

# God's Wisdom in the Cross is His Wisdom for the Church

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**INTRO: What does the wisdom of the cross of Christ look like in our ecclesiology?**

It is Christ who has purchased His church. He owns the church and rules the church by His infallible Word. When believers forget Christ owns and rules His church there is an inescapable pull in the direction of man-centeredness: “it’s ours, look what we built.” But in chapter one of the first epistle, Paul states **10 times in the first 10 verses** that Jesus Christ is in HIS Church. Paul consistently stresses God’s ownership of the church—a church purchased with God’s own blood (**Acts 20:28**). And Paul incorporates a series of verbs to declare in “divine passives” to stress that **God did it**—He formed the Church, He owns it in Christ: believers are sanctified in Christ—v. 2, enriched in Christ—v. 5, called in Christ—v. 9, saved in Christ—v. 18, and chosen in Christ—vv. 27-28. The Corinthians radical lack of unity was evidence that the believers were treating the church as if it belonged to them and not to Christ.

***The situation in the N.T. church of Corinth provides a vivid example of what may happen when the glory of Christ is neglected or concealed.*** Paul’s letters to Corinth represent a powerful corrective to the ‘Corinthian catastrophe’. It is the problem of divisions in the church that has led Paul to expound the meaning of God’s wisdom. In seeking the wrong kind of wisdom (natural, man-centered), the Corinthians had fragmented the church into cliques and factions. Until the Corinthians, along with us realize the scandal of the cross has put an end to human boasting, they will remain carnal babes who boast in men. Only when believers embrace the *scandal of the cross* are they ready for the diet of the mature, the wisdom of God in the cross.

**Paul’s thrust is that Christ crucified must be realized in the Corinthians’ lives—if not, they will continue to operate by earthly score cards.** The focus is to be upon the Lord Jesus Christ and His atoning work. Corinth had left that focus.

***In the Corinthian correspondence, Paul refutes their false concept of spirituality. Paul proclaims that power comes through bearing Christ’s weakness! (2 Cor 4; 11-13).*** God’s power is perfected through human weakness (**2 Cor 12:9**). The cross is the paradigm for this formula. Paul boasts of his weakness because it preserves the cross paradigm, THEN God’s power rests upon Paul in his ministry. In other words, it is the believer’s weakness that is the ‘staging area’ for God’s power to be manifested (**1 Cor 4:7-16; 2 Cor 4:7-11; 2 Cor 12:9-11**). Thus, the Corinthian letters constitute a sustained theology of the cross—which is God’s way of working in the world, through

human frailty. It is regarded as a way of weakness scorned by human wisdom; but hidden in the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God (**1 Cor 1:24-25**).

***It is the problem of divisions in the church that has led Paul to expound the meaning of wisdom in the first place.*** In seeking the wrong kind of wisdom, the Corinthians had **fractured the church** into sectarian huddles. Until they realize the scandal of the cross has put an end to boasting, they will remain fussy carnal babes (**1 Cor 3:1-9**). How they needed the recovery of Christ's glory in His Church, BUT that is only embraced when the **paradox of the cross** is embraced, for that is God's wisdom.

***Paul's call to unity: speaking the same thing, avoiding divisions, and being of the same mind is to be based on a common devotion to Christ and to the Word of the cross (1 Cor 1:10).*** But at Corinth there was *speaking different things, a propensity for divisions, upsmanship, a party spirit, and triumphalism*. The contrast is clear: Corinth was fraught with divisions and a preoccupation with human leadership. Why? Because they were infatuated with human wisdom and not with the wisdom of the cross. They were impressed by, and hungry for the rhetoric of celebrity pastors. A preoccupation with human leaders had taken the Corinthians' focus off Christ. In addition they were engaged in an over-under kind of 'pecking order'. They looked down on suffering as unspiritual, not wishing to suffer with Christ now (**Rom 8:17**). Their *victorious life view* was in direct conflict with the wisdom of the cross (this error is sometimes designated, *realized eschatology*—'kings now' **1 Cor 4:6-13ff.**).

**1 Cor 1:12 – The church at Corinth had divided itself into factions.** The apostle Paul identifies the cause of divisions—it is the focus upon man and dependence on human wisdom. For it is **only the wisdom of God which exalts God's power**. Each of these factious parties had a leader from whom the followers sought to draw their religious identity (glory and status): "*I am of Cephas; I am of Apollos, etc.*" The challenge for the apostle Paul was to dismantle the thinking of the Cephasite party without saying anything disparaging against the apostle Peter!<sup>i</sup>

***To subdue sin and promote spiritual life, something far more powerful and wise is needed than human pragmatism, resolve, and reasoning.*** Only when the wisdom of the cross is consistently applied can this be accomplished. Human wisdom cannot promote the unity of the Body. Only God's wisdom in the cross and its paradox can reverse the problem of disunity.

**In Paul's purpose statement (1:17), he is guarding the centrality and purity of the gospel—he did not want the central point of the gospel to be robbed of its power by mixing the gospel with human wisdom.** In response to the divisions at

Corinth, the apostle indicates that Christ did not send him to baptize; “. . . *but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the **cross of Christ should not be made void***” (1:17). The faith of Corinthian believers was not to ultimately “*rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God*” (2:5). Only then does the gospel exert transforming power in the lives of people.

***Paul is resolute about keeping his gospel away from the entire sphere of the wisdom of men.*** Paul startles us out of our complacency as he warns that **there is a form of Christianity which nullifies the power of the gospel.** It’s a disturbing prospect that by *philosophy, eloquence, psychology, and tradition*, in other words by *human wisdom*—the power of the cross in peoples’ lives can be neutralized (1 Cor 1:17). Paul exalts God’s wisdom and power in the cross, lest the effect of the cross be emptied.

***Paul’s preaching is set in strong contrast with the “wisdom of words.”*** In verse 18, he begins the emphasis upon the power of God, “*For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is **the power of God***.” V. 18 is essentially the fulfillment of v. 19 – “*For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.*”

**God showcases His wisdom and power in the destruction of the wisdom of the world.** The cross brings man’s wisdom low, for when natural wisdom is confronted with divine wisdom it is dismantled and destroyed in the process. **Application:** the contrast between God’s wisdom and man’s wisdom reaches its apex in v. 5 of chapter two: “*That your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.*” The concluding thought is that your faith might be in the power of God in the gospel of Christ so that it is not supported by the wisdom of men.

***To the extent that we promote God’s wisdom, we exalt God’s power in Christ.*** God’s purpose is to destroy the wisdom of the world by means of His wisdom in the cross. How has God made foolish the wisdom of the world? He has made it foolish “*through the foolishness of the message preached*”—the gospel (1:21). What folly it is to depend on man’s wisdom—and how foolish to exalt man’s wisdom in the church

**1 Cor 1:22-23 – *The infinite wisdom of the cross is spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:10-16). Standards of human wisdom fail to perceive divine wisdom in the cross.*** Both sets of criteria applied by Jew and by Gentile for discerning what is wise do not recognize the cross of Christ as wisdom. The Jewish criterion for wisdom is, **signs and visible power**, and the Gentile test is, **natural wisdom found in philosophy**. Thus, when the human or natural tests of wisdom are applied, both groups reject the wisdom of God

in the cross of Christ. This gives us insight into that pivotal verse, “*The stone which the builders rejected (after careful examination) became the very corner stone [the foundation itself]*” (1 Pet 1:7; Ps 118:22; Is 28:16). When Christ and His cross-work are evaluated standards of natural wisdom, His Person and work are discarded as an unworthy foundation upon which to build one’s life.

