
A WORD TO THE WISE

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Text: I Corinthians 1:17-31; 2:12-16 (Phil 2:1-11)

Helmut Thielicke relates the story of a theological student returning to a Bible study group in which he once played a vital part. A zealous young medical student is enthusiastically seeking truth and life from the Word of God, and poses a question. However, the theological student answers with “paralyzing and unhappy trivialities” that have something to do with Bultmann and the Synoptic Problem, but nothing to do with truth and life. So, Thielicke says, “the muscular strength of a lively young Christian is horribly squeezed to death” by “abstract ideas.”¹ The seminary student used what he had learned in Seminary to diminish others’ faith, rather than to build it up.

Loving God with all of our minds means a willingness to allow him to use what we have learned. Knowledge in itself can be mis-used. Perhaps the Word of God helps us. To the Corinthians, Paul contrasted true wisdom with the world’s “wisdom.”

I. “Wisdom” and Wisdom (1:17-25)

The so-called “wisdom” of the world is not the wisdom of the gospel. The Corinthians think that there is virtue in “words of human wisdom” (v. 17). They were evaluating the gospel that Paul brought

¹Helmut Thielicke. *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, trans. Charles L. Taylor (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1962), 8.

them by the standards of the “wise,” this world’s scholars and philosophers. Have they forgotten that wisdom must be more than fine sounding words?

For a time, Augustine was a follower of the Manichean orator, Faustus. Crowds followed him everywhere just for the sound of his words. But when Augustine tried to have an intelligent conversation with him over some philosophical issues, he found Faustus shallow, even ignorant. Augustine turned away from him disappointed. His next mentor, the saintly Christian bishop Ambrose, was no orator. He was a plodding and dull speaker. But Augustine found in him depth of insight and profound wisdom, and that is what led the great Augustine into the bosom of the Church. There are many Faustuses today, too few Ambroses.²

The Ambroses of the world have surrendered themselves to the cross of Christ rather than to the lure of the crowds. The cross, however, is not a sign of wisdom to the world. The very phrase sounds foolish: is there any “logic” in the Christ dying? To pagan minds, one may have a Savior or a crucifixion, but not both. The words “cross” and “salvation” come crashing against each other in human logic. Should God have consulted us, we would have told him that this violates all wisdom, this plan of salvation. Though the cross is always folly to the wise of the world, there is no wisdom greater to those who follow Christ than the cross.

There was scarcely any “wisdom,” as the world reckons, in God choosing you and me. There were persons of means in the Corinthian church. The city was a place of social mobility. Freed slaves could become respectable and prosperous citizens. But in the church, Paul

²*The Confessions of Augustine*, Book V, chapters 6-7, 13-14.

says, none must forget where they have come from, and who has made them what they are.³

Like the Corinthians, not many of us were from influential families or so-called “noble birth.” Most of us, like the Corinthians, were gathered from the weak and lowly. There was no logic or wisdom in God choosing me, who was chosen the “Most Quiet” male for the freshman class of 1973 at Eastern Nazarene College, and whom a fellow student, knowing I was a religion major, discouraged from thinking that God had called into ministry. Unless there was a radical change in my personality, he said, I should give up such notions of ministry.

If we were choosing leaders for the kingdom, we would have chosen a more telegenic group, a bunch of better looking and more intelligent people than we are. It is by sheer grace. It was not because of who we are that we were chosen. Even now, we carry with us “thorns in the flesh” and human weaknesses. As Paul wrote later to the Corinthians, we house the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” in earthen vessels—in jars of clay—so that the excellency of the power might be in God, not in ourselves (2 Cor 4:7).

Some would say, you are wasting your talents by teaching at APNTS; your career will go no where if you go to the Philippines. In reality, without him we would be nothing. Not by our merits, nor for our personality or brains did God choose us. “My mind is not much,” we say when we come to Christ, “but it, along with my heart and soul, is yours to use.” A mind presented to Christ in that way is never wasted.

³Abraham J. Malherbe. *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, second ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 71-79.

II. Boasting . . . in the Lord (1:26-36)

The Corinthians have been boasting about their “wisdom,” and tending to forget the limitations of it.

Theological study has an almost unavoidable tendency to produce vanity: a kind of gnostic pride that covers our spiritual insecurity. It leads some to suppose that there is a theological elite with more knowledge than the “theological proletariat,” and to demean or ridicule those who have never even heard of John Wesley or Karl Barth, who cannot even pronounce “soteriology” and “eschatology”—much less explain what they mean! Theological education sometimes breeds this kind of arrogance. Often there is a lapse between a theological student’s intellectual growth and his or her spiritual growth. I talked with a student just graduating from a Seminary in the US. He confessed that he was spiritually weaker than he had ever been in his life. I remember feeling the same way.

We are anything but worthy of being preachers and teachers if we are spiritually down and intellectually arrogant. Helmut Thielicke advises seminary students not to preach or teach until after they graduate (perhaps partly because they are too fond of quoting obscure German theologians like Helmut Thielicke). There is danger in being unleashed into local churches rattling obscure words of English or Greek theological vocabulary. Why do we do so? To impress more than to bless, I am afraid.

Theological students must not forget their obligation to the church to communicate the gospel plainly and lovingly. We need to be humble enough to receive spiritual wisdom from common laypersons—uneducated in theology and lowly in the eyes of the world—whose walk with the Lord has been long and close. Their wisdom and spiritual depth cannot come through three years in a theological seminary. They are his saints, and they must be our—yes our—spiritual mentors and teachers when we enter pastorates. Else,

we are truly fools. We must not forget that the church is our “pastor”—and that we too, need a pastor.

In our attempt to impress others we neglect love. If we use our learning to stifle sincere faith, we neglect love. No wonder some are suspicious of theological study if it is prone to dampen spiritual enthusiasm and ardor. In a setting here in Asia I was proudly remarking how many of our faculty members have earned doctorates. A church leader remarked later in the conversation: “What good are PhDs if they cannot lead men and women to faith in Christ?” In a subtle way, the remark chastised me. I may have needed chastising.

The spirit must be mature as well as the mind. It is tragic if it never becomes so. We have known people like that—brilliant in mind, but useless to the kingdom. Others, not so brilliant, year after year have blessed ministries.

Remember (v. 24) that it is Christ who is the wisdom and power of God. He is the final Word. In his Kingdom that is to come, there is no Christian elite based on theological education. What matters is that we love the Lord our God and our neighbors as ourselves. Love requires no seminary degree. It is tragic if instead of nourishing love, theological education starves it, if instead of helping us to connect with people it separates us from them. Love is destroyed when we have to show others how smart we are. As students and even as faculty members we are too prone to this, rejoicing too little in the accomplishments of others and boasting about ourselves.

The gospel reminds us that whatever we are comes by grace: “God has eliminated every human pretension and all self-sufficiency.”⁴ Christ alone is our righteousness, holiness and redemption. He is our righteousness since we cannot perfectly keep the law, and he writes the law within our hearts. He alone is our holiness since we are not

⁴Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 84; 63-88, 112-20.

unblemished offerings, and he both sanctifies us and calls us to be holy (1:2) like him. He alone is our redemption, for without Him we are but slaves to sin, and he demands that we also be crucified with him.

III. The Crucified Mind (2:12-16)

To say we have the mind of Christ is to say that we have a crucified mind. That is a truly consecrated mind set on knowing Christ. It is a teachable mind. It is a mind set free from selfish interests and desires. It is a mind directed fully toward God and toward others. That requires teachability. Sometimes students come to APNTS believing that they already have all of the answers. They just want a degree. It is difficult for a teacher to break through that type of intellectual arrogance.

It is not arrogance to believe that God wants to sanctify and use our minds. Later in this letter, Paul tells the Corinthians that when he prays he prays with his mind as well as his spirit, and that when he sings he sings with his mind as well as his spirit (14:15). God does not bypass our minds when he speaks to us or speaks through us. Our minds are precisely where God speaks to us using the “language” of Christ.

Our minds are surrendered to Christ for the sake of others. That means allowing Him to teach us what otherwise we could never understand, and allowing our thoughts and words to be vehicles of grace for others. That is our goal: by our actions and by our words to make plain the gospel. We must know the doctrine of the trinity well enough to defend it before Moslems, but also well enough to explain it to third-graders. Usable preachers and teachers (and the ones who best understand what they are trying to preach and teach) are able to convey deep truths plainly to common and simple men and women. Kosuke Koyama, who served as a missionary from Japan to Thailand, “decided that the greatness of theological works is to be judged by the extent and quality of the service they can render to the farmers” to whom he was sent. He wrote: “I also decided that I have

not really understood *Summa Theologiae* and Church Dogmatics until I am able to use them for the benefit of the farmers. . . . I dare to give priority to the farmers over Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth in my theological thinking.”⁵ The “crucified mind” is necessary for conveying the gospel. We must be constantly ready to crucify our urges to display our erudition, and instead, to humble our minds for the sake of both learning and building up the community of faith.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, a prayer of St. Anselm may help us to center on the connection between the “wisdom” of the world and true wisdom, which comes through belief.⁶

*I confess, Lord, with thanksgiving that you have made me in your image,
so that I can remember you, think of you, and love you.
But the image is so worn and blotted out by faults,
so darkened by the smoke of sin,
that it cannot do that for which it was made, unless you renew and refashion it.
Lord, I am not trying to make my way to your height,
for my understanding is in no way equal to that,
but I do desire to understand a little of your truth which my heart already
believes and loves.
I do not seek to understand so that I may believe;
But I believe so that I may understand;
and what is more, I believe that unless I do believe I shall not understand.
Amen.*

⁵Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1974), viii.

⁶*The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), 243-44.