

Paul's pointed exhortation to unity made it clear that he repudiated without exception or qualification all schisms and factionalizing in Christ's Church. Whether a faction arose because of heretical doctrine or out of pious devotion to him as Jesus' chosen apostle, both were equally outrageous and contrary to the nature of the Body. So also if baptism was supplying a basis for forming allegiances to men, Paul was going to denounce that just as firmly. It wasn't that he regarded baptism as irrelevant, but he recognized that it serves an *attesting* role:

- Baptism signifies the fact of the believer's participation in Christ; it does nothing except testify to the truth that, by the power of the Spirit, a person has been joined to Christ's death and resurrection; his human existence is now hidden with Christ in God.
- Thus baptism speaks to and exalts the gospel: the good news of the kingdom of God and its nature and efficacy in relation to human beings. The gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16) – not only in terms of those who are saved through it, but also in the sense that this good news holds forth to the world of men the true nature, orientation and operation of the divine power of the triune God. The gospel discloses and explains God's power and how it functions for the recovery of mankind (and the whole creation). And in the hands of the Spirit, the gospel effects in a person's life that which it proclaims.

This is why Paul could assert to the Corinthians that Christ had sent him, not to baptize, but to preach the gospel (1:17). Without this proclamation and its fruitfulness by the Spirit, baptism would be meaningless and of no value. Baptism has no life or significance in itself; even more, it speaks to the oneness of Christ's Body. How, then, can it be the basis for church factions?

5. Paul understood that Jesus had called and commissioned him to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God. But he also recognized that that message conflicts with the frame of reference and pattern of thinking which characterize the natural mind. This truth has two important implications for the testimony of the gospel, both of which are evident in Paul's treatment in the next context (1:18-31).
  - a. The first is that the natural mind – the mind that is “according to the flesh” (ref. 1:26, 3:1; cf. also Romans 8:5-8; Galatians 5:16-24) – cannot help but regard the gospel as *foolishness*. The reason is that every person perceives, thinks and judges using himself as the datum and standard of assessment; his own perspective, understanding and value system determine what is true, good, right, worthy, lovely, desirable, etc. Men have no choice but to think, judge, and respond out from their own minds, and this means that, where their minds are at odds with the truth of God as revealed in the gospel, they will perceive the gospel as foolishness – ultimately irrelevant, if not utterly irrational.
  - b. The second implication flows from the first, which is the effect of the apparent foolishness of the gospel on those who hear and proclaim it. Because the gospel strikes the fallen mind as foreign and foolish, the natural tendency is for the hearer to “translate” it into an acceptable form. In effect, people hear what they want to hear, and if allowed to embrace a pseudo-gospel constructed in their own minds (irrespective of what the speaker is actually saying), they will do so.

On the other side, those who preach the gospel eventually come to recognize this problem with their hearers and so often find themselves searching for a way to make the gospel more reasonable and acceptable. To use Paul's words, they fall prey to the thinking that "cleverness of speech" will win the day and the hearts of those listening to them. Beyond concern for the success of his message, the herald of the gospel has the added selfish motivation of not appearing foolish himself.

But whether they turn to sophisticated, clever and/or persuasive argumentation in order to make their evangel more clear and compelling or to guard their own reputation (frequently it's for the sake of both), Christians who do so are guilty of *making void the cross of Christ*. Hays' comments are helpful in discerning Paul's point:

*"Preaching is the proclamation of the cross; it is the cross that is the source of its power. The convincing power of the cross could not be fully manifest if preaching shared too evidently in the devices of human rhetoric; if men are persuaded by eloquence they are not persuaded by Christ crucified. Hence Paul rejects wisdom as a rhetorical device."*

6. Verse 17 provides the hinge between what precedes and what follows. Paul repudiated the factions at Corinth, disallowing even baptismal reasons for them by putting baptism "in its place." Not baptism, but the preaching of the gospel is the core concern for Christ's servants, and that gospel must, in turn, be jealously guarded against everything that would undermine it and strip it of its power. These enemies of the gospel are not discernable to natural wisdom; to the contrary, such "wisdom" eagerly embraces them as proper and profitable; only a *different* kind of wisdom enables men to discern the true power of the gospel and expose the foolishness of that which men so highly regard.

So it was with the Corinthians. However proud they were of their discernment and judgment in aligning with the right man, the truth is that they were fools: men whose carelessness respecting the truth and wisdom of God in the gospel had allowed them to become captivated again by human wisdom. *Their factions reflected the foolishness of immature children (ref. 3:1-4), not superior insight and maturity.* And so, just as with the other issues at Corinth, Paul could only deal with the problem of schisms by taking the Corinthians back to the truth of the gospel and the antithesis it reveals between human and divine wisdom, between the natural mind and the mind of Christ.

Thus 1:18-31 explains and elaborates upon Paul's transitional declaration in v. 17. In that statement the apostle asserted a fundamental antithesis between the gospel and human wisdom, specifically the truth that "cleverness of speech" evacuates Christ's cross (which is central to the gospel) of its power. *To a congregation of people enamored with wise and persuasive rhetoric, this was surely an astounding and even preposterous claim.*

- a. Paul began his defense of his thesis by noting how human wisdom responds to the gospel. Despite the fact that the gospel sets forth God's power for salvation, this power isn't manifest to all men; quite the opposite, those who appraise the gospel with the faculty of natural wisdom find the "word of the cross" to be foolishness. And regarding it in this way, they turn away from it unto final ruination (1:18a).

Conversely, it is those who are being saved who discern the power of God in the word of the cross (v. 18b). There are a couple of important considerations that arise from this assertion:

- The first pertains to the tendency to read this verse in terms of the relationship between personal faith in Christ and personal salvation. Many see in Paul's statement further proof of the doctrine that faith is a gift of God. That is, apart from God's work of illumination and regeneration, the truth of the gospel remains obscured to the hearer; it is foolishness to him. One must be saved (i.e., regenerated) before he can discern the wisdom of God in the gospel and the true nature of its power to save.

But Paul wasn't speaking to this issue, and to read him that way is to completely miss his meaning and the import and power of his argument for the Corinthian situation. Paul wasn't thinking in terms of the salvation of the individual person, but God's purpose for His creation and the way in which He has accomplished it. Hays is again helpful:

*“God has revealed in Christ another kind of wisdom that radically subverts the wisdom of this world: God has chosen to save the world through the cross, through the shameful and powerless death of the crucified Messiah. If that shocking event [that is, its meaning] is the revelation of the deepest truth about the character of God, then our whole way of seeing the world is turned upside down. Everything has to be reevaluated in light of the cross.”*

- The above observation points toward another crucial consideration, namely that Paul's expression, the “word (*logos*) of the cross,” indicates that he was speaking of the purpose and comprehensive meaning of the cross rather than the crucifixion event as such. Indeed, there is no wisdom – divine or human – in the mere fact of Jesus' brutal murder. God's wisdom resides in His glorious, all-encompassing plan which has been accomplished in Jesus Christ and is proclaimed to the world in the gospel.

Paul was using the cross of Christ as *synecdoche* – a figure of speech by which the whole is represented and signified by one part of it. The cross here signifies the “Christ event” which itself embodies the totality of God's purging, renewing, and reconciling work. Just as the preaching of the gospel is the preaching of *Christ crucified* (cf. 1:17-18 with 2:1-2), so it is the proclamation of the good news of the *kingdom of God* – the news that God has fulfilled His promise of creational recovery (Acts 28:30-31).

*“The gospel is not an esoteric body of religious knowledge, not a slickly packaged philosophy, not a scheme for living a better life; instead, it is an announcement about God's apocalyptic intervention in the world, for the sake of the world.”* (Hays)

Thus, Paul's statement in 1:18 isn't concerned with the mechanisms of how an individual person "gets saved." (Is he saved because he believes, or does he believe because he's "being saved"? So also, do men perish because they reject or do they reject because they're perishing?) Rather, Paul was taking note of the larger, profound truth that, in the person and work of His Son, God has confronted the world with His wisdom and power – wisdom and power that are radically antithetical to the natural mind's conception of them. *The result of this confrontation is that human beings are compelled to take stock of their own notions of wisdom and power. That assessment, in turn, serves to divide mankind into two distinct camps:*

- those who hold fast to their natural, self-affirming conception of those realities and those who see through their own foolishness and impotence and embrace the wisdom and power of God;
  - in Paul's language, those who are on the path of ultimate destruction (ruination) and those who are on the path of salvation.
- b. Paul understood this dividing to be a matter of prophetic fulfillment – the way in which God has ultimately fulfilled His scriptural pledge to "*destroy the wisdom of the wise*" and "*annul the cleverness of the clever*" (1:19). Interestingly, Paul drew his citation from Isaiah 29:14, a passage which, in context, has nothing to do with Paul's use of it here. This sort of apparent misappropriation of an Old Testament passage is characteristic of the New Testament writers and Jesus Himself, and has posed no little problem for those who insist upon the notion of a "single meaning" in any given scriptural text. In the name of guarding scriptural veracity ("the Bible means what it says") and avoiding speculative private interpretation, such individuals ironically are forced to do precisely what they condemn, which is to refuse to let the Scripture interpret itself and say what it means.

Paul's citation is part of a larger context containing a series of *woes* (judicial pronouncements) against Judah and Israel (28:1-31:9). In this particular woe Yahweh was pronouncing, on the one hand, His just punishment of Jerusalem (Ariel) and, on the other, His promise of subsequent deliverance and restoration.

With respect to the former, David's city (symbolizing the covenant kingdom) was appointed for destruction and desolation because of the people's arrogance and complacency toward their covenant Father and Lord. Judah hadn't abandoned the required exercises of its worship and devotion; quite the opposite, the people were proud of their careful piety. But their honor and devotion were merely mechanics and lip service; their hearts were far from their God (29:13; cf. Matthew 15:1-9).

Yahweh knew this to be the case but the sons of Judah did not: They had blinded themselves to their true state and become stupefied, unable to see with their eyes and hear with their ears (cf. Isaiah 1:1-15 with 6:1-11). *They believed themselves to be wise and pious, but they were actually blind, rebellious fools.*

Nevertheless, desolation wasn't to be the last word. Yahweh had given His oath to Abraham and David regarding an everlasting kingdom reaping the fruit of global – indeed *cosmic* – blessing. Israel would yet fulfill its calling for the world.

Thus God's pronouncement to Judah – the pronouncement which Paul cited – carried a marvelous *double entendre*:

- As part of a message of judgment and desolation, it indicated that Yahweh was going to strip Judah naked and expose her arrogant folly; she who was convinced of her wisdom and piety and favor with her God would soon be confronted with the truth in the form of His fierce indignation (29:1-4).
- But more importantly, the pronouncement highlights Yahweh's determination to *remove* the folly and blindness of His wayward people. He was going to unmask and annul the wisdom and discernment of the "wise," but in order to expose as glorious His own wisdom and so bring men into its light and blessing. For the sake of restoration as well as condemnation, that which was hidden was going to be revealed (29:9-24).

Paul understood this Isaianic prophecy, not merely as it implicated the near-term future of Judah, but more importantly as it spoke to Yahweh's saving purposes for His creation in His Servant-Messiah. Paul recognized that the Lord's oath to "destroy the wisdom of the wise and set aside the cleverness of the clever" was not liable to numerous interpretations and diverse meanings, but to a unified, organic meaning that reached forward along the trajectory of salvation-historical fulfillment to find its fullness – its *sensius plenior* – in Jesus Christ.

- Isaiah's prophecy revealed that Judah was soon to be made desolate and its sons carried away into captivity in Babylon. The Lord's patience was coming to an end, and though He'd withhold His wrath for a season, destruction and exile would not be averted. Zion was going to be stripped of her children, but a remnant would return and rebuild the sanctuary and city when Yahweh raised up His *meshiach* Cyrus. In this way God was going to judge human wisdom and power, annulling them and abasing those who exulted in them, in order to reveal and exalt His own.
- Judah would see the triumph of divine wisdom and power in righteous judgment and restoring mercy, but the remnant's recovery from Babylon would not ultimately fulfill the prophet's promise. There remained another day for judging and destroying human wisdom and the resource it trusts and draws upon – the wisdom and sense of personal power which prevent men from knowing God and therefore from knowing themselves and the world around them. There remained another day in which Yahweh would make known to the whole world the glory of His wisdom and might – a wisdom and power that appear foolish and impotent to the natural mind, but which vindicate themselves in the new creation in Christ Jesus.