

10. Paul's commitment at Corinth – as indeed everywhere he went as Jesus' ambassador – was to present only Christ and Him crucified. He was determined that his gospel would not in any way or to any extent draw attention to himself or any other human feature, quality or consideration. Paul understood that his own faithfulness in discharging his ministry was to be measured by how truly and fully men discerned God's wisdom and power in his gospel and were drawn to Christ by them rather than by human device.

In terms of the natural mind and its conceptions, Paul's gospel was not a word of wisdom but of foolishness. And yet the truth of the matter is that this seemingly foolish and incoherent message is profoundly and transcendently wise; the problem is simply that the fact of its wisdom is lost upon multitudes of people. Paul has insisted that the wisdom and power of God in the gospel are missed by the natural mind; now he draws out that truth by applying it to the natural-minded *believer*.

To the extent that a Christian continues in his natural thinking – whether because he's a “babe in Christ” (ref. 3:1) or because he fails to take his mind captive to Christ (ref. 2 Corinthians 10:1-18), *the true nature of God's wisdom and power in the gospel will continue to elude him*. So it was with many among the Corinthian believers; though their faith in Christ indicated that they'd discerned (at least to a certain extent) and embraced God's wisdom in the word of the cross, they were now living out their faith in the practical denial of that wisdom. Believing themselves to be wise, they remained fools.

- a. Thus Paul's statement that he “*spoke wisdom among the mature*” (2:6a) directly indicted the Corinthian community. The Corinthians considered themselves wise and mature, but Paul's assertion showed that he rejected that notion on both counts: The divisions at Corinth were proof that many were missing God's wisdom in the gospel; that, in turn, proved that they were yet “babes in Christ.”

There had been a season when their immaturity was justified – when it had been right and proper to the circumstance. Every Christian begins his life in Christ as a “babe,” and the Corinthians were no exception. Paul hadn't begrudged feeding them milk when they'd first come to faith; spiritual infants can only digest and be nourished by spiritual milk. But that season had passed; by the time of Paul's writing, the Corinthians were beyond their spiritual infancy and should have been feeding on solid food. But the truth was that they were still not ready for it (3:1ff).

It's important, then, to understand how Paul was defining immaturity. The Corinthians weren't immature in that they knew only the most rudimentary truths concerning Jesus Christ and had no instruction in the deeper things of the gospel. This clearly wasn't the case because *Paul* himself had been their tutor in Christ and he'd spent a year and a half discipling them. The Corinthians' immaturity wasn't a matter of the gospel *content* they'd heard or been taught, but *what they'd taken from it* – the way they'd processed and owned the gospel truths Paul had delivered to them. They were immature because they were *fleshly*: Christians who couldn't profit from “solid food” because they were yet attempting to digest it with natural minds rather than with the mind of the Spirit (ref. again 3:1-3).

Thus Paul's statement in 2:6a has two crucial aspects:

- 1) The first is that he was including the Corinthians (at least many of them) among the immature to whom he'd been unable to "speak wisdom."
- 2) But – and this is most important – *the absence of wisdom in Paul's gospel witness among the Corinthians was the result of their immaturity – their natural-mindedness – and not simplistic instruction on his part.* By his own insistence, he came to them proclaiming God's wisdom and power in the gospel of Christ crucified (1:22-24, 2:1-5) and he'd spent a year and a half laying and strengthening that foundation (3:10-11). Paul delivered among the Corinthians a message of wisdom but, as natural-minded babes, they had not been able to digest it and be nourished by it. Tragically, their condition hadn't changed; they remained in their spiritual infancy.

To their shame, the Corinthians had missed (or lost) the wisdom of God in Paul's gospel. The result was that, in their thinking and judgment, they were no different from those outside of Christ's Church. Men's state of alienation has darkened their hearts and minds, so that even the preeminent rulers and sages of this present age cannot come to grips with God's wisdom. They have their own "wisdom," but it, like they themselves, is passing away as empty and useless (2:6b). *But this human wisdom was precisely what the Corinthians were enamored with:*

- The natural mind has its own standard of wisdom by which it defines and perceives preeminence, and the world's leading men (its "rulers") are the reflection and expression of that standard. But these are the very men among whom Paul insisted it's pointless to speak true wisdom; bound by their own wisdom, they are insensitive to that which is wisdom indeed.
- But the same human judgment that marks out and exalts the preeminent men of this age was at work among the Corinthian believers; they, too, were assessing men with natural minds (cf. 1:12 with 3:1-23).

