

WISDOM IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

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Colossians 2:3 says that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ. In this verse the words *wisdom* and *knowledge* can be taken as synonyms. But I Corinthians 12:8, the final mention of wisdom in that epistle after a break since 3:19, is hard to interpret unless one assumes a difference between wisdom and knowledge: "To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for his advantage. For to one through the Spirit is given [a, or the] word of wisdom, and to another a word of knowledge according to the same Spirit, [and] to another faith. . . ." Of course faith is given to all Christians; and no doubt knowledge and wisdom are somehow connected because they are both expressed in words, in a *logos*: a discourse, sermon, or argument of wisdom and a discourse, sermon, or argument of knowledge. But since these two are in an enumeration of nine gifts of the Spirit, the two phrases can hardly be taken as completely synonymous.

What this distinction has caused confusion among the commentators. A frequently made distinction is that wisdom refers to practical judgments and knowledge consists in theoretical understanding. H. A. W. Meyer, however, reverses this. Referring to 2:6 and 13:2 Meyer makes wisdom an elementary grasp of Christian doctrines, whereas knowledge is a deep and thorough elaboration of their connections. Much to one's surprise Meyer then infers that wisdom (the elementary grasp of Christian doctrines) continues throughout the Parousia, but knowledge (the profound elaboration of their relationships) ceases (13:8). Surely this view, or, at least this conclusion has less to recommend it than the former does.

Charles Hodge makes the almost impossible suggestion that wisdom is the inspiration given to the apostles alone, and knowledge is the ability of lesser teachers to understand the apostles' writings. The reason this seems impossible is the fact that I Corinthians 13:8 says that knowledge shall be abolished or made of no effect. Since the ability of lesser teachers to understand the apostles' writings continues to the present day, the time prophesied must be the Parousia. But is it not strange that the lesser teachers should lose their ability to understand the Scriptures by reason of Christ's return? One would expect them to understand better. There is something, however, that has already been abolished: *viz.*, apostolic inspiration. But 13:8 does not say that "wisdom" (Hodge's inspiration) shall be abolished; it says that "knowledge" will become of no use.

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This is sufficient to cast doubt on Hodge's distinction between wisdom and knowledge. It is not sufficient as an explanation of 13:8. Under any imaginable condition it hardly seems possible that knowledge should be of no use. Nor that it should be abolished. The following verses can be taken to imply that partial knowledge will be abolished because full knowledge supervenes. Indeed, Paul almost seems to say that human knowledge will equal God's, for "now I know in part, but then I shall know to the same extent that I was known" [by God?]. Hodge rather evades the difficulty in this verse, but in any case it does not bear on the main topic here, which is the meaning of knowledge and wisdom.

It may be that, in spite of first impressions, the distinction between wisdom and knowledge is not too sharp. One notes that the third gift mentioned in 12:7-10 is faith. True, the popular connotations of wisdom, knowledge, and faith differ. People often contrast faith with knowledge. Yet this contrast is absent from the NT. Faith and knowledge can be considered identical, or, at least, faith is one kind of knowledge; *viz.*, a knowledge of theology, not a knowledge of botany. Perhaps then the terms *wisdom* and *knowledge* refer only to a difference of degree, in which case the similarity would be basic. Unfortunately I Corinthians 12:7-10 does not give any explanation. Whatever information can be had must come from the first three or four chapters of the epistle. To them we now turn.

Whom does Paul address in his first epistle? His second epistle expressly mentions the church at Corinth with all the saints that are in the whole of Achaia. The first epistle too seems directed, not merely to the several congregations in the city of Corinth, but to other congregations also, "in every place," presumably every place in Greece. At least two verses in the first three chapters, if they do not require this inference, make better sense if so understood. The reference to Greeks in general and not just Corinthians in 1:22, and as well the *wherever* and *whenever* of 3:3-4, give some small support to the assumption of a wider public. The first of these two references is the better for this purpose because at first sight it seems strange that Paul has so much to say about wisdom and knowledge to the Corinthians. Corinth was not Oxford; it was Liverpool. Hence when he says in 1:22 that the Greeks seek after wisdom, he may have had Athens in mind. The Corinthians mostly sought after money and pleasure.

