

Divine Wisdom versus Human Wisdom: An Exegetical-Theological Analysis of 1 Corinthians 1:10–2:16

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Abstract²

This journal article undertakes an exegetical-theological analysis of 1 Corinthians 1:10–2:16 in order to distinguish between divine wisdom and human wisdom. It is maintained that human wisdom is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic in orientation. In contrast, divine wisdom is Bible-based, Christ-centered, and Spirit-led. It seeks to glorify the Lord, not oneself, by focusing on the eternal sagacity of Jesus' atoning sacrifice. Furthermore, human wisdom uses empty rhetoric and deceptive arguments to snare its victims. Conversely, divine wisdom heralds the truth of redemption in plain language so that the cross is not emptied of its power to save. Religionists and sophists consider the teaching about Jesus' death and resurrection to be utter nonsense; yet God uses the message of the cross to annihilate the erudition of the worldly wise and thwart the understanding of those who imagine themselves to be clever. Regardless of whether they are young or old, rich or poor, powerful or weak, famous or unknown, everyone must trust in Christ for salvation. Moreover, they must rely on the Holy Spirit for insight and understanding into the will of the Father.

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1. Introduction

Christians who are aware of today's panoply of religions know that teachers with ostensibly new spiritual insights combine ideas that sound reasonable with a smattering of Bible verses. Then, when skilled speakers proclaim these falsehoods through the modern electronic and print media, their ideas can come across sounding fresh and exciting. In point of fact, though, these alleged "truths" are not original, but actually echo ancient lies. Even more tragic is the tendency for a gifted speaker with questionable motives and dubious biblical views to win a following and gradually substitute his or her own authority for that of Scripture. That is how most religious cults gain a toehold in society.

Believers need to evaluate the teaching they hear, making certain that it is grounded in Scripture and honors the Savior; yet it is not enough to simply disregard fraudulent teachers. After all, Christians do not grow spiritually by merely turning a deaf ear to heretical teaching. They also need sound instruction to learn how to be faithful to God, how to be more Christlike, and how to better serve the Lord. Biblically-grounded and astute teachers will help Jesus' followers comprehend the true wisdom of God and reject pagan substitutes. The following exegetical-theological analysis of 1 Corinthians 1:10–2:16 emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between divine wisdom and human wisdom.

2. The Historical Backdrop of the Corinthian Congregation

The first-century A.D. church at Corinth was still young when problems like divisions, immorality, immaturity, and instability began to emerge (cf. Brown 1996:427-428). To address these issues, Paul, who had founded the church less than five years earlier while on his second missionary journey (A.D. 50–52; cf. Acts 15:40–18:23),³ wrote a letter to believers instructing them to live godly lives. The most likely date, then, for 1 Corinthians is A.D. 55, when the apostle was near the end of his three-year ministry at Ephesus and at the midpoint of his third missionary journey (A.D. 53–57; cf. Acts 18:23–21:17;

³ The dates used in this essay for Paul's life are based on the timeline appearing in the *Zondervan TNIV Study Bible* (2006:1854-1855).

Betz 1992:5:188-189, 191-192; Betz and Mitchell 1992:1:1141; Bruce 1986:3:699, 703; Bruce 1993:684-686; Prat 2008; Purdy 1962:3:685-686).

New Testament Corinth was located on a narrow isthmus of land in southern Greece about 45 miles (or 73 kilometers) from Athens, in the Roman province of Achaia. The lower portion of Greece is connected to the rest of the country by this four-mile-wide isthmus, so all traffic between the two areas of the country passed by Corinth. The isthmus was bounded on the east by the Saronic Gulf and on the west by the Gulf of Corinth. Sea captains could literally have their ships rolled across the isthmus on a stone tramway and avoid a 250 mile trip around southern Greece. As a result, the city prospered as a major trade center, not only for most of Greece but also for much of the Mediterranean area, including North Africa, Italy, and Asia Minor. Nearby Isthmia hosted the Isthmian games, one of two major athletic events of the day (the other being the Olympic games). This created more people-traffic through the city and thus increased the potential for business and prosperity (cf. Finegan 1962:1:682-684; Furnish 2003:1-2; Madvig 1979:1:772-774; Morris 1979:1:775; Murphy-O'Connor 1992:1:1134-1139; Robertson 2001:62-63).

As a commercial city with a constant influx of visitors from nations around the known world, Corinth also became infamous as a center for immorality. Greek philosophy was discussed and wisdom was emphasized, but such considerations in no way bridled the debauchery practiced in the Corinth. In some respects city's religious composition helped create this atmosphere of depravity. Though the Jews had established a synagogue near the city's forum, at least 12 temples to various pagan deities existed in Corinth and overshadowed the city's Jewish influence. One of the most famous of these shrines was the Temple of Aphrodite (the goddess of love), where at one time more than a thousand priestess-prostitutes served the shrine's patrons (cf. Brown 1997:511-513; Carson, Moo, and Morris 1992:263-264; DeSilva 2004:555-560; Gilmour 1962:1:685; Guthrie 1990:432-433).

It was into this setting that Paul brought the gospel while on his second missionary journey (cf. Acts 18:1-18). Before leaving the city to continue his trip, Paul established a church made up of a growing number of Christian converts, including both Jews and Gentiles, higher classes and lower classes, free persons and slaves. Upon the apostle's departure, the philosophical,

sexual, and religious temptations of Corinth took their toll on many of the new believers, and after a while, began to diminish the unity of the congregation. When Paul got word of the divisiveness and immoral practices arising among the believers, he penned a letter to them in the hope of correcting the problems they were experiencing (Bock 2007:575-583; Fisher 1975:10-11; Hodge 1969:vii-ix; Johnson 2004:20; Lenski 1961:13-14; Reese 2000:638-651; Tannehill 1994:221-229; Walaskay 1998:168-172).

