

The Foolishness of God, Part 1

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18–21

Code: 1813

INTRODUCTION

A. The Circumstance Presented

The book of 1 Corinthians is divided into Paul's discussions of the various problems that existed in the Corinthian church. The entire book, beginning in verse 10 of chapter 1, deals with the problems in the assembly. The first problem that confronted the Apostle as he wrote was the problem of division. The church was divided into factions and parties that were quarreling with one another. In fact, their church had split. This was a very grave problem; so the Apostle, from chapter 1 verse 10 to the end of chapter 3, deals with the problem of division in the church.

Now, as we come to 1:18, Paul continues to deal with this problem. We're going to be looking at 1:18 through 2:8 as a unit, and call our study on this portion of Scripture, "The Foolishness of God."

This, I think, is one of the greatest sections in all of Scripture because it gives a contrast between the foolishness of men (which they think is wisdom), and the wisdom of God (which they think is foolishness). In other words, it contrasts human wisdom with divine wisdom. Now, you say, "But, John, how does that relate to the subject of division in the church?" Well, let me tell you how:

1. Human Wisdom in Greece

The Greeks were in love with philosophy. In college I took a course in Greek philosophy, and learned that just about every philosophy of modern times is Greek in origin. The Greeks were the great philosophers. They would go around propagating various philosophies and attracting people to them. And so the whole of Greek culture was philosophically divided into little groups.

America's political system fairly well divides itself between the Republicans and the Democrats.

There are also American Independents, Freedom Party members, Communists, Socialists, and so forth; but they are a rather small minority. Predominantly, America is divided into two main parties. In Greece, however, there may have been as many as fifty dominating philosophies, so the populace was split into groups that held varying viewpoints regarding man's meaning and destiny.

The word philosophy simply means "man's wisdom." In the Greek, the word literally means "the love of wisdom" (sophia and phileo="to love wisdom").

The Greeks loved human wisdom, and developed many systems of philosophy. The people gravitated to the various systems, causing many factions of philosophy in Corinth.

2. Human Wisdom in the Church

When the church was born and many of the Corinthians became saved, even though they were united in Christ, and even though they identified commonly with the cross, they still held on to the varying philosophies that they had originally held to. As a result, the church also became split into little groups-- each holding various philosophical viewpoints. It would be as if our church was split between the Democrats and the Republicans, and never able to agree on things. That's how it was in Corinth. They were split into little philosophical factions, because when they became Christians, they still held on to their particular philosophy.

Let me tell you something about philosophy: it is unnecessary. Why? Because when it's right, it will agree with Scripture--so you don't need it. But when it's wrong, it will disagree--so you don't want it. You see, philosophy has nothing to offer. You don't need philosophy, because if it's right, the Bible says it anyway. If it's wrong, you don't want it.

The point that Paul is making is, "Look, since you've become Christians and you're united around God's revelation as it comes to a peak at the cross, forget your former philosophies. All they are doing is splitting you into little groups. That shouldn't be. " There are churches today that are divided over philosophical viewpoints. Churches are split over politics, economics, philosophies, and education. Division still happens today.

B. The Contrast Probed

Notice that Paul attacks this problem in Corinth beginning in verse 17: "For Christ sent me not to baptize but to preach the gospel. . . . " Now, "the gospel" is the good news. What is the good news? The good news is the message of the Bible-- the revelation of God that culminates in the redemptive act of Christ on the cross. Continuing on in verse 17, Paul says, ". . . not with wisdom of words [Gk. *sophia logou*= 'word wisdom,' or 'wisdom doctrine'], lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect [or 'rendered void or null']". "

Paul introduces the basic contrast that's going to dominate his thinking until the end of chapter 3. He sets human wisdom against the cross. "I came to preach the gospel, not human wisdom. The doctrines of human wisdom are opposite the truth of God--they are opposite the gospel. "

Paul is saying to the Corinthians, "Look, don't split over human philosophy. The gospel--the revelation of God--is all that is necessary. All the truth that God intends you to have is here. You do not need a human philosopher. " The Word of God stands alone; it needs no additions of worldly wisdom. Paul sets human wisdom against the gospel. In fact, throughout the rest of chapter 1 he uses the word *sophia* sixteen times. So, this is his main point.