The implication is clear: The divisions in the Corinthian church were proof that many among them continued to think and operate according to the principles of this world as it exists in alienation from God (what Paul here called "this age"). They were thinking and living as *worldlings*, and in this way indicting themselves as *liars*. For when Jesus joined them to Himself by His Spirit, He delivered them from the "world" that is the fallen order and brought them into the new age of the kingdom which He inaugurated in Himself as the Last Adam (cf. John 17:14-16 with Colossians 1:13 and Ephesians 4:17-5:10). For Christians to live according to the former age – that is, to operate with natural minds – is to lie against the truth of who they are (Colossians 2:20ff). But more than that, it is to make *God* a liar. For Jesus hasn't merely delivered His people from the old Adamic age; He has condemned and overthrown it. The one who continues to live according to the principles and wisdom of "this age" denies the truth of God's triumph.

b. The natural mind – whether operating in believers or unbelievers – fails to grasp the full truth and implications of the wisdom of God. In the case of believers, Paul identified these as the *immature* to whom he found himself unable to “speak wisdom.” But there were mature ones among the saints who could receive what the worldly wise and immature could not; to them Paul was able to communicate “*God’s wisdom in a mystery...*” Paul recognized a mysterious quality in the divine wisdom bound up in Christ, and this idea deserves careful consideration.

- First of all, Paul used the term *mystery* almost exclusively in reference to the gospel, and specifically as the gospel embodies the eternal purpose of the triune God which has been progressively revealed and worked out on the stage of salvation history culminating with the Christ event (cf. 4:1 with Ephesians 1:9-10, 3:1-9, 6:19-20; Colossians 1:21-27, 2:1-3, 4:2-3; 1 Timothy 3:8-9, 14-16). So here *mystery* refers, not to something that is strange or incomprehensible, but gospel truth that is bound up in God and which He makes known to men according to His purpose and timing.
- Second, the prepositional phrase, *in a mystery*, can be grammatically linked to Paul’s statement in a couple of different ways. The first option is that Paul was using it adverbially such that it clarifies the manner in which he spoke to the mature of God’s wisdom. That is, he spoke to them in a fashion that can be regarded as mysterious in the sense that it wasn’t understood by all who heard. The second option is that the phrase is adjectival, modifying the noun *wisdom*. In this case Paul’s meaning was that God’s wisdom has a mysterious quality to it.
- Determining Paul’s meaning must also take into consideration his second modifier (*hidden*), which is an adjectival participle that explicitly modifies the noun *wisdom*. This wisdom of God is such that it *has been concealed*.
- Finally, Paul clarified this concealment and God’s purpose in it with the relative clause, *which God predestined before the ages unto our glory* (2:7b). God didn’t conceal His wisdom in the sense of seeking to obscure it or keep it from men, but in order to manifest it to the world at the proper time and in the proper way. The very nature of God’s wisdom – which again refers to His all-encompassing purpose for His creation bound up in the person and work of Jesus Christ – precluded God from manifesting it until the “fullness of the times”: until the time when He had completed His preparatory revelation and work on the stage of salvation history (cf. Ephesians 2:11-3:12; Galatians 3:1-4:5; 2 Timothy 1:8-11).

Taken together, these considerations – and the larger context – show that Paul was attaching the idea of *mystery* to God’s wisdom in two distinct, but related ways:

- 1) First, mystery is associated with God’s wisdom in the sense that this wisdom has only become fully manifest to the world in the Christ event.

The preparatory salvation history focused on it, but disclosed it only in shadows and types so that it couldn't be fully discerned until the fullness of the times and the coming of Yahweh's messianic Servant (cf. Romans 16:25-26; Colossians 1:25-27). God's wisdom, for long ages expressed in terms of His *promise* to His creation, was confined to the realm of mystery until it could be fully revealed in the light of christological *fulfillment*.

This meaning of *mystery* points toward attaching Paul's phrase, "in a mystery," to the noun *wisdom*: The wisdom of God – His eternal purpose for His creation in Christ – was veiled for ages and generations, reserved for full manifestation in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah.

