

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES

Part XIV

by Thomas Ice

*Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a **mystery**, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would have never crucified the Lord of glory.*

—1 Corinthians 2:6–8

1 Corinthians 2:1–10 is one of the most relevant passages in relation to the mindset of the world in which we live during the first half of the twenty-first century. The Corinthians of Greece in Paul's day were similar to those who live in San Francisco or similar cultural environments in our day. Yet, the gospel had taken root there and Paul was writing to a group of people who were genuine believers in Christ. As could be expected from believers emerging from paganism, this church had a great number of problems Paul is writing to deal with. In the process of interacting with the Corinthian issues Paul emphasizes the revelatory nature of the mystery aspect of God's plan for humanity. It should be noted that when dealing with people's problems Paul always brings up theology as the basis for his interaction. Paul never dismisses theology or God's Word when dealing with issues within the church no matter how carnal or young a believer is. Once one understands the theology then the practical application becomes obvious.

WORLDLY WISDOM VERSES BIBLICAL REVELATION

A lack of unity had developed among the Corinthian church concerning a number of issues that divided them into various groups (1 Cor. 1:10–17). The division was the result of a lingering pagan mindset causing behavior inconsistent with the revelation of the gospel through God's Word (1 Cor. 1:18–2:5). Paul then contrasts worldly wisdom, which is the product of naturalistic human thought that rejects God's revelation with God's viewpoint that is conveyed through God's revelation to humanity through Scripture (1 Cor. 2:6–16). In the first few chapters of 1 Corinthians Paul teaches an important lesson for all believers to learn. The lesson is that Christianity is not based upon human reason or human experience, but upon revelation from Almighty God Himself. In fact, Paul is arguing that worldly wisdom prevents one from accepting and understanding the wisdom of God that is conveyed by revelation from God, not by the tools of carnal mankind. Charles Hodge put it this way: "Although we do not teach human wisdom, we teach the true wisdom."¹

Another important theme in Paul's letter to the Corinthians is the contrast between the "spiritual man" and the "natural man." "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor. 2:14). In contrast Paul says, "But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him? But we have the mind [mentality] of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:15–16). How do we as biblical believers have the

mentality of Christ? We have His mind through revelation by means of the Holy Spirit speaking His word through the apostles and prophets of the New Testament.

Biblical Christianity is not the result of a human initiative at any point. Biblical Christianity is entirely the product of God, starting with the plan of God the Father, the role of the Son in history, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is why one cannot mix God's Word with human viewpoint "wisdom" or experience. God has revealed His eternal plan for history solely through the Holy Spirit's means of revelation.

GOD'S WISDOM IN A MYSTERY

After Paul notes that he does not want the Corinthians faith to be rooted in a false hope but in the power of the Lord's gospel (1 Cor. 2:5), he declares that there is an otherworldly wisdom unknown to the natural man in verse 6. However, this wisdom is for those who are "mature." The Greek word "mature" is *teleos*, which in this context means to be "mature, full-grown, adult" and is said to be contrasted with an "infant" in 1 Corinthians 3:1.² Later in the passage (1 Cor. 3:1-3) Paul tells the Corinthians (no doubt genuine believers), that he "could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly." (3:1-3a). The milk Paul gave them were the basics of God's Revelation or God's Word. They should have been nurtured and grown through the Word, but they had remained babes, immature.

God's wisdom is said by Paul to not be "of this age, nor of the rulers of this age" (2:6b). This implies that the Corinthians were pursuing the wisdom of this age, which was not sourced in God's Word. How is this wisdom from God conveyed? It is administered via a "mystery." Clearly such a mystery is a reference to the hidden plan of God from eternity past that was always part of God's plan as noted more clearly in some of Paul's other epistles (Rom. 16:25-27; Eph. 3:2-13; Col. 1:24-2:3). "The phrase 'in mystery' does not modify the verb 'we speak.' It does not characterize Paul's instruction but the nature of the wisdom of God."³ Paul says, but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory" (2:7). Ernest Campbell says, "This means that it is wisdom which had previously been *in the form of a secret*."⁴ Some aspects of God's plan, especially relating to the gospel and New Testament mysteries, are things not taught in the Old Testament, but are now being revealed through revelation. One commentator says, "This message is hidden mystery because it can be known only through God's revelation. It is now an open secret: open because God has revealed it, and a secret because the revelation both reveals the mystery and obscures it at the same time."⁵ Another concludes: "The contrast is between Christian wisdom and the wisdom of the world. Christian wisdom is the gospel, while the so-called wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age is the worldviews, sophistry, and belief systems which fail to recognize the gospel."⁶

The Greek word *proorizo* means to "decide upon beforehand, predetermine"⁷ or predestine as most English translations render it. This Greek term is used in Acts 4:28; Romans 8:29-30; and Ephesians 1:5, 11. The focal point of the passage is: "Yes, Paul received revelation concerning God's plan for history and it a notion that is not compatible with the mindset of the world, but God determined that it will take place before the foundation of this world anyway. Therefore, what are the implications of such a view? The implication is that, had the rulers of this world known the real implications of their crucifixion of Jesus, they never would have done it.

THE RULERS OF THIS AGE

The question arises as to whom “the rulers of this age” (2:8) refer. Commentators are split as to whether it refers to the demonic world or to the human rulers who crucified Christ. I think it refers to human leaders since this is supported by the context. It is true demonic influences often stir-up human leaders; however, “they represent the people of the present age who fail to recognize the wisdom of God and who thereby stand in contrast to those who are destined for glory; but it also seems to reflect an early expression of the Christian message as it was preached in the Pauline circle.”⁸ John MacArthur identifies the rulers of this age as follows:

Neither the leaders of the Jews, to whom the gospel was a stumbling block, nor the leaders of the Gentiles, to whom it was foolishness, understood God’s divine wisdom. In their ignorance of God, their willing ignorance, they executed His Son. Paul’s own testimony demonstrates that ignorance (1 Tim. 1:12–13). That is the outcome of human wisdom. In the world’s eyes, Jesus was anything but glorious; but in God’s eyes He is the very Lord of glory.⁹

The fact that the rulers of this age rejected the God’s earlier revelation of Himself in the form of the Old Testament as demonstrated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5—7) as He corrects their false interpretations was only compounded as their killing the Messiah lead to mankind’s actual salvation. In other words, the humility of Jesus in His death is the very means that leads to His glory. Just such an implication is why Paul calls Jesus “the Lord of glory” (2:8). Even though God has revealed much in the Old Testament about His plan for history, key aspects like the church and some aspects of the gospel were missing. Because the world rejects God’s revelation as put forth in the Scriptures, they still do not understand even though the Lord has provided greater revelation during the Church Age. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

¹ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), p. 33.

² Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature*, 3rd. ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 995.

³ David E. Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003). p. 95.

⁴ Ernest R. Campbell, *A Commentary Of First Corinthians: Based On The Greek New Testament* (Silverton, OR: Canyonview Press, 1989), p. 45. Italics original.

⁵ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, p. 96.

⁶ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *Holman New Testament Commentary: I & II Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), Vol. 7, p. 34.

⁷ Danker, *A Greek-English lexicon*, p. 873.

⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), p. 110.

⁹ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984). p. 61.