

T. Austin-Sparks:

Reading: 1 Cor. 1:1-31, 2:1-5, 3:18-23.

As we meditate in the first letter to the Corinthians, it grows upon us that the background of the letter is represented by the word "wisdom". It seems quite clear that it was that which took hold of the apostle as summing up the situation at Corinth, and demanding rectification.

Undoubtedly to the Corinthians wisdom was the pre-eminent, the most important thing. Indeed it was so with the whole Greek world. As the apostle says in this letter "...the Greeks seek after wisdom", and the Corinthians were a very strong expression of that fact, the quest for wisdom. That which was their natural disposition had been brought by these believers into the realm of the things of Christ, into the realm, shall we say, of Christianity, and that quest, that element, that disposition, that craving, lay behind the whole occasion of this letter. With them wisdom determined value. According to the measure of what they would call "wisdom", so the value of a thing, or of a person, stood or fell. The whole question of power hung upon the matter of wisdom. For them dimensions were always determined and governed by the idea of wisdom. That is to say, in their eyes a thing, or a person, was great or small, powerful or weak, to be taken account of or to be entirely set aside, according as what of them was accounted "wisdom" was possessed or evidenced by such. It was that domination of the "wisdom" idea which influenced their attitude toward men.

A Wisdom That Issues in Division

It would seem that this is the explanation of the divisions in the Corinthian assembly. The apostle writes, "Each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ." These respective attitudes were governed by this "wisdom" idea. For some Paul was the embodiment of wisdom; for others Peter; for others, though still in a natural way, Christ was the embodiment of wisdom. Thus their attitudes were influenced and governed by this dominating, shall we say, this obsessing, idea of wisdom. The whole tendency of it was to make Christianity a philosophy, and to separate it from the living Person. When that is recognized it is possible to understand and appreciate this letter to a far greater extent, and to see that the whole letter has a bearing upon that issue.

A Wisdom That Issues in Unrighteousness

Further, notice the effects morally of this wisdom obsession, remembering that with them it was natural wisdom, the wisdom of the natural man, or, as Paul calls it, the wisdom of this world. What is the nature of that wisdom? There is one passage in the letter of James which will greatly aid us in understanding this first letter to the Corinthians, and in our answer to that question. The statement is as follows:

"This wisdom is not a wisdom that cometh down from above, but is earthly, sensual (the margin reads 'natural', though more literally the word is soulical, or soulish, psychical), devilish." (James 3:15 R.V.)

There we have the wisdom of this world strongly defined. Look at it. It is "earthly": that sets it over against the heavenly wisdom. It is "sensual", soulish, psychical: that makes it entirely of the fallen nature of man and not of the nature of God; not divine nature, but fallen human nature. It is "devilish": finally, therefore, it is not of God but of the devil.

Carry that back into the first Corinthian letter and you have an explanation of what is found there along those very lines. You see these Corinthians being strongly influenced by their natural propensities, their natural inclinations, their natural desires in the sphere of wisdom, and bringing all that into the realm of Christianity. The outworkings of such a course is that you have sensuality making its appearance in the realm of divine things, and with just such a condition of affairs this letter has very strongly to deal. You know some of the grave touches in this letter, how far even these who were in the assembly, in the Church, went in the matter of sensuality. And the wisdom which led them that way led them into this further state, where they failed to discriminate between what was of Christ and what was directly of the devil, inasmuch as they came into an active touch with demon idolatry in its intrusion into this world, and opened a way for it into the very assembly of the Lord. The wisdom which is from beneath will go that far. What sort of wisdom is this? Sensuality, leading imperceptibly into touch with what is directly of the devil! The temple of God, and idols! The Lord's table and sacrifices offered to demons! Oh, the blindness of this thing, the utter blindness! Yet they were in the Christian church, in the Christian assembly.

These divisions are another outworking of this “wisdom” matter. Wisdom worked out in schisms. The apostle touches the deepest depths when he says that this wisdom led those who were its devotees to crucify the Lord of glory, and therein is a veiled suggestion that that may happen even in the assembly of the saints, if the same thing is governing, namely that which is of man; that which is of uncrucified natural man brought within the compass of the things of Christ. Even there the cross of Christ may be made of none effect, may be made void, and all that the cross stands for may be countered, contradicted, and these things obtain. The “wisdom” question pervades this letter from start to finish, is the background of it all, and because of the serious outworkings and effects of it the apostle wrote this letter, in order that he might show what the true wisdom is, the wisdom which is from above.

We will not deal with the wisdom itself for the moment, but give our attention to this first chapter of the letter under consideration, which sets for us the basis of everything. Here we have the question of stature, worldly and divine. Firstly the worldly standard of value is presented, stature as viewed and determined from the standpoint of worldly wisdom, and then stature as judged from the divine point of view.

We have dealt with the worldly side. We have seen enough for the moment of what its valuation is, and we are not very impressed. If what we have noted is the stature of worldly wisdom, then indeed God has made foolish the wisdom of this world, and God has made weak the strength of this world. We are not impressed with those dimensions of a man.

Divine Wisdom

Stature according to this wisdom

We now turn to look at the divine side. “For behold your calling, brethren (that is, behold God’s call, what God has called), how that not many wise after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God chose the foolish things of the world... and God chose the weak things of the world... and the base things of the world, and the things that are despised... and the things that are not...” (1 Cor. 1:26-28). This is very strong, very positive. God chose! The force of that is “to pick out”. This has nothing to do with eternal election. The apostle is not touching here upon election in relation to God’s purpose in Christ. This has reference to the natural calibre of those who were chosen in Christ. God picked out foolish things. God picked out weak things. God picked out base things. God picked out things that are not, (literally, things which have no being); God picked out things which are despised, or considered nothing. Why? That He might put to shame wise men of this world; that He might put to shame strong things of this world; that He might bring to naught, or make void, things that are. Let us grasp the situation as presented to us here. Foolish things set over against wise men: weak things set over against strong things: things which are not set over against things which are: things which are despised set over against things of repute. God did this deliberately.

That word “chose”, or as we have translated it “picked out”, is very interesting. In a book by Dr. Deissman called “New Light on the New Testament”, he makes much of this section of the chapter before us as a means by which the calibre of the first believers is established, and he says that in the rubbish heaps which have been turned over in recent years in the East a great deal has come to light as to the Greek language which was used in New Testament times. He tells us it is amply proved by the disclosure of these rubbish heaps that communication was very largely in the language of the ordinary people, and that the New Testament language—the Greek of the New Testament—is that of the common people. He takes this word “chose”, or as we have called it “picked out”, and says the very ordinary people, not the educated, of those days used this particular Greek word when they were making a selection from a number of things, getting something which they were set upon. They would turn over a number of things, and when they found the best thing they took hold of it and picked it out from all the rest and carried it off. It was the common language of the people, and this particular word related to turning over things and finding just that thing which was wanted and picking it out.

That is a good commentary. It is as though God looked over the mass for something that He was after, and when He lighted upon it, He picked it out from the rest and separated it, and made it His. God picked out, like that, foolish, weak, despised things, things which are not, for His own purpose.

There is an inclusive reason given, which is found in verse 29: “That no flesh should glory before God.” We have seen that God in part picked out things of no worth that He might bring to naught, or make foolish, the wise of this world, the mighty of this world, the things which ARE of this world: but inclusively the governing principle of His choice was, “that no flesh should glory before God”.

Then a quotation from Jeremiah 9 concludes that part of the chapter: "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord." There you have the explanation of everything. What is God after? On the negative side, He is undercutting all the glory of man; on the positive side, He is providing Himself with a basis by which He Himself shall receive the glory. That is the governing factor in all God's dealings with us; on the one hand, to undercut that natural tendency to glory in man, and, on the other hand, to constitute a basis for glorying in the Lord.

What are God's men of stature? We see what the world's men of stature are, but what are God's men of stature? They are, on the one hand, foolish things, weak things, despised things, and things which have no being. That is the negative side, and it is essential to the positive side. The positive side is only possible in so far as that obtains. What is the positive side? Glorying in the Lord; that is, an utter, complete appreciation of God, where the Lord is everything. Of course, the further statement of the apostle has to be put in there, over against his enumeration of God's choice of the foolish, and the weak, the despised, and the things which are not — "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption..." That covers this whole book again, and takes you through it on this other line. You see how natural wisdom takes you through this letter, and mark the consequences, which are sensuality, devilishness, divisions; now come on to the line of God's wisdom, and you find wisdom of another order, working out, not in sensuality, but in righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

We must leave that; but you see that for all the deficiencies and lack on the natural side God has made full provision in His Son. He is made unto us wisdom. The outworking of that wisdom is its own vindication, just as the outworking of the wisdom of this world is its own condemnation. The condemnation of the wisdom of this world is that it leads to schism, to sensuality, to devilishness. It leads to all these things. That is its own condemnation. The vindication of this wisdom from above is that it leads to righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption. The men of stature from the divine standpoint are those in whom this wisdom is working out in that way, who are standing in the value of that wisdom, even in righteousness, sanctification, redemption.

Zero in Man — The Divine Starting-Point

All that we have to say at this time is this one special thing, that stature from God's standpoint is a matter of the utter nothingness of man in himself, and the absoluteness of Christ for man. Do you want to know what stature is? It is not to be something big, and important, and noble, and wise, and strong from this world's standpoint, but to be the negation of all that in a relationship with Christ, in which He alone is value to the vessel. The deliberateness of God's act is seen here, with a view to giving men a stature. He chose, He picked out, He went over everything, He turned over everything, He scrutinised everything, and then He deliberately picked out what He was after; and when He had secured it, He said of it, so to speak, "Poor stuff!" Where is the wisdom of that? Where is the strength of that? What is there to glory in in that? God deliberately lifted that out of the mass with an object, and bringing that into living relationship with His Son, He deposited in that thing of poverty something that infinitely transcends all the wisdom, and the power, and the glory of this world. Then of this He says, That nothing, that foolish, weak thing in a living apprehension, appreciation, enjoyment of My Son is stature from heaven's standpoint, from My standpoint, from eternity's standpoint.

This is calculated to revolutionize conceptions of things. The apostle Paul so thoroughly accepted that position himself, that no sooner has he summed up the position in the words, "He that glorieth let him glory in the Lord", than in respect of himself he continues — there should be no break in the text between chapter 1 and chapter 2 — "And I, brethren, when I came unto you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom... I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling." I ask you whether your own heart, and whether history, bears record to the fact that Paul was a man of stature. We covet some of his stature; but here he is taking that position of a foolish thing, a weak thing, a despised thing, a thing which has no being from this world's standpoint. But, oh, how that nothing has counted! How God has registered Himself upon the course of this world through that nothing! That is stature from God's standpoint. It is the measure of Christ. The measure of Christ entirely depends upon the little measure of ourselves, or the no measure. God can do things when He gets us there.

The Cross — The Divine Means

Paul puts the cross right at that point — "...Jesus Christ, and him crucified..." "The word of the cross is to them that are perishing foolishness" "...the foolishness of the thing preached..." (R.V. margin), not as otherwise rendered "the foolishness of the preaching". What is the foolishness of the thing preached? It is the cross, which brings us to foolishness in ourselves, and causes us to glory in Christ. The Lord Himself acts in a way that makes it possible for the world, as it looks upon believers in themselves, to regard them as very foolish things, things which do not count at all. The world is quite right, if it takes that view of us naturally. But

The Wisdom of the World

the world is very far out in its calculation, if it thinks that that is where the matter ends because the world is going to discover, as it has already discovered, that that which it is quite justified in regarding as weak, and foolish, and nothing in itself, will nevertheless utterly overthrow the world, will challenge the world in such a way that the world cannot answer the challenge. The history since Paul's day has been that in the "nothings", the foolish things, God has established a challenge which the world cannot get over, a force mightier than all the force which this world in its totality of wisdom and power can possess.

Why always try to be important? Why want to be somebody or something? Why want to be seen and known and heard? That is the way to counter your spiritual effectiveness. Shall we not covet rather to be in ourselves nothing, that Christ may be more gloriously displayed by this? Shall we not in a new way say Amen! to God's choice, and recognize that that is the way of His glory? "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord."