

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – Epistle

Here is The One Who is Wise

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written,

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the

world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

DIAGNOSIS: Where Is the One Who Is Wise?

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *High and Mighty Wanna-Be*

Who doesn't covet the Mensa title? Who wouldn't want a higher Intelligence Quotient (IQ)? We all want prestige and power—at some level or another. Whether it's in the workplace, in the church, or in our home, is secondary. Each of us wants to be respected, seen as wise and discerning. None of us wants to be humiliated or to be tripped up. So we avoid “stumbling blocks” (v. 23) lest we be associated with failure.

How embarrassing it must have been then, for Paul to remind the Corinthians publicly in this letter that “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (v. 26). Perhaps if Paul had been more concerned about the status of Christianity he might have been wise enough to keep such information to himself, so that the church might maintain its dignity and grow in status.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Boasting in the Presence of God (v. 29)*

But Paul doesn't seem to be concerned about the church's status, nor that of his parishioners in Corinth. Instead, he was more disturbed by the church's response to worldly pressures: The Corinthians were caving to society; taking up the same elitist tactics as their worldly brothers and sisters. They were equally

as tempted to boast about themselves in the presence of God (v. 29). And Paul was appropriately troubled. For boasting about yourself is just another way of putting your faith in yourself, not God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Perishing (v. 18)*

The result of such boasting was that the Corinthians had created the same predicament for themselves as their pagan counterparts faced: They treated the cross as foolishness, and demonstrated that they too were perishing (v. 18). And perishing is the end of every worldly-wise creature—in other words, all of us. Why? Because God will not have us be self-made. So God destroys our worldly wisdom, and thwarts our discerning (v. 19). God demonstrates that what we call “wisdom” and what we call “strength” shrivel and die and are shrouded in shame (v. 27), even in the face of God’s foolishness and weakness (the cross). In the end we have nothing to boast about (v. 29). In fact, we are nothing.

PROGNOSIS: Here Is the One Who Is Wise! (v. 20)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Low and Despised by the World (v. 28)*

Much to our amazement and perplexity, God takes what is low and despised (v. 28) and makes it the means of our redemption: The cross of Christ. Christ crucified (v. 23) makes it possible for humankind to be saved (v. 18). The very thing that, to the world, is a “stumbling block” and “foolishness” (v. 23) is God’s means to buy back humanity (redeem it, v. 30). Through Christ crucified God gives a new life that doesn’t perish (v. 30).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Wiser than Human Wisdom (v. 25)*

The cross calls believers to a new kind of wisdom (v. 25) where things are opposite what we might expect: Through the cross, we come to understand that worldly wisdom won’t save us, only a

foolish proclamation about Christ can do that (v. 21). The cross is wiser than any worldly wisdom. Once we know that (“are called” into that life, v. 24), we realize how superior God’s wisdom and power in Christ are (foolish as they may seem to others)! And finding our life in Christ we receive all Christ’s benefits: righteousness, holiness, redemption (v. 30).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Boasting in the Presence of Humans (v. 31)*

God’s wisdom thwarts every attempt to prove ourselves wise—and we know it. So what can we boast about with our friends—if not ourselves?! We boast about the only thing worth boasting about in the presence of humans (v. 31): We boast in the Lord Jesus and what he has accomplished through his foolish cross. We boast about the power of God to raise the dead, because God himself succumbed to death. We boast that while we are not wise or powerful or of noble birth according to human standards, we know One who lays all such priorities to waste. We know One who, by his noble (some would say, “foolish”) gesture of love on the cross, has turned our priorities upside down. No longer do we shun the low and despised, we see Christ there. No longer do we avoid the weak, we see the cross there.