

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE WISDOM OF GOD

“We should expect to find Wisdom as one of the important words of the New Testament,” observes H. K. Moulton, “and indeed it is. The noun comes 51 times; the adjective *wise* 20 times, and the verb *to make wise* twice. Their combined distribution is interesting. Matthew has them five times, Mark only once, Luke and Acts eleven, John never, Paul 44 times (including 26 in 1 Corinthians 1-3), James five times and the other books seven. The surprising thing about Wisdom in the New Testament is that it is very far from being generally praised. In nearly one third of its mentions it is quite clearly condemned. It meets with approval under only certain very definite conditions. There is no *guāna mārga*, as generally understood, in the New Testament. Human wisdom, as Paul argues especially in the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, confers no benefit on man. It is only the wisdom that is God’s gift which is worth possessing. We may therefore divide the uses of the words into six sections: Mere human wisdom, usually condemned; 2. Human wisdom spoken of in a neutral sense or with a measure of approval; 3. The Wisdom of God in the sense in which the Old Testament uses the word; 4. The wisdom of Jesus in His incarnate life; 5. The wisdom of God in heaven or of the Exalted Christ; 6. The gift of wisdom to men from Father, Son or Spirit. The condemnation of human wisdom is found especially when Paul is writing to a Greek church at Corinth because Greeks sought wisdom (1 Cor. 1:22) and thought that they could be saved by it. Normally, however, it led men astray; *the world by its wisdom knew not God* (1:21), its wisdom was foolishness in His sight (3:19). *The wisdom of this age* (2:6) is not God’s wisdom at all; He has made it foolish (1:20) and has chosen the things that in the world’s sight are foolish to put to shame those who think themselves to be wise (1:27). So Paul speaks of God’s destroying the wisdom of the wise (1:19), of His taking the wise in their craftiness (3:19), of His knowing the reasonings of the wise, that they are vain (3:20). And he learns from God to say *Where is the wise man?* (1:20), and to come to Corinth *not in wisdom of speech* (1:17), *not with excellency of speech or wisdom* (2:1), *not in persuasive words of wisdom* (2:4), *not in words which man’s wisdom teaches* (2:13), so that his hearers’ faith may stand *not in the wisdom of men but in the power of God* (2:5). If anyone thinks that he is wise, it is better for him to become a fool in the world’s eyes (3:18), and Paul can thank God that *not many wise after the flesh* had been called (1:26). This teaching, so strongly emphasized in 1 Corinthians, is echoed elsewhere. Rom. 1:22 speaks of those who professed to be wise and become fools, 2 Cor. 1:12 contrasts fleshly wisdom with the grace of God. Col. 2:23 talks of the human things that have a mere show of wisdom. Jas. 3:15 describes the wisdom that does not come from above as *earthly, sensual, devilish*. 2 Pet. 1:16 has the phrase *cunningly devised fables*, which is literally *fables that have been made wise*, too wise, too clever in fact. All this condemnation of the wrong kind of wisdom is very strong but very necessary.”¹

There is a human wisdom, however, that does not need to be condemned. Jesus in Mt. 11:25 and Lk. 10:21, speaks of things that are hidden from the wise and understanding but He does not specially condemn them for their wisdom. Moses was *instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians* (Acts 7:22), and very noble wisdom it was. Paul speaks of himself as a debtor both to wise and to foolish (Rom. 1:14). He urges the Romans to be wise as regards that which is good (16:19), and asks the Corinthians *Is there not one wise man among you?* (1 Cor. 6:5). The Ephesians are bidden to *walk, not as unwise but as wise* (5:15), and the

Colossians to *walk in wisdom towards them that are without* (4:5). Paul is the last person to rant indiscriminately against wisdom as a whole. Even if he had wanted to, the Old Testament would not have allowed him. Jesus Himself speaks of the wisdom of Solomon (Mt. 12:42; Lk. 11:31). He also lets the Wisdom of God speak, as it were, as a separate person (Lk. 11:49), as she does, for example, in the eighth chapter of Proverbs. And when, in Mt. 11:19 and Lk. 7:35, He describes Wisdom as being proved right by her works (or her children), He is thinking in Old Testament terms of God's Wisdom, which has sent both the Baptist and Himself into the world. The New Testament also emphasizes Jesus' own wisdom when He was here on earth. He grew up, filled with wisdom (Lk. 2:40), and advanced in wisdom as He advanced in age (2:52). There was a wisdom about Him that astonished men (Mt. 13:54; Mk. 6:2). But this is transcended by the New Testament description of the wisdom of God in heaven and the wisdom of the Exalted Christ. *Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom of God*, sings Paul (Rom. 11:33), such wisdom that even His foolishness is wider than men (1 Cor. 1:25), and by His wisdom men are kept from knowing Him by their own wisdom (1:21). For He is *the only wise God* (Rom. 16:27), to whom alone can be ascribed *blessing and glory and wisdom* (Rev. 7:12), and by whose *manifold wisdom* (Eph. 3:10) His purposes were revealed in Jesus Christ. That means that Christ alone is *the wisdom of God* (1 Cor. 1:24) and has become to us *wisdom from God* (1:30). He is the *One in whom all the treasures of wisdom are hidden* (Col. 2:3). And so of Him also it can be sung that He is *worthy . . . to receive the power, and riches, and wisdom* (Rev. 5:12). This means that in nearly every case in the New Testament where men possess wisdom it has come to them as a gift from God – the Father, the Son, or the Spirit. There are 23 such instances (strangely enough the same number as the instances of human wisdom condemned in our first section). It is Christ who sends wise men into the world (Mt. 23:34). When the disciples are being persecuted, it is Christ who will give them *a mouth and wisdom* (Lk. 21:15). It was because Stephen and the other deacons were filled with the Spirit that they were filled with wisdom (Acts 6:3, 10). Stephen himself emphasizes that it was God who gave Joseph his wisdom (7:10). If Paul can speak wisdom to the Corinthians, it is because it is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 2:6, 7). If he is a *wise master-builder* (3:10), it is only according to the grace of God given to him. If anyone wants to become wise, he must become a fool or he will not be receptive to God (3:18), and it is only through the Spirit that men are given a word of wisdom (12:8). Any wisdom that we have is what God made to abound to us (Eph. 1:8). It is He who gives us a spirit of wisdom *1:17), and who fills us *with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom* (Col. 1:9). If Paul can *teach every man in all wisdom*, it is only because Christ works in Him mightily (1:28, 29). If the Colossians are to possess wisdom, it is only when the word of Christ dwells in them richly (3:16). The Scriptures are written according to the wisdom given by God to their writers (2 Pet. 3:15), and therefore they are able to make their readers *wise unto salvation* (2 Tim. 3:15). Where there are difficult passages, as in Revelation, the writer can exclaim: *Here is need of wisdom* (Rev. 13:18, 17:9), and the need is supplied only by God. And so St. James has the final word: *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all liberally* (Jas. 1:5). Then he will be able to show that he is wise, by a life lived *in meekness of wisdom* (3:13), for the truly wise man is never conceited. He knows that all that he has is God's gift. *And the wisdom that comes from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity* (3:17, R.S.V.).

- I. **THE CHRISTIAN'S SUMMA CUM LAUDE.** The grounds for this highest praise is found in Christ. All the good that we have, we have only in Christ, and we know of these things only through the Scriptures.² Note the riches that are bestowed upon believers.³
 - A. **Wisdom.** In Proverbs 8, wisdom is the personification of one of the names of the Son of God.⁴ In what sense is Christ the wisdom of God? Christ is the wisdom of God to us in at least two senses; first, He is the brightest display of the infinite wisdom of God. How so? Because it is *only* through Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, that God could save sinners.⁵ Secondly, Christ teaches His people by the Holy Spirit through Scripture all that is necessary to make them wise unto salvation. "He teaches them," says Alexander, "what they ought to believe, and what they ought to do."⁶

- B. **Righteousness.** What is righteousness? It has to do with that which is right, and this in turn points to conformity to a standard. What standard? The standard is God Himself, and this is revealed to us in the Law of God. How is Christ our righteousness? The Apostle is **not** saying that this righteousness is infused in us (as Roman Catholicism teaches), rather, the righteousness of Christ is imputed or reckoned to us (cf. Romans 5:17-19). We have no righteousness of our own, and we can never render ourselves righteous in God's sight. It is only **in Christ** that we have no condemnation. It is only **in Christ** that we are acceptable (declared righteous) before God.
- C. **Sanctification.** Righteousness (or justification) is immediate and once and for all. Our justification is **not** subject to increase or decrease. Sanctification is, in essence, separation. We have in Christ a twofold sanctification. First, we have what may be called positional or *definitive* sanctification. In this sense, sanctification is used with reference to some decisive action on God's part that occurs at the inception of the Christian life. This sanctification, writes John Murray, "is one that characterizes the people of God in their identity as called by God's grace."⁷ It is another way of saying that Christians are consecrated to God. The second and best-known understanding of sanctification is what is commonly referred to as *progressive* sanctification (and is derived from definitive sanctification). "Justification," says Alexander, "is an act of God altering our relation to the law, and pronouncing us free from its curse, and giving a title to eternal life; but sanctification is a work within us, commenced in our regeneration. The one has for its foundation the perfect satisfaction which Christ has rendered to law and justice; the other is a work of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ within us, purifying us from the pollution of flesh and spirit."⁸
- D. **Redemption.** The word, like sanctification, is used in more than one sense in the Scriptures. Its primary meaning is that of liberation. Christ, by His death, ransomed His people from the slave market of sin (Ephesians 1:7).⁹ Here, I think the word has reference to our *final* redemption of our bodies from corruption (cf. Romans 8:35-39; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57.)

CONCLUSION: Ezekiel Hopkins, one of the great Puritan preachers, in a sermon on Proverbs 3:17, "her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace," explained the text by observing: "That relative particle, *her* ways, leads us back to the 13th verse: *Happy is the man, that findeth wisdom; and the man, that getteth understanding.* From which he proceeds to demonstrate the happiness of this man, in the following verses, by the excellence of wisdom: vv. 14, 15. *She is more precious than rubies: and all the things that thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her:* then, by the rewards of it, in three of the choicest blessings which human nature doth most covet, long life, riches, and honor: *length of days is in her right hand; and, in her left hand, riches and honor:* and, lastly, by the pleasantness of it, in the words of my text, *her ways are ways of pleasantness.* So that, if life, if riches, if honor, if pleasure, if the confluence of all good, can make a man happy, he might well pronounce, *Happy is the man, that findeth wisdom.* Well, but what is this wisdom, which is thus profitable, thus pleasant? Is it a subtle management of our own concerns, or a politic negotiating of the mighty affairs of states and kingdoms? Alas! the cares, perplexities, and disquiets, which attend these things, do evidently prove, that they are not *ways of pleasantness:* but, sometimes, unsafe; always intricate and entangled. In a word, therefore, that wisdom, whose ways are *pleasantness and peace,* is nothing else but true religion, solid piety and holiness: *the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil, that is understanding:* Job xxviii.28. And therefore we find, that, throughout this whole book of the Proverbs, wherein Solomon doth so often chastise the fool, he means no other person but the wicked man. Wisdom and folly are synonymous terms with holiness and impiety; and do very well express them, both in their causes and their consequences: for, as folly is the cause of sin, and the consequences of sinning do very evidently prove them fools who commit it; so wisdom is the origin of piety, and the consequences of piety do clearly prove them wise who follow it. So then you see, that these ways of wisdom, which are recommended to us as pleasant, are the fear of God, holiness, and true piety."¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹H. K. Moulton, *The Challenge of The Concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied In Depth* (Bagster & Sons, 1977), p. 25. The following analysis is adopted from pp. 27-29.

²“The Bible,” wrote B. B. Warfield, “is a perfectly plain and a perfectly practical book. The purpose of its gift to the world was not at all that scholars might have a field in which they might try the depth of their insight and expend their best efforts in seeking and securing truth. It was given to plain and practical men, as a prescription to cure them of the disease of sin; to busy and careless men as a trumpet call which they could not choose but hear. Its prime purpose was not to teach either a philosophy, or a science, or an art – not all to systematize knowledge in any sphere of learning. Its prime purpose was simply to tell sinful men what a God they had, and what they practically needed to do in order to serve that God and save their souls.” *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield I* (Presbyterians & Reformed, 1970), p. 130.

³The reading of the NIV properly captures the Greek text at this point (the Authorized Version gives the impression that there are four distinct qualities). *Righteousness, holiness and redemption* are subordinate to *wisdom*, and explanatory of it. As Gordon Fee points out: “Paul is not suggesting, as the KJV implies, that Christ has been made these four things for believers. Rather, God has made him to become *wisdom* – but not of the kind with which the Corinthians are now enamored. True wisdom is to be understood in terms of the three illustrative metaphors, which refer to the saving event of Christ.” *The First Epistle To The Corinthians: The New International Commentary on The New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1987), p. 86.

⁴The language of Proverbs 8 speaks poetically of a divine attribute and not concretely of a divine person. Unless this is kept in mind, much confusion will result, because the text speaks of wisdom having a beginning, etc. In fact, the arch-heretic of the early Church, Arius, used this passage to argue that Christ was a created being, cf. *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. S. B. Ferguson and D. F. Wright (IVP, 1988), p. 726.

⁵Why did God sacrifice His Son on the cross? Could He have saved mankind some other way? The answer is a profound NO. Once God elected to save, He was under absolute necessity to do so by the sacrifice of His Son. “In a word, while it was not inherently necessary for God to save, yet, since salvation had been purposed, it was necessary to secure this salvation through a satisfaction that could be rendered only through substitutionary sacrifice and blood-bought redemption,” John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1975), p. 11.

⁶Alexander, op. cit., p. 198.

⁷*Collected Writings of John Murray: Systematic Theology II* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 278.

⁸Alexander, op. cit., p. 202.

⁹At the turn of the century, B. B. Warfield warned that the word *redemption* was about to undergo verbicide. “You see, what we are doing today as we look out upon our current religious modes of speech, is assisting at the deathbed of a word. It is sad to witness the death of any worthy thing – even of a worthy word. And worthy words do die, like any other worthy thing – if we do not take good care of them. How many worthy words have already died under our very eyes because we did not take care of them!” *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield II* (rpt. Baker Book House, 1981), p. 394.

¹⁰*The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins III* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1977), p. 477.