Nevertheless at the time of Paul's writing wisdom and knowledge were appropriate subjects because (as Paul says immediately after the signature, address, and blessing) God had enriched them "in all utterance and all knowledge." The translation "utterance" is poor. It is better put: "in every doctrine and in all knowledge." Meyer agrees with the KJ translation in his phrase "aptitude for speech;" and Beza wanted to translate *logo* as glossalalia. Both are mistaken. *Logos* means doctrine, reason, thought. This fits with the next term *knowledge*. It is not an unusual term in Paul's writings, or in the NT as a whole. In one place Paul uses the idea, if not always the word, five times in two verses (Eph. 1:17-18). Similarly II Peter 1:2, 3, *et passim* emphasize knowledge.

Since American Christendom (used in a loose sense), including even the semi-conservative enclaves, has little of this emphasis, one must, in order to understand First Corinthians, rediscover the NT stress on knowledge. Paul here thanks God that the Corinthians have been made rich in all doctrine and knowledge in proportion to their growing assurance of the truth of the gospel witness.

The apostle's remarks on wisdom and knowledge arise through his discussion of certain schisms or divisions that were occurring in the church. Led by undependable teachers, four sects had developed. Each claimed allegiance to a prominent Christian leader: Paul, Apollos, Peter, and even Christ. To head off this development Paul calls upon them all to "say the same thing, . . . and to be joined together in the same mind and in the same opinion." Whatever visible actions the schisms generated, such as holding separate meetings, electing new officers, and whatever else one can imagine from a knowledge of later church history, schism is not essentially an organizational division. The source of the difficulty in Corinth lay in what the people said and thought; that is, their opinions were the center of the evil. Therefore Paul wants them to think alike and compose their intellectual disagreements.

It should go without saying that Paul, Apollos, and Peter, not to mention Christ, had not initiated these divisions. Apollos and the two apostles agreed in doctrine, they said the same thing, they had the same mind. Paul as the writer of the epistle makes it very clear that he had done nothing to cause the present disturbance. His earlier abstention from administering the sacrament of baptism (except to three or four persons) turns out to be a fortunate circumstance, for had he shown a zeal to baptize, some might have said he baptized in his own name rather than in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Paul had spent his whole time preaching the gospel, "not in wisdom of word, that the cross of Christ should not be made empty" (1:17).

This is the first occurrence of the word *wisdom* (*sophia*) in the epistle. The phrase is *sophia logou*. Ordinarily translated as 'wisdom of word' (the plural *words* in the KJ and ARV is incorrect, and the RSV substitutes an interpretative paraphrase), it can equally well be translated as 'wisdom of doctrine,' argument, definition, or formula. The phrase with its several possible meanings presents a difficulty. The context has a good deal to do with baptism. Paul expressed satisfaction that he had baptized so few and hence could not be charged with substituting the doctrine of the deity of Paul for the deity of Christ. Could it be that Paul now adds, "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in the wisdom of a baptismal formula . . . ? *Logos* can mean formula; hence this interpretation is grammatically possible. It also fits in with the context. Though most commentators would no doubt reject this interpretation, it nonetheless seems superior to making the phrase mean 'polished eloquence.' *Sophia* would be a queer term to denote ornate style. Furthermore, the immediately preceding contrast between baptism and the gospel, would be balanced by

the contrast between rhetorical flourish and plain, sincere speech. This not only makes a poor balance, it is ruled out by the explicit mention of the cross of Christ. Hence "wisdom of word" must refer to some thesis or doctrine, some intellectual judgment, other than the doctrine of the Atonement. This other doctrine could just possibly be the doctrine of baptism

Although the interpretation "baptismal formula" fits in nicely with the preceding contrasts, the following paragraph suggests or even definitely fixes a different interpretation. The idea of baptism drops out. It must be regarded as entirely parenthetical. This leaves the previous reference connected solely with the rise of schism. Thus the interpretation begins with the new idea of the cross of Christ in 1:17, to be explained in 1:18-25. The parenthetical break in continuous development has the disadvantage of misleading the reader momentarily, but it is a disadvantage to be borne, for the thought of the following paragraph is quite clear.

Instead of the formula for baptism 1:18 takes up the idea of the cross of Christ and proceeds directly to the doctrine of the Atonement. This must be noticed, for a careless reading might mislead the reader in another direction. He might conclude from the phrase "not with wisdom of doctrine" that Paul proposes a non-doctrinal anti-intellectual religion. Does not Paul here condemn all *logous* (doctrines)? Of course he does not. The following verses must be regarded as the interpretation or explanation of the short phrase in 1:17; and this explanation centers on the doctrine of the Atonement.

