

The Deep Things of God

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Human wisdom and pride will never understand the deep things of God

Wonderful things had happened at Corinth, six years prior to Paul writing these words. As their founding pastor, his preaching had resulted in many remarkable conversions; trophies of grace. This enormously wealthy Greek city, proud of its beautiful buildings, its philosophy and teachers, had yielded up a people humbled by the power of the Spirit and brought to see their need of salvation.

The Corinthian church was nothing like as bad as it is often portrayed. There is a tendency among expositors to overstate the deficiencies of the church, turning it into a carnal church with fundamental unbelief and great moral sin. But it could not have been as bad as this, because the apostle Paul gives it high commendation. Nevertheless, he is very candid about the problems that had developed.

There certainly were immoral people, and the church was greatly at fault for not having exercised discipline as they should have done. But the wicked ones were clearly a small minority, for Paul approves the church overall, and addresses them as dear brethren in the Lord.

Here is another of their problems that had to be challenged. There was a trend among the Corinthians to feel embarrassed by the Gospel. The message of the cross had saved them, and they loved it, but when it came to telling their relations, colleagues and friends about it, they thought that it was not sophisticated enough.

The Gospel Not Enough?

They forgot how this message in its apparent simplicity had worked powerfully in their own lives. They felt that for their people they needed to somehow contextualise the Gospel. They needed to make it more intelligent, and more Grecian. They needed to accommodate it to the outlook of the proud, proud people of Corinth, who would expect philosophical arguments, and quotations from their own worthies. In fact, they strove to make the message look very much like what people already believed, to make it acceptable to them.

The apostle must now show them how outrageous this was, to be tempted to intellectualise, philosophise or accommodate the Gospel to worldly wisdom. They wanted all the embellishments of polished Greek orators, with all their rhetorical devices. Paul must now persuade them of the folly of such thinking, and he does so, first, by showing how ignorant 'worldly' learning is when it comes to human need and

the way of salvation. Then he reminds them of their own spiritual history, saying, ‘And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency [superiority] of speech or of wisdom.’

Paul’s condemnation of the wisdom of this world does not, of course, refer to mathematics or a host of other subjects, but to man’s ideas about the nature of God, of man, and of how man may be reconciled with God. In these most significant areas of knowledge, all human wisdom, declares Paul, is foolishness.

Where Human Wisdom Fails

Why do human beings at their most intelligent miss the mark in this field of knowledge? Obviously, because we can know nothing about the mind of the eternal God unless he reveals it to us. Without revelation, we cannot discern how he brings people into relationship with himself. Human speculation cannot see into the divine mind.

Also, the pride of man prevents him from acknowledging vital truths, such as his own depravity, and this leads him to think that he can by his own efforts earn the favour of God. If the fallen state of man is asserted, human pride says, ‘This isn’t true; we are not depraved; we are good at heart. We cannot accept this idea.’

Paul therefore reminds the Corinthians of what happened when he arrived in their city. He brought no elaborate, spectacular oratory, with embellishments, ornamentation or rhetorical tricks. He employed no histrionics, and quoted no philosophers.

Some Christians think the Gospel is not enough. We must have multiple bands with people rocking for hours, and a little bit of message slipped in

Mark you, there are many Christians who fall into exactly the same mistake as the Corinthians today, only worse. They think that the Gospel, however earnestly preached, declaring man’s need, Christ’s coming and death, and the way of repentance and faith, is not enough to draw respect and attention, let alone persuade people to turn to Christ. Drama must be employed, and films made to effectively communicate. The Word of God is not enough. We must, like the fiasco held last year in Essex called *Rock Thurrock*, set up by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, have multiple bands with people rocking for hours, and a little bit of message slipped in. This will improve on the Gospel, which must be accommodated to what people want and think, giving the impression that the faith is not far from their godless, worldly lifestyle. This will commend it to their taste. Just as the unsaved Corinthian would not feel he would have to surrender his philosophies or his culture, the people at *Rock Thurrock* will not need to give up the world. So Paul’s words apply to professing Christian people today.

For his part, Paul says, 'For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.' This was the great topic of his preaching: our need of Jesus Christ and his suffering and death on Calvary, making atonement for lost sinners. Our need of Christ includes the law of God and our need of cleansing. We may preach these themes from texts that teach them directly, from biblical testimonies and accounts of salvation, from parables depicting salvation and from miracles picturing soul-healing. But Christ must be the heart of our evangelistic preaching. We will preach Christ from the Old and from the New Testaments, but he and not human teaching or entertainment must be the sole concern of the Christian church.

