

Excursus: Heeding Paul's Exhortations

Paul recognized that the various problems in the Corinthian church were the product of their natural-mindedness (their "fleshliness," 3:1-4). He also understood that their fleshliness escaped their conscious notice; they were self-deceived about their true condition and the way they were thinking and judging. Far from being ashamed of "boasting in men," they were proud of themselves and believed that they were honoring Christ by passing judgment on His servants. They ascribed to themselves spiritual wisdom and maturity and couldn't see that they were foolish and infantile, men who were effectively denying the mind of Christ within them.

The Corinthians didn't recognize their self-deception, but Paul did and he directed them to confront it seriously and decisively (ref. again 3:18, 21). The apostle was clear in what the Corinthians needed to do, *but was conspicuously silent regarding how they were to go about doing it* – how they were to become wise by becoming fools. The obvious implication is that Paul believed the Corinthians knew exactly how to deal with their folly and self-deception. He felt he didn't need to give them specific instructions, and the first reason was his close, long-term relationship with them. Paul knew what the Corinthians had been taught because he'd been their primary teacher over a period of a year and a half. He knew that he'd imparted to them the spiritual resources of understanding sufficient for them to deal with their natural-mindedness and the multitude of problems it was causing. But beyond that, Paul understood that the Corinthians possessed the life and mind of Christ. All things were theirs in Christ through His indwelling, transforming Spirit; *the Corinthians – as all of God's saints – were fully adequate for all that was required of them; they simply needed to recognize and exercise that adequacy.*

Paul was confident that the Corinthians possessed the knowledge, discernment and spiritual resource necessary to fulfill their obligation; providing them with a set of "how-to" instructions would have undermined and even denied the very things he believed about them and sought to remind them of. The Corinthians needed to be confronted and challenged, but Paul (and Apollos) had grounded them in the gospel such that, once awakened to their folly and self-deception, they were fully able to apply the remedy they already possessed. So it ought to be with all Christians; why, then, do so many fall short?

- First of all, human beings *naturally* follow the natural law that things follow the path of least resistance. This is true of planets and star systems hurtling through space, air moving through a building, and water running downhill. It is also true of students taking a course, workers doing their jobs and, all too often, of Christians living the Christian life. It's not that such individuals have no interest in obedience and godliness; they just prefer a simple definition of them and a way to "become holy" with the least amount of thought, effort and struggle. Their minds direct them toward doctrinal and practical prescriptions for living the Christian life and a simple, concise articulation of the procedures for achieving success in their efforts. This is not to imply that all believers approach their lives in Christ in this way; it is only to affirm that this way of thinking characterizes the natural mind; it is sure evidence of natural wisdom at work in Christ's saints.

Natural-mindedness inclines Christians toward “to-do” lists and “how-to” strategies, and so they readily gravitate toward those who will provide them to them. This is why Christians instinctively love “practical” sermons and feel less than satisfied when preachers don’t supply them with a prescriptive “application.”

- Another reason Christians don’t deal with natural-mindedness is that it’s invisible to them. And that’s because they don’t know what it means to be a Christian. A person can’t perceive his thinking and judgment to be a fleshly counterfeit if he doesn’t know what it means to think with the mind of Christ. And how can he understand that if he really doesn’t understand what it means to be “in Christ”?

For many Christians, the “gospel” they know and embraced when they came to faith embodies a handful of truths regarding Jesus’ death for sinners, the promise of forgiveness for their sins and the need for repentance and obedience. Those things are biblically true so far as they go, but they are actually *stripped* of truth when they are stripped of their biblical context and meaning. Yet a minimalist “gospel” will yield its fruit: It leaves its adherents to conclude that being a Christian amounts to little more than being forgiven, living an upright life and being assured of a future in heaven. On the other hand, many lose the gospel of God’s wisdom in Christ and its meaning for their Christian lives in a maze of doctrinal minutiae. For them, employing the mind of Christ becomes synonymous with theological study and commitment to a particular doctrinal formulation.

- In all this, the lion’s share of the fault lies with the Church’s shepherds. For every Christian who chafes at the seemingly overwhelming vastness of God’s wisdom in Christ and craves a simpler “gospel,” there are multitudes of believers who have never really had the biblical gospel set before them. And there has never been an instance of a Christian who sought a shepherd to come alongside him in his natural thinking (whatever form it happens to take) who has been unable to satisfy his quest. Itching ears always find willing scratchers.

Paul confronted the Corinthians with their self-deception and he expected them to deal with it decisively. It wasn’t enough for them to admit the wrongfulness of their factions; they needed to address their underlying cause, and that meant first “coming to their senses” respecting the way they were thinking and recognizing that they’d fallen prey to the deceitfulness of natural wisdom. What appeared to them to be godly wisdom was actually destructive foolishness; once they discerned that, they were ready to embrace that which is wisdom indeed; they were ready to begin employing the mind of Christ.

1. Discerning the Natural Mind

The natural mind is a *deceiver*; it deceives others as well as itself, and does so as a matter of course. For all men inhabit the world their minds present to them, and the natural mind forms its impression of reality and responds to that impression in and of itself. The natural mind determines for itself what is true, proper and wise independently of the Spirit of *truth*, and so cannot avoid falsehood, delusion and self-deception.

This being the case, it follows that dealing with self-deception requires knowing the natural mind; one must know his enemy if he is to defeat him. All people are unique, but the “fleshly mind” is one, even as worldly wisdom is one (3:19). The natural mind operates according to certain perspectives, principles and patterns, and once they’re understood, natural thinking is exposed and can no longer masquerade as wisdom.

- a. First of all, the natural mind is *fleshly*. Paul used this term to refer to man as he is in himself apart from God (cf. Romans 8:5-8). The fleshly mind perceives reality in terms of *me* and *not me*, and, being self-referential and self-concerned, it appraises and interacts with everything outside it (people, things, circumstances, situations, etc.) in terms of their perceived value in relation to the self.

This is why, on the one hand, the natural mind is incapable of authentic love, and why, on the other, its judgments and exertions all reflect the centrality and primacy of perceived self-benefit. *This is as much the case in the arena of spiritual concerns* (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10-12, 3:1-4:5, 7:1-24, 8:1-13, 11:1-34, 12:1-14:40 with Romans 14:1-15:7; cf. also Acts 20:17-31 with 1 Timothy 1:3-7, 2:8, 4:1-12, 5:17-20, 6:1-10; 2 Timothy 2:1-18, 22-26, 4:1-4; Titus 3:9-11) *as it is in the arena of material ones* (cf. Romans 13:8-14; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 4:17-5:12; Colossians 3:1-17; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12).

- b. The natural mind is self-referential because it is *self-isolated*. It draws on outside stimuli, but processes and interprets that data within the fortress that is self. This isn’t to say that Christians who are governed by natural thinking are antisocial or unconcerned with others. The natural mind may be eminently sociable and even sincerely philanthropic; *it just cannot relate to and engage in true intimacy – the intimacy that characterizes the relationship within the Godhead*. By sharing in Christ by the indwelling Spirit, Christians share in the trinitarian life and love and this vital union determines and defines their relationship with one another. In Jesus’ words, His people are one even as He is one with the Father (ref. John 17:20-23). This sort of relationship is revealed to men in the person of Jesus Christ and realized in the world only in and through His Spirit. It is utterly foreign to this world and incomprehensible to the world’s wisdom which operates according to the natural determinative principle of *me* and *not me*.
- c. The previous two considerations show that the natural mind is preeminently an *independent* and *autonomous* mind. Again, this doesn’t mean that “naturally-minded” Christians refuse involvement with or input from other believers. It simply means that, in the final analysis, they retain for themselves all prerogatives of judgment and action. The natural mind does what is right in its own eyes.

Interestingly, the natural mind recognizes this principle of independence. But far from renouncing it, it seeks to use it to its own perceived benefit. So churches exalt and exploit individualism by pandering to it, whether in the gospel they preach or the church model and strategies they embrace; whether for the purpose of gaining converts or keeping congregants happy.

2. Employing the Mind of Christ

If the natural mind contradicts and opposes the mind of Christ, then employing the mind of Christ (the spiritual mind) depends absolutely upon rightly discerning, confronting and overcoming natural-mindedness. Because the natural mind reflects and expresses man as he is in himself apart from God, employing the mind of Christ begins with understanding the true nature of the Christian life.

- a. Of first importance in this regard is discerning what it means to be “in Christ.” One cannot live the Christian life if he doesn’t understand what it is. Sadly, whatever their doctrine, multitudes of Christians *live* day-to-day as if being “in Christ” means nothing more for their *persons* than being forgiven of their sins. That is, they think of their lives in Christ in terms of new convictions, new commitment and new conduct, not *new creation*. Their priorities and practices are to be “new,” but their essential person is the same as before they were saved.

This perspective is perhaps most evident in the way Christians think about the concepts of *old man* and *new man*. For many, “old man” and “new man” are metaphors for the kinds of thinking and behavior that characterize the unbelieving and disobedient on the one hand and obedient believers on the other. They are regarded as speaking to distinction in *practice* rather than to distinction in *being*.

- The first implication of this is that the concepts “old man” and “new man” come to represent a kind of spiritual dualism: They are treated as two competing natures within the same person. Christians are thus reduced to spiritual Jekyll and Hyde creatures who, at any given point, can show forth either of the two natures that still determine them as human beings.
- As a result, “putting on the new man” becomes synonymous with the Christian’s abiding obligation of personal obedience.

This mindset is so common that Paul’s actual usage and meaning appear suspect to some. Nevertheless, it remains that Paul wasn’t referring to two possible ways of living the Christian life, but to the two forms of human existence: humanness according to the *first Adam* and humanness according to the *Last Adam*. Thus “old man” and “new man” are eschatological concepts that speak to the reality of renewal and restoration (new creation) that has come about in Jesus Christ (cf. Ephesians 4:17-24 with Colossians 3:1-11; also 2 Corinthians 5:17).

The notion of Christians having two natures is utterly foreign to Paul. A person is of one of the two “Adams” but not both. Those who share in Christ’s life have died to the old Adamic nature and now share in Jesus’ true humanity (cf. Romans 6:1-11; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:1-3). Most importantly, this participation in the Last Adam is determinative: Christians aren’t an essential combination of old man and new man; the language of *flesh* and *spirit*, *death* and *life*, and *bondage* and *liberation* makes this clear (Romans 8:9f; Ephesians 5:1ff; Colossians 1:13).

Commenting on Paul's instruction to the Ephesians (4:20-32), Greg Beale makes the following summary observations:

“Paul reminds his readers what they learned when they first came to faith (vv.20-21). At that time they were instructed to ‘lay aside the old man... and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.’ Therefore, it is in the past that the ‘old man’ has been laid aside, ‘the spirit’ has been renewed, and the ‘new man’ has been put on.”

- b. If “new man” refers to the new-creational existence the believer now has by virtue of sharing in Christ's life, then all that the Christian is and does *in truth* is determined by it. This means that, to whatever extent he is thinking or acting apart from or contrary to this defining reality, he is guilty of the disobedience of lying against the truth (Ephesians 5:1-10). It also means that the imperatives of the Christian life are simply the truth and life of the indicatives of new creation: The Christian has the singular obligation – expressed in all sorts of particulars – to live authentically into the truth of the “new man”; that is, to be in mind and practice who he is in Christ. Again, Beale is helpful: *“The ‘indicative’ of the new creation must precede the ‘imperative’ to act as a new creation.”*

The Christian possesses one essential nature, but in accordance with the inaugurated eschatology principle of *already-but-not yet*. The old Adamic self was crucified with Christ and the new self – the new man bearing the image of the Last Adam – was raised to life in Him (Romans 6:1-7). The old self has been put to death in Christ, but its influence continues on. *Adamic man was judged and abolished in Christ, so that those who share in Him share in that abolition. Christians have been released from the enslaving power of the Adamic nature (the old man), but the new man can still live as if that weren't the case: The Christian must reckon himself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ (Romans 6:10-11).*

And so, while the “old man” has been crucified, his patterns of thinking and acting still come against the “new man.” For this reason Christians have an ongoing obligation to take their thoughts captive to the truth as it is in Christ – to set their hearts and minds on the heavenly reality that they died and their lives are hidden with Christ in God, and then conduct themselves accordingly.

The patterns of the “old man” continue to rise up in the believer's mind and heart, and the driving force behind these impulses is the natural mind. This means that Christians are obligated to reckon themselves dead to the sinful attitudes and practices characteristic of the natural (“old”) man (Colossians 3:1-17; cf. Romans 6:11-14; Galatians 5:19-21), *but even more fundamentally, they're obligated to discern the operations of the natural mind itself.* The obvious reason (which is at the heart of Paul's instruction to the Corinthians) is that the natural mind is as inclined to religious zeal and piety as it is to immorality and flagrant ungodliness. Like the one it mimics, natural-mindedness readily poses as an angel of light.

- c. In order to address the problem of natural wisdom the Christian must be able to recognize it. One cannot treat a disease he is unable to diagnose. And recognizing natural wisdom and its operations depends upon knowing what it *really* means to be a Christian – what it means to be “in Christ.” Skill in detecting the counterfeit results from mastery of the genuine. And when the Christian comes to discern spiritual wisdom (the mind of Christ), he will find, like Paul, that spiritual wisdom stands in antithesis to its natural counterpart.

Again, the natural mind is a divided mind – a mind that perceives and reasons in terms of *me* and *not me*. Antithetically, the spiritual mind perceives and thinks in terms of *common-union*, first in relation to God, then in relation to other believers, and finally in relation to the creation itself. Spiritual wisdom doesn’t think in terms of “me” and “not me,” but in terms of “me” as implicated and bound up in “not me.” It recognizes God’s provision in Christ for *me*, but as it is His provision for the whole creation of which I am a part. So spiritual wisdom thinks in terms of the corporate body of Christ, not the individual believer (just as God taught Israel to think of itself in corporate terms as the singular “son of God”).

The spiritual mind recognizes that the unity which exists among believers is grounded in and is an extension of the unity within the Godhead. Thus the spiritual mind cannot think in individualistic categories, and so has no inclination or capacity to *operate* in an individualistic manner. Independence, autonomy and individualism find no place in the Scripture’s understanding of the Christian life and the Christian Church. This is the fundamental reason the New Testament is silent regarding formal membership in a body of believers; it assumes as a matter of nature and course an essential and thorough common-union among Christians that makes speaking of committed membership completely unnecessary.

And so, if one would heed Paul’s exhortations he must commit himself to careful and honest self-examination and personal redirection in the light of the demands of spiritual wisdom. Natural wisdom is a deceiver, and the Christian who would be wise must recognize his propensity to deceive and be deceived and yield himself to God’s provision for it, which is the mind and leading of the Spirit *in the context of Christ’s body*.

The spiritual mind is an open, receptive and yielded mind, not because it denies or despises individual conscience and the lordship of Christ, *but precisely because it rightly honors and upholds them*. It knows that the natural mind is deceitful and its powers of deception depend upon isolation and autonomy; the man who holds himself accountable to his own musings is a self-deceived fool; he shows that he despises a good conscience that is submitted to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:11-12).

So those who would be wise and not self-deceived fools must hold their perceptions, understanding and convictions with due suspicion, true humility and open teachability. The one who believes he *knows* proves his natural-mindedness (1 Corinthians 8:2), for his conviction renders him isolated and autonomous: Not only can he not yield to those who disagree with him, he cannot even accept them; to do so would be to embrace error.