This doctrine is nonsense (*moria*) to the reprobate; it is the "power of God" to the elect. As the Apostle says also in II Corinthians 2:16, the savor of his knowledge is not only from life to life, but also a savor from death to death. He confirms this idea in 1:19 by quoting or adapting Isaiah 29:14, "the wisdom of their wise men shall perish and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid."¹ In Isaiah the language applies to the Jewish people. Therefore the idea cannot be narrowly restricted to the Greeks. Verse 20 connects the wise man and the scribe—clearly a Jewish reference. True, in 1:22 "the Greeks seek after wisdom." This extends the meaning of Isaiah, but with all the references to wisdom in the OT Paul's thought is not limited to Greek philosophy, to Plato and Aristotle, about whom the Corinthian traders knew so little.

It should be made clear at once that Paul does not disparage wisdom and argument. He certainly teaches that neither scribal pedants nor "co-operative investigators" of this world ever brought anyone to God. These two groups thought that the Atonement was nonsense. Here can be found the source of Tertullian's contrast between Jerusalem and Athens. Their principles have nothing in common. But just as Tertullian did not on this ground despise close reasoning—his arguments prepared for and almost arrived at the Athanasian position—so Paul here condemns only the wisdom of this world and neither the wisdom of God nor the doctrine of the Atonement.

1. Paul merely substitutes "I shall set aside" for the LXX "I shall hide."

ment. Paul does not support anti-intellectualism. It was the wisdom and intricate plan of God that prevented the world from knowing God by its own wisdom. God foreordained pagan philosophy and Jewish disputes for the purpose of blinding the eyes of the reprobate and hardening their hearts. He made their wisdom nonsense. But far from teaching anti-intellectualism Paul even here in this paragraph, and more clearly elsewhere, commends the wisdom of God. This wisdom is Christ, here called *Sophia* rather than *Logos*. Therefore Paul preaches the doctrine of the Atonement.

At this point, with the mention of Tertullian, one might consider what the Apostle Paul thought of Aristotle's cosmological argument for the existence of God. Nothing in the text shows that he had ever read *Metaphysics*, book Lambda. Hence the exegete is limited to conjecture. Thomas Aquinas held that Paul proleptically declared valid Thomas' restatement of Aristotle. From the present paragraph one would suppose that Paul regarded it as nonsense. It is strange therefore that some Christians who speak vigorously against the wisdom of this world and deprecate what they call "human logic" also are strenuous defenders of the cosmological arguments and think that the truth of God should be proved true by secular investigations.

Insofar as Paul's words can be applied to Aristotle, 3:20 would be even a clearer repudiation of philosophical speculation about God. Using the term *dialogismous* (reasonings, deliberations) the verse says, "The Lord knows that the arguments of the wise are futile." Christian apologetes therefore would do well to repudiate the scholastic futility of so-called "natural theology." They should desist from attempts to prove God's existence and to describe his nature on the basis of empirical observations.

Verses 1:25 and 27 speak of weakness. God has not called many men of fleshly wisdom, nor many powerful, nor many well born. That this does not disparage wisdom as such follows from the fact that Paul does not disparage power and good birth as such. He considered his own lineage and birth (II Corinthians 11:22, Romans 11:1, Phil. 3:4-8) a most fortunate inheritance; and his counting it as loss in comparison with Christ does not invalidate its advantages any more than his submission to the thorn in the flesh makes sickness preferable to health. In this passage Paul might have referred to wealth—indeed wealth might be included in the ideas of powerful and well born. Now, wealth can be and often is a barrier to heaven. Yet the Bible does not condemn Abraham and Job. Thus as these advantages are not condemned as such, neither should Paul be understood to disparage wisdom, learning, or knowledge. This thought in no way contradicts the express statements that God chose what the world regarded as nonsense to shame the wise man, and the weak to shame the strong, and the ignoble to shame the well born.²

2. Whether "things that do not exist" is in apposition with the ignoble and weak, or is in addition to them, and if in addition, what they are, is difficult to say. The omission of *kat* in p. 46, Aleph, A, et al. against Aleph 3, B, C 3, et al. would favor apposition and would make very good sense.

The chapter ends by saying either that Christ became three things in our case, *viz.*, (1) wisdom, (2) righteousness and holiness, and (3) redemption; or that Christ became a wisdom that consists of two parts, *viz.*, (1) righteousness and holiness and (2) redemption. The exact meaning is not very clear, but the grammatical construction hardly permits the interpretation that Christ became four things. At any rate wisdom is not despised.

