

The Wisdom of God – Some Thoughts

(The wisdom of faith and the knowledge of God)

A well-credentialed Calvinist theologian recently stated that his creed embraces the principle that God created some people for heaven, and that He created all others for hell. Even though God *could* save everyone, His will is that only *some* people will be saved, namely, those He has chosen or elected to be saved. He immediately acknowledged the difficulty that many have with this doctrine. How can such a notion fit in with a God of love? He gave the following illustration in an attempt to resolve the inconsistency. Whether or not the story is entirely true is of little consequence. What is important is the use he makes of it to support his theology.

During WWII the allies used the Enigma machine to decipher the German code (which is indeed accurate). The theologian went on to claim that through this machine British intelligence decoded a German plan to bomb the city of Coventry. They informed Winston Churchill the then Prime Minister of England of the plan. Churchill's deep love for the people of Coventry at first proposed an evacuation of the city. However, he claimed that Churchill ruled against this and allowed the Luftwaffe to bomb Coventry, with the subsequent devastation and loss of life. The reason is clear said the theologian. If Churchill had evacuated the city the Germans would have known that their code had been broken, and the War possibly lost. Churchill *could* have saved Coventry, but he *chose* not to do so even though it meant condemning the people of Coventry to death. He had a greater glory and victory in view.

This example, declared the theologian, illustrates why God can be a God of love, even though He condemns those he *could* save to hell. It would be unjust to say that Churchill had no love for the people of Coventry. It is simply that he had a greater love which served a greater glory – the saving of many others by winning the War. Similarly, just because God has chosen some to be saved and condemns all others to hell, does not mean that He does not love those He sends to hell. God, like Churchill has a greater glory in view, which is His special love for His elect. And, by condemning all others to hell He shows His hatred of sin.

I trust we can identify the serious error in this line of thinking! This theologian has resorted to the wisdom of the world to support his theology. It is a wisdom that elevates man, demotes God and paradoxically maligns His sovereign power. He has cast God as Churchill's equal in regard to the magnitude and means of love. God is *not* like Churchill whose love was limited by his humanity. God could for instance have sent a storm over the English Channel causing the German bombers to abort their mission. Coventry would have been saved and the Germans remain unaware that their code was broken. He need not have condemned the people of Coventry to death in order to serve "a greater glory." This brings us to our two texts.

The wisdom of faith – its distinction

1 Corinthians 1:21: “For after that 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 [have faith].” **1 Corinthians 1:18:** “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.”

We begin by observing two opposing principles in these verses. First, the *wisdom of the world* (the wisdom of the flesh), which regards the preaching of the cross as foolishness. Second, we have the *wisdom of faith* which is of the Spirit. It is *faith* that makes us wise unto salvation. There are two things about the preaching of *the cross* that is foolishness to the wisdom of the world, but which faith accepts. First, the *provision* of the cross. In its wisdom the world cannot understand the need for a *sinless sacrifice* for sin and the need for a *sinless substitute* for repentant sinners. Second, the *appropriation* of the cross. Salvation by faith is contrary to the wisdom of the world.

The wisdom of faith – its provision and acquisition

“The world by wisdom [has] not known God.” Faith brings us into the sphere in which we appreciate the wisdom of God. Without it God cannot be known. “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him” (Heb 11:6). And what is that reward? It is the knowledge of God – what He is, to the extent that He has seen fit to reveal Himself.

In contrast, the wisdom of the world is grounded upon man’s *reasoning*. No matter what height it reaches, man’s reasoning cannot illuminate God and His ways. At best, it can never rise above the finite capacity of man’s mind; at worst, it falls prey to man’s pride and prejudice. Job in his distress asked, “Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?” (Job 11:7). This is where grace comes in, because the only way God can be known is through His revelation. “For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?” (Rom 11:34). Only when we exercise simple faith in the revealed word of God, even though it *appears* foolishness to man, can we begin to know God and His ways with us. “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14). It is faith that allows the Spirit to do His work. Should we be surprised then when men using the wisdom of the world find the things of God foolish?

The Lord speaks of the same thing but from the standpoint of the kingdom. “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3). The kingdom of God is not of the world and cannot therefore be seen (or entered) through the wisdom of the world. Rebirth is by faith and, faith as we have seen is the door to the knowledge of God. Upon rebirth we become a new

creation in Christ. Paul reminded the Corinthians of it. “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God” (1 Cor 2:12). “For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). Having the mind of Christ and the wisdom that comes from it!

The wisdom of faith – its illustration

The wisdom of faith, as we have noted is acquired when we accept what is revealed in the Word of God – even when that revelation seems foolish to the natural mind. It is this kind of faith that is rewarded with the knowledge of God. Hebrews 11 lists some of the biblical “triumphs of faith.” We may well call them the triumphs of the *wisdom* of faith. These are the revered patriarchs noted for their faith in divine revelation – irrespective of how foolish it seemed to the natural mind and to the wisdom of the world. It brought them into the knowledge of God.

Noah built an ark amidst worldly scorn and ridicule. Yet, through faith he came to know the *Covenant God of providence*. “And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and everything that is in the earth shall die. But with thee will I establish my covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee. (Gen 6:17-18). It was so in regard to the father of faith. When “Abraham was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.” “He passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him” (Gen 12). His faith was rewarded with wisdom in that he came to know the *God of abiding presence*. It was so when the aged Abraham and Sarah were told of a son to be born to them. Abraham came to know Jehovah as the *Covenant God of promise* (Gen 12). It was so when “by faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son.” He learned then of the *God of provision*. He called the name of that place Jehovah Jireh – God will provide! It was so when Moses and the children of Israel crossed over the Red Sea on dry land and came to know and sing of Jehovah as the *God of power, purity* and fearful in *praises*. “Thy right hand, O LORD, is become glorious in power: thy right hand, O LORD, hath dashed in pieces the enemy.....Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?” (Ex 6, 11). “And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets” (Heb 11:32).

Of David, but not of Solomon, which appears strange at first sight! The man known for his peerless wisdom is not listed in the testimony to the wisdom of faith. Some have suggested it is

because Solomon esteemed the altar and its sacrifices, those things which were clear to sight and engaged the senses; but David cherished the Ark which lay beyond sight and sense, and hence it became the object of faith. But there is more to be observed. David's faith was not merely in cherishing what was hidden – but what it *was* that was hidden. His faith was in the Ark of the Covenant and its place in the divine *order*. Solomon built God a house; but it was David “Who found favour before God,” because he “desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob” (Acts 7:46–47). Others have noted that Solomon built “a high place for Chemosh ... and likewise did he for all his strange wives, which burnt incense and sacrificed unto their gods” (1 Kings 11:4–8). But could it be, that Solomon, though wise in many things, knew nothing of repentance. His writings do not speak of it. Perhaps this is the sense in which Christ is “one greater than Solomon.” He not only spoke much about repentance, but He also offered forgiveness because of it! It is through Christ, and not the Solomons of this world that we become wise unto salvation.

Many claim faith in God, but it does bring them into a greater appreciation of Him. It is because they have little idea of Christ, the Son of God and His place in divine things. It was David's faith concerning the ways of God that led him to declare “such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it” (Ps 139). Yet, there are those who through the centuries have tried to attain to it by natural reasoning.

The testimony of those listed in Hebrews 11 is that they exercised absolute faith in the revealed word of God *even* when it seemed contrary to natural wisdom. And, in so doing they acquired a greater appreciation of God and His ways with man. It is only through unquestioning faith that we come to know God in His *creatorial* glory. The opening verse of divine revelation invites it. In the beginning God created! “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear” (Heb 11:2). Only when we come to accept salvation in child-like faith can we come to know His *redeeming* glory. When in simple faith we bow before what is revealed concerning God in Scripture, though it confounds our miniscule intellect, can we begin to know something of His *personal* and *eternal* glory. Only when we accept by faith that God is holy and must judge sin – even where we would apply natural justice and mercy, can we come to see His *judicial* glory.

The theologian schooled in Calvinist dogma must come to accept the revelation of Scripture in simple faith, that God is sovereign in election yet universal in His love in offering salvation to *all*: that God “is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). Before the humanist schooled in the theory of evolution can progress in wisdom and offer a comment on the origin of things, he/she must bow before the truth, that “through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear” (Heb 11:3).

When Paul was moved by divine grace to preach the Son of God to the Gentiles, he declared that he conferred not with flesh and blood” (Gal 1:16). Surely this was the result of his earlier determination of faith. “Lord, what will thou have me to do.” When the Lord commended Peter’s seminal confession, He declared, “Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matt 16:17). It was by faith that Peter acquired the wisdom to confess, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Peter then knew more of Christ, and we see how this knowledge transformed him into the devoted disciple that penned his epistles.

The wisdom of faith – its desertion

What happens when we forsake the wisdom of faith for the wisdom of the world? We may end up like Israel in a poor state of soul. It was their lack of faith and turning to the wisdom of the flesh that caused them to lose the knowledge of the God of their salvation. They clamoured to return to Egypt lusting after the leeks, onions and garlic. We become vulnerable to the wisdom of the world and the doctrine that flows from it. We may fall into the way of *Cain*, and through human wisdom manufacture what we believe to be “a more excellent sacrifice.” Such is the case with theologians who would have us believe that God chooses only to save some to display His greater glory; who teach the odious accompaniment that the non-elect are “passed over” and consigned to hell. We may go after the fleshly rewards in the way of *Balaam*, who sought reward from Balak. Or, we may become an opposing gainsayer like the Levite *Korah*. The sons of Reuben lost their priestly rights and incited the rebellion. They reasoned according to natural wisdom that *all are holy* and so all can serve as priests.¹ This same worldly sentiment is seen today in support of women “in the ministry,” and in the liberal idea that all who “are of the Lord” can partake of the privileges and responsibilities of assembly life without proper regard to NT doctrine and discipline.

The progressive decline which begins with the way of Cain has been widely noted yet largely unappreciated. An assembly may slip into the Corinthian condition of forsaking faith in God’s word preferring the wisdom of men. And so division and carnality arise. But what is equally grave is the failing in testimony in regard to the divine order. The local assembly is of the Body of Christ and, as such, Satan will seek to mar its *unity* – that unity made by the Spirit (Eph 4:3). It is also of the Bride of Christ, and here Satan will seek to mar its *purity* – which was Paul’s concern in regard to the assembly at Corinth. “For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor 11:2). There is further warning in connection with the local assembly as the *temple* of God – where

¹ Others have noted a further example of the wisdom of the world. Reuben and Gad preferred the land that was a “place for cattle,” and so they built “cities” for their “little ones” and refused to take possession of the land “over Jordan.” What started out as a good “place for cattle” later became a place for swine – Gadara (Mark 5).

Satan seeks to mar its *sanctity*. “If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which ye are” (1 Cor 3:17). It is not here the assembly as God’s husbandry – His *cultivation*, neither is it God’s building – His *construction*. It is His temple – His place of holy *communion*, His sanctuary. As redeemed saints in this dispensation we have been called out as the temple of God. How blessed! Israel never was and will never be the temple of God. But the temple of God (the tabernacle) was in the midst of Israel. And we know what defiled it. Aaron’s consecrated sons Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire before the Lord. They defiled the sanctuary with things which were according to their natural mind. Simple faith was not enough for them. They were destroyed and, furthermore, Aaron was forbidden to enter the sanctuary in his garments of glory and beauty. His intercessory work had to be done outside the sanctuary.

The wisdom of faith – its benediction

The Spirit of Truth has given us a vital practical principle regarding the wisdom of faith “Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise” (1 Cor 3:18). To believe in a God who creates out of nothing; who elects but offers salvation to whosoever will; whose Son is God yet truly man, is indeed to become as fools in the eyes as those without faith. However, it is through belief that we become “wise unto salvation” and come to know the God of Salvation. Let us not allow our faith in what God **has** revealed to be undermined by speculation about what God **has not** revealed. “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever” (Deut 29:29).