**1:24-25 – The wisdom of God and the power of God are brought together in one Person, our Lord Jesus Christ.** *Christ is the only source of total, final, absolute wisdom that exists.* The whole fulcrum, the whole balance point, the focus of God’s wisdom, the very axis of God’s wisdom is **Christ and Him crucified**. If we are not glorying in Christ who is God’s wisdom, we will glory in mortal man and mankind’s pseudo-wisdom with its earthly score cards. We are to glory in God and His mercies in Christ alone. In God’s wisdom is infinite wisdom—wisdom which scandalizes and offends natural reason, wisdom which towers over the human intellect, wisdom that is infinitely above man’s greatest efforts (Rom 11:33-36; Eph 3:8-10).

**Christ and Him crucified is the divine wisdom which invades the realm of human wisdom.** Human wisdom is a feeble, it cannot lead to the knowledge of God (1:21) or address the ruined human condition—God’s wisdom invades like an **immense wedge of carbon steel, piercing the impotent realm of human wisdom**, smashing it to pieces (1 Cor 1:19). Unless Christ is preeminent and central, God’s wisdom is not exalted. Whenever Christ is not exalted, **man’s wisdom rushes into the vacuum**.

Paul declares how has God made foolish the wisdom of the world—He has made it foolish “*through the foolishness of the message preached.*” Thus, if this is **God’s overarching purpose** to make a public display of demolishing human wisdom, then how foolish to exalt human wisdom in the church!

**1 Cor 1:27-31 -- The power of God made known through weakness is also manifested in the makeup of the Church – “not many wise, mighty.”** The power of God is seen in how He has constituted the church—God put the people in the *Body* according to His wisdom. He has primarily composed the church of average, broken, unwise, needy people—the population of the church is not dominated by the earthly wise, the mighty, and the well born. These two verses (vv. 26-27) highlight **whom God has called** and **whom He has not** called. Now Paul personalizes the purpose of God in the destruction of human wisdom by setting up an antithesis between the two forms of wisdom. This striking contrast has everything to do with **solving the Corinthian catastrophe**. The Corinthians in considering their call were to realize that

they were **chosen to exalt God's wisdom**.

**This is amazing, God's choice of the foolish, immoral, and base Corinthians was designed to exalt divine wisdom!** Thus, the church at Corinth is commanded to remember their past—their own salvation—that they were *foolish, weak, base, and of common birth*. “Look at your calling you Corinthians to see the foolishness of depending on human wisdom.” Your spiritual origin is all of God. **Application:** when we consider our own election, we also will begin to see things from the divine viewpoint, from the perspective of divine wisdom. If the Corinthians reflected upon their calling, they wouldn't be living the way they are living. Think upon God's sovereign merciful purposes in your election. Consider the ‘pit’ from which you were ‘dug’. By *His doing* alone you are in Christ Jesus. God has done it this way to eliminate every possible occasion for boasting in relation to salvation (1:30).

**1 Cor 1:27-28 – God intends to shame the wise—this is His divine purpose. God is energizing a clash in worldviews!** God destroys the world's wisdom, and He does so with cosmic ramifications. It is a public display ultimately to be witnessed by both men and angels (Eph 3:9-10)—consuming at the end of the age.

**1 Cor 1:29-31 -- The Corinthian problem was not merely the domestic issue of how to solve disharmony in relationships.** Corinth was **overturning the whole saving purpose and objective of God**—namely that no flesh should boast or glory in God's presence (1:29-31). Paul is making his case in a convincing manner, self-exaltation in the Body of Christ), and its resulting strife, is a byproduct of assimilating the world's wisdom and values in the church! How remarkable, the Corinthian **catastrophe is traceable to the veneration of human wisdom!**

This hits home for all of us, for how familiar we are with that insatiable desire to jockey for status. Think of how many **corrupt fleshly fruits** are generated by the activity of seeking to undergird our worth by **differentiating ourselves from others** (Gal 5:20, 26). Paul summarizes that carnal tendency in this manner: “For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding” (2 Cor 10:12). The solution is always the cross and the purchase of grace by which the believing sinner receives both a status, **sonship**, and a righteous standing, **justification** all by gracious donation. No wonder Paul says, why do you boast as if you have not received it? (1 Cor 4:7). We are to glory in God and His mercies in Christ alone.

**1 Cor 2:1-5 – In order to exalt God’s wisdom, Paul reflects upon his coming to them.** *He calls the Corinthians to think about his manner and mode when proclaiming the gospel to them:* “And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in the demonstration of Spirit and of power” (vv. 2:3-4). The content of Paul’s message, and his conduct during his message were in kept in absolute harmony. “Whenever he preached Christ and Him crucified, he preached Him in a crucified style.”<sup>ii</sup> This opposes dependence upon eloquence, rhetoric, or personality. The contents of his preaching and his conduct agreed with the divine message. Paul’s manner and mode—*humble, loving, trembling, the Word of the cross only, weak, unimpressive, and “cracked clay pot”* were in total synchrony with God’s wisdom in Christ and Him crucified. Paul wasn’t glib, witty, casual, or downhome. There is a demeanor in the preacher which is consistent with the wisdom of the cross—Paul manifested this manner or bearing in his conduct before the Corinthians.

**God has an infinitely wise dualism, a dichotomy in His infinite wisdom. Christ and Him crucified** is the divine wisdom which invades the realm of human wisdom. This infinite wisdom is Christ’s Person, His two natures divine and human, and Christ’s perfect sacrifice (Col 2:2-3). Conversely, human wisdom is **feeble** wisdom, for it cannot address our ruin in Adam. **God’s wisdom pierces the impotent realm of human wisdom tearing it into pieces in a massive display** which will reach its public climax at the consummation of history.

**Paul’s preaching of God’s wisdom in Christ set up an antithesis with the human wisdom that was wreaking havoc in Corinth.** *The apostle makes it perfectly clear: God’s wisdom and man’s wisdom do not mix!* Paul always starts with Christ. He always takes his readers and converts back to Christ. This is how he deals with man-centeredness. The glory of Christ consistently displayed, exhibited, and feasted upon has **the net effect of disintegrating human wisdom** and in placing human pride in the dust. The cross of Christ levels our manmade distinctions. **Paul is single-minded.** Whether the issue is immorality (*the body is for the Lord—6:13*), or a compromised Lord’s Table (*we don’t share in the cup of demons—10:21—discern the body of Christ—11:29*), or the bodily resurrection of believers (*Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead according to the Scriptures—15:3*). **Paul runs everything and every problem through Christ and Him crucified!** The one, divine, overarching wisdom of God is the solution to every problem.

*The citizens of Corinth were drawn to human wisdom like a magnet, they envied the Athenians who had their ideal Greek man. He was the epitome of human wisdom, strength, rhetoric, philosophy, pride, dynamism, partisanship, athleticism, asceticism, and popularity.* The cross overturns all of this—for it openly rejects the achievements of man as a foundation for trust and reliance. In effect, Paul was saying to the Corinthian believers, “you are trying to be like Athens.” “You want a great rhetorical preacher in front of you in whom you may take pride and in whom you may boast.” Paul was not trying to win them with his ability to communicate. He proclaimed that each local church was founded solely on Christ’s cross, and not on the charisma of its human founder, and not by adding anything to the cross.

***Divine wisdom overturns human wisdom.*** Christ’s manhood was absolutely permeated with the mindset of **Philippians 2:1-8**. Christ was the perfect disciple; He had no “will to power”—He was the suffering servant characterized by absolute surrender to God. The will of His Father was His meat and drink. By contrast, the spirit of natural wisdom has a fallen, *Adamic* value system of human wisdom characterized by boasting and self-assertion, and by the assumed ability of self-differentiation—as if to say, “I can and will by my achievements carry my own importance and superiority and distinguish and differentiate myself from others.” That’s poison to Body life.