That this wisdom is not a personal encounter as Soren Kierkegaard and Emil Brunner describe it has already been indicated by the phrase "the doctrine of the cross" (1:18). In a peculiar sense Kierkegaard himself requires a man to have a certain amount of intelligence in order to become a Christian. He holds that a man must understand doctrine x, must understand doctrine y, and must understand that x contradicts y. Then the man must throw away all his intelligence, sacrifice his intellect, and believe both parts of the contradiction. Brunner also teaches that the Bible is self-contradictory. He argues that the doctrine of election is illogical; if we drew inferences from it, we would conclude that God is not love. One cannot have logic and a loving God too. Hence, says Brunner, since the Bible teaches election, it is consistently inconsistent. Calvin, as opposed to the Bible, is logical and must be repudiated. His mistake was to think that theology is concerned with intelligible truth (*einsichtige Vernunftswahrheit*). Brunner further says that God and the medium of conceptuality (*Begrifflichkeit*) are mutually exclusive. None of this sounds like Paul. His denunciation of worldly wisdom is no invitation to believe contradictions.

To return now to the text itself, 2:1 says that Paul did not come preaching the mystery³ of God in superiority of word or wisdom.

If anyone prefers *message* to *mystery*, the point of the present article become easier to substantiate. Otherwise the writer must show that *mystery* is nothing "mysterious," but simply a proposition that cannot be discovered through natural theology but must be revealed by God. The reason is that instead of depending on Aristotle or Aquinas Paul decided to confine his message to the doctrine of the Atonement. This is borne out in 2:4 and 5, where the contrast between divine words and wisdom and human words and wisdom is made explicit. "My argument and my preaching," says Paul, "were not in persuasive words of wisdom,⁴ but in demonstration⁵ of spirit and power in order that your faith should not be [grounded?] in human wisdom but in divine power." The contrast is clearly not between rationality and irrationality, but between human wisdom and divine wisdom. The

3. *Mystery* is found in p. 46 (apparently), the original Aleph, A, C, and a few other MSS. *Message* is found in the third hand of Aleph, B, four other uncials, and a long line of cursives.

4. The textual problem here is one of the worst in the NT. Counting variations of variations there are about a dozen readings. They need not be discussed now, for all have the same general sense.

5. Note the use of a term in logic. *Apodexis* means: showing forth, making known, publication, exposition, proof, deductive proof by syllogism, appointment, display, achievement (the latter two meanings seem to be found mainly in the time of Herodotus and neither before nor after).

pietists incline to the contrast between an intelligible message versus the power of the Spirit. They fail to give adequate attention to the fact that the power of the Spirit functions in the argument or doctrine (*logos*) and the message preached (*kerugma*). Paul's contrast lies between divine truth and false opinions based on natural theology, not between truth and non-rational power.

"We speak wisdom," writes Paul; and if wisdom is preached, proclaimed, or spoken, wisdom must consist of intellectual propositions expressed in intelligible language. These truths are mysteries, i.e., secrets that God did not tell the pagans. He kept these secrets hidden from the rulers of this world. So says the OT. Then come two or three verses that the pietists and mystics so lamentably misunderstand. The introductory words come from two passages in Isaiah. "What the eye did not see and the ears did not hear and did not enter man's heart, i.e., those things that God prepared for those who love him,⁶ God revealed to us [emphasis on *to us*] by the Spirit." The next words, the second half of 2:10, identifies these secrets as "the deep things of God."

Too frequently a pietist will use these verses to maintain a position directly contradictory to what the verses say. For example, Dr. A. W. Tozer published a sermon that Dr. Aiken Taylor strangely thought excellent enough to reprint in *The Presbyterian Journal* (February 11, 1970), a periodical supposedly devoted to the principles of the Westminster Confession. Dr. Tozer is not an advocate of natural theology. He stands at the opposite extreme, an opponent not only of natural theology but of revealed theology as well. His sermon, entitled *Revelation is Not Enough*, is basically a repudiation of the text, the words, the theology of the Bible, and a plea in favor of something to be found between the lines or behind the text. In fact he claims that the difference between a fundamentalist who accepts what the Bible says and believes in the Deity of Christ and a modernist who rejects the message of the Bible and denies the doctrine of creation is insignificant in comparison with the difference between the acceptance of the Biblical text and the search for something beyond and beneath the inspired written words.

Dr. Tozer's defense of mysticism (and he himself accepts this designation) is partly an exposition of John's Gospel⁷ and partly an appeal to the present passage in Corinthians. As to this latter he quotes beginning at the material from Isaiah. He even includes the words, "God has revealed them [in my opinion, the deep things of God] unto us." But he does not quote, and fails to take into account, and presumably denies that these deep things are precisely the *argument*, the *proclamation*, of verse 4, the *knowledge* of verse 12, and the *spoken* spiritual [words] of verse 13. What Paul here commends, Dr. Tozer dismisses as "the dead body of truth." Now, to do Dr. Tozer justice, one must acknowledge that he says some good things about the Bible, and even recommends memorization. But

6. At this point a comma makes a better grammatical construction than does a period.

7. Cf. my *The Johannine Logos*, pp. 58-66. Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co.

these good things are nullified by his explicit acceptance of mysticism.

In opposition to mysticism Paul has asserted that God revealed to us his secrets concerning the crucifixion of Christ. These secrets are the various intelligible propositions that compose the doctrine of the Atonement. Paul then, somewhat unnecessarily as some might think, defends the ability of the Spirit to make such a revelation on the ground that the Spirit is privy to all of God's thoughts. What is more germane to the present subject is the added idea in 2:11 that no one by natural theology can know the thoughts of God. A man has this knowledge only by revelation. Now, we Christians have received "the Spirit from God in order that we might know those [theological theses] which God has graciously given us. These are the doctrines we speak, not in didactic words of human wisdom, but in the didactic [words] of the Spirit, explaining spiritual [matters] in spiritual [words]."

This passage shows clearly that spiritual matters can be explained in words. The words themselves are spiritual. They are also didactic. They are the words Paul spoke, and, we may add, wrote. All this fits in nicely with verbal inspiration, but is far removed from inexpressible, non-verbal, mystic experiences.⁸

"The psychical man does not receive the [doctrines] of the Spirit of God." This does not deny that he understands them. Before his conversion Paul understood very well what the Christians meant by calling Christ Lord. Very probably he understood it better than most Christians did. But he did not receive it as true. It was foolishness to him; even more it was blasphemy. It could have been neither, unless he had understood it. Therefore when 2:14 says, "the psychical man . . . cannot know" the divine doctrines, it is using the verb *know* in the sense of *know as true*. That this is the meaning is clear from the reason given for it: "for they are spiritually evaluated."

8. So this passage. Someone may wish to mention another passage, II Corinthians 12:2, which sounds very much like mysticism. If it were, it would even so not be normative for other Christians. They would not be compelled to go behind the text and ascend to the third heaven. This would be even less a requirement for salvation than a repetition by everyone or anyone of Paul's experiences on the road to Damascus. However, these considerations are unnecessary, for II Cor. 12:2 ff is not mysticism. Verse 4 uses the word *unspeakable* or *inexpressible*, and mystics may take what delight they can in this word. But how words (*rhemata*) can be inexpressible, let the mystics explain. The translation, however, is poor. *Arreta* is not *inexpressible*. Souter gives: "not to be uttered (because too sacred), secret." Liddell and Scott give: "unspoken . . . that cannot be spoken . . . not to be spoken . . . unutterable . . . horrible . . . shameful to be spoken . . ." In classical Greek the word frequently had an evil meaning inappropriate to the context of II Corinthians. This context indicates which of all these meanings is to be chosen. What was revealed to Paul in this vision consisted of words (*rhemata*). They were *arreta*, not because it was an irrational emotional upset, but because they were not *lawful* (*exon*) to be spoken. *Exon* means lawful or permissible. They were divine secrets, which Paul could (no doubt easily) understand; but God commanded him not to tell these secrets to other Christians. The whole revelation is verbal and rational.

Parenthetically and perhaps repetitiously one notes that this intensive use of the verb *to know* undermines the alleged distinction between *gnosis* and *epignosis*, for in this verse the heightened sense of know is expressed with the simple, not the compound, verb.

Then in three lines the chapter ends with the assertion, "We have the mind of Christ." It does not say that we have the emotions of Christ. The 'punch line' of the chapter, its climax, its last word, is a word of intellectualism, intelligibility, knowledge, and understanding. "We have the *mind* (*noun*) of Christ."

To complete the list, the only other instance of the word *sophia* in I Corinthians is 3:19. It adds no new thought. Once again it confirms the conclusion that the arguments of Aristotle, Hegel, and Wittgenstein are no more than foolishness. This conclusion includes the application to those who try to base the truth of God's Word on the secular or so-called scientific investigations of history and archaeology. Nothing in Paul suggests that the work of "cooperative investigation" (1:20) is more certain or reliable than the wisdom of God. Is it not strange that any evangelical, for whom *sola Scriptura* is the formal principle of theology, should try to base the truth of Scripture on the conclusions of Dr. Albright and Miss Kenyon? For Paul revelation is self-authenticating. Athens, Oxford, and American universities have nothing in common with Jerusalem.