1. Philosophy Threatens God's Revelation

Philosophy has always been a threat to God's revelation. It certainly has never helped God's revelation. You don't need to add human opinion to the divine Word. You don't need to say, "God said such-and-such. . . and I personally would like to add " No. Once God has said it, it's done being said. You can't say, "In addition to what God has said, I would like to add. . . . "

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "The whole drift toward modernism that has blighted the church of God and nearly destroyed its living gospel may be traced to an hour when men began to turn from revelation to philosophy. " Now, you may not know much about the history of doctrine or the history of the church, but that is a very accurate statement. The Bible was accepted by people until modernists began to introduce human philosophy. That isn't anything new; they've been doing it ever since the Corinthians did it.

2. Philosophy Dismisses God's Revelation

Let me tell you something else: Whenever philosophy gets mixed with revelation, revelation loses. We call that modernism, but it isn't. There's nothing modern about it.

Let me give you four illustrations of how philosophy dismisses God's revelation:

a. Rationalism--The first five books of the Bible--Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy--were written by one man. Who was that man? Moses. In fact, the Jewish people call these books "the law of Moses" or the "Pentateuch" (Gk. *penta*=five, *teuchos*= scroll). About a hundred years ago, a group of men called the rationalists came along with the following criterion for truth: only that which is rational to the human intellect is true. They said, "If something cannot fit into our minds and be conceived by us to be true, then it is not true. " So they looked at the Old Testament and said, "There are several things here we can't understand. First of all, we do not agree that Moses wrote the first five books, because Moses couldn't have known that much information that long ago. The evolution of law came a lot later; he could never have written the Ten Commandments that early. " Well, if Moses did not write that, who did? They said, "J, E, P, and D did. " You say, "Who's that?" This is their explanation: "Every time the word Jehovah appears, it was written by the Jehovah writer. When the word Elohim appears, it was written by the Elohim writer. Then there's the P, which stands for the priestly writer, and then the D, which indicates the person who wrote Deuteronomy. The only problem is, sometimes the elements of J, E, P, and D are all in the same

verse. At that point, the rationalists have a major problem. But they try to get out of it by saying, "There were a lot of editors who came along and edited everything. They're the ones who really wrote it. It wasn't really written by Moses at all. "Notice, when human philosophy was imposed on revelation, which one lost? Revelation! Incidentally, Moses did write those books. Those people who said there couldn't have been a developed system of law lost their argument not too many years ago when somebody discovered the Code of Hammurabi--a very sophisticated legal system that predates Moses. b. Theistic Evolution In Genesis 1, the Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. . . . the first day. . . . the second day. . . . the third day. . . . the fourth day. . . . the fifth day. . . . the sixth day" (vv. 1, 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). Then on the seventh day, God rested. The Bible explicitly states that God created all things. But human philosophy says, "No, the only explanation for the existence of things is evolution. " Well, does the Bible say anything about evolution? Does the word evolution appear in the Bible? No, it doesn't! The Bible does not talk about evolution, human philosophy does. Human philosophy says everything began from a primeval puddle. And in the primeval puddle was a one-celled thing that was very, very distressed about being a one-celled thing. It wanted company, so it split and became two. And then, of course, everything went wild--and here we are! That, in a nutshell (and a limited scientific explanation), is evolution. The Bible says that God created everything in six days. Evolution says everything originated from a primeval puddle and developed over millions of years. Well, somebody came along and said, "Of course the Bible says everything did emanate from God. I believe that. But I also believe in evolution. " So, he came up with theistic evolution--a conglomerate of both! Theistic evolution believes that God made the puddle, and life evolved from that puddle. Then, once life came to the place of becoming man, God gave him a soul. In other words, God started it, then interjected the soul. The rest was an evolutionary process. This is called progressive creationism, or theistic evolution. Do you know what happens, again? Philosophy is imposed on revelation, and revelation loses out. We don't need evolution. . . and God certainly doesn't need it, either. c. Psychology Today we have a so-called science called "psychology. " However, it is anything but a science! Now, the Bible tells us a lot about how to live, doesn't it? It also tells you a lot about how to get rid of guilt--confess your sin. I never knew any therapy that could do as much as confession could do. I never knew of any psychiatrist who could deliver anybody from sin. But I know Christ can. The Bible says a lot about that. It also says a lot about counseling and exhortation. But what happens is that some people take the Bible and try to combine it with fourteen years of Freudian education. Guess which loses? The Bible. The patterns of life in the Scripture do not need Freud to help them along. God did not need Freud; Freud needed God! d. The Social Gospel There are those who say, "I know the Bible teaches the gospel, but we must add to the gospel. " These people created what is called the "social gospel. " You know what happens? Eventually, the true gospel is lost. Philosophy never did any favors for revelation--ever. Listen, you don't need human wisdom or human philosophy. All you need is the Word of God. If you know and understand the Word of God, you understand what you need to know, and you have the source of solutions to your problems. You see, there are only two views of anything: man's and God's. Man's view is indulgent, shallow, short-sighted, and unrealistic. It panders to the flesh, elevates desire, supports pride, advocates independence, and makes man the center of everything. Human philosophy just fulfills Romans 1:25: It changes the truth of God into a lie and worships the creature more than the Creator. Paul says in Romans 1, "The knowledge of God was there. You had the knowledge of God. You had the revelation of God. It was all there. But you imposed human philosophy on it and turned the truth of God into a lie. " Listen, God wants us to accept His revelation, not to split into philosophical factions. Human wisdom added to divine truth renders the cross null and void (1 Cor. 1:17b). So, in verse 17 Paul launches into a lengthy contrast between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men.

