

10 September 2023

Wisdom of This World

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

We continue in 1 Corinthians this week, reading from, chapter 1, verses 18-25:

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written,

*‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’*

²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Usher an invisible Paul to a seat.

Ah, Paul. Come in, come in. Thank you so much for taking time today. I’m Jerry and . . . did the elders who invited you tell you who I am? Ah, then let me start there. I’m a consultant on public relations and branding, and I’ve been asked to work with you a little on your mission to Asia and Greece. And my goodness, let me start by telling you how very impressed I am with what you’ve accomplished! So many churches started! I’ve never seen a franchise spread so quickly! I wish some of my other clients had your energy! But, um, all your churches are still quite small, aren’t they? Yes? Still gathering in homes? Hmm. Well, let’s see what we can do about that. We want to dream big, don’t we? I’m talking numbers in the hundreds and a *huge* public presence!

Let me start with some of your writings that the elders have shared with me. I *love* this passage, about “I am all things to all people that by all means I might save some.” That’s exactly the right spirit! Say or do whatever it takes to seal the deal, amiright? But just one thing about that. It’s that bit about *all* people. I asked the elders, and they said that the church was for people of all social classes. Hm. That’ll be an obstacle, you know. People like to mix with their own kind. But we can work with it. I would just say that it doesn’t have to be all people at once. We should focus on one demographic at a time. My recommendation would be to start with the upper class, the ones with the financial resources to support a growing institution. See? Then, when we’ve gotten those giving units committed to the . . . what do you call it? Gospel? . . . then we can wait for the gospel to trickle down to the masses. Just think about it.

But that brings me to my main question. This gospel you preach. I like it. It’s got a good ring, and that eternal life thing at the end is going to be a big seller when people get used to the idea. But there’s one thing I would suggest changing. You keep on about Jesus’ crucifixion. My staff and I did a focus group, and that crucifixion thing is non-starter. Number one reaction? *Slaves*. It is a form of execution mostly used for slaves, you know. Other reactions: *humiliation*,

shame, public disgrace, murderers, villains. You're going to lose people before they ever hear about resurrection. So, Barry in the back room had an idea: can you craft the story so that Jesus died in a blaze of glory, killing most of his enemies, especially their evil leader, and saved a beautiful woman or a puppy before dying? *That* was solid with the focus group! No? Pity. Then can we at least gloss over the crucifixion? Don't answer yet. Think about it first. I'm scheduled to meet with you tomorrow at this time to talk about fund-raising. Until then, goodbye. You're beautiful, man. Beautiful.

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul sketches a stark contrast between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God, which the world regards as rank foolishness. He says that Jews look for physical proof and Greeks look for rational arguments, but he just preaches the crucified Christ, which is a stumbling block to one and foolishness to the other. Much of that reaction was exactly what the church consultant said: crucifixion was not only one of the most horrible ways to die but a way that was designed specifically for slaves and foreigners and traitors. It was a public humiliation and object lesson for others. But the Christians gloried in it. They took Christ's crucifixion as a victory and claimed the cross as a pattern for them as well, a call to – as Paul would put it in Philippians – *self emptying*. The Church proclaimed the Kingdom of God, but it was an upside-down kingdom, in which weakness replaced strength, forgiveness replaced vengeance, worldly humiliation was a badge of honor, and life was only fully lived when it was given away. And to everybody else, that stuff was just crazy.

It's not just that Christianity rejects the worldly values of money, fame, and power. Lots of philosophers and teachers reject that stuff, after all. It's that all this "empty yourself" business seems contrary even to common sense. It challenges things like the value of hard work and frugality, of prudence and caution. The world's wisdom tells us to read the fine print, get it in writing, trust but verified, save your receipts, change your passwords occasionally. Common sense. And what's wrong with that? Nothing. We need it. It has its place. But it's not enough.

You see Christians are sort pollywogs, tadpoles. We are being transformed and one day will be real frogs, but right now we live among the minnows, and look a lot like them. The Church is the gathering of those who are being transformed but aren't there yet. We are supposed to stretch toward the transformation, and when we do, we love the unloving, the unlovely, and the unlovable. We give our time, attention, and resources to people who will never return anything to us, maybe not even thanks. We welcome people who have nothing to offer us. And we do all this because our example is one who died in humiliation and torment and forgave his torturers. These weird things proclaim the mysteries of the kingdom of God. But at the same time, the Church is made up of human beings, and we also have no illusions about them and what they're capable of. So we have to be smart. In this church, we govern ourselves with committees and oversight boards to protect ourselves from arrogant pastors on power trips, and we swap out those boards occasionally, to protect ourselves from them. We have a Finance Committee that oversees our money, and an audit team that examines our books and systems every quarter. Do these things proclaim the mysteries of the kingdom of God? No. This is "this world" stuff. But we still need it, because we still live here. For now, and until further notice, we have a foot in each kingdom.

Paul knows that. His letters are filled with common sense advice. But this passage shows that he's afraid that the Corinthians have lost sight of their weird. They are trying to do church

according to the wisdom of this world and losing sight of the kingdom of weird. A few chapters on, in chapter 6, Paul just about blows a gasket: “What’s this I hear? Some of you suing each other? In *Roman* courts? Really? You have nobody in church who can mediate a dispute? And none of you would rather, like, just forgive your neighbor?” Paul’s fear is that the Corinthian church is becoming just another human institution, run entirely by human means and methods. It can happen.

And it does happen. A lot. Churches faced with difficulties or challenging environments turn in fear to the wisdom of this world. Their denominational leaders send whiz-kid consultants who present the latest program for fixing the church, based on the latest secular management bestseller. And sometimes those worldly methods even work, at least in terms of worldly goals, by which I mean numbers. If you take the right leader, with the right gifts, provide adequate funding, and the right location location location, you *can* start a successful church, with or without God’s involvement. But then what do you have? Without the weird, it isn’t really a church, is it?

Paul asks the Corinthians, “Where is your weird?” Where is ours? Where are the decisions we make that don’t make sense, but that we make anyway because they feel right? Where are the things that we do that will never add a single member to our congregation, but we do them anyway? Where are the unpromising or rejected lives that find family here? This church has answers to all those questions. We have some weird. Maybe not enough, but a good start. So today’s challenge is: Don’t lose that. Don’t ever get too smart. I’ll try, too. I’ll try never to preach an attractive Christ, a focus-group tested savior, but rather the embarrassing one, the one who was crucified, the one who told his leaders to be servants, the one that no sane person would ever follow.

Jesus once told his disciples, “Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). That perfectly summarizes what I’ve been talking about today. We do need to be smart, to use the best tools that are available to us in our world; but at the same time, we are also supposed to be as innocent as doves. I think the modern church has gotten pretty good at the serpent part. So, yay. Well done us. But that part has to be paired with the dove. This week, as you go out into the kingdom of this world, remember our weird.