Paul's Fear and Trembling

Paul reminds the Corinthians of his coming to them, saying, 'I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.' He was certainly in great bodily weakness, having been violently treated previously. But what does he mean when he says he was in fear and in much trembling? Was he frightened of coming alone to the sophisticated city of Corinth, bringing what to them might seem a ridiculous message, that they were all sinners, alienated from God? Was he trembling at the thought that he could be seized at any time? Was it opposition, crowds, and heckling that he was afraid of?

Acts 18.9 tells us that it was none of these things, recording how the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision soon after he arrived in Corinth, saying, 'Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city.'

Paul had received a magnificent assurance of success in his mission and he firmly believed that assurance. So his fear and trembling was not produced by any outward threat.

Paul's great fear was due to the responsibility which lay upon him. His whole frame seemed to say that the work was above his capacity. The task of bringing people to conviction of sin, and seeing their need of Christ, caused him to pray, 'Lord, how can I bring this about? How can I do it?' He was afraid for their souls, thinking, 'Shall I come to Corinth, labour to preach, and then go my way leaving people under the judgement of God for rejecting these things? Lord, be thou present in mercy; help me, and work in their hearts by irresistible power. Deliver me from mistakes, and own thy Word.' Paul was not a self-sufficient preacher.

Most preachers are accustomed to preaching, and even if they are fearful of standing before crowds in their early days, they get over that. They are not generally afraid of confronting people. But the earnest preacher is always afraid in the way that Paul was. As a preacher he knows he is not sufficient for the task.

There are souls, eternal souls, before him, and he needs the help of the Spirit to

make the Gospel plain. He must do justice to the message, and lift up Christ, but only the Spirit can move the heart. The preacher says to himself, 'If only I could make him real to people, and his dying love, and his heart to redeem, so that the Spirit may use the message!'

What a task! When the day comes that the preacher is not anxious, fearful, and apprehensive about souls, and about affecting people, he has surely lost his sincerity and usefulness to God. He has become, even in precious work, little more than a showman.

Conversions not miracles

Paul goes on to say that his preaching had been, 'not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but *in demonstration of the Spirit and of power*'. Some think that the apostle is saying that he worked miracles. Of course, Paul as an apostle could work the signs of an apostle, but that is not what he is referring to here, because his subject is the way he spoke. In this verse the 'demonstration of the Spirit and of power' refers to the effect of his preaching. He means that unadorned, faithful preaching resulted, by the power of the Spirit, in glorious conversions.

We do not mean to suggest that he was a tame preacher. An earnest preacher is bound to be somewhat larger than life, partly because he is speaking to a crowd, and partly because his subject matter is so significant and important. But without histrionics, emotional manipulation or oratorical tricks, the presence and the power of the Spirit was demonstrated in the conviction, repentance and faith of many. Corinthian people were changed, receiving a new nature, and a new heart, and going home as different people. This could never have been produced either by earthly wisdom or superior oratory.

To reinforce the point, Paul speaks of the necessity of faith being brought about by the work of the Spirit, and not by their being impressed by earthly wisdom. It is essential, says Paul, 'that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God'. The conversion of the Corinthians did not rest on their being carried away by the power of oratory, but on conviction of sin, and seeing Calvary, and calling out to God in sincere repentance.

Sometimes faith rests on an inadequate foundation, such as a powerful apologetic address. Such a message has its place, but to be convinced by persuasive arguments that God exists is not the same as believing in the atoning death of Christ and repenting.

Paul's next words are surprising and remarkable – 'Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect.' We might assume that the apostle means that while the unconverted need the Gospel, a much more sophisticated line of teaching is available for those who are converted. After conversion, the greater wisdom of the great doctrines of the faith are taught.

The Gospel is the wisest and most profound scheme in the universe

While there is truth in this idea, it is not what Paul means here. His point is actually far grander, and it is music to our ears. The claim that we ‘speak wisdom among them that are perfect’ refers not to more advanced teaching for Christians, but to the Gospel. Paul says, in effect: ‘In saying that worldly wisdom cannot help, and that we must hold to the ungarnished Gospel, I may have given the impression that the Gospel is simple. The reality is, it is the wisest and most profound scheme in the universe. Gospel wisdom is far greater than worldly wisdom.’

‘Them that are perfect’ means *they who have reached the goal or key place*, namely, the point of illumination and regeneration. They, by the Spirit, grasp Gospel wisdom and are saved. The plan of salvation – never imagined by man – is the deepest plan, flowing directly from eternal divine genius, and the only scheme that could possibly work to accomplish human redemption.

