

HUMAN WISDOM AND SPIRITUAL POWER

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PAUL'S STATEMENT at the beginning of First Corinthians seems to voice a protest against using the 'wisdom of the word' in proclaiming the saving mystery of Christ. Paul's rejection of 'human wisdom', 'secular wisdom', and 'the persuasive words of wisdom' could be interpreted as a recommendation of an anti-intellectual stance in preaching the gospel. Recently, Anthony O'Leary has expressed some of the questions which naturally arise from this negative reaction to culture and sophistication: 'Are there implications here for our preaching? Does Paul reject the use of philosophy, of other methods of communication and aids in attracting people's attention? Do these empty the cross of Christ?'¹

The corinthian situation

A right answer to these questions requires careful attention to the context in which Paul has written his letter. His spirit was heavy with disillusion and disappointment. Within a few months after his departure from Corinth, the fervent community showed signs of losing its authentic christian spirit. The new emphases and sophistries of polished speechmakers had so impressed the culturally inferior converts that they cast aside their fidelity to the 'hard truths' of Paul's preaching which would have kept them firm and wholesome.² Instead, whims and fancies about already sharing fully in the resurrection softened their spiritual texture with moral effeteness.³

How to restore these people to christian common sense was now a grave problem for Paul. His prestige had suffered, and he could no longer lay claim to his earlier influence. When he first came to Corinth he had used a simple and direct method of preaching. This may have been by deliberate choice, as a reaction to his unsuccessful use of culture and eloquence at Athens,⁴ or as an adjustment to the

¹ 'Preaching Christ crucified', in *The Way*, 20 (January 1980), p 18.

² Cf 1 Cor 1, 26-28.

³ Cf 1 Cor 4, 7-14.

⁴ Acts 17, 22-34.

limitations of the socially inferior converts. On the other hand, Paul's style of preaching may have been shaped by his own limitations. To the greek-speaking audiences of the diaspora, his sermons would have sounded raucous, with tell-tale signs of his aramaic background. He confesses frankly that he was 'unskilled in eloquence',⁵ and reports that others spoke of his speech as 'beneath contempt'.⁶ This lack of oratorical finesse, however, had proved no obstacle to the conversion of the Corinthians. They welcomed his simple and forthright message of the Christ who had been crucified and, filled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, pledged themselves to the full living of their new-found faith.⁷

Later the church of Corinth was visited by other preachers like Apollos. In contrast with Paul, this alexandrian Jew was a gifted speaker.⁸ Well versed in the Scriptures, he mightily impressed the bumpkin Corinthians with his eloquence and his ready use of allegorism. During Paul's eighteen-month stay at Corinth, there was no danger that fascination with another speaker's style would obscure the substance of the Gospel message as it was constantly presented by Paul. But once he left, the Corinthians became suddenly self-reliant and so oblivious of Paul's emphases that they veered lopsidedly with an exaltation of spirit which made them indifferent to the basic demands of christian living. A. C. Thiselton attributes all the problems of the Corinthian Church to the self-elation they felt in their unfounded confidence that the liberty and glory of the resurrection was already theirs.⁹

Paul on the defensive

Writing from Ephesus, Paul found it necessary to do something more than merely recall to his converts the basic truths which he had first preached. The time had come when he had to defend the very substance of what some now regarded as the 'preaching of a simpleton'.¹⁰ He found the best way of defence in open attack. With unveiled contempt he makes light of the pretensions of human eloquence and sophistication which had played a large part in

⁵ 2 Cor 11, 6.

⁶ 2 Cor 10, 10.

⁷ Cf 1 Cor 1, 4-8.

⁸ Acts 18, 24-25.

⁹ 'Realized Eschatology at Corinth', in *New Testament Studies*, 24 (1978), pp 510-26. Instead of relying entirely on 1 Cor 4, 8, Thiselton suggests that the eschatological approach pinpoints a single common factor which helps to explain an otherwise utterly diverse array of apparently independent problems at Corinth.

¹⁰ 1 Cor 1, 21.

confusing the immature converts. At the same time, he stresses how unimpressive his own sermons were: and this in order to pound home the truth that the divine content of his message enriched the pale stream of his weak words with power and wisdom. More than this, he emphasizes that the saving deed of God could itself be judged by human standards as the 'work of a simpleton'. Yet it was precisely this deed of God proclaimed by Paul in his preaching of Christ crucified which brought the full power of the Holy Spirit into the lives of the Corinthians.¹¹ Therefore, their present rejection of the 'foolishness' of Paul's preaching blinded them to the 'weak' power and the 'foolish' wisdom of the divine event which not only created christian life but also traced the way it must be lived.

Emergent principles on human wisdom

In view of the problem which Paul had to resolve in the opening chapters of First Corinthians, it seems unwarranted to interpret his words as urging an anti-intellectual stance in presenting the gospel. The only negative principle to be certainly deduced from his treatment of the Corinthians' fatal fascination with 'wisdom' is the truth that the message revealed by God must never be obscured or distorted by reasoning, culture or sophistry. Later he will have occasion to repeat this principle in his insistent warnings to the Galatians and the Colossians.¹²

On the positive side, these first two chapters of First Corinthians present rich affirmations about authentic christian wisdom. The Apostle makes it clear that the mystery of God's saving work is patent of a profound human understanding, which has its primary source in the revealing light of the Holy Spirit but which also requires the response and co-operation of man's spirit. In the light of Paul's jewish background, some authors emphasize the eschatological and apocalyptic qualities of God's mystery as the object of this supposedly esoteric wisdom.¹³ But in view of Paul's emphasis on the cross,¹⁴ and of what he writes of wisdom in his later letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, it is clear that for him the object of wisdom is the all-inclusive saving mystery of God, its length and breadth, height and depth.¹⁵

¹¹ Cf 1 Cor 1, 22-25.

¹² Cf Gal 1, 7-9; Col 2, 8.

¹³ Robin Scroggs, 'Paul: *Sophos and Pneumatikos*', in *New Testament Studies*, 14 (1967), pp 33-55.

¹⁴ Cf 1 Cor 1 and 2.

¹⁵ Cf Eph 3, 18.

Due to the unpromising situation at Corinth, Paul stresses the fact that this wisdom is the special enrichment of those who have grown mature in spiritual living. Because the self-centred and self-important converts were still 'infants in Christ', such wisdom was a rare asset among them.¹⁶ It must be noted, therefore, that Paul's extreme reserve in speaking of true christian wisdom and his presentation of it as something almost esoteric (some would say gnostic) is due in large part to the real situation at Corinth, and the unpreparedness of spirit among those to whom he writes. This judgment is borne out by the fact that later, in a different situation, Paul explicitly refers to wisdom as an essential part of the whole thrust of his apostolate: 'We instruct everyone in all the ways of wisdom, so as to present each one of you as mature in Christ'.¹⁷

Paul's intellectualism

Far from being anti-intellectual, Paul recognized and accepted fully the mental challenges of his apostolate. For him the task of being a competent preacher was of first importance, because it was his mission as founder of the young churches to create and foster an authentic christian 'mind-set' in his converts. Others would baptize, but Paul devoted himself to the preaching of the message which men must receive in order to live.¹⁸ This work of professing the gospel was for Paul a matter of confessing his own faith: 'I believed and therefore I spoke'.¹⁹ The apostolate itself, therefore, demanded of him a deeply personal and highly intelligent grasp of the faith. He boasts of this in his words to the Ephesians: 'If you read my words, you will have some idea of my understanding of the mystery of Christ'.²⁰

The changing diversity of Paul's audiences provided an ongoing need for facile and intelligent adaptation. Striving to be all things to all men, both Jew and Gentile, he had to shape the form of his *kērygma* to the needs and cultural background of his hearers. The sermons attributed to him in Acts represent the various patterns of preaching which he had to use. To a jewish audience he showed himself well versed in the spirit and history of God's people.²¹ With the pagans he appealed to the first principles of universal natural religiosity, and made a point of quoting their poets and reasoning

¹⁶ 1 Cor 3, 1.

¹⁹ 2 Cor 4, 13.

¹⁷ Col 1, 28.

²⁰ Eph 3, 4.

¹⁸ Cf 1 Cor 1, 17.

²¹ Cf Acts 13, 16ff.

with the logic of their philosophers.²² Whatever the task he proved himself equal to it.

Once he had formed a church, he was ready and eager to supplement earlier instruction with ongoing formation. Thus he explicitly tells the Thessalonians that he wants to see them again 'in order to make up any shortcomings' in their faith.²³ He was ready to offer words of counsel and encouragement even to the prestigious church of Rome, though it was not founded by him.²⁴ His competence on both the doctrinal and practical level enabled him to boast that, though he was not 'skilled in speech', he was outstanding in knowledge and had made this manifest in many ways.²⁵

It is not necessary to belabour Paul's personal intellectualism. Even slight familiarity with his letters shows a man who was steeped in the knowledge of the Bible, equipped with the intellectual riches of the wisdom school, fully conversant with rabbinical lore, and a man who could see clearly the point of contact between sound elements of secular thought and life-giving aspects of the mystery of Christ. Paul's doctrine on the Body of Christ owes much to the analogue which the Stoic philosophers were using to describe the global unity of the universe.²⁶ He is not afraid to recommend to his converts the greek philosophers' ideal of virtue — as he himself had lived it.²⁷ In the light of all this it would be a travesty to suggest that Paul was an anti-intellectual.

Wisdom in christian life

And we know more than this about Paul's attitude. Far from claiming knowledge and wisdom as the unique preserve of apostles and ministers of the word, Paul clearly affirms that every Christian should grow in progressive understanding of the mystery of God. He never thought of himself as a mystagogue initiating Christians into an unknown world by means of the mumbo-jumbo of superstitious rites. The *kérygma* which he preached described clearly the reality and meaning of God's act of salvation, and prompted the faith and baptism which introduce the believer into the 'new creation', where all life and holiness come from God through Jesus Christ by the activity of the Holy Spirit.²⁸ Paul would have shied away from speaking of faith as 'a leap in the dark' or as a blind

²² Cf Acts 17, 22ff.

²⁵ 2 Cor 11, 6.

²⁸ Cf 2 Cor 5, 17.

²³ 1 Thess 3, 10.

²⁶ Cf 1 Cor 12.

²⁴ Cf Rom 1, 11-12.

²⁷ Cf Phil 4, 8.

surrender to a God of mystery. Certainly he was fully aware of divine transcendence; but he was equally insistent that the initial faith of the Christian is an intelligent response to the gospel message revealed by God and preached by apostles who were ambassadors for Christ.²⁹

Though this faith is first articulated at a given moment, it will perdure as the spirit of commitment which should activate the whole of christian life.³⁰ For Paul the hearing (*akoē*) of the word must become a lifelong obedience (*hypakoē*) to the word. Therefore, when he tells his Christians, 'You have attained your standing through faith', he uses the perfect tense and not the aorist for, 'You have attained your standing' (*hestēkas*), in order to show that the initial mind-set of the believer must last forever.³¹ This means that the whole subsequent life of the Christian, after baptism, involves a frequent reflective self-relating to God and his Son and their eminent act of salvation. This indeed was the pattern of Paul's own striving, as he affirms: 'As for the life that I now live here upon earth, I live it by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me'.³²

This intellective aspect will always be an essential element in faith. In one of his earliest letters, Paul stresses this fact by identifying his own faith with knowledge. Like all true lovers who already believe in the one they love, he yearns to know more and more about the beloved. This is why he describes his life of faith with the words, 'All I want is to *know* him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings'.³³ So too, in one of his latest letters he states clearly that a dominant purpose of his ongoing apostolic work is to help people actuate this rich cognitive aspect of the life of faith. Writing to the Colossians about the hard struggle of his ministry, he says: 'It is all . . . to stir your minds, so that your understanding may come to full development, until you really know God's secret, in which all the jewels of wisdom and knowledge are hidden'.³⁴

Paul was so convinced of the need for this vital response in mind and spirit that he has formed the vocabulary of his later epistles to emphasize this. The letters written from his roman captivity introduce in a marked way words like 'wisdom' (*sophia*), 'knowledge' (*gnōsis*), 'insight' (*epignōsis*), 'perception' (*aisthēsis*): all of them centring attention on the intellectual activity which should be an integral part of christian faith.

²⁹ Cf 2 Cor 5, 19-20; Rom 10, 14-17; Heb 2, 3-4.

³¹ Rom 11, 20; cf 5, 2.

³² Gal 2, 20.

³⁰ Cf Rom 1, 16-17.

³³ Phil 3, 10.

³⁴ Col 2, 2-3.

The meaning of pauline wisdom

Perhaps the use of the words 'intellective' and 'intellectual' is unfortunate. To some readers they may suggest ponderous and pedantic cerebral activity, the kind of knowledge which we associate with scholars and scientists. But such book lore is not essential to the 'wisdom' of which Paul speaks. Though he himself benefited greatly in his spiritual life and in his apostolate from his scholarly background, he was convinced that the real life and light of all christian knowledge rises from the deeper source of a person's vital response to the action of God's Spirit, who 'searches everything, even the depths of God'.³⁵ Paul is intransigent in insisting on the greek principle of 'like by like'. To know God completely is the privilege of God's Spirit (*Pneuma*).³⁶ If a man wants to know God, to get a profound insight into God's wisdom, he must have a share in the same *Pneuma*, in accordance with the principle 'like by like': 'We have not received the *pneuma* (spirit) of the world, but the *Pneuma* (Spirit) which is from God, that we might know what God has given us'.³⁷ The '*Pneuma* must be man's property, if he wants to be a *sophos* (a wise man)'.³⁸

That the gift of the Spirit to the newly baptized should bear fruit in a growing knowledge and wisdom, accords with the very make-up of man as he appears in pauline anthropology. Speaking of the Christian as one who responds to God and who follows the lead of the Holy Spirit, Paul describes such a person as *pneuma* (spirit). But underlying this concept is the basic natural reality of *pneuma* itself, that is, the whole man under the aspect of his intellectual alertness and openness to better things. It is this man, with his power of vital mental activity, who responds to the inflowing light of the Spirit's revelation. Therefore, when Paul describes the Holy Spirit as the revealer of God,³⁹ the wisdom which the Christian receives is due not only to the illumining activity of the Spirit, but also to the corresponding and subordinate response of man as *pneuma*: intellectually alive and alert, pondering and reflective. For the Spirit comes to the Christian, not to blind and to atrophy, but 'to teach us to understand the gifts that God has given us'.⁴⁰

The knowledge which the Spirit gives centres in God and his saving mystery in all its dimensions, both in the past and in the

³⁵ 1 Cor 2, 10.³⁶ Cf 1 Cor 2, 6-16.³⁷ 1 Cor 2, 12.³⁸ Bertil Gartner, 'The Pauline and Johannine Idea of "to know God" against the Hellenistic Background', in *New Testament Studies*, 14 (1967), p 218.³⁹ Cf 1 Cor 2, 10-16.⁴⁰ 1 Cor 2, 12.

present, both in this life and in the world to come.⁴¹ Because all comes from God's love manifested in the life and death-resurrection of Christ, this christian knowledge can never be something merely speculative and academic. It is alive with love: or, at least, a yearning desire to love. Paul's own life is the best commentary on what this means. He desired to 'know' Christ, not simply as an object of theological discussion, but as the very person of the Son of God who loved him and proved this by dying for him.⁴²

How greatly St Paul would rejoice in the luminous words of St Thomas Aquinas, who finds in christian knowledge a likeness to the second person of the Blessed Trinity. 'He is not any sort of word, but a Word that breathes love'.⁴³ So too the knowledge of the Christian, in the thought of St Paul, must not be any kind of knowledge, but a knowledge which is alive with love. It is this loving knowledge, this experiential awareness of God's goodness, which provides the whole power for christian living, the whole force for christian ministry.

More than this, because christian knowledge centres in the work of God's love, it must be alive with an inner tension for growth. Paul indicates this with a phrase which is paradoxical: 'knowing the love of Christ which is beyond all knowledge'.⁴⁴ God's love for us can never be 'grasped' or 'comprehended'. The knowledge of which Paul speaks, therefore, is more like knowing how much we are loved by God than knowing the infinite God whom we love. It is this awareness of God's all-embracing love which illumines the study of the works of God, and gives a deeper insight into all the aspects of his saving mystery, as it is revealed in Christ and in the wisdom manifest in God's splendid works and wondrous decrees. The object of this wisdom is so immense that no matter how much a person knows about the mystery of God, he stands only on the threshold of its vast and incomprehensible riches.

The way to wisdom

The price of this wisdom is much more demanding than what is required for merely speculative knowledge. That can be purchased by hours of study and research; but the wisdom which Paul desires for his converts requires the co-operation of the whole man. The interaction between the Spirit of God and the spirit of the Christian

⁴¹ Cf Eph 1, 17-23; 3, 16-21.

⁴² Cf Gal 2, 20; Phil 3, 10; Rom 5, 6-11.

⁴³ *Summa Theologica* I, q. 43, a. 5, *ad* 2.

⁴⁴ Eph 3, 19.

is life's best treasure and, therefore, an eminent gift of God. For this reason Paul knew that it must be asked for in prayer; and often in his letters he tells his converts that he ceaselessly pleads before God that they may receive this gift.⁴⁵

At the same time, he emphasizes the need for the Christian to be disposed for the illuminations and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Because the Spirit gives light through the word of God, Paul urged: 'Let the message of Christ, in all its richness, find a home with you. Teach each other, and advise each other, in all wisdom'.⁴⁶ His words to the Philippians describe what one might call the mentality of a true christian humanist. Paul bids his converts to enrich their minds with all the thoughts which could become vital elements of their share in the 'mind of Christ'. He tells them, 'fill your minds with whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious; if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things'.⁴⁷

In a special way Paul stresses the preparedness which faith and charity provide.⁴⁸ For example, writing to the Ephesians, he tells them how he prays that God may give them 'a spirit of wisdom and perception' because he has heard about their faith in the Lord Jesus and the love that they show to all the saints.⁴⁹ It is easy to understand why Paul singles out the virtues of faith and charity as disposing man for the wisdom which the Spirit gives. Because faith involves the Christian in continuing humble obedience to God's word, his mind and heart are never selfishly enclosed within merely human dimensions; they are always open to the inflowing light of the Spirit. Jesus himself taught the close bond between humble faith and wisdom when he praised God with the words, 'I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children'.⁵⁰ As for the need for charity, this must be seen as intimately connected with the need for the obedience of humble faith. For charity is the Christian's obedience to one of the Lord's most compelling words, 'This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you'.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Cf Col 1, 9ff; Phil 1, 9.

⁴⁶ Col 3, 16. ⁴⁷ Phil 4, 8.

⁴⁸ Cf Eph 1, 15-17; Phil 1, 9; Col 1, 9ff.

⁴⁹ Cf Eph 1, 15-17; Col 1, 3-9.

⁵⁰ Mt 11, 25; Lk 10, 21.

⁵¹ Jn 15, 12.

Wisdom and growth

The weakness of their faith convictions and the lack of authentic charity among the Corinthians was proof positive to Paul that they were not disposed to receive God's gift of wisdom. This judgment carried the cognate meaning that they lacked personal and christian maturity. His words to them are bitterly incisive:

Brothers, I myself was unable to speak to you as people of the Spirit: I treated you as sensual men, still infants in Christ. What I fed you with was milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it; and indeed, you are still not ready for it, since you are still unspiritual.⁵²

It cannot be doubted that Paul saw an intimate bond between christian maturity and the openness of man's spirit to God's gift of wisdom. His vocabulary indicates this because he often conjoins the words 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' with his description of those who are 'mature' and 'spiritual'. Indeed, in a number of texts Paul speaks of christian knowledge illumining the way to maturity in christian conduct. Thus, in writing to the Colossians, he says:

We have never failed to pray for you, and what we ask God is that through perfect wisdom and spiritual understanding you should reach the fullest knowledge of his will. So you too will be able to live the kind of life which the Lord expects of you, a life acceptable to him in all its aspects; showing the results in all the good actions you do and increasing your knowledge of God.⁵³

One might say that Paul saw an interaction between maturity and wisdom. Vital faith and real charity disposed the Christian for the Spirit's gift. This loving knowledge, in turn, strengthened the obedience of faith and intensified charity so that the Christian became ever more mature and, therefore, ever more open to the Spirit's gift of new insights into the mystery of God. It is this ongoing interaction which explains Paul's emphasis on 'more and more' as the rule of christian living. May we not, therefore, consider Paul a teacher of the thesis that christian conformity to Christ is best furthered by the Spirit's gift of contemplative knowledge and wisdom?

⁵² 1 Cor 3, 1-2.

⁵³ Col 1, 9-10.