

Around 51 AD Paul spent 18 months establishing a community of followers of Jesus in Corinth. Acts 18 tells us that Paul first went to the synagogue in Corinth with the message about Jesus. After the Jewish community rejected his message, Paul moved his base of operations to a house next door and began preaching to the Gentiles, and through his ministry, house churches including both Jewish and non-Jewish believers were established.

Paul writes 1st Corinthians from Ephesus, another harbor city across the Aegean Sea. Paul views the members of this church as his children. Since Paul is far from Corinth, he sends a letter to remind them of his love for them through Jesus Christ, correcting their doctrine and life, and answering the questions they had sent to him.

As you might imagine for a major center of business and travel, Corinth was also a place where ideas were exchanged. You can hear echoes of that emphasis on wisdom in the passage we read tonight. The Corinthians wanted—even expected—Paul to be a teacher who disclosed hidden wisdom, like some of the great Greek philosophers or Jewish scholars. They sought to become more "mature" and more "spiritual," to be educated in the mysteries of life.

Toward that end, it seems they were looking for preachers who were the best and the brightest—people whose rhetorical skills could compete in the Corinthian marketplace of ideas.¹ They even began to identify and divide themselves by which particular pastor they preferred, and not all of them were especially impressed by Paul: “I follow Paul,” or, “I follow Apollos,” or even in contrast to the other believers in the Corinthian church—“I follow Christ.”

In Paul’s absence, the Corinthians are wondering: Is Paul a preacher of secret wisdom, or not? Does he really have the corner on the mysteries of God? So Paul writes in part to answer these questions and critiques about him and his message. And he clarifies that the wisdom that he is seeking to preach is different from what the Corinthians understood by “wisdom.”

The Corinthians, *sophia*, or wisdom, meant both *exalted knowledge* and the *ability to express that knowledge* in a powerful way. But for Paul, *God’s* wisdom is something quite different.

1 Corinthians 1:22-24²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,²³ but we preach *Christ crucified*: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

For Paul, secret wisdom, the deep mysteries of God, isn’t some ecstatic knowledge available to the few. For Paul, God’s wisdom is expressed through the cross: Christ crucified. The crucified Jesus is *himself*, the exalted knowledge, *is* the powerful expression of God’s message, *is* the most important and compelling word of wisdom God has to speak to the world.

Somewhere long ago, I read about a little girl who was asked why Jesus was called the Word of God. Without pausing, she responded, “Because Jesus is all God wants to say to us.” The wisdom of God in the crucified Christ is so profound that the rulers of this age, who are in the process of becoming obsolete, missed it; and it is clear and simple enough that children can trust it.

“We declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” The mystery Paul seeks to preach is Christ crucified, and to preach him clearly. No other message of “wisdom” will do.

So enough of being overawed by glossy, polished messages by trained orators! Enough of defining and dividing yourselves by which preacher you follow, Paul says to the Corinthians. Crafted words and intelligent expression are nice as far as they go. *But compelling rhetoric, intellectual prowess, and slick productions alone are no substitute for the content of the most important and powerful message in heaven and on earth.*

We declare God’s wisdom: Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. If exalted knowledge and elevated styles aren’t how the Corinthians come to know God’s surprising wisdom in Christ, how do they come to faith in a crucified Savior? After all, this *is* “hidden wisdom:” something God conceived long ago that “no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human mind has conceived” (1 Cor. 2:9). No one among the wise and powerful of this age could understand it.

Paul says that God has revealed these hidden things (1) by his Spirit; and (2) to people who belong to a totally different age. Just as a person’s inner being or spirit alone knows the thoughts of the mind and the heart, Paul says, so the Holy Spirit knows the thoughts of God. The Spirit installs a new operating system in the hearts and minds of believers. The Spirit makes known the hidden wisdom of God: Christ crucified.

By the Spirit, believers “have the mind of Christ,” Paul says (1 Cor. 2:16). That’s an audacious claim. How do we know that we’re in touch with the wisdom of God, the mind of Christ?

I’m indebted to a Lutheran commentator named Mary Hinkle Shore for this analogy: When you go to see the eye doctor, you sit in the patient’s chair. You press your face up against the refractor, that machine the optometrist uses to swap out lenses to find the right prescription. And that enormous letter E on the wall will be blurry until the lenses are just right. As the doctor switches out lenses and charts, you’ll be able to see smaller, more detailed charts with greater and greater clarity until you can read properly.

Similarly, for Paul and for us, the cross of Jesus, the wisdom of God, is the lens that brings everything into focus. That’s the orienting moment in history and in our lives. The Spirit refracts the lenses of our faith: making our trust in Christ possible, so that what’s critical for our salvation and life with God comes into focus at the cross. We recognize the mind of Christ in us when our mind, our inner being, can recognize and profess Christ as Savior, not because we have some kind of secret wisdom.

So there is no room for pride in identifying ourselves with certain preachers, no point to dividing into factions called by *their* names. God’s wisdom for us is in the face of Christ. His mind in us is shown as we live and speak of our faith in the Crucified One. So if wisdom here for Paul is nothing more and nothing less than God’s Son on a cross, how do we walk in that wisdom? What does it mean that we’ve been given the mind of Christ, especially as we try to live faithfully before him?

One commentator wrote that having the mind of Christ is “to be able to imagine the new creation and participate in it before it has come into focus for others.” Christ’s love for us and for the new creation he is forming made the betrayals tolerable, the nails bearable, and the curse of crucifixion supportable. God in his wisdom graciously shares the sacrificial mind of Christ with those who were his enemies.

Our participation in imagining and living into the slow but certain coming of the kingdom ruled by this sort of Lord doesn’t mean that we can claim a secret wisdom or knowledge hidden to others who also love Jesus. That would be to repeat the mistake of the Corinthians. Instead, as God’s people together we consider what is most dear and crucial to us in light of the cross of Jesus. We see that the ultimate reality of the new creation is still coming into focus.

As we see ourselves, and our brothers and sisters in Christ as equally in need of the salvation offered us in Christ. And through our hands, and hearts, and thoughts, and words, Christ reaches out to help us up, not to push us down. And leaning on each other, we’re strengthened to walk with God and our brothers and sisters in patience and humility, acknowledging the sacrificial love of Jesus as our focal point.

Asking the Spirit to fix our minds on God’s wisdom revealed at the cross recalibrates our perspective for the long game. I told you I came to this passage wondering if by it God might shine more light on how we are discerning God’s wisdom for our practical questions.

Instead, as I studied God’s wisdom revealed in the cross of Jesus, I was reminded that my questions and concerns are important, but not ultimate. Through this passage, the Spirit adjusted my lenses and refocused my vision. It was as if Jesus said to me, “You’re very eager for my directions, aren’t you? Don’t you see, child? I’ve given you myself.” I wanted God’s wisdom, and God invited me into awe in his presence.

Christ crucified, God’s wisdom, is the rock that does not move. Christ crucified, God’s wisdom, receives us needy and perplexed souls in love. Christ crucified, God’s wisdom, bows

his head as his enemies seem to triumph. God's wisdom, revealed in the cross of Jesus, is not a hidden mystery to be answered, but an invitation into a relationship to be lived.

And as we sit with that version of God's wisdom in this passage, the Spirit sends our roots deep into the wonderful, unchanging, irrevocable assurance that we are his.

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