- 2) The second sense in which the divine wisdom is mysterious pertains to the issue of human perception. Though fully disclosed and illumined in the Christ event, God's wisdom remains veiled to the natural mind. Such men are able to understand the facts and acknowledge the correctness of God's wisdom in Christ, *but they process that truth through the grid of natural conceptions and sensibilities*. The result is that what they perceive and embrace is the wisdom of men rather than the wisdom of God.

For revelation to succeed, the truth that exists in the mind of God must come to reside in the mind of men. Thus revelation is ultimately concerned with *meaning* and not words, ideas and events as such. This is why God's wisdom is hidden from the natural-minded even when they hear and accept as true the things they're hearing. Unless and until hearing and understanding yield *faith* – that is, the appropriation and conviction of truth *as it is in Jesus Christ*, God's wisdom remains veiled in the realm of mystery (cf. Matthew 13:1-23; Romans 10:1-21; 2 Corinthians 3:1-16).

This second meaning of *mystery* points toward treating Paul's phrase, "in a mystery," adverbially. That is, Paul was saying that mystery is attached to the proclamation of God's wisdom in the sense that the divine wisdom is hidden from the natural mind. (In the end, both interpretations are appropriate to the context and are not mutually exclusive. In fact, it's quite possible that Paul intended both.)

This mystery is the reason for Paul's insistence that "*none of the rulers of this age has understood*" (2:8). This statement, too, can be interpreted in two ways: Paul may have been speaking of *human rulers* and, by extension, human structures and systems of authority and power in this world (cf. Romans 13:3), or alternately of *satanic spiritual powers* (Ephesians 2:2). Here as well both views are acceptable and Paul may actually have intended both in that each implies the other: The human rulers (and all fallen men) of this age operate according to the mind and will of satanic powers – they are "children of their father, the devil" (John 8:43-44); so also satanic spiritual powers accomplish their ends through human agents and their earthly power and authority (cf. Isaiah 14:1-22; Ezekiel 28:12-19).

Whether human or angelic “rulers,” Paul’s indictment holds true: Confronted with God’s wisdom and power in Christ, their alienated minds could not discern it.

- In the case of satanic powers, they understood what God was attempting to accomplish in the Christ event but they believed they could prevail against the divine intent; somehow, in their perverse minds they believed the death of the Lord of glory would mean their victory.
- The earthly rulers who presided over Jesus’ death had no such insight. At bottom, the Jewish rulers perceived in Jesus a threat to their theocratic power and the status quo in Israel (John 11:45-50); their Gentile counterparts saw only a weak and irrelevant Jew who was at the center of a foolish Jewish controversy which threatened the civil order.

In both cases, the divine wisdom and power in Jesus Christ were perceived as foolishness and powerlessness – that which deserved only contempt and opposition. Angelic and human rulers alike, had they been able to discern “the glory of God in the face of Christ,” they’d have never crucified the Lord of glory.

But as it was, the wisdom, power and glory of God in Christ were hidden from them. *Angelic and human powers both gloried in Jesus’ death, but they did so as epitomizing the world of men blinded by their natural minds and bent on the triumph of their supposed wisdom and power.* Natural thoughts and conceptions necessarily set themselves against the knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:1-6), but ultimately to no avail; in the end, human wisdom and power are the servants of their divine counterparts inasmuch as everything – even error – serves the triumph of God’s truth in Jesus Christ (cf. 1:18-21 with Acts 4:23-31, 26:1-18).

- c. The wisdom of God in Christ is hidden from the natural mind, and this means that it will inevitably elude every human being apart from divine intervention: In the entire course of human history with all of its insights and attainments, “*no eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor has it even entered into the heart of man all that God has prepared for those who love Him*” (2:9). Natural resources, faculties, and processes are inadequate to arrive at divine wisdom, for that which is of flesh is flesh; for all its striving, flesh cannot transcend its bounds (John 3:1-6, 6:22-65).

Paul’s citation is puzzling in that it is not present in the Scripture in the form he presents it. And yet his introductory phrase, *it is written*, shows that he regarded it as scriptural. This is a classic example of how Paul – and the New Testament writers – viewed and interacted with the Scripture. Unlike many today who believe that verbal inspiration demands word-for-word precision in using the scriptural text, Paul and his counterparts recognized that *meaning* is the issue in scriptural inspiration, authority, and infallibility. They employed the Scriptures organically, canonically and christologically, not narrowly and mechanically. *Thus Paul could ascribe scriptural authority to a statement that doesn’t occur in the text, and yet expresses a general truth woven into the fabric of the Scripture.*