

God's Wisdom and the Foolishness of the Cross

Paul's famous words in 1 Corinthians about the foolishness of the cross and his decision to preach the cross, but not with wisdom, have often been misinterpreted. For many they stand as evidence of a strong anti-intellectual strand in Paul's thinking and a clear reason for us to neglect apologetics and instead focus on other issues. In this session we will analyze Paul's understanding of wisdom and foolishness as we look at four particular issues: (1) Paul's thinking when he started the church in Corinth, (2) Paul's thinking when he wrote to the church in Corinth, (3) the cultural context of the church in Corinth, and (4) Paul's message in his first letter to the church in Corinth.

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Introduction

William Ramsay claimed that Paul changed his mind between Athens, Acts 17, and Corinth, Acts 18:

Paul was “disappointed and perhaps disillusioned by his experience in Athens. He felt that he had gone at least as far as was right in the way of presenting his doctrine in a form suited to the current philosophy; and the result had been little more than naught.” William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1892), p. 252.

1 Cor. 2:2 read as an anti-apologetic confession: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified”

A. Evaluating Paul's speech in Athens, Acts 17

1. There is no hint from Luke that the speech was a failure. On the contrary, he gives it premier status as *the speech* to the Gentiles in the book of Acts.
2. The result was encouraging. Some people said to Paul: “We want to hear you again on this subject”, v 33. And even more: “Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.” v 34.

3. Paul did not change his attitude when he left Athens for Corinth. On the contrary, Luke tells us that Paul was “trying to persuade Jews and Greeks”, 18:4. This was also clearly understood by his opponents, who accused him of “persuading the people”, 18:13.

B. Understanding the context of 1 Corinthians

For sound interpretation “context is king”. Example: Is Putin's unusual walk a sign of Parkinson's disease or of intense KGB training?

A double context for the first letter to the Corinthians:

1. The context of Paul writing the letter is Ephesus.
 - a. According to 1 Cor. 16:8 Paul is writing from Ephesus: “But I will stay on at Ephesus ...” And we know how Paul preached the gospel in that city: Luke says that he was “arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God”, 19:8, and later that he “had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus”, 19:9. Paul’s enemies accused him of having “convinced ... large numbers of people”, 19:26.
2. The context of the church receiving the letter was a city admiring the rhetoric of the sophists.
 - a. Chrysostomos Dio describes Corinth during the Isthmian Games: “That was the time, too, when one could hear crowds of wretched sophists around Poseidon's temple shouting and reviling one another, and their disciples, as they were called, fighting with one another, many writers reading aloud their stupid works, many poets reciting their poems while others applauded them, many jugglers showing their tricks, many fortune-tellers interpreting fortunes, lawyers innumerable perverting judgment, and peddlers not a few peddling whatever they happened to have.” (Chrysostomos Dio, *Discourses* 8,5).
 - b. Philostratus on sophistic rhetoric: “theatrical shamelessness”, “flowery, bombastic, full of startling metaphors, too metrical, too dependent on the tricks of rhetoric, too emotional”. (Philostratus. *The Lives of the Sophists*).
 - c. The sophistic context helps us understand many themes in the two letters to the Corinthians:
 - “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation?” 2 Cor 3:1
 - “We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth ... For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” 2 Cor 4:2-5

- “You are judging by appearances”, 2 Cor 10:7
 - “For some say, ‘His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing’.” 2 Cor 10:10
 - “I do not think I am in the least inferior to those ‘super-apostles’. I may indeed be untrained as a speaker, but I do have knowledge ... Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge?” 2 Cor 11:3-7
 - “many are boasting in the way the world does ... I will boast of the things that show my weakness” 2 Cor 11:18, 30
- d. Ben Witherington III writes: “Paul does not use the approach a Sophist would, where there was such an emphasis on form that *sophia* became virtually identical with eloquence rather than content. – – Paul deliberately decided to take up an anti-Sophistic strategy.” (*Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1995, p. 103, 125).

Anthony Thiselton writes: “what we now know of the rhetorical background at Corinth, releases Paul of any hint of an uncharacteristic or obsessional anti-intellectualism, or any lack of imagination or communicative flexibility. His settled resolve was that he would do only what served the gospel ... regardless of people’s expectations or seductive shortcuts to success, most of all the seduction of self-advertisement. Neither then nor now does the gospel rest on the magnetism of ‘big personalities’.” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC, Eerdmans, 2000, p. 212)

- e. Conclusion: In 1 Corinthians Paul is opposing, not the use of the mind, but the rhetoric of the sophists. Paul preached the gospel “not with wisdom and eloquence”, 1:17 and he “did not come with eloquence or human wisdom”, 2:1, but with the message about Christ and him crucified. Paul’s emphasis was on content, not on impression or form.

C. True Wisdom and False Wisdom

1. Paul is not against wisdom, but urges his readers to distinguish between true wisdom and false wisdom, between God’s wisdom (1:21, 24, 2:6, 7) and human or worldly wisdom (1:17, 19, 20, 2:1, 13).
2. The message of the cross is not foolishness; it is *accused* of being foolishness “by those who perish”, 1:18. In reality it is the “power of God” (1:18) and the “wisdom of God” (1:24).