C. The Confusion Pronounced

Moving on to verse 18, we read, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness;

but unto us who are saved it is the power of God. " Now notice this verse carefully: ". . . the preaching of the cross is to them that perish [i. e. , `those who are without God, those who are dying in sin, those who will spend eternity in hell, those who do not know God, those for whom God's heart is grieved'] foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God. " It's foolishness to them because they have elevated their own philosophies. The cross looks stupid and foolish to them. They have such complex philosophies, that to come along and say, "I want to give you a simple message: God in human flesh died on a cross, paid the penalty for your sin, and by faith in that act and His resurrection you can be saved and your eternal destiny be secured in heaven forever," will get a negative response. The world will say, "How stupid to believe that the death of one man on one hill on one piece of wood at one moment in history is the determining factor of destiny for every man who ever lived! That's ridiculous!" They just can't believe it. It's foolish to them. By the way, the word "foolishness" is the Greek word *moron*, from which we get *moron*. It means "moronic, stupid, and silly. "

1. The Contrast

Notice the word "preaching" in verse 18. It's the Greek word *logos*, which literally means "the word. " So it literally reads, "For the word of the cross " In verse 18 we read, "For the word of the cross. . . , " and looking back at verse 17, we read, ". . . the word of wisdom. . . . " Paul contrasts the word of wisdom with the word of the cross. Human wisdom is set against the cross.

2. The Clarification

The phrase "the word of the cross" means "all that is involved in the cross. " The *logos* is the total revelation. You say, "John, what is the word of the cross?" Did you know that everything before the cross pointed to it and everything after the cross explains it? The word of the cross is the revelation of God.

The revelation of God, which peaks in the cross, is set against the wisdom of men. Paul says that these things are opposite each other. That's why the people who hold to worldly wisdom think that the cross is moronic. But we who are saved know it to be the power of God. This is basically what Paul said in Romans 1:16: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. Even though the world thinks I'm stupid, and even though the philosophers think I'm uneducated, I still am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. It may be moronic to them, but it is the power of God to those who believe. " So, the word of the cross, which looks like foolishness to men, is really the power of God. Men, because of their rationalism, their elevation of the human ego, and their desire for their own philosophies, can't stoop to something as simple as that. It is so simple, in fact, that Jesus Himself said, "Unless you become as a little child, you can't enter the Kingdom" (Lk. 18:17). It is simple. It is not a complex philosophy.