**1 Cor 2:6-7 – To know Christ and Him crucified is the beginning point in the understanding of God’s whole purpose of creation and redemption.** So, Paul says this divine wisdom was foreordained before the ages for our glory. We who behold the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ are being changed from glory into glory (**2 Cor 3:18**). God’s wisdom leads to our ultimate glory. God’s people are destined for glory, not shame (**Rom 5:3-5**). How powerfully this sets up a contrast to the rulers of this age who are destined for shame, for in their idolatrous infatuation with human wisdom, they oppose God’s purpose, and will lose every bit of their glory (see **Jn 5:44**).

**1 Cor 2:8 – The sad irony is that the Corinthians in pursuing human wisdom are pursuing what belongs to this age and is passing away (1 Jn 2:17).** This is Paul’s point—the rulers and the wisdom of this age are on their way out: “Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, NOT of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood: for it they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, things which eye has not seen and

ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him” (2:6-9).

***Preoccupation with human wisdom leads to willful ignorance of the infinite wisdom of God in the cross and blindness to the scope of God’s redemptive plan.***

Christ’s glory, manifested in His obedience unto death, was not recognized by the rulers of this age—they did not recognize Christ as the agent of God’s salvation of man, therefore in their rebellion, they lose their glory. By applying their natural faulty wisdom to the gospel, they sentenced themselves to remain in ignorance, blocked to the knowing God (1 Cor 1:21).

***2:10-14 -- God’s wisdom, the person of Christ and Him crucified is not esteemed nor is it conceivable to the natural human mind (1:21; 2:14).***

The cross is filled with paradox. To think that the dereliction of the God-man should reconcile the derelict—to think that the God-man’s willingness to be a victim in the face of evil should conquer evil—that His abject weakness and ignominy in His passion should overpower the most powerful enemies of man. That succumbing to death should conquer death; that being made the curse of God should lift the curse from God’s elect, and that death and entombment and resurrection should bring the redeemed from defiled dust to incorruptible glory. This is only made understandable to God’s people through the Holy Spirit. The gospel is a revelation of God (Rom 1:16-17).

***It is staggering to our intellects to think that God should operate contrary to the strength of His reasoned attributes to reveal the saving knowledge of Himself.*** For in the cross of Christ, God works opposite to His reasoned attributes of strength, authority, and life—instead the cross has weakness, abandonment, victimhood, reproach, horror, shame, and death. In an amazing work of substitution, a guilt exchange. God takes His stand on earth within human crooked desperateness of the human condition.<sup>iii</sup>

***This concept is above natural human understanding. That God should work through the ignominy and weakness of the cross to reveal Himself savingly in His power and wisdom is baffling to man.*** The Jewish religious leaders of Jesus’s day stumbled over the Rock—stating that “if you come down from the cross, down from weakness and abandonment, we will believe” (Mt 27:40-42).

***(2:12; 4:1). Our message then is that there is one cross, one wisdom of God—but there are different reactions to God’s message.***

We have one message, Christ and Him crucified. Our whole lives are to be built upon this one message. The response will vary—even within churches! A Scripture-based, cross-

centered ministry is what is called for; if the brethren do not accept this one expression of love—*God’s will for them in the Word*, then they must be dealt with in another expression of love—*discipline by the church and/or by God (4:21)*. The Corinthian error represents what happens when believers imbibe the world’s wisdom and make it the basis for values, relations, identity, and church forms and polity. The result is carnality, strife, and jealousy (3:1-3).

***“Be careful how you build” is Paul’s command in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15.***

The evaluation of our work is based upon *how* it is built, and with *what* materials. The issue is what lasts and what doesn’t. The foundation for our building is *God’s wisdom in the cross; Christ and Him crucified*. Christ and His cross is the cornerstone which sets the pattern for the rest of the building. It is the *foundation plan* which dictates the nature, shape, and content of the structure. It dictates the quality and kind of work. Paul laid the foundation of Christ for all that the church does. This must be our non-negotiable ecclesiology. Without it we will be stuck in religious *forms* that cannot fulfill the biblical *function* of the church.<sup>iv</sup>

**3:16 – *The foundation of Christ and Him crucified*** produces an incredible tension with natural wisdom. “*You are a temple of God*” (v. 16). You are *in quality* and *by quality* a temple, the dwelling place of God. You must see yourself and the local body in this way as the abode of God in Christ. The Church is Christ’s abode. This alludes to a huge ecclesiological tension—“whose idea will rule the church?” At the outset, the beginning—everyone must park their baggage at the door and abide in Christ including the pastor(s). Without gospel saturation keeping us focused upon Christ and Him crucified as our only foundation, our default mode will be to defer to the ideas and policies of the most influential human personalities in the church.

