

13. The Corinthians believed they were building upon the foundation of Christ with “gold, silver and precious stones.” They clearly didn’t view their factional allegiances as sinful and destructive; in fact, the context indicates that they were *proud* of them, as indeed they took great pride in themselves and their perceived spiritual wisdom and maturity (cf. 3:21 with 4:1-7, 5:1-2). It is quite likely that the Corinthians regarded their factions as showing the depth of their commitment to the Lord and His cause. The very reason they rallied around a particular individual was that they saw that person as more faithful to Christ, more mature, more gifted, or more effective in the work of the gospel.

Even as they were convinced of their mature insight and understanding, the Corinthians were undoubtedly confident of the reward that awaited them on the day when God will bring all things to light. How shocking it must have been to have Paul insist that they (at least many among them) were actually guilty of working toward the ruination of God’s Church and that, far from rewarding them, God was going to bring *them* to ruin (3:17). For some, nothing but their bare salvation would survive His assaying fire.

It was bad enough that these individuals foolishly judged themselves wise, but they also assessed their own actions and labors with that same foolish mind. As a matter of course wise minds bring forth wise actions; so the natural judgment that led the Corinthians to ascribe to themselves the former also deceived them regarding the latter.

- a. Paul understood that the Corinthian factions were symptomatic rather than problematic; the underlying cause of their divisions was their failure to think and judge with the mind of Christ. Thus he summarized his treatment of the issue by turning again to the antithesis between divine and natural wisdom, this time in order to apply his instruction directly to the Corinthians with a series of pointed exhortations (3:18-4:5).

- The wisdom of the world is foolishness in God’s esteem, even as God’s wisdom is foolish to the natural mind. Therefore, the Christian who has judged himself wise based on the perspectives and faculties of reasoning and judgment that characterize the natural man must recognize that he has *deceived* himself. The one who so judges himself wise is actually a fool.
- But precisely because divine and human wisdom are antithetical, the Christian who would *actually* be wise – that is, think and judge with the mind of Christ through the leading of His Spirit – must be willing to become a fool in the assessment of natural wisdom.

To the natural mind, the remedy for the Corinthians’ factions was clear: they simply needed to denounce and dismantle them. Paul, however, discerned that their factions were merely one manifestation of the *principle* of division that governed their thinking. Resolving their divisions depended upon addressing the real problem, and that meant dealing with their self-deception: They needed to recognize and then reject the folly of what their natural minds regarded to be wisdom and embrace the apparent foolishness of what is wisdom indeed (3:18).

b. For all its appearances, natural wisdom is actually foolishness, and Paul indicated two ways in which that is the case:

- 1) The first is the more obvious of the two, and that is that natural wisdom misperceives and misjudges truth. In particular, it misjudges the wisdom of God in Christ so that it is ultimately unable to comprehend the things of the Spirit of God (ref. 1:18-24, 2:6-14, 3:1-2). Natural wisdom allows for learning theological and doctrinal data, but it falls short of truly grasping the divine wisdom that is the glory of the triune God in the face of Jesus Christ. In Paul's thinking, the essential distinction between "milk" and "meat" is not in the content ingested, but in the capacity of the person to digest it with insight and understanding. His own experience had taught him that a person can be a Bible scholar and yet be ignorant of its truth.
- 2) The second way in which natural wisdom is foolishness is highlighted in the present passage: It is foolish because it operates out of the natural human presumption of *personal independence* which ultimately supplants God with the primacy of self (3:19-20). The natural mind doesn't necessarily seek liberation from God altogether, but it does insist upon personal identity and significance independent of God. The natural mind conceives and interacts with reality in terms of *me* and *not me*; in regard to personal relationships, it operates according to the paradigm of *me* and *you*, and this is as true of its interaction with God as with other men.

For that reason, natural wisdom is truly *natural*: It reflects man as he is in himself – as he thinks from within his own mind as it operates apart from the truth as it is in Christ. Such a person may be eminently religious and theologically informed, but he subjects divine truth to the perspectives, premises and convictions of his own natural mind. He may believe he's hearing the voice of divine wisdom, but he's really only hearing his own.

So it was with the Corinthians: While they believed they were submitted to God and were serving the cause of His gospel, they had in fact subjected God to *themselves*. True, they were giving their allegiance to men other than themselves, but that action itself reflected an autonomous, willful and proud spirit by which they felt justified in setting one of Christ's servants over against another. In stark contrast to Paul who submitted all things to the Lord's examination and judgment, many at Corinth insisted on taking the prerogative of passing judgment (ref. 4:3-5).

c. These considerations show why Paul referred to *the* "wisdom of this world" (3:19, cf. 1:20) even though worldly wisdom has countless expressions, religious and secular. He understood that, regardless of its personal, social, cultural or religious premises and orientation, worldly wisdom is actually *one* precisely because it derives from the mind of man as he is in himself. For all the differences between people, there is but one natural human mind and therefore one human wisdom.

- d. Whatever their distinct emphases or orientation, all forms of natural wisdom are ultimately one, and that one “wisdom” is foolishness before God. Paul’s own life with Christ had taught him this, but he substantiated his claim to the Corinthians by drawing upon the Scriptures (vv. 19-20, cf. 1:19). *Here again it is important to reiterate the way in which Paul viewed and interacted with the biblical text.*

Unlike so many Christians in the past and present, Paul didn’t view the Old Testament text as a collection of discrete theological, doctrinal and practical proof-texts. He rightly understood the Scripture’s individual texts to be components of the overall *Text*: Like individual tissues in a body, each contributes in precise, determined fashion to the one organic, all-encompassing storyline which unfolds God’s realization of His eternal purpose (His *wisdom*) in Jesus Christ. Thus Jesus Himself insisted that all the Scripture testifies of Him, and His Spirit equipped His witnesses to proclaim Him by revealing to them how that is indeed the case (cf. John 16:13-15; Acts 1:1-8, 2:1-36, 3:12-26, 4:5-12, 23-30, 7:1-53, 8:26-35, 13:1-41, 15:1-21, 17:1-3, 10-11, 18:4-11, 24:10-15, 26:1-27).

Paul had an organic, narrative sense of the Scripture, and this perspective drove the way he employed it in his ministry and preaching. *He could not think of a particular scriptural passage except as it fit into the overall Old Testament storyline with its myriad interwoven themes and sub-narratives.*

- What this means is that Paul didn’t cite a passage of Scripture because it happens to contain a couple of key words or ideas that relate to the things he was discussing at the moment.
- When Paul drew upon a particular text, he was drawing upon its broader salvation-historical context and meaning. He never used a text as an isolated proof-text, but always as a hook that brought with it a whole realm of content and significance (ref. 1 Corinthians 9:6-11; 2 Corinthians 6:1-18; Romans 9:22-26; Galatians 4:21-31; Ephesians 4:7-13; etc.).

Paul wasn’t alone in viewing the Scripture in this way; it was the perspective of all the New Testament writers, even as it was of Christ Himself. Sadly, many Christians don’t understand this, and so find themselves in the uncomfortable position of trying to vindicate their doctrine of scriptural literalness and “contextual meaning” in the face of the apparent “out of context” way Paul and his counterparts used the Old Testament text. Ironically, in some instances inspiration itself becomes their answer to the apparent misuse of the text by the New Testament writers: *“They were inspired men and so could find meanings beyond the immediate context; we’re not inspired, and so can’t do what they did.”*

What all this means for the present passage is that Paul’s citations in support of his claims about worldly wisdom must be examined and considered within their broader salvation-historical and christological context. To fail to do so is to fail to grasp Paul’s meaning in employing them.

- 1) Paul's first citation is from Job 5:13, which is set in the midst of Eliphaz' first address to his friend Job. Like Job's other two friends, Eliphaz sought to lead his suffering friend to see the true cause of his plight, and thereby discover the remedy for it. Eliphaz was the first of the three to speak, and this opening address centers on his conviction that Job was responding to his situation foolishly (4:1-5:27; cf. 15:1-6, 22:12-22).

The basis of Eliphaz' rebuke was Job's despair over his desperate situation and his tacit charge of injustice against God (2:1-26). Eliphaz responded that God is not unjust, but the same cannot be said of men. All are impure in God's sight and all lack the wisdom to sit as His judge (4:12-21). Irrespective of what Job may have believed about his circumstance and God's role in it, he needed to acknowledge that the Lord was treating him justly, submit to His reproof and seek His mercy going forward (5:1-27).

It is in that context that Eliphaz insisted that God "*captures the wise in their craftiness.*" The notion of wisdom here refers to the human judgment that regards itself as insightful and shrewd and yet is actually foolish and devoid of understanding. It is the wisdom by which men vindicate their independence from God and convince themselves of the rightness and ultimate triumph of their labors. Eliphaz recognized the folly of that thinking: God's wisdom always prevails, and it is antithetical to its human counterpart (5:8-16). This means that God's wisdom always triumphs over men's wisdom, but in such a way that it exposes their folly (5:12-14).

Eliphaz ascribed that sort of "wisdom" to Job and called him to seek the Lord in repentance and humble entreaty. Eliphaz' theology of divine vs. human wisdom was correct in principle; however, he failed to apply it properly to Job as well as to himself. Eliphaz, too, was foolish, not understanding the true nature of Job's plight and what God was doing through it – first, with respect to Job himself, *but more importantly, as it contributed to His ever-deepening revelation of His own wisdom that was yet to be revealed in Jesus Christ.*

Eliphaz understood something of the antithesis and interplay between divine and human wisdom, but he was unable to rightly apply that insight to his own judgment and the conclusions he drew respecting the circumstance before him. In that regard, Eliphaz was just like the Corinthians. And as in his case God had "caught the wise in his craftiness" (Job 42:7-8), so it was with the worldly wise at Corinth; they, too, were misjudging His revealed truth and speaking things of Him that were not right; they, too, were going to be brought under His judgment.

- 2) Paul's second citation is from Psalm 94:11. Though not typically reckoned among the imprecatory psalms, this psalm parallels them in calling for God's retribution upon those who come against His people.