3. The Presence of Divisions at Corinth (1 Cor 1:10-17)

Though the believers at Corinth were abundantly gifted (1 Cor 1:7), major shortcomings existed within their congregation. Perhaps the chief issue plaguing the church was the people's schisms and sharp disagreements (v. 10; cf. Marshall 2004:253; Thielman 2005:279). In non-biblical writings, the Greek word translated "divisions"⁴ was used to refer to a tear in a garment, the breaking of bones, the separation of joints, and the eruption of factions among political groups struggling for power (cf. Danker 2000:981; Harris 1971:3:543-544; Louw and Nida 1989:1:226, 494; Maurer 1971:7:963-964; Welborn 1987:86). While Paul had the apostolic authority to give commands to the Corinthians, he instead appealed to them as fellow believers in Christ. The apostle urged them, as those living under Jesus' lordship, to stop arguing among themselves about minor, peripheral issues and cultivate harmony, rather than hostility, in their church. Paul also implored them to be of one mind, whether it involved their thoughts, plans, or actions (cf. Fee 1987:52-53; Fee 2007:135; Polhill 1983:327; Wanamaker 2005:420-421).

The apostle learned from members of Chloe's household that heated arguments had arisen from among the members of the church (v. 11). The Greek word rendered "quarrels" can also be translated "rivalries" or "disputes" (cf. Danker 2000:392; Giesen 2000:2:52-53; Louw and Nida 1989:1:439; 495; Spicq 1994:2:69-72). The term points to the existence of "factions engaged in a struggle for power" (Welborn 1987:87). The various cliques were centered around favored personalities and antagonistic to other like-minded groups. (Chloe was a Christian woman who lived either in Corinth or in Ephesus, the

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from *Today's New International Version* (hereafter abbreviated, TNIV).

latter being the place where Paul resided when he wrote his epistle.) Regrettably, groups of converts began to prefer different ministers (v. 12; cf. Calvin 1996:26; Fiore 1985:86-87, 101; Furnish 2003:5; Garland 2003:43-44; Ker 2000:75-76; Kistemaker 1993:10-11; Lenski 1961:41-42; Thielman 2005:281).

Some believers claimed to follow Paul, their spiritual parent, while others (possibly Jewish Christians) said they favored Peter, perhaps the most prominent member of the twelve disciples whom Jesus had called. ("Cephas" was Simon Peter's Aramaic name.) Still others asserted they listened only to Apollos, a Christian Jew from Alexandria, Egypt, who conducted a dynamic ministry, first at Ephesus and then at Corinth (cf. Acts 18:24—19:1; Bruce 1971:32-33; Horsley 1998:47-46; Ker 2000:77; Lampe 1990:117; Morris 1979:1:776; Wenham 1995:130). At first glance, Paul may seem to have contradicted himself when he scolded one faction for alleging they followed Christ (1 Cor 1:12), especially after the apostle urged all the groups to be united in the Savior (v. 10); however, it is possible that this clique thought they were superior to the others by claiming to be devotees of Jesus. Perhaps they convinced themselves that their pride-filled allegiance to Him made them better than those who claimed to follow the teachings of merely human leaders (cf. Betz and Mitchell 1992:1:1141-1142; Furnish 2003:30; Gilmour 1962:1:687; Hodge 1969:14; Marshall 2004:253; Morris 2001:41; Polhill 1983:328).

The believers at Corinth had lost sight of the source of their unity (cf. 12:12-13). They had become divided over which one of their spiritual teachers they liked most. Because the entire New Testament had not yet been written, believers living in the first century of the common era had to depend heavily on the preaching and teaching of ministers such as Paul, Peter, and Apollos for the gospel message and spiritual insight into the Old Testament. Inevitably, different believers were attracted to certain personalities, leading to arguments and schisms in the early church. The Corinthians' self-centered preference for one teacher caused them to argue with other believers over which minister of the gospel supposedly was better. Also, they childishly emphasized the human messenger more than God's message (cf. Fisher 1975:24-25; Garland 2003:5-51; Mare 1976, 10:192; Orr and Walther 1976:150; Verbrugge 2008:266).

In 1:13, Paul asked his readers a series of rhetorical questions to get them to think seriously about the implications of their actions. For instance, the congregants were guilty of trying to divide the spiritual body of Christ (cf. Fee 1987:60; Fee 2007:101; Welborn 1987:87). The apostle, however, wanted them to realize that while God used different people to proclaim the gospel, they were all united in their message and focused on pointing people to the Savior. The apostle's main point was that the body of Christ was never intended to be divided into fractured groups. To underscore what he was saying, Paul used himself as an example. It was not the apostle who was crucified on behalf of sinners; rather, Jesus was sacrificed to pay for sins. Likewise, the Corinthians had been baptized into the name of Christ, not Paul. Expressed differently, they had become identified with Jesus and spiritually united with His people. Thus they were to be followers of Christ, not of some infinitely less significant person (cf. Garland 2003:52; Grosheide 1984:38-39; Johnson 2004:50-51; Kistemaker 1993:49-50; Orr and Walther 1976:150-151).

As Paul reflected on his ministry at Corinth, he recalled baptizing only two believers there: Crispus and Gaius (v. 14). Crispus had once been a ruler of the Jewish synagogue at Corinth. When he heard Paul proclaim the gospel, Crispus trusted in Jesus as the Messiah, and so did the entire household of Crispus (Acts 18:8). Some think Gaius was the person who hosted Paul when he wrote the letter to the Romans (cf. Rom 16:23). Tragically, the recipients of Paul's letter to the Corinthians had transferred their allegiances from the Savior to their spiritual mentors. That is why the apostle deemphasized the baptisms he performed while among the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:15). Paul was not minimizing the importance of baptism, but rather was emphasizing the supremacy of the Lord Jesus in all situations. Upon further reflection, the apostle also recalled baptizing the household of Stephanas (that is, family members, slaves, and so on; v. 16). The latter was a member of the church at Corinth. According to 16:15, those in his household were the first converts in the Roman province of Achaia (namely, southern Greece) and among the few whom Paul had baptized; but beyond these believers the apostle did not remember baptizing anyone else (cf. Barrett 1968:47-48; Calvin 1996:30-31; Conzelmann 1975:36; Lenski 1961:46-48; Mare 1976, 10:192; Robertson 2001:76-77; Verbrugge 2008:266-267).

The solution to the Corinthians' problem was to shift their attention away from prominent leaders and back to the Messiah. This did not depreciate the value of the ministers who led them. It just meant that no one could replace the Savior and be given more prominence than Him. Accordingly, Paul realized his place in the church; and that is why he declared his thankfulness for restricting the number of baptisms he had performed in Corinth. Moreover, the apostle did not want this ministry to be a cause of divisions. Neither did he want anyone to claim having been baptized in his name, and as a result, promote discord among the Corinthian believers. Paul sensed that his chief calling was not to baptize people (v. 17). As before, his intent in making such a statement was not to devalue baptism; rather, he was stating that his main goal was to proclaim the gospel (cf. Fisher 1975:28; Garland 2003:55; Johnson 2004:53; Morris 2001:42-43; Prior 1985:37-38; Soards 1999:35).

Regarding Paul's preaching, he wrote that his words were not based on clever speech and ingenious salesmanship, but on the redemptive power of Jesus' death at Calvary. Put another way, it was Christ—not eloquent Bible teachers—who alone died to atone for the sins of the lost (cf. Welborn 1987:101-102). Paul knew that many of the Corinthians were enamored by worldly wisdom. Thus the apostle's words contained an implicit warning. His readers were not to be misled by empty rhetoric and deceptive arguments and thereby miss the simple message of the cross of Christ. These statements do not mean Paul was against those who carefully prepared what they said (i.e. he was not promoting anti-intellectualism); rather, he was against those who tried to impress others with their knowledge or speaking ability. Thus, the apostle heralded the truth of redemption in plain language so that the cross would not be emptied of its power to save (cf. Calvin 1996:52; Grosheide 1984:40-41; Hodge 1969:18; Keener 2005:32-33; Smit 2002:245-246; Sampley 2002, 10:808).

Biblical wisdom may be defined as the ability to handle matters skillfully, to exercise sound judgment, and to apply the truths of Scripture to one's conduct. Wisdom from the Lord guides the believer to live in an upright, virtuous, and well-pleasing manner. The wise person is committed to God, devoted to His will, and obedient to His Word (cf. Blank 1962:8:852-853; Brown 1971, 3:1027-1028; Estes 2008:854, 856-857; Gilles 2005, 12:8522-8523; Lichtenstein and Camp 2005, 6:4077-4078; Lioy 2008:24-25; Murphy 1992,

6:920, 924-926; Schnabel 1993:967-968; Sheppard 1988, 4:1074, 1076-1077; Wilson 1997, 4:1277-1280). There are numerous facets of wisdom that merit consideration. There is an intellectual dimension, in which sublime truths are taught (Prov 4:11) and an ethical dimension in which such virtues as righteousness, justice, and equity are commended (2:7; 8:20). Wisdom stresses the importance of revering God (1:7; 2:5) and caring for the needy (Jas 1:27). God-given sagacity also indicates how one can lead a satisfying life (Prov 2:10-21). Scripture urges believers to embrace the wisdom of God (3:1-2) and forsake the folly of the world (9:13-18).

The prudent individual tends to enjoy a productive life, peace with the Lord, and spiritual joy (3:16-18). In contrast, the foolish person often reaps sorrow, emptiness, and death (4:14-17). The fruit of wisdom is far superior to gold and silver (8:19) and far more creative than anything humankind can produce (vv. 22-31). Those who appropriate the truths of God's Word are pleasing to the Lord, while He condemns those who reject His wisdom (12:2). Although these contrasts between the results of wisdom versus those of foolishness are generally true, there are always exceptions. There are times when godly, hardworking people do not thrive materially. Likewise, there are instances when lazy, deceitful people live with an abundance of material possessions.

Truly wise people are humble because they are aware of the depth of their ignorance. The more they learn, the more they realize how little they really know. In Greek thought, humility was a negative trait that suggested weakness and a lack of worth or dignity. Jesus, however, made humility the cornerstone of Christian character (Matt 18:4; 23:12; Luke 18:14). Scriptural humility involves an absence of arrogance, and it is rooted in the understanding that all we are and have we owe to God. A humble person is secure enough to praise and lift up others without any need for self-exaltation (Phil 2:3-4). The biblical concept of humility knows nothing of harsh self-abasement, belittling of oneself, or putting oneself down. This is a form of false humility (Col 2:18, 23).

James 3:13-18 comments at length on the nature of godly versus worldly wisdom. Undoubtedly, there were some Bible teachers in the first century of the common era who claimed they were wise and understood God's ways. Verse 13 admonished these would-be sages to prove their moral insight and

intellectual perception by living in an honorable manner. They were also to show their expert knowledge by doing good works with the humility that comes from godly wisdom. Against the backdrop of humility and graciousness that characterizes a truly wise person, it is easier to spot the cheap imitations. The worldly wise (the so-called "street smart") are characterized by bitterness, envy, and selfish ambition. The trail of deceit and strife they leave behind is nothing to boast about; in fact, their bragging and lying are used to cover up the truth (v. 14). Verse 15 spotlights the real source of worldly wisdom. The jealousy and selfishness it spawns originate from below, not "from heaven." In this light, believers can more fully appreciate this emphasis on seeking divine wisdom (cf. Adamson 1976:149-153; Davids 1982:149-153; Hiebert 1979:226-233; Motyer 1985:130-133; Stulac 1993:132-133).

James 3:16 explains that where envy and selfish ambition are present, the natural result is confusion and a variety of immoral behaviors. These vices, of course, are in direct opposition to the unity, peace, and righteousness God intends to be at work in the relationships His people have with one another. A person focused on nothing but his or her own advancement is less likely to be concerned with the "troublesome" issue of ethics. Moral boundaries are usually perceived by such people as obstacles in the way of their success. Since the Lord is neither a God of disorder nor receptive toward evil, the worldly wisdom that produces such bitter fruit cannot come from Him (cf. 1 Cor 14:33; 1 John 1:5; Adamson 1976:153-154; Davids 1982:153; Hiebert 1979:233-234; Motyer 1985:134-135; Stulac 1993:133-135).

After being exposed to the unwholesome images associated with earthly wisdom, it is refreshing to learn more about heavenly wisdom. First of all, divine prudence is known for its purity and compassion. This, in turn, promotes tranquility and harmony, along with gentleness and humility (Jas 3:17). The wisdom from above is also characterized by sensibility and kindness, mercy and love, impartiality and sincerity. None of these virtues comes about immediately; rather, the Spirit cultivates them as believers yield to God's will. The emphasis in verse 18 is on being peacemakers, rather than peace-breakers. James compared peace to seeds that the godly plant. In short, the harvest is an abundance of righteousness, goodness, and justice (cf. Adamson 1976:154-158; Davids 1982:154-155; Hiebert 1979:234-238; Motyer 1985:135-138; Stulac 1993:135-138).

4. The Power and Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:18-25)

The account of Jesus' crucifixion proved a powerful challenge to the believers at Corinth. Since the congregants were prone to factions, many took sides on the issue of God's wisdom versus worldly learning (cf. Grosheide 1984:44; Schnabel 1993:969; Soards 1999:39). At the center of many of the arguments was Jesus' death and resurrection. These philosophical debates were drawing believers away from the central points of the Christian faith. Consequently, Paul sought to turn them back to the sufficiency of the gospel. The apostle's message to the Corinthians centered on the cross (cf. Barrett 1968:51; Plevnik 1989:478; Prat 2008). He said that even though the truth about Jesus' atoning sacrifice has the power to save lives eternally, to unbelievers its content is sheer folly. Moreover, as long as unbelievers reject the message of the cross as absurd, they are doomed to eternally perish (v. 18). In contrast, to those who are saved through their faith in Christ, the good news is a demonstration of God's power (cf. Rom 1:16; Lenski 1961:54-55; Mare 1976, 10:194; Polhill 1983:329; Verbrugge 2008:268-269).

In 1 Corinthians 1:19, Paul quoted the Septuagint version of Isaiah 29:14 (cf. Prior 1985:41; Wenham 1995:131). The context of the latter were prophecies describing Assyria's siege of Jerusalem and the Lord's deliverance of the city. Isaiah described the people of Judah as stunned, blind, drunk, and asleep (vv. 9-10), all of which refers to their spiritual insensitivity. Tragically, they did not even pay attention to what God was trying to tell them through His prophets and seers. Isaiah described his own oracles as being comparable to words recorded in a sealed scroll that the people refused to open and read (vv. 11-12). Though the inhabitants of Judah rejected God's Word (as presented through His prophets' declarations), they did maintain their religion; but Isaiah declared their ritual honoring of God was mere lip service and their worship was no more than legalism (v. 13). Like the people's refusal to listen to prophecy, this feigned obedience was a sign that their hearts were not turned toward God. In former times, His people had witnessed His awesome wonders, particularly when He delivered them from Egypt. Now He would astound the current generation of hypocrites with one unexpected judgment after another. In this way, the Lord would disprove the ideas of the so-called wise, who supposed they knew better than Him what they needed (cf. Grogan

1986:6:188-189; Leupold 1983:1:458; Oswalt 1986:1:532-533; Tucker 2001:6:243-244; Young 1972:2:320-322). Paul picked on this latter thought to state that God used the message of the cross to annihilate the erudition of the worldly wise and to thwart the understanding of those who imagined themselves to be clever (1 Cor. 1:19; cf. Ciampa and Rosner 2007:697-698; Fisher 1975:29; Grosheide 1984:45; Johnson 2004:56-57; Kistemaker 1993:55).

As in verse 13, Paul used a series of rhetorical questions in verse 20 to reinforce his argument against those who fancied themselves to be the epitome of sagacity and prudence (cf. Isa 19:12; 33:18; Barrett 1968:53; Ciampa and Rosner 2007:698; Conzelmann 1975:42-43). It did not matter whether these individuals were brilliant philosophers, scholarly experts in the Mosaic law, or the world's most impressive debaters. The Lord had shown that regardless of the type of philosophical or ideological system favored by unbelievers to address humanity's concerns, all of it was foolish (cf. Lowery 1994:252; Orr and Walther 1976:159-160; Polhill 1983:329). For the Jewish religious elite of Paul's day, the foremost issue was the advent of an end-time Messiah to deliver them from Rome's oppressive control. In contrast, the primary aim for Greek sophists was using logic and debate to answer their questions about human existence. The apostle essentially asked, "Of what use is worldly wisdom in light of the saving message of the cross?" (cf. Brown 1971, 3:1030-1031; Bruce 1971:35; Sheppard 1988, 4:1080-1081). In their search for God, many people had errantly looked only to pagan knowledge and understanding in the hope of finding Him; but God did not intend for worldly wisdom to be the means of knowing Him, especially since the unregenerate "way of assessing life" was "egocentric" (Garland 2003:66-67). Rather, it pleased the Father, in His infinite wisdom, to use the allegedly "foolish" message of the gospel, which Paul and others proclaimed, to redeem those who put their faith in the Son (1 Cor 1:21; cf. Furnish 2003:38; Ridderbos 1975:242; Schnabel 1993:970; Thielman 2005:282).

The good news of salvation represented both an exaggerated paradox and incomprehensible absurdity to the lost. As a precondition to accepting the gospel, educated Jews demanded miraculous signs (cf. Matt 12:38; 16:1, 4; Mark 8:11-12; John 2:18; 6:30), while learned Greeks insisted on worldly erudition (1 Cor 1:22); but what was an intolerable offense to the Jews and

utter nonsense to the Gentiles—the Messiah’s atoning sacrifice at Calvary (cf. Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13)—was the only way for people to come to a saving knowledge of God (1 Cor 1:23; cf. Brown 1971:3:1031; Brown 1996:432; Joop 2003:190; Morris 2001:45-46; Robertson 2001:138). The phrase “Christ crucified” was a startling contradiction in terms. To the religious elite, a reference to the Messiah was closely associated with power and triumph, while remarks about the cross were synonymous with weakness and defeat. In contrast, those summoned by the Father to redemption—both Jews and Greeks—the Son was the epitome, embodiment, and emissary of God’s power and wisdom (v. 24; cf. Rom 1:4, 16; Col 2:3; Fee 1987:75; Fee 2007:101; Hodge 1969:22-23; Lenski 1961:66-67; Lowery 1994:252; Thielman 2005:280; Wenham 1995:117-118, 353). Paul had good reason to emphasize these truths. Apparently the believers in Corinth were drawn toward worldly wisdom and away from what they perceived to be the folly of the cross. The apostle explained that the supposed “foolishness of God” (v. 25; as seen in Jesus’ crucifixion) was infinitely more profound and efficacious than any human plan or course of action. Similarly, what appeared to be God’s weakness was immeasurably more powerful than whatever people imagined to be their greatest display of human strength (cf. Ellis 1974:95; Guthrie 1981:95; Grosheide 1984:50; Lampe 1990:120-122).