**(3:21-23). This reality of being co-heirs with Christ must hit us between the eyes like a thunderbolt.** We must realize this to the core of our being if we are to release our hidden demands for control and self-exaltation: “*So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God*” (3:21-23).

**4:1-2 -- *The truth is, according to Paul, we as Christian leaders are nothing but stewards.*** In the institutional, or ‘business model’ of the church, leaders are frequently elevated and praised as their managerial skills are put on display. What a contrast this is with the biblical model in which Christ’s servants are solely stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor 4:1). (Grk. *hyperetai*, under-rowers on the bottom deck of a large ship).

By stating that the apostles are stewards of the “mysteries of God” he is referring to the truth of the gospel.<sup>v</sup> And by emphasizing that the apostles are but trustworthy servants of Christ and stewards of the ‘mysteries of God’ Paul is reiterating his premise that *the wisdom of the world cannot be developed into the wisdom of God*.

**4:3 – It is so liberating to live under the eye of Christ. Paul reveals how he was set free from the fear of man, “Your estimation of me and my life doesn’t really carry much weight compared to the Judge who is the Lord.”** It’s not that we don’t care what others say—it is the weight of the Lord’s evaluation that counts. As Spurgeon said, “Compared to what Christ thinks of me, the opinions of others are like so many chirping sparrows.” If we had this central truth straight, we wouldn’t be so prone to strife and jealousy—which are symptoms of living under the eye of man (**Jn 12:43**).

**4:7 – Are you boasting in your distinctions? God alone, by His sovereign grace is the distinction-Maker!** “Why do you boast as if you had not received it?”

Sin is inherent in our **self-justification, our desire to seek intrinsic differentiation from others.**<sup>vi</sup> **Self-justification is the action of defending our intrinsic worth. This defense of our intrinsic worth has manifestations or flesh fruits, (1 Cor 3:3; Gal 5:19-21), which are all traceable to original sin.** BUT, through the wonder of ‘guilt transfer,’ Christ has brought believing sinners to God (**1 Pet 3:18**). We require a Substitute, or we will forever be banished from God’s presence, favor, life, love, light, and blessedness.<sup>vii</sup> The good news of the gospel is about the divine action to accomplish such a work of guilt transfer by substitution. Christ died for me—this is a one-to-one substitution (**Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:21; Rom 7:25**). We have life by His blood (**Lev 17:11; Rev 7:13-14**). Christ voluntarily assumed our moral liabilities, our guilt, and our condemnation. He became of no reputation. He was sold under sin and thus paid the price of that sin as our suffering Substitute (**Rom 7:14**).

**The grace of God demands that we see ourselves from the divine perspective.** Because of the gospel, **all true differentiation**, all individual identity is a gift by grace which frees us from self (i.e. self-justification). The redeemed have freedom and **identity by a different measure than the one applied by mankind.** The child of God has status, favor, sonship, identity, acceptance, and standing ALL by divine grace—that my friends is God’s wisdom in the cross of Christ.

End Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ii</sup> John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life*, p. 12

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- <sup>iii</sup> Paul Zahl, *A Short Systematic Theology*, p. 28, 33, 36
- <sup>iv</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Love your God with all your Mind*, Navpress, Colorado Springs, CO, pp. 191-192
- <sup>v</sup> Hillyer, p. 1057
- <sup>vi</sup> Paul F. M. Zahl, *A Short Systematic Theology*, pp. 54-55
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid, pp. 56-57