Who are the Princes?

The apostle mentions ‘the princes of this world, that come to nought’. Who are these? They are all the rulers, teachers and others who shape this fallen world’s culture. In Paul’s home country it was the chief priests, the scribes and the Pharisees, and also the Greek teachers and orators.

In our day we would say the ‘princes’ were politicians, educationalists, writers of soaps and lyrics of rock songs, and all other influences that are anti-authority, anti-moral and anti-God. All the architects of this present world’s culture, opposed to God, come under the heading of ‘princes’, and all will come to nothing.

They come to nothing during the course of the centuries in the passing of great empires and ideologies, thrown down by the hand of God. They also come to nothing whenever an individual is saved, and the worldly influences that once governed his life are renounced.

They will come to nothing finally and conclusively in the last great day when Christ returns and brings to an end this present phase of the world’s existence. Why should we or the Corinthians quote the princes of this world, or adapt their teachings to our purpose? All their learning and influence is doomed to come to nothing.

What is Meant by Mystery?

Our faith, Paul says, does not stand on human wisdom, but this does not mean it is not wise, for – ‘we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory’ (verse 7).

The Gospel is a mystery, not in the sense that it is hard to understand, but because it is undiscoverable by human reason. Earthly thinking is too proud to see that salvation must be by grace alone. Pride will not accept the depravity of man, and the

impossibility of earning the favour of a holy God. Human pride resents and rejects the idea of humble repentance, and dependence on a salvation wholly secured by an atoning Saviour.

To confirm the inability of mankind to grasp that salvation must come freely through the work of a Saviour, Paul quotes the magnificent words of *Isaiah 64* – ‘Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.’

It may sound as though the prophet was speaking about Heaven, but he was actually speaking about how God was preparing the coming of Christ, and the work of redemption. Isaiah says that unsaved people living before Christ would not look ahead to the Christ described in *Isaiah 53*. Today, when we preach the Gospel, people will not see the point unless God moves in their heart. Humans are too stubborn, too proud, to see grace. ‘What is this preacher talking about?’ they think. The ear does not hear convicting words, urging them to repent and be saved by grace alone.

Writing 700 years before Christ, Isaiah could say that God had prepared for the Saviour to come, and that God’s true people waited for him. Isaiah’s words (adapted by Paul for his hearers) read: ‘For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him.’

The deep things

Paul then pens words which rank among the most glorious and elevated of his inspired teaching: ‘For the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.’

The Spirit, of course, does not search in the sense that he needs to find out. He is the Holy Spirit, the eternal, all-knowing Holy Spirit, equal with the Father and the Son. He searches in the sense that he surveys and penetrates all knowledge and all events. He has the past, present and future in his mind all the time.

The Spirit searches in the sense that he *actively knows*, taking constant account, and comprehending perfectly all that he knows.

I thought I would illustrate this by reference to an Internet search engine which must search every website every day, but then I realised how far short this fell from the insight of the Holy Spirit. A search engine must hop from website to website with tunnel vision, looking at each one in turn, parking its information in a vast store, forgetting it, and proceeding to the next website. That is no good for illustrating the searching of the Holy Spirit who knows all things continuously, intuitively and perpetually.

In raising this matter, Paul is asking the Corinthians – Why do you want to import Greek philosophy and oratory? Why do you want to quote people who do not know about God or about man’s nature or about salvation? Why are you so anxious to refer to the princes and philosophers of this world? Don’t you know that the Holy

Spirit, who inspires the Word and enlightens the believer, is infinitely higher than all these? He is the eternal Spirit, who actively apprehends and appreciates the farthest reaches and the most obscure depths of knowledge whether human or divine, and he is our teacher. Could there be any greater privilege than that of having his light in our hearts?

Says Paul, 'the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.' What are these deep things? Are they the highest and most sublime doctrines? No, they are the wisdom of the Gospel, for Paul has not changed the subject. There is nothing so deep as the Gospel.

Enlightened children of God find it easy to say that Christ has died for them, and his righteousness is imputed to them. But they cannot begin to grasp the whys and the hows.

Why, why did Christ pay such a price for a creature like me, when I should have been discarded and judged? And what was the price that he paid on Calvary? He died for my sin, but how deep and extensive was the punishment? I cannot comprehend or measure or tell the depth. All I can say is – *'Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all!'*

There are divine motives and transactions we can scarcely begin to know or appreciate, but the Spirit knows and searches all things; yea, the deep things of God, including the whys and hows of Calvary and of grace. And we shall explore them in wonder through all eternity.