

8. Paul explained and substantiated his thesis in general terms and then turned his attention to the specific example of the Corinthians themselves (vv. 26-31). If any at Corinth questioned the antithesis between the divine and human conceptions of wisdom, power and worth, they needed only to consider their own community of believers: There were not many among them who were wise according to human standards, not many who possessed human authority or power, not many who could claim noble birth or status.

To the contrary, most of the believers at Corinth were men and women whom their own culture and countrymen would regard as mere “nobodies” – people who had no status or influence. Before coming to faith they were part of the irrelevant masses; now that they were Christians, if they drew any notice at all it was in the form of ridicule, disdain and scorn. The church at Corinth contained many proud and self-important members, so that Paul’s statement must have provoked some offense. And yet the Corinthians couldn’t deny his claim. He wasn’t using rhetorical flourish to make a point; he’d lived and labored among them and he knew their individual lives and backgrounds. When he declared that most among them were nobodies, he was stating the undeniable truth.

- a. At the same time, there clearly were *some* believers at Corinth who’d come from noble or noteworthy backgrounds. Among them were Crispus the Corinthian synagogue ruler and Erastus the city treasurer (ref. Acts 18:8; Romans 16:23). By design, Christ’s Church is global and cosmopolitan, and this truth has been ignored only to the Church’s detriment (as, in some respects, was the case at Corinth). And yet there have always been those intent on making the Church into another sort of caste system – a system of “us” and “them,” whether in relation to the world or within the ranks of the Church itself.

- This is present in Catholicism in, among other things, its dogmas of magisterial authority, the priesthood, and supererogation (which underlies the three “evangelical counsels” of poverty, chastity and obedience).
- This spiritual caste structure in the Church has counterparts in Protestantism, among them Christian traditions that value “simple living” to the extent that the renunciation (or absence) of material well-being (sometimes even the ease afforded by modern conveniences and technology) is regarded as appropriate to, if not synonymous with, mature piety and spiritual commitment. Of course, any such “ethic of subtraction” tends toward a suspicious and even scornful assessment of professing Christians whose lives aren’t marked by the same austere “devotion.”

Whether Catholic or Protestant, it’s been all too common for professors of Christ to adopt (in practice if not in formal doctrine) an arrangement of “us” as opposed to “them,” where the point of distinction isn’t the gospel of Jesus Christ, but the circumstances and content of a person’s day-to-day existence. *Is it any wonder so many miss Paul’s meaning when he spoke of “worldliness”?* Turning his meaning on its head, such persons promote as godliness the very mindset Paul rebuked as worldly and satanic (cf. Colossians 2:20-23; 1 Timothy 3:14-4:6).

- b. Paul wasn't denouncing status and earthly power as such. Were he doing so, he'd have been denouncing himself since he'd lived his adult life as a prominent Pharisee – a man of notable status and influence among the sons of Israel. His statements simply highlight the fundamental difference between the “city of man” and God's kingdom (Matthew 20:17-28). Like everything else in God's creation, privilege and bestowment are to be regarded and utilized as instruments of worship and service to God. Of whom much is given much is required.

In this as well Paul was true to his Master and His teaching. Contrary to what many believe, Jesus didn't advocate an ascetic lifestyle in which earthly goods and resources are renounced. Asceticism is a child of natural wisdom, and so is actually a stumbling block to the life of faith; what matters is rightly appraising and using God's good gifts, not ridding oneself of them. Thus Jesus exhorted His followers to employ “the mammon of unrighteousness” in the cause of obtaining heavenly friends and heavenly reward (cf. Matthew 6:19-33 with Luke 16:1-13).

- c. Nothing is more natural than for human beings who inhabit a material world to interpret Paul's antithesis in terms of the “haves” versus the “have nots.” People are sharply aware of their material existence and needs, and their self-obsession transforms this awareness and concern into classism. In the religious realm, this classism not infrequently takes the form of theological dogma.

- On the one hand, material status is regarded as the measure of divine blessing. This was a characteristic of first-century Jewish theology (cf. Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-2), and it is true of many Christians today (so the widespread “prosperity theology” in American Christianity).
- On the other side of the same coin is the phenomenon of pitting the “goodly poor” against the “wicked rich.” As noted above, many regard Jesus' material lowliness as the paradigm for His followers. Thus the faithful and godly will be found among the poor, even as they are the ones upon whom God's favor rests (cf. Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 2:1-6).

But to interpret Paul in this way is to entirely miss his point. His antithesis doesn't pertain to the possession or lack of earthly status and power, *but to how those things are perceived and esteemed by God in contrast to men*. For God and men (or, in Paul's language, divine wisdom versus human wisdom) perceive the value and usefulness of earthly provision in very different, mutually-exclusive ways: Divine wisdom, power and significance are *antithetical* to their human counterparts, but in the sense that the former effectively **negates** the latter.

- First of all, it's important to note that this negation isn't merely logical (as is inherent in the notion of *antithesis*). Rather, it is a matter of nullification and abolition (ref. 1:19, 28). God's wisdom and power haven't simply “won the argument” against their human counterparts, they've effectively nullified and vanquished them.