Paul’s statement was not intended to minimize God’s wisdom or power. The apostle certainly was not implying that God ever does anything weak or foolish. Instead, Paul used gentle sarcasm to show the vast discrepancy between the infinite wisdom of God and feeble wisdom of humanity (cf. Barrett 1968:56; Conzelmann 1975:50-51; Garland 2003:70-71; Polhill 1983:330). Specifically, God chose a means of salvation that overturned the world’s greatest philosophers, namely, individuals who saw the cross as being ludicrous and pointless. Allegedly, if the Father was all-powerful, He would never allow His Son to perish at Calvary. Instead, the Father would intervene to save His Son from such an ignoble fate. Supposedly, to do otherwise would reveal weakness (cf. Matt 27:39-44; Mark 15:29-32; Luke 23:35-37); yet the Father, by not intervening, displayed wisdom and strength far beyond any human understanding by raising the Son from the dead (cf. Acts 2:24; Rom 1:4). Also, in this way, the Father opened wide the door of salvation to all who

would believe in the Son (cf. Heb 2:9, 14-18; 1 Pet 1:3-5; Johnson 2004:58-59; Mare 1976, 10:195; Sampley 2002, 10:812; Verbrugge 2008:270).

5. Glory Only in the Lord (1 Cor 1:26–2:5)

The believers in Corinth, who came from the various echelons of society, were a living example that established the validity of Paul's assertion concerning the power and wisdom of the Father in the crucifixion and resurrection of His Son. The apostle asked his readers to consider their circumstances when God called them to salvation through the proclamation of the gospel. By any human standard, few of them were intellectually impressive or sophisticated. Not many of them were considered persons of wealth, influence, and power. Moreover, hardly any were noted for their high social standing (1 Cor 1:26). Indeed, most of them were less educated people from the lower classes. Perhaps that is why some of the parishioners in Corinth were tempted to incorporate aspects of Greek philosophy into their belief systems, for doing so would secure for them a privileged status within their community. Thankfully, Paul warned his readers against pursuing such worldly ambitions (cf. Gilmour 1962, 1:685-686; Lampe 1990:126; Meeks 1998; Thielman 2005:277).

The apostle revealed that God deliberately chose what seemed idiotic to the sophisticates of the world. God's purpose in doing so was to shame the latter. He also chose to manifest His saving grace on the outcasts of society through the ignominy of the cross. In this way He used what the world considered weakness to discredit what it lauded as being strong (v. 27). In this contrarian approach, God intentionally selected what pagan human society belittled as lowly and despised (cf. Grosheide 1984:51; Orr and Walther 1976:161; Soards 1999:47; Welborn 1987:97). Indeed, He chose things the lost considered to be worthless and irrelevant to reduce to nothing what the world considered to be important (v. 28). In short, God disgraced the worldly wise by overturning their warped perspective. Indeed, the presence in the church of those who had little or no rank or standing in society completely negated what the rich and powerful thought was important (cf. Fisher 1975:33; Joop 2003:191; Polhill 1983:330; Wenham 1995:131-132).

Paul added that by means of this counterintuitive approach, God eliminated the possibility of the world's elitists boasting in His presence (v. 29).

Expressed differently, through the message of the cross, God demonstrated conclusively that human beings can do nothing to earn salvation. Assuredly, all the effort in the world—and even all the wisdom in the world—cannot merit anyone's redemption. The Father alone is responsible for bringing believing sinners into spiritual union with the Son. Because they are joined to Him by faith, the Messiah has become for them the living essence of wisdom (cf. Barrett 1968:59-60; Garland 2003:78-79; Lenski 1961:81-82; Orr and Walther 1976:161; Ridderbos 1975:242). Prudence and sagacity no longer remain theoretical abstractions dominated by society's privileged upper class. As well, not even the religious elite can maintain a stranglehold on the claim to be more upright and sanctified than others. After all, the Father has made the Son to be the enfleshment of righteousness (cf. 2 Cor 5:21), holiness (cf. Rom 8:9-10; Eph 2:8-10; 2 Pet 3:18), and redemption (cf. Rom 3:24; 1 Cor 15:55-57); and the Father graciously bestows these blessings on all who trust in the Son for eternal life (1 Cor 1:30). As they abide in Him, they become more virtuous in their conduct, separated from sin, and set apart for the Lord (cf. Calvin 1996:46-47; Furnish 2003:43; Horsley 1998:52-53; Mare 1976, 10:197; Verbrugge 2008:272-273).

In verse 31, Paul quoted from Jeremiah 9:24 to substantiate his point. The collection of messages in Jeremiah 7–10 is commonly called "The Temple Address", for the prophet delivered these oracles at the sanctuary in Jerusalem. Chapter 26 describes the probable historical events surrounding these prophecies. King Josiah's reforms died when he did, and the idolatry of the Canaanites rapidly reemerged in Judah during the early reign of Josiah's son Jehoiakim. In chapter 9, Jeremiah urged those who considered themselves to be wise, strong, and wealthy to stop putting their trust in their human attainments and resources (v. 23). Instead, if they wished to boast, it should be that they knew the true and living God and that He alone is the Lord. They were also to affirm that it was only God who acted out of covenant faithfulness and that He alone was able to bring justice and righteousness to the earth (v. 24; Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard 1991:153-154; Feinberg 1986, 6:444-445; Huey 1993:121-122; Miller 2001:6:656; Thompson 1980:318-321). The consequence for Paul is that no one has any right to boast about how he or she has earned God's favor (1 Cor 1:31; cf. Ciampa and Rosner

2007:699-700; Fee 1987:87-88; Fee 2007:129-130; Grosheide 1984:54; Johnson 2004:61-62; Kistemaker 1993:65-66; Morris 2001:50).

Paul referred to himself as an example of someone who had found significance through faith in the Messiah. The apostle mentioned the occasion, during his second missionary journey (cf. Acts 18:1-18), when he proclaimed in Corinth the "testimony about God" (1 Cor 2:1). (Some manuscripts read "mystery" rather than "testimony"; cf. Barrett 1968:62-63; Bruce 1971:37; Garland 2003:83; Mare 1976, 10:199; Verbrugge 2008:275.) It is also possible that Paul was referring to the testimony borne by God or the apostle's witness initiated by God. In any case, this testimony is the truth concerning the crucifixion of the Son. Paul wanted the latter to be the sole focus of the message he presented to the lost. Even though the apostle could have overwhelmed his listeners with finely-honed intellectual arguments, he refused to do so. He also rejected the tactics exploited by well-trained Greek orators of the day—which included lofty eloquence and impressive erudition—to persuade the lost, for to do otherwise would have called attention to himself. Instead, the apostle declared the message of salvation in a simple and straightforward way. Despite Paul's stellar professional credentials, he made up his mind that while he was with the Corinthians, he would forgo his encyclopedic knowledge of the Mosaic law and keep his focus squarely on the Lord Jesus, especially His atoning sacrifice at Calvary (v. 2; cf. 2 Cor 11:5-6; Lampe 1990:127; Morris 1990:66; Polhill 1983:330-331; Sampley 2002, 10:817; Soards 1999:52-53).

The Book of Acts provides some background information about the founding of the church at Corinth. Paul had come to Macedonia (northern Greece) after a vision he experienced in Troas (16:8-10). Before heading to Athens, the apostle established churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. During his time in Athens, Paul reinforced his conviction that when it came to knowing God in a saving way, worldly wisdom had nothing to offer (cf. 17:16-34). Then, after the apostle arrived in Corinth (18:1), he befriended an influential couple named Priscilla and Aquila (vv. 2-3). Paul preached in the synagogue at Corinth until Jewish opposition forced him to focus his ministry on the Gentiles (vv. 4-7). As a result of the apostle leading a number of people to faith in Christ, a church was established (consisting of both Jews and Gentiles) and soon began to grow (vv. 8-10). Paul's ministry in Corinth lasted a fairly

long time (more than 18 months; vv. 11, 18), and he accomplished much while in the city (cf. Grosheide 1984:13-14, 57; Horsley 1998:29-30; Kistemaker 1993:9-10, 71-72; Lenski 1961:90-91; Mare 1976, 10:179; 180; Morris 1979, 1:775-776; Verbrugge 2008:241-242).

In summary, before Paul arrived in Corinth (about A.D. 51), he had been beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, run out of Thessalonica and Berea, and scoffed at in Athens (cf. 16:22-24; 17:10, 13-14, 32). Understandably, the apostle felt weak as a result of struggling with timidity and trembling (1 Cor 2:3). This circumstance prevented him from proclaiming the gospel with clever words and persuasive rhetoric; instead, he was plainspoken in his preaching and teaching (cf. Fisher 1975:33; 34; Joop 2003:191-192). Out of necessity, the apostle could not resort to worldly means, but had to rely entirely on the Spirit's power (v. 4). As a result, the apostle preached with honesty and integrity (cf. 2 Cor 2:17); and in the process, only God could be credited for the effect the gospel was having on people's lives (including their manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit; cf. 1 Cor 1:7). Moreover, the faith of the converts living in Corinth (that is, both their decision to believe and the content of what they affirmed) was due to God's power, not human wisdom (2:5; cf. Hodge 1969:31; Keener 2005:8, 34; Johnson 2004:63-64; Smit 2002:246; Sampley 2002, 10:775-776, 817; Thielman 2005:283).

In stepping back from what Paul said, it appears that he was launching a counterattack against a faction in Corinth that was trying to exalt worldly wisdom and its own personal strengths. These opponents of the apostle were arguing that their understanding of truth was more valid than his due to their sophisticated logic and carefully crafted oratory. Paul emphasized that deep life changes had occurred in the believers at Corinth when they embraced a message that ran counter to pagan human philosophies. This is the same good news that had been delivered by an evangelist who, at the time, seemed poorly prepared to deliver a compelling witness; and yet the results were amazing. Paul stressed that the fascination of his readers with secular forms of erudition would lead them to self-sufficiency and self-congratulation—the very opposite of what would bring them to spiritual maturity. Without question, God's power was the only sure and eternal foundation on which to stand (cf. 2 Cor 12:9-10).

6. Wisdom from the Spirit (1 Cor 2:6-16)

Paul had previously argued that the success of the gospel cannot be attributed to the skill of its messengers, nor is it reliant upon what the world calls "wisdom" (1 Cor 2:6). It would be incorrect to conclude, however, that the good news is devoid of wisdom, for it is part of the inspired truth recorded in God's Word. Moreover, the wisdom found in the gospel belongs neither to this world nor to its rulers, who have only temporary power and are soon forgotten after they die. In point of fact, all earthly splendor is rendered meaningless by the death and resurrection of Christ. Also, in the day of God's judgment, all forms of human strength, wealth, and wisdom will be brought to nothing (cf. Ladd 1997:477; Lampe 1990:127; Mare 1976, 10:200; Verbrugge 2008:276-277).

Paul clarified that the "mature" were those who believed the truth of the gospel. Moreover, they were enlightened by the Spirit (cf. Barrett 1968:69; Conzelmann 1975:60; Ridderbos 1975:243; Scroggs 1967:39-40; Soards 1999:58). In extrabiblical literature dating from the first century of the common era, the Greek word rendered "mature" was used to refer to those being initiated into the so-called mystery religions (cf. Danker 2000:995-996; Dellling 1967:8:68-69, 75-76; Louw and Nida 1989:1:124, 753-754; Schippers 1971:2:59-60 62). Undoubtedly, some recent converts in Corinth were enamored by these pagan belief systems and the religious frauds who disseminated them. In an effort to counter this tendency, the apostle took a familiar term and applied it to believers to indicate that they were the ones who are full of spiritual awareness and understanding (cf. Brown 1971:3:1031; Plevnik 1989:468; Welborn 1987:105). The Greek term rendered "mystery" (v. 7) was originally used to refer to secret knowledge and surreptitious rites associated with pagan cults in vogue at the time. Devotees vowed to never divulge this information to noninitiates (cf. Bornkamm 1967:4:803-808; Danker 2000:661-662; Finkenrath, G 1971:3:501-503; Louw and Nida 1989:1:345). Paul adopted this terminology to refer to "God's wisdom", especially as seen in the cross of Christ (cf. Grosheide 1984:63-64; Ridderbos 1975:46-57; Schnabel 1993:970).