3. The Challenge

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he arrived in a maelstrom of philosophies--a melee of words flying all over Corinth.

What was he going to do? Was he just going to offer another philosophy and get caught in the whirlwind? Look at chapter 2. Beginning with verse 1, he says, "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom. . . . For I determined not to know any thing among you, except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (vv. 1-2). Do you know why he said that? Because there was already enough verbiage flying around. He wasn't about to offer them another philosophy; it would just have been another thing to hang on the wall. He wanted to give them something real, not something superficial; something simple, not complex; something historical, not ethereal; something concrete and objective, not subjective and foggy. He preached to them the cross--and kept it up in Corinth for at least eighteen months.

4. The Conclusion

If you study human philosophy, you'll find that every religion man has ever developed (which is all of

them except Christianity) is complex. The complexity appeals to his brain-- to his ego. Man won't crush his ego to come down to the level of the cross. When he's told it doesn't matter how smart he is, but that he's saved by faith, he doesn't like it. He doesn't like the cross because it forces him to admit that he's a sinner. That's the problem. The cross is still the issue. God's revelation peaks in the cross. Human philosophy doesn't understand that.

To give you an illustration, even Peter didn't understand the cross.

a. Peter's Opinion Depicted Peter had a philosophy. Instead of the word philosophy, we could use the word opinion. Peter had an opinion: He thought the Messiah would come and set up His Kingdom and everything would be just rosy. In Matthew 16, when Jesus said, "I'm going to die" (v. 21), do you remember how Peter reacted? "No, Lord. You're not going to die!" (v. 22). Now, one thing revelation doesn't need is Peter's opinion; it was at variance with the truth. Jesus then said to Peter, "Get thee behind Me, Satan. You've got a satanic philosophy" (v. 23). Later on in John 18 when the soldiers came to the Garden of Gethsemane to capture Christ, Peter took out his sword and started slashing at the crowd. But Jesus said, "Put that thing away! Haven't you got the message yet?" b. Peter's Opinion Destroyed Finally, after the resurrection, Peter understood the cross. In Acts 3 he said, ". . . those things, which God before had shown by the mouth of all His prophets, that Christ should suffer, He hath so fulfilled" (v. 18). When he wrote 1 Peter, he said, "Who His own self bore our sins in His own body on the tree. . . " (2:24). You see, Peter eventually learned the meaning of the cross. But at the beginning, his philosophy (opinion) was at odds with the cross. He couldn't see or understand it. He was like any other Jew. To him, ". . . Christ crucified, unto the Jews [was] a stumbling block, and unto the Gentiles [or `Greeks'] foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:23). The cross doesn't fit in to human reason. It can't be rationalized, as if the intellect were supreme. So, the contrast is established, then, in verses 17 and 18. The cross is the power of God to salvation, and is the source of our salvation. But to the world, steeped in human wisdom, it is moronic. With that as an introduction, in 1:19-2:8 Paul gives five reasons why he considers God's wisdom superior to man's. The first point is. . .

I. GOD'S WISDOM: ITS PERMANENCE (vv. 19-20)

A. Paul's Quote (v. 19)

In verse 19, Paul uses an Old Testament passage to show that man's wisdom will be swept away-- that it is very temporary. Quoting Isaiah 29:14, Paul says, "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. "

1. Isaiah's Announcement

a. Its Future Fulfillment This verse can have a very general ultimate fulfillment. There is coming a day when all of the philosophies of men will be swept away. Christ will reign as King of kings, and all of man's wisdom will become ashes. In the book of Revelation, we read that the Tribulation period will be a time of the disintegration of all of man's wisdom. Isaiah 29:14, however, has more than just a future fulfillment; it had a very interesting meaning at the time that it was given. Like many other prophecies, it has an immediate fulfillment and a future fulfillment. b. Its Immediate Fulfillment 1)