With respect to the issue of worldly wisdom, the psalmist rebuked these opponents as the worst sort of fools: men who believe they can array themselves to destroy the Lord's people without His knowing or responding. The heart of the psalmist's rebuke is the folly of assuming that the Creator of men – the One who gives them their capacity to perceive and discern – is Himself unaware and without discernment (vv. 5-11).

The “wisdom” of the fool tells him that all is well; even if he can't convince himself that he's doing the Lord's work, he is confident God will never bring him to account, or if He does, that he will be able to exonerate himself (cf. Psalm 10:1-13). But the truth is that Yahweh *does* see and know and He will exact just recompense. The psalmist cried out to the Lord to arise against the wicked, foolish oppressor, and He has answered that cry in His Son. The Lord knows that the musings and machinations of men are vain and destructive (v. 11), and He has exposed and condemned them by the cross of Christ. Thus the import for the Corinthians:

*These who affirmed God's assessment and condemnation of natural wisdom when they embraced Jesus Christ – God's wisdom – had allowed themselves to again become enamored with it. **Did they think the God who'd condemned and overthrown the glory of men in their wisdom would tolerate it in His children – those whom He'd delivered from it?***

- e. Paul summarized his assessment by exposing what it was that the Corinthians were actually seeking through their factions. They were “boasting in men,” but not out of jealousy for those particular men; in the end, their concern was for themselves. They were concerned to be associated with the right individual and thereby gain the reward they sought, which was the approbation of God, other men, and ultimately their own hearts.

The proof that the Corinthians had a self-serving goal in their factions is found in Paul's qualifying statement: “*So then let no one boast in men, **for all things belong to you...***” Whether they consciously understood it or not, the Corinthians were seeking to gain something for themselves through aligning themselves with certain individuals. Their natural minds told them that there was profit for them – something they could claim as their own – in those allegiances, but the mind of the Spirit in Paul exposed the error and folly of that thinking: *There was nothing to gain through their allegiances to men for the simple reason that all things were already theirs.* Barrett enlarged this consideration by highlighting the particular “gain” that is a sense of personal identity and belonging:

*“Boasting in, and glorifying, human leaders is not only dishonoring to God but also degrading to those who boast, for it mistakes the relationship between the Christian and the leader. Those who gloried in the church leaders said, I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas. This inverts the truth. You do not belong to this or that minister, for all things are yours...”*

Paul's insistence was that all things belong to Christ's saints, and that includes the men He raises up to lead them; the Corinthians didn't need to lay claim to Paul or Apollos or Cephas (or anyone else) because they were already theirs (3:22a). This is true in the sense that the Church's leaders are its *servants* (3:5). Such men are preeminently servants of Christ Himself – undershepherds who serve the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:1-4), but for this very reason they are servants of Christ's flock. The Lord has appointed leaders to serve His saints in His name and for His sake; they are Christ's *gift* to His Church, not its overlords.

Thus Paul intended his statement to indict and rebuke the leaders at Corinth as much as the congregation. The saints were culpable for forming factions by aligning themselves with particular individuals, but the leadership was also culpable for allowing the factions to exist and for attaching themselves to them. If the congregants sought gain through their factions, so did the leaders. They may not have been the direct objects of allegiance, but by taking sides in the factions they effectively made themselves the “on-site” leadership representative of Paul, Apollos or Cephas. Leaders as well as congregants were using the Lord's servants for their own gain, seeking from them personal identity and status.

Christ's servants belong to His Church, but so do *all things*. Some have puzzled over why Paul chose to mention the things he did – the *world, life, death, things present* and *things to come*, but his catalog was purposeful and appropriate. Paul didn't arbitrarily list some things within the all-encompassing category that is “all things,” but things that marvelously capture and express his point.

When Paul referred to “all things” as belonging to the saints, he was speaking of that which is theirs in Christ – *that which has come to them as the fruit of God's wisdom in Christ*. Again, Paul used the phrase, “the wisdom of God,” in reference to God's eternal purpose for His creation which is bound up in the person and work of the incarnate Son. Christ has manifested and fulfilled the divine wisdom, and by His gospel – the good news of this fulfillment in the inaugurated kingdom of God – this wisdom is now being revealed to the world and bearing its fruit.

The wisdom of God concerns the restoration and everlasting perfection of the whole creation in its relationship with Him and then with itself. Paul understood this, and so recognized that what the saints possess in Christ vastly transcends forgiveness and cleansing. He knew that God's goal isn't atonement for transgression, but the summing up of the whole creation in His Son. *Soteriology is grounded in and serves eschatology, which itself is preeminently christological*.

The things Paul enumerated speak to this truth: In union with Christ, the saints possess the glory and riches of creational renewal and perfection. The cosmos itself is theirs, but so is the life that is in Christ and, with it, His triumph over death. He has inaugurated the new creation and they are sharers in it (“things present”), but with complete assurance of the everlasting fullness to come. All things are theirs, because they are of Christ and Christ is of God (Romans 8:31ff).