- Secondly, the previous discussion shows that this negation isn't God's nullification of certain human beings in deference to others. When Paul insisted that God has chosen the weak and foolish of the world, he wasn't saying that God calls and uses the "nobodies" among men in distinction from the "somebodies." *It's not weak and foolish people that God has chosen, but seemingly weak and foolish things.* He hasn't chosen the poor and impotent to shame and overthrow the rich and powerful, but He's determined to employ things – existential realities – that appear to the natural mind to be nothing in order to nullify the things the natural mind holds in high esteem as wise, powerful and prestigious (1:27-28).

Paul's antithesis resides in the distinction between what men esteem and pursue and what God has accomplished in His Son. *The antithesis is between the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God – between reality as men perceive it and as it really is by virtue of the person and work of Christ.* Philanthropy, philosophy and religion are the proof that men admire and pursue righteousness and spiritual well-being. But they do so according to the conceptions of their natural minds, and so find the *logos* of the Christ event (what Paul called the "word of the cross") to be incoherent and even absurd. Jew or Gentile, it runs counter to people's natural conception of things, and so must either be modified or rejected.

- d. Religion, piety and philosophy uphold and promote human wisdom, power and sense of significance; it is *in Christ* alone that they are unmasked and exposed as hopeless and foolish delusions that cannot deliver or save. He has triumphed over human delusion and folly by exposing them, but He hasn't left the matter there. Overcoming an enemy is one thing; restoring what that enemy destroyed is quite another. So Jesus hasn't merely destroyed the wisdom of the wise and the power of the mighty; He has **supplanted** them with God's wisdom and power – the wisdom and power that are bound up, revealed, and granted to men *in Himself*.
 - Jesus has become for our sake God's wisdom, righteousness, consecration and redemption (1:30). All truth – all that God is, all that His creation is, and all that it was created for – is bound up in Him. All things have their origin, meaning and destiny in Him; *Christ is God unto the creation and the creation unto God.* In Him are all the treasures of wisdom, understanding and power as they pertain to the Creator and the creature.
 - Thus Jesus has supplanted all that fallen man perceives and puts forth as wisdom, power and significance. But this comprehensive supplanting is a matter of restoration and not mere conquest: God's wisdom and power in Christ have vanquished their natural human counterparts, not by logical or theological triumph, but by *creational renewal and restoration*.
 - And this new creation – the kingdom of God – hasn't simply replaced the impotent kingdom of man; it has put the latter on display and notice as an imposter and usurper. *In this way it issues a call to the world of men.*

God's wisdom and power in Christ have nullified the things that are. They reveal that what men regard as wisdom is foolishness and what they regard as power is weakness. Moreover, they expose the emptiness and uselessness of their human counterparts by supplanting them, and the fact that they've done so leaves the human race with a solemn obligation: the obligation to reject falsehood and vanity in favor of truth and power; to renounce the darkness and embrace the light.

- e. Thus the *logos* of the cross embodies two inseparable components: the truth of what God has accomplished in His Son and the consequent human responsibility. The word of the cross is the word of the resurrection, and the resurrection holds forth the truth that the old order – the former existential reality – has been judged and done away with in Christ. The old Adamic age has been supplanted by the new age of the Last Adam. Jesus' resurrection life has overcome Adamic death and is the paradigm of the new humanity; more than that, it is the beginning of the new creation that will one day take the whole created order into its grasp.

This means that the demand of repentance and faith is a matter of **conformity to truth** and not mere compliance with divine dictates. God requires all men to find life in His Son (cf. Isaiah 45:22-25 with Acts 17:30-31) because this is what the truth demands. For God to not require it would be for Him to embrace falsehood and make Himself a liar. But God is true, and so cannot abide falsehood either in Himself or His creatures; He can do no other than require of His image-bearers that they repent and embrace the truth by embracing the One who is the truth.

Thus embracing Jesus Christ as the truth is a person's *righteousness*, not because it's the right thing to do, but because He is True Man. A thing's righteousness (its "rightness") consists in its conformity to its true identity and purpose. For human beings, this involves authentic, uncompromised human existence and this is realized only by sharing in the life of Him who is authentically and consummately human. Jesus is what man was created to be; by His incarnation, the divine Son has become righteousness with respect to men and unto men (1:30).

In His Son, God has accomplished, brought to light and granted to men what they instinctively seek but can never attain. All men are drawn toward wisdom, power, significance and immortality – that which is life indeed. The common patterns and legacy of every human culture demonstrate that human beings sense the supreme and transcendent value of this sort of "life," but men also sense their need to *obtain* it; they discern that it is neither inherent nor automatic. Thus they seek it through human virtue, whether in the form of religion (including religious law), philosophy, philanthropy, etc. The very fact of their pursuit proves their confidence that their goal is obtainable, and it also implies what they believe such obtainment holds for them, namely *the right to boast*. But the *logos* of Christ crucified affords men no such boast. It does grant them a boast, but only that they should boast in Him who has wrought marvelous works in the earth.

"Behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid."