Confronting the Wisdom of This Age

(Colossians 2:8-10)

INTRODUCTION

In *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, Cornelius Plantinga defines wisdom as “the knowledge of God’s world and the knack of fitting oneself into it.” Folly is “a kind of witlessness with respect to the world.”

- An example of folly is the opening video clip.
- A second is the one reported by Rachel Wynberg and Christine Jardine in their book *Biotechnology and Biodiversity*.

With these illustrations in mind, let’s begin our study with three observations:

1. It’s possible to be educated – even highly intelligent – and yet not very wise.

   Smart people aren’t always wise; wise people aren’t necessarily smart.

   Christianity isn’t about IQ; it’s about living wisely in the world that God has made.

2. There are people who are knowledgeable in certain areas but not when it comes to God or the Bible.

   a. In *The People’s Religion* George Gallup found that . . .

      - Fewer than half of adult Americans can name Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as authors of the Gospels
      - Only 4 in 10 know that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount
      - 3 in 10 teenagers do not know why Easter is celebrated
      - Many believe “God helps those who help themselves” is from the Bible
b. Sociologist Miriam Murphy’s conclusion: “There are many people in America today with a Ph.D. in aerodynamics, but only a third grade knowledge of religion.”

3. In nearly every case where the NT addresses wisdom, the goal is to contrast it with the world’s “foolish” wisdom about God and to help us think wisely about Christ.

I. A CONTRAST OF EXPECTATIONS (Col. 2:8a)

Paul has said some remarkable things about Christians in Colossians 1

What should we conclude from this?

A. Christian wisdom concludes . . .

• That we need prayer (1:9a)
• That we need multifaceted growth (1:9b-12)
• That we need warnings and instruction (2:8)
• That we’re “Not perfect; just forgiven”

B. Worldly wisdom concludes . . .

When Christians say the kinds of things Paul has been saying in Colossians, they’re claiming to be “holier than thou” and because they aren’t, the whole thing is either hypocritical or untrue or both.

QUESTION: If Christianity is true, why aren’t all Christians nicer obviously nicer than other people?

• Christ told us that a tree is known by its fruit. When Christians behave badly, we are making Christianity unbelievable to the world.
• Any Christian will be nicer than that same person would be if they were not a Christian
• Anyone who becomes a Christian should be growing in their faith
• “Unlovely” people to turn to Christ in greater numbers because they most feel their need for him
In contrast to worldly wisdom, Christianity doesn’t expect – or teach – that we will always have our act together. It reaches out instead to a broken and hurting world with good news: You don’t have to be perfect to be or become a Christian; you only need to be forgiven.

II. A CONTRAST OF OUTCOMES (Col. 2:8)

Paul says
- There are hollow and deceptive “philosophies” that take people captive
- Such wisdom is contrary to the teachings of Christ

Worldly wisdom says
- “It’s arrogant to say your religion is superior and try to convert everyone to it. Surely all religions are equally good and valid for meeting the needs of their particular followers”

- “Religious exclusivity is not just narrow—it’s dangerous. Religion has led to untold strife, division and conflict. It may be the greatest enemy of peace in the world. If Christians continue to insist that they have ‘the truth’—and if other religions do this as well—the world will never know peace”
- COEXIST

A. What Paul Is Not Claiming

Paul is not claiming that Christianity has a monopoly on truth and that all other religions are totally false.
“If you are a Christian you do not have to believe that all the other religions are simply wrong all through. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all these religions, even the queerest ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. But, of course, being a Christian does mean thinking that where Christianity differs from other religions, Christianity is right and they are wrong” (Mere Christianity, p. 29).

B. What Paul Is Claiming

All beliefs don’t achieve the same result. Wisdom that omits or diminishes Christ is hollow and empty and leads to bondage, slavery, and despair (Col. 2:8).

Paul is making an empirical statement based on the reality of life in his day.

ILLUS.: Rodney Stark, University Professor of Social Studies at Baylor University, has written two books that explain “how Christianity conquered Rome.”

In the Cities of God, Stark highlights two things:
1. Greco-Romans cities were filthy, crowed, and dangerous places.
2. Pagan religion had little to offer their inhabitants

In The Rise of Christianity, Stark contrasts the Christian and pagan responses two major epidemics that swept through the Roman Empire in AD 165 and again in 251.

Sample Christian response . . .

Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love . . . never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ . . . Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead . . . The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen . . .
Sample pagan response . . .
The famous physician Galen fled for his life.

What accounts for these contrasting responses?

1. The Christian belief that God loves humanity, has compassion toward us, and wants us to be like him was an alien concept to Galen and other Romans.
2. The Christian belief that it’s acceptable to die doing God’s will because he rewards us for such behavior “in the resurrection” was also alien to the Romans. “The pagan gods offered no salvation,” Stark notes. And they “did not provide an escape from mortality.”
3. “The notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd” by the pagans.

SUMMARY: What people believe is a big deal. It makes a difference in how people behave.

III. A CONTRAST IN ALTERNATIVES (Col. 2:9-10)

Nearly every phrase in these next two verses is sure to offend somebody.
- Jesus is Messiah
- In him – and only in him – has all the fullness of deity in bodily form ever been found
- He lives
- He is the head over every power and authority

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I’m saying, “I’m Messiah.” I’m saying: “I am God incarnate.” And people say: No, no, please, just be a prophet. A prophet we can take. You’re a bit eccentric. We’ve had John the Baptist eating locusts and wild honey, we can handle that. But don’t mention the ‘M’ word! Because, you know, we’re going to crucify you. And Jesus says, but actually I am the Messiah. At this point, everyone starts staring at their shoes, and says, “Oh, no. He’s just gonna keep saying this.

So what you’re left with is either Christ was who he said he was—the Messiah—or a complete nutcase. I mean, we’re talking on the level of Charles Manson. I’m not joking here.

The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its face changed and turned upside-down by a nutcase, for me that’s far-fetched.

**IV. A CONTRAST OF PROMISES**

When you choose Christ, you discover that he provides all that you’ll ever need.

**CONCLUSION**

It’s not easy to believe in the exclusive wisdom of Christ in today’s “multi-wisdom” world. But here’s what Jesus has to offer:

• A humble wisdom – that reminds us we are vulnerable and need to be forgiven
• A satisfying wisdom – that actually delivers people from emptiness, deceit, and despair
• A defined wisdom – that clears our head and frees our mind
• A sufficient wisdom – that we will never be able to exhaust in this life or in the life to come