

- e. The mediation of divine wisdom from God to men is solely the work of the Spirit. Again, this is true first because only the Spirit of God knows the depths of God (2:10) where the transcendent, glorious truth of His comprehensive purpose in Christ originated and has its life and power. Even the angels who dwell in the very presence of God long to gaze into these mysteries (1 Peter 1:10-12). The second reason is that man in his natural state is incapable of discerning and appropriating God's wisdom (2:14); as the Spirit plumbs the depths of the divine wisdom in Christ, so He reveals that wisdom in the depths of the human soul.

Paul's statement in 2:14 is often drawn upon in defense of the doctrine of total depravity and its central concern of human inability. This doctrine is widely understood in terms of an absolute human incapacity and resistance toward God and His truth. Thus man's natural condition of "spiritual death" is often caricatured as the absence of all understanding and interest in the things of God, other than a hatred for God that expresses itself in conscious, active hostility.

So, in the case of the present passage, many see it as teaching that man's natural state leaves him utterly unable to understand the biblical text and embrace its teaching. Kept in a narrow purview, this conclusion might appear reasonable enough, but it exemplifies the danger of "proof-texting": of using an isolated Bible passage to defend a presumed doctrine or position.

- In the first place, this interpretation is entirely foreign to Paul's argument and conclusions in the larger context. That this is the case shouldn't be at all surprising; the more narrowly one examines something, the more possibilities he opens up respecting that thing's identity and meaning.
- But secondly, the canonical text does not support this conclusion. One need only consider the nation of Israel – and its epitomization in the Israelite Paul – to see that the natural (depraved) man is capable of spiritual fervency, sincere commitment and remarkable attainment in his interaction with the God revealed in the Bible (cf. Exodus 24:1-3; Joshua 24:1-18; Acts 22:1-3, 26:2-7; Galatians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:1-7).
- Indeed, the above interpretation has a very dangerous implication: If the unsaved man can neither understand nor embrace the things of God revealed in the Scripture, it follows that interest, understanding and approval of the biblical text are sure proof that a person is saved.

But Paul's intention here wasn't to prove the doctrine of total depravity; he was continuing his argument regarding the antithesis between divine and natural wisdom and the implications for the Corinthian church and its malaise. His goal was to cause the Corinthians to see that they had been brought under the sway of natural wisdom and so had become insensitive to God's wisdom. A man – even a saved man – cannot listen to both the Spirit of God and the spirit of this world. The Corinthians were listening to the latter, to the great detriment of the church.

For all their confidence respecting their spiritual wisdom and maturity, many at Corinth were actually in the position of “not accepting the things of the Spirit of God” (those “things” being God’s wisdom in Christ mediated by the Spirit). This is a critically important observation that is readily missed by those who assume that Paul’s intention here was to affirm the doctrine of human inability and its counterpart of divine monergism in personal salvation. Interacting with Paul’s statement from that vantage point, the immediate (indeed, the necessary and unquestioned) conclusion is that the apostle was speaking of unsaved people.

But while the unregenerate are certainly included among those who are “natural men,” Paul was actually referring to the Corinthian believers – at least those among them who were implicated in the issues he was addressing.

- The phrase “natural man” refers to men as they think and operate in accordance with their natural humanness. The contemporary connotation notwithstanding, Paul did not employ it as a pejorative implying irrationality, insensitivity or even sinfulness; it merely designates human beings as they are in and of themselves. It applies just as aptly and fully to the religiously astute, disciplined and upright as to the worst of men.

The natural man is the person who is informed and directed (most often, quite unconsciously) by the “spirit of the world” – that is, by *natural wisdom*. In his case, the wisdom of God is transformed into the wisdom of the world: an understanding of gospel verities that effectively misses the truth as it is in Jesus Christ. In the instance of the natural man, the wisdom of God remains in the realm of mystery (cf. again 1:20-25, 2:6-10, 3:1-4).

- Paul set the “natural man” in antithesis to the “spiritual man,” which refers, not to the religiously attuned and astute, but to those who are taught and led by the Spirit of God. These are the mature ones in whose case Paul’s gospel was rightly appropriated as God’s wisdom in Christ.

Unbelievers are obviously “natural men” as Paul defined that concept; indeed, they are the *proper* referents of that designation. But, in context, Paul was addressing the Corinthians, not the world of unsaved men: They were the “men of flesh” who were not able to receive the things of the Spirit of God, at least to the extent that these things of the Spirit amounted to “solid food.” And precisely because the Corinthians were saved individuals – persons who possessed the mind of Christ *in substance* through the indwelling Spirit (2:16), their guilt before God went beyond that of their unbelieving countrymen. The unbelieving of the world are *in fact* “mere men”: men devoid of the Spirit and therefore of the life and mind of Christ; the Corinthians were guilty of conducting themselves *as if* they were still “mere men” – as if they were “men of flesh” (cf. esp. 3:1, 3). They weren’t devoid of the Spirit, but were “babes in Christ,” childish believers who were grieving and quenching the Spirit. In that state, and despite their convictions to the contrary, they were men who were unable to appropriate God’s wisdom.

- f. Paul followed his assertion with the justification for it, which is that the things of the Spirit of God (God's wisdom in Christ) are *spiritually appraised*: The wisdom of God can only be rightly discerned when the recipient processes it with the mind of the Spirit who mediates it to him rather than by the spirit of the world. For those who lack this mind (for whatever reason), God's wisdom is reduced to the wisdom of men. Unbelievers lack this mind altogether because they are devoid of the Spirit. But Christians also *effectively* lack the mind of the Spirit to the extent that their perception, thoughts and judgment are governed by natural wisdom.