God's Promise Declared This is the context in which Isaiah 29:14 was given: There was a mighty king named Sennacherib who ruled over a nation called Assyria. The Assyrians wanted to conquer Judah, and made preparations to attack Judah. God, through the prophet Isaiah, said to Judah, "Don't worry; deliverance will come, and Sennacherib will fail in his conquering. But, it won't be because of your wise men--it won't be because of the strategy of the political advisers to King Hezekiah [who was the king of Judah at the time]. You're not going to escape the hand of the Assyrians because of your wisdom. I will protect you Myself because I want to demonstrate to you the impotence and impermanence of human wisdom. When all of your wisdom has run the gamut, I'll just destroy it all. I Myself will do what all of your wisdom couldn't do. " That was quite a promise, because Sennacherib had a huge army. 2) God's Power Displayed You say, "If God's going to deal with Sennacherib, He's going to have to do a mighty work. " He did. He just called one of His angels,

and we read in 2 Kings 19:35 what happened: "And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the LORD went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand; and when they arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. " One angel slew one hundred and eighty-five thousand men. The few men remaining rose up early in the morning and found themselves surrounded by all those dead bodies. Do you know what that says about angels? Don't mess with them. What all of the political advisers and wise men of Judah couldn't do, God did with one angel. He said, "I'll destroy your wisdom--I don't need it. "God always told Israel that He would fight their battles for them. When Israel marched to battle, the choir often went first so they could be up front singing praises to God. Why? Because they knew God was going to give them the victory. Instead of trying to solve everything by our own ingenuity, we should leave things to God. By the way, Sennacherib went back later and lived in Nineveh, which was the capital of Assyria. In 2 Kings 19:37 it says, "And it came to pass, as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch, his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, smote him with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon, his son, reigned in his stead. " Sennacherib was killed by his own children. God didn't need any of the wisdom of Judah.

2. Paul's Application

Going back to 1 Corinthians 1:19, Paul says, "Look, you know the passage in Isaiah. God never did need human wisdom; God never did need human understanding. "

3. Scripture's Admonishment

a. Proverbs 14:12--"There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death. " There are always people who want to give their opinion about things. I think one of the reasons that a lot of people won't read the Bible, come to church, or study Christianity is because they don't want to deal with anything that might threaten their philosophy. They'd rather mask themselves and put their head in the sand. They'd rather just keep their fingers crossed and hope that, in the end, they're right. b. Jeremiah 8:9--"The wise men are ashamed; they are dismayed and taken. Lo, they have rejected the word of the LORD; and what wisdom is in them?" Listen, if you reject revelation, what wisdom is left? None. God is set against worldly wisdom and philosophy. He even destroyed the philosophy of Judah. Man's wisdom is also defined in. . . c. James 3:15--"This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, demoniacal. " This is obviously referring to man's wisdom, not God's wisdom. Man's wisdom does not come from above. Man's wisdom is "earthly" (it doesn't understand supernatural reality), "sensual" (it is based upon human desire and lust), and "demoniacal" (its source is Satan). According to James 3:15, then, man's wisdom is set against the wisdom of God. So, Paul says, "It is written, man's wisdom is impermanent; God's wisdom is permanent. "

B. Paul's Questions (v. 20)

1. The First Question (v. 20a)

At the beginning of verse 20, Paul asks a question with three parts: "Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age?. . . " In other words, "Where are all the smart people who are going to solve all the problems?"

Human Wisdom Never Solved Anything

People talk so much about how great education is. But we've educated ourselves into problems we can't solve. Of course, we never could solve them. Human wisdom--all of our education--never really solved anything.