Admittedly, to the unsaved the meaning of the gospel was a "mystery". Though its significance was an enigma to the world, the true import of the

good news was known and appreciated by all who put their faith in the Messiah (cf. Ellis 1974:87; Furnish 2003:40; Polhill 1983:331). Paul, in saying that the message of the cross was once "hidden", meant that prior to Jesus' advent, the gospel had been unknown and obscure, for people could not fully understand it. Even so, before the world began, the Father decreed His redemptive plan and program for the eternal benefit and glory of the redeemed (cf. Rom 8:17). Now that the Son had been raised from the dead, the Holy Spirit empowered ministers such as Paul to explain the theological significance of Jesus' atoning sacrifice to the lost so that they might be saved (cf. Rom 11:25-36; 16:25-26; Eph 1:3-10; 3:3-11; Col 1:25-28; Fee 1987:105-106; Fee 2007:107; Guthrie 1981:95; Joop 2003:193; Morris 1990:47).

The central truth of the apostle's preaching was that the Father had sovereignly determined to redeem sinners and bring many into His glory through the crucifixion of the Son. For a time, though, God had kept this truth veiled from human awareness and understanding. Indeed, if the rulers of this age—such as the chief priests, Pilate, and Herod Antipas—had comprehended the divine plan of salvation, they would not have crucified the Messiah (cf. Luke 24:20; Acts 3:17; 4:25-28; 13:37). In all probability, these earthly heads of state were unwittingly acting in alignment with supernatural forces opposed to God's kingdom (contra Carr 1976:21, 24-27; Miller 1972:526-528; cf. Dan 10:13, 20; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Rom 8:38; Eph 1:20-21; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:16; 2:15; Bruce 1971:38-39; Conzelmann 1975:61; Orr and Walther 1976:164; Prior 1985:50-51). Scroggs (1967:43) opined that "here stands under judgment the entire rulership of the old order, both heavenly and earthly". Paul's reference to the Son as "the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8) is perhaps the "loftiest title" the apostle "ever applied to Christ" (Morris 2001:55). The epithet not only points to the Savior as being characterized by glory, but also to His supreme rulership over it. Beyond question, the phrase emphasizes Jesus' status as the divine Savior (cf. Pss 24:7-10; 29:3; Acts 7:2; 20:28; Fisher 1975:33; 39-40; Fee 1987:106-107; Fee 2007:136; Garland 2003:96-97; Hodge 1969:36; Lenski 1961:100-101).

In 1 Corinthians 2:9, Paul most likely quoted from Isaiah 64:4 to substantiate his point. (Less likely possibilities for his statement include the following: Isa 52:15; a citation taken from a Jewish liturgy; an amalgamation of Old Testament concepts; or a line originating from the anonymous apocryphal

work titled the *Apocalypse of Elijah*; cf. Ciampa and Rosner 2007:701; Conzelmann 1975:63-64; Mare 1976, 10:200-201; Orr and Walther 1976:157; Verbrugge 2008:278.) In the preceding verses, the prophet (speaking on behalf of the faithful remnant) petitioned God to once again manifest His protection and favor on His people. Isaiah also prayed that God would punish the enemies of Israel by splitting the heavens and dealing forthrightly with the nation's wicked oppressors. The prophet then affirmed the Lord's awesome power and splendor by noting that since the dawn of human history no one had ever seen or heard a God like Yahweh. He alone intervened to rescue those who put their hope in Him (cf. Grogan 1986:6:338-339; Leupold 1983:2:352-353; Oswalt 1986:2:532-533, 622-623; Seitz 2001:6:529; Young 1972:3:494-495).

Paul picked up on the latter thought by stressing that prior to the advent of the Messiah, no one had imagined God's marvelous plan of salvation. Indeed, no one had conceived of the heavenly blessings God had prepared for those who love Him (1 Cor. 2:9). The apostle explained that what once had been an undisclosed truth, the Spirit of God now revealed to believers through the proclamation of the gospel (cf. Eph 1:17-19; 3:16-19; 2 Pet 1:20-21). Indeed, only the Holy Spirit understands the wisdom of God and can convey those eternal verities to us (cf. Calvin 1996:38; Brown 1996:434; Lowery 1994:252). Thankfully, it is not secret knowledge reserved only for a select and privileged few. Instead, the Father uses the Spirit to unveil the mystery of the cross to believers (cf. Guthrie 1981:555-556; Morris 1979:1:777). This arrangement is appropriate, for the Spirit searches out everything, even the hidden depths of God's redemptive plan (1 Cor 2:10). Paul did not mean that the Spirit literally conducts an exhaustive search to uncover divine truth. After all, the Spirit is Himself fully divine and He already knows all things. Instead, the apostle was saying that the Spirit clarifies the Father's essence, His attributes, and His glorious purpose for those who trust in the Son for salvation (cf. Ellis 1974:95; Ridderbos 1975:244-245; Sampley 2002:10:821).

In verse 11, Paul used an analogy to illustrate the Spirit's deep and profound knowledge of the Father (cf. Morris 1990:77; Polhill 1983:332; Wenham 1995:134-135). No one can give an accurate reading of what goes on inside a person—all the emotions, thoughts, and desires—except that person's own spirit (i.e. the immaterial aspect of one's existence). Likewise, no one can

understand what is taking place within the mind of the Father except the Holy Spirit. He knows the Father intimately, as no human can; and it is only the Spirit who leads believers into a truly personal knowledge of the triune God. Paul related that the Father has given His Spirit, not the world's spirit, to believers. In turn, the third person of the Trinity, as a genuine personality and sentient being, teaches us the wonderful things the Father has freely bestowed on us in union with the Son (v. 12). The salvation offered by the Messiah is one of the Lord's supreme gifts, and it is made available to all who receive it by faith. This was an important truth that Paul declared to his readers (cf. Furnish 2003:45; Garland 2003:98-99; Grosheide 1984:70-71).

