

Newsletter October 2019

In the article of this newsletter we shall discuss the Gospel and the exclusive purpose and power of the Gospel to redeem some, while it simultaneously has the power to harden and condemn many others. This dichotomy of the Gospel was candidly addressed by the Apostle Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthians, but before we delve into that text a few definitions and general observations are in order.

Let us first define the word “gospel.” The word “gospel” is translated from the Greek word, *euaggelizo*, which when translated to English means “an announcement of good news” or “to evangelize.” In the biblical sense in which it is used, this is not just a declaration of good news, but a proclamation of the very best news that a doomed sinner could possibly hear, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (Jn.3:16). The great news of the Gospel is that God so loved mankind that He offered up his only begotten son as a blood sacrifice on a crude wooden cross to purchase full atonement of the sins of the entire human race. Christ has taken upon Himself our sins, for which He has paid the full penalty in his death in exchange for his divine righteousness that is then imputed to us through the agency of faith. Therefore, it is necessary that we now define “faith” in the biblical sense.

The writer to the Hebrews defined faith for us as follows: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (He. 11:1.) That is, faith is the essence of a firm expectation of redemption, providing a substantive proof of the working of God, which makes the realization of that redemption possible. As to the object of that faith, it is only to be found by “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of *our* faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (He. 12:2). The exchange of our sin for God’s righteousness is accomplished only through faith and trust in Jesus Christ, who is the author, facilitator, and finisher of divine faith. Christ is the author of that faith, in the sense that He has written it in his own blood; and He is the facilitator of that faith, inasmuch as faith is implanted by Him in mortal men and women through a supernatural impartation of the Holy Spirit. Finally, He is the finisher of that faith, making it complete, inasmuch as He now sits at the right hand of God.

Saving faith cannot be gained through human effort, nor can it be acquired through human wisdom, such that we could boast of having appropriated it through our own mental acuity. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ep.2:