You say, "Wait a minute! We used to live in the boondocks, and now we're in cities and homes. " But we're just as rotten now as we were then. We haven't changed; we're just more comfortable. Our immorality isn't committed out in the woods; it's committed in fancy hotels. We just made our sinning a little more accommodating. Human wisdom, throughout the history of man, has never solved any real problem. It just makes us more comfortable with our problems.

a. Regarding the WisePaul refers to Isaiah 19:12 when he says, "Where is the wise?. . . " in verse

20. In Isaiah 19, God was talking to Egypt and He said, "Egypt, you're in trouble. You've gone after false gods and worshiped them. You've denied My truth, and are going to be judged. " He prophesied that Egypt's rivers would dry up, that the sea wouldn't give them water anymore, and that all the reeds would be broken. He prophesied that Memphis, the great capital city, would be destroyed. All of those things came to pass. Afterwards, Isaiah 19:12 says, ". . . Where are thy wise men? . . ." In other words, "Who's going to offer the solution to the destruction of Egypt by God?" The answer is: no one. Egypt went seeking for counsel from her soothsayers, mediums, and wizards, and could get no answers. b. Regarding the ScribePaul then says, ". . . Where is the scribe? . . ." A scribe was a writer. Paul quotes this statement from Isaiah 33:18, which had to do with the Assyrians. The Assyrians, when they sent their army down to Israel, sent scribes along. The scribes were to write out all of the things that the Assyrians took when they conquered Israel. They were to list all the booty and to record all of the tribute that was to be exacted. Do you know what happened? They didn't take a victory, and the scribes had nothing to write. So, Isaiah says, ". . . Where is the scribe? . . ." c. Regarding the DisputerPaul then asks in 1 Corinthians 1:20, ". . . Where is the disputer of this age? . . ." This part of the question doesn't have an Old Testament counterpart. In the Greek, the word "disputer" is used to mean "one who argues about philosophy. " Paul is saying, "Where are your philosophical arguers now? Where are the people versed in philosophy? Where are the people versed in rhetoric? Where are they when you need them? Their wisdom is folly. "The world is the same way today, too. Who knows any of the answers? So, to make clear the futility and fatality of human wisdom, Paul sarcastically says, "Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? You tell me. What has human philosophy ever contributed to man? What has it ever done to make him nobler? What has it ever done to make his heart better? What has it ever done to lift him up? Nothing!" The wisdom of the world is stupidity when it tries to redeem men and transform sinners. It can't do these things.

2. The Second Question (v. 20b)

Paul says, ". . . Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" God made the world's wisdom look foolish.

Philosophy is foolish. I'm not dismissing ethics, kindness, and love. I'm just saying that none of these human philosophies, no matter how good they appear on the surface, ever get to the real issue--man's eternal soul.

So God, in His wisdom, allowed learned men of the world to seek, by their worldly wisdom, the solutions to man's misery and suffering. Whenever they thought they saw the solution to a problem, they made a philosophy. But do you know what? They never uncovered the secret. They were left without the one thing they needed most--the knowledge of God. They never knew God.

It is only in God that peace, joy, forgiveness, freedom from guilt, meaning to life, and eternal hope can be found. Because all of human philosophy never met God, men never found those things. Paul says that men thought the cross was stupid; but it was their philosophies that were stupid. And so God moves in to do what human wisdom could never do.

That takes us to our second point:

II. GOD'S WISDOM: ITS POWER (vv. 21-25)

Paul says that God's wisdom is superior to man's: first, because of its permanence; and second, because of its power. It is able to do what man's wisdom couldn't do.

A. The Foolishness Of God Reaches To Men (v. 21)

"For after that [lit. `for since'], in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. "

Now notice this: He says the world, with all of its wisdom, never knew God. It never reached the ultimate goal of man--to know God. Since man's wisdom couldn't reach God, God reached man--through the cross.

Just think of it: we have had philosophers for ages. What do they know? What have they offered? Wars have increased. Crime and injustice continue to increase. We still have hate, cruelty, mental breakdowns, drugs, alcohol, and many other problems, all of which will never change. Human philosophy hasn't solved any problems. Men cannot attain salvation by their own wisdom. They cannot transform their nature. They cannot know God by their own wisdom. Even man's religions don't succeed--the philosophies of the world come up bankrupt.

So God says, "It shall please Me, with something as basic and silly in their sight as death on a cross, to accomplish what they couldn't accomplish with their philosophies throughout the ages. " Isn't that beautiful?

In 1 Corinthians 3:18 we read, "Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this age[i. e. , if any of you think philosophy makes you wise], let him become a fool, that he may be wise. " In other words, it isn't until you come down to the level of the cross that you become truly wise. In verse 19 it says, "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. . . . " He takes the wise in their own craftiness. Verse 20 says, ". . . The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. "

1. Ignorant Man Surrounded by the Wisdom of God (v. 21a)

"[Since], in the wisdom of God, the world. . . . "

Now that can mean two things: one, that the wise plan of God was to allow the world to go on in its own wisdom. In His wisdom, He permitted the world to follow its own path.

But, there's another potential meaning of the phrase "in the wisdom of God. " It can mean "in the sphere of the wisdom of God. " In other words, man exists surrounded by the wisdom of God. In the midst of the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God. Here we are, surrounded by God's wisdom, and ignorant of it. The Bible talks about that in Romans 1: ". . . that which may be known of God is manifest in them. . . . " (v. 19).

a. Man's Ignorance in General God's wisdom is all around men. The invisible things of God can be seen in His creation; but men did not want to retain God in their knowledge. They turned from God, and turned His truth into a lie. They worshiped the creature more than the Creator, and began to worship images (Rom. 1:20-25). Man is surrounded by the wisdom of God. Every time he looks at a mountain, at his hand, at the stars, or at the intricacies of nature, he sees God's wisdom (Ps. 19:1). But he chooses to live by his own wisdom, rejects God's wisdom, and never knows God. Think about it: The astronomer looks through his telescope and sees stars, but doesn't acknowledge God. The natural scientist studies his biology and botany, but he comes up with the theory of evolution.

Religion creates a god who is not God, and then bows to that god. b. Man's Ignorance in Greece The Greeks lived in ignorance of God's wisdom, too. Greek philosophy was centered in the great city of Athens. The pinnacle of Athens was the Areopagus (Mars' Hill, which was a law court). In Acts 17 we read that Paul walked up Mars' Hill, where all the Greek philosophers gathered, and saw a great altar there. Inscribed on it was, "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD" (v. 23). Isn't that interesting? With everything that they knew, the one thing they didn't know was the one thing that was the most obvious--God. In the midst of the wisdom of God, as 1 Corinthians 1:21 says, the world by its own wisdom didn't know God. Instead of accepting revelation, they depended on their own wisdom.

2. Inadequate Man Saved by the Wisdom of God (v. 21b)

". . . it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. "

This is the greatest possible blow against all the complexity of human wisdom. God did something so simple, and by it He accomplished what all of the philosophers and wise men of the ages couldn't do. The wisest of the wise men are stupid compared to the simplest message of a wise God.

a. ". . . the foolishness of preaching. . . . " Now notice the word "preaching. " That's a poor translation. It isn't the Greek word euangelizo, meaning "to preach the gospel. " It isn't the word kerusso, meaning "to proclaim. " It is the word kerugmatos, which has nothing to do with the act of preaching, but rather, the content of the message (Gk. kerugma="the message, the content"). What it's saying is

this: "It pleased God by the stupidity of the gospel message (the content of the cross) to save them that believe. "It isn't saying that preaching is foolish. Some preaching is foolish, but that's not the point. The point here is the foolishness of the gospel itself: It seemed so silly, so low, so uncomplicated, so distasteful. To the Jewish people it was a stumbling block. It seemed foolish. But it was that foolish thing--Jesus dying on a cross--that was. . . b. ". . . to save them that believe. "You don't have to be smart. Does it say at the end of verse 21, ". . . to save them that are intellectuals"? Does it say, ". . . to save them that have a Ph. D. "? No, it says, ". . . to save them that **believe**. "God didn't save us because we were smart. It doesn't matter how smart we are--we just need to believe. Faith appropriates what God has done. Faith is the very opposite of human reason unaided by divine revelation. Faith goes beyond the intellect. It puts you right on the same level as everyone else in Christ. That's why you can have a prayer meeting with a college professor, a medical doctor, a laborer, and someone who is disabled all in one group. They can all share together in the same common life, and pray together to the same God. They can experience the same fellowship and the same salvation, because they do not gather on the basis of intellect. Look a little further on at verses 26-27: ". . . not many wise men. . . not many mighty, not many noble, are called; but God hath chosen the foolish things. . . ." Among the people that God calls, there are not many wise, there are not many mighty, and there are not many noble. Most of us are just plain, common folk. God did that purposely to stand as a rebuke for all time against human wisdom. God never needed it in the past; He doesn't need it now. All that is needed is the cross. Those who believe in the cross are saved--that's all it takes. That's the message of salvation.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is the first problem that Paul deals with in the book of 1 Corinthians?
2. What was the cause of division in the Corinthian church?
3. What does "the gospel" refer to in 1 Corinthians 1:17? What is it that Paul contrasts to the gospel?
4. What criterion for truth did the rationalists set? What is the result of imposing human philosophy on God's revelation?
5. Explain what theistic evolution teaches. How can psychology undermine the Bible?
6. What does human philosophy do, according to Romans 1:25?
7. ". . . the preaching of the cross" is better translated, "the word of the cross. " What is the definition of "the word of the cross"? What does it mean to the world? What does it mean to the saved?
8. First Corinthians 1:19 is quoted from Isaiah 29:14. What is the future fulfillment of this prophetic passage? What was its immediate fulfillment?
9. What was Paul trying to tell the Corinthians by quoting Isaiah 29:14?
10. According to James 3:15, where does man's wisdom not come from? What does James 3:15 describe human wisdom as?
11. To sum up 1 Corinthians 1:19, Paul is saying, in effect, "It is written, man's wisdom is _____, God's wisdom is _____.
12. What three questions does Paul ask in 1 Corinthians 1:20a, and what do they mean?
13. Has human wisdom ever solved any problems? Has man ever changed? What has man really done about his sin?
14. Human wisdom has _____ solved any real problem; it just makes us more _____ with our problems.
15. None of man's philosophies get to the real issue in life; they are superficial. What is the real issue?
16. Could man in his own wisdom reach God? Why or why not? How did God reach man?
17. What two things could the phrase "in the wisdom of God" mean? Which is it more likely to mean?(1 Cor. 1:21a)

18. In the phrase "the foolishness of preaching," Paul isn't talking about preaching or proclaiming the gospel. What is he's talking about? (1 Cor. 1:21b)
19. What is the only thing one needs to do to become saved? Is salvation in any way related to one's intellect? Why or why not?

Pondering the Principles

1. The division in the Corinthian church was caused by those within the church holding on to varying philosophies they had adhered to prior to their salvation. There are churches today hurt by division, often caused by such things as misinterpretations of the Bible and differences of opinion. Such division, however, is unbiblical. To see the importance of oneness in the church, read 1 Corinthians 12:12-14. How does verse 12 describe the body of Christ? According the verse 13, how were we brought into the body of Christ? Does it matter what our background is? Compare verse 14 with verses 4-11 of this chapter. What are the differences that will exist in the body? Verse 7 tells us that the different spiritual gifts of the body are for the common good of everyone. In verses 4, 5, 6, and 11, note the common denominators that work in all of us. With that in mind, can you see now how the source of all disunity is man himself? Read Philippians 2:1-4, and ask yourself if what it says is true in your life. Are there problems that are dividing the people in your church or fellow Christian friends that you know? Ask God for the opportunity to share these verses with those who need to hear them.
2. Paul preached Christ "not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect" (1 Cor. 1:17b). Paul's point here is that the revelation of God does not need human wisdom added to it. Have you ever heard someone say, "I agree with what the Bible says, but I also believe such-and-such a philosophy to be true," or, "God said this, and I'd like to add. . ."? Read Psalm 19:7-10; 119:160; Proverbs 30:5a; and Matthew 24:35. How is the Word of God described in those verses? Read Proverbs 30:6; Revelation 22:18-19. What happens to the person who adds to the Word of God? Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17. For what is the Word of God profitable? According to verse 17, what was God's purpose in giving man the Scriptures? Knowing this, why can we be confident that the Bible need not be supplemented with man's wisdom?

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2026 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).