In point of fact, the wisdom the apostle shared with believers came from the divine Spirit. By way of implication, Paul's teaching was not based on the pagan musings of human wisdom. Verse 13, which is literally rendered, "comparing spiritual with spiritual", has been understood in various ways, three of which are worth mentioning. The apostle was referring to: (1) comparing one spiritual reality with another spiritual reality; (2) interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual; or (3) explaining spiritual concepts in spiritual language (cf. Barrett 1968:76; Calvin 1996:60-61; Conzelmann 1975:67; Fisher 1975:33; 43; Hodge 1969:41-42; Johnson 2004:68; Kistemaker 1993:90-91; Lenski 1961:113-114; Orr and Walther 1976:165-166). Regardless of which option is preferred for understanding the precise meaning of the clause, Paul's main point is clear. The Spirit is the source of divine truth. Additionally, the spiritual truths mature believers receive from Him are not to be hoarded, but rather freely passed on to others. Doing so enables spiritual growth to occur within individual believers and within the entire faith community (cf. Ellis 1974:87-88; Guthrie 1981:556; Morris 2001:58; Soards 1999:61).

In verse 14, Paul mentioned the "person without the Spirit". This is more literally rendered the "natural person" and refers to unbelievers. The main difference between them and Christians is who or what directs their lives. In short, unbelievers are steered by their own fallen inclinations. Moreover, because non-Christians depend solely on wisdom derived from the world, they refuse to receive or accept the gifts of God's Spirit. In fact, what the Spirit graciously offers seems nonsensical to unbelievers. Neither do they fully appreciate salvation through faith in the crucified and risen Messiah, for this

can only be spiritually examined, discerned, and appropriated by the Spirit. As long as unbelievers reject the assistance of the Spirit, they remain spiritually blind (cf. Ladd 1997:533; Marshall 2004:273; Mare 1976, 10:202-203; Verbrugge 2008:280).

In contrast to people who rely on worldly wisdom, Jesus' followers are dominated by the Spirit's presence within them. The Spirit instructs, enlightens, regulates, and guides believers. Therefore, people who are controlled by the Spirit are able to evaluate the worth of all things through the discernment He gives. Moreover, when it comes to the truths of the gospel, Christians are not subject to the scrutiny and condemnation of unbelievers. After all, the latter have no insight into the things of the Spirit, especially what it means to trust in the Messiah for salvation and live by faith in Him (v. 15). Some claim that, as Christians, they are beyond the counsel or discipline of other believers; but the fact that Paul was writing to the believers in Corinth to reprove them undercuts this idea (cf. Barrett 1968:76-77; Calvin 1996:63; Hodge 1969:44-45; Keener 2005:39; Garland 2003:100-101; Grosheide 1984:74; Sampley 2002:10:822).

In verse 16, Paul quoted the Septuagint version of Isaiah 40:13 to substantiate his claim that unbelievers are not qualified to pass judgment on believers regarding spiritual matters (cf. Wis of Sol 9:13). The prophet asked a series of rhetorical questions in verses 12 to 14 that point to the unfathomable depths of God's knowledge and greatness. In the work of creation, God is pictured taking great care in measuring out the correct ingredients. This was something only God could do; and He needed no coaches or consultants to show Him how to do it. Indeed, no human being could ever fathom the depths of the Lord's infinite wisdom or instruct in Him in the proper plan of action to take (cf. Rom 11:34; Ciampa and Rosner 2007:702-703; Fee 1987:119; Fee 2007:130-131; Grogan 1986:6:244-245; Leupold 1983:2:30; Oswalt 1986:2:59-60; Seitz 2001:6:342; Young 1972:3:44-45).

Paul drew upon the preceding truth to illustrate his earlier point that the mystery of God's salvation had been revealed through the cross of Christ. All those who believe that Jesus' crucifixion (and resurrection) has brought them salvation can comprehend spiritual truths in a manner similar to the way the Messiah Himself understands them; and because the Spirit has made these

truths known to believers, they genuinely have the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). The latter phrase signifies "insight into the very mind of God" (Ladd 1997:519; cf. Brown 1996:435; Keener 2005:39-40; Morris 2001:60; Soards 1999:62). In addition, with the Spirit's help, believers remain in tune with the Lord's thoughts, counsels, plans, and will. The answer to Paul's rhetorical question in this verse is that no one instructs the Lord. Furthermore, believers get their instructions from the Father because they have a priceless possession—the mind of the Son. Expressed differently, all of His wisdom, love, and humility are available to every believer through the agency of the Spirit. Consequently, it is possible to grow in Christlikeness. Believers are the recipients of God's wisdom, not for the purpose of intellectual speculation, but so they can live fully pleasing to Him in all things (cf. Rom 12:1-2).

7. Conclusion

This journal article has undertaken an exegetical-theological analysis of 1 Corinthians 1:10–2:16 in order to distinguish between divine wisdom and human wisdom. The latter is earthly, unspiritual, and demonic in orientation. In contrast, divine wisdom is Bible-based, Christ-centered, and Spirit-led. It seeks to glorify the Lord, not oneself, by focusing on the eternal sagacity of Jesus' atoning sacrifice. Human wisdom uses empty rhetoric and deceptive arguments to snare its victims. Conversely, divine wisdom heralds the truth of redemption in plain language so that the cross is not emptied of its power to save. Religionists and sophists consider the teaching about Jesus' death and resurrection to be utter nonsense; yet God uses the message of the cross to annihilate the erudition of the worldly wise and thwart the understanding of those who imagine themselves to be clever.

In short, regardless of the type of philosophical or ideological system unbelievers may choose to address humanity's concerns, all of it is foolish. To the chagrin of those who envision themselves to be the epitome of sagacity and prudence, God uses the message of the cross to bring about the redemption of the lost. By means of this counterintuitive approach, God demonstrates conclusively that human beings can do nothing to earn salvation. Regardless of whether they are young or old, rich or poor, powerful or weak, famous or unknown, everyone must trust in Christ for salvation. Moreover,

they must rely on the Holy Spirit for insight and understanding into the will of the Father. Whereas earthly wisdom is derived solely from a person's own misinformed ruminations and subject to human limitations and error, divine wisdom comes from the mind of the omniscient Creator and is infallible. For this reason, prudence and discernment originating from God's Word are what believers need to live in a manner that pleases and honors the Lord.

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