This was the problem at Corinth, but not uniquely so; the Corinthian church was merely a microcosm of the church in every place and generation. For churches are comprised of believers in the process of transformation into Christ-likeness. They possess Jesus' life and mind, but not consummately and without admixture. The Spirit is yet transforming them "from glory unto glory," toward the day when they will manifest in themselves the whole stature of the fullness of Jesus' glorious humanity (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:1-13). The Spirit will accomplish His work in the lives of God's people (2 Corinthians 4:13-14; Philippians 1:6), but not in a vacuum: *Christiformity demands human effort, both personally and in the context of the life and function of the body* (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 with Ephesians 4:11-16; Philippians 2:1-13). Thus Paul's exhortation to "put off the old self and put on the new" (Ephesians 4:17-24; cf. Colossians 3:1-11).

- g. Putting on the "new self" amounts to walking by ("keeping in step with") the Spirit – that is, intentionally yielding oneself to be informed and led by Him (Galatians 5:16-26; cf. Romans 8:1-17; Ephesians 5:15-21). So Paul here asserted that receiving and knowing in truth the things of the Spirit of God depends upon spiritual appraisal, and this capacity is the property of "*the one who is spiritual*" (2:15). Again, Paul was referring, not to the person who is characterized by spiritual interest or "spirituality" in the contemporary sense, but the person taught and led by the Spirit of God. *Importantly, the spiritual man is thus the antithesis of – and only alternative to – the natural man* (cf. vv. 14-15): There are those who think (and so order their lives) in accordance with the mind of the Spirit; *all* others think with natural (worldly) minds in accordance with the spirit of the world. Again, simply being born of the Spirit doesn't exempt one from natural-mindedness, as the Corinthian situation proved (cf. Colossians 2:20-3:4).

And because the spiritual man relates to all things with the mind of the Spirit, to that extent his perception is accurate and his judgment is true; he is able to rightly "appraise all things," *including those who are natural men*. But the nature of the case won't allow the converse: The spiritual man appraises the natural man, but he isn't himself subject to the latter's appraisal (2:15). At this point it's critical to recognize that Paul wasn't promoting some sort of Christian elitism or a spirit of autonomy by which a believer regards himself as above criticism, correction or accountability. *Quite the opposite, the "spiritual man" who rightly judges all things will be the most humble, receptive and accountable of men, for he operates with Jesus' mind, which is the antithesis of pride, autonomy, and self-seeking.*

- h. Paul substantiated his contention regarding the spiritual man (“he who is spiritual”) with a profound summary, drawn from the Scripture and directed at the Corinthians as well as himself. The essence of his summary is that the spiritual man has the capability Paul ascribed to him because he has the *mind of Christ* (2:16), which is the mind of the Spirit of Christ. Considered within the larger context, this means that the spiritual man – like the Spirit Himself who indwells and instructs him – has access to the deep things of God, here the “mind of Yahweh.”

Paul’s citation is taken from the Septuagint of Isaiah 40:13, which has a markedly negative sense in its Isaianic context. That is, the question Yahweh posed through His prophet anticipated from Israel a negative response: *No one understands the mind of the Lord, and no one has counseled Him*. This question comes at the outset of a large section highlighting Yahweh’s coming salvation in His Servant, and His point (as Paul’s) is that His glorious purposes for His creation are His own, hidden within His own mind, *but one day to be revealed to the sons of men*.

The Isaianic question begged a negative response from Israel, and the contextual reason is clear: Yahweh’s messianic Servant had not yet entered the world and accomplished its reconciliation and restoration by His atonement and outpoured Spirit. The covenant people – as the entire world of men and the earth they inhabit – yet remained under the curse of estrangement from Yahweh. The Abrahamic nation designated “son of God” held that status in name only; they were, in truth, “sons of harlotry” who didn’t know their covenant Father and Lord (Isaiah 1:1-4).

At the time of Isaiah’s interrogation, the answer the covenant people were compelled to give was that they *didn’t* know the mind of the Lord. But Paul understood the larger context of Yahweh’s question and recognized that it held prophetic significance, looking ahead to the day when the plight of Israel (and the world) would be finally and forever resolved. In that day, Yahweh was going to liberate the sons of men from their bondage to the “blindness” of worldly wisdom and grant them insight into His mind and purpose – His *wisdom in Christ* (cf. Isaiah 40:1-11 with 40:21-31, 41:21-29, 42:1-25, 44:1-20, 45:1-25, 48:1-49:23).

Paul understood that that promised day has come; the Lord’s Servant has accomplished His work and sent His Spirit (cf. 48:16 with 42:1-7 and 44:1-5) to enliven and illumine the world of men and gather them into His kingdom as bona fide sons of God – sons who share the divine life and mind. Thus Yahweh’s question to men now calls for a positive response: There **are** those who know the mind of the Lord as it pertains to His glorious purposes revealed in Jesus Christ; in Paul’s terms, there are those who are able to discern God’s wisdom in Christ because they possess the mind of Christ. Paul was one of those individuals, *but so were the Corinthians* (“**we** have the mind of Christ”): They’d been given the Spirit in order to “know the things graciously given to them” in Christ (ref. vv. 9, 12; cf. again John 14:16-28, 15:26, 16:13-15 with Acts 1:1-8). They were, by the grace of the Father and the Son and the renewing work of the Spirit, spiritual men. But they were yet living as “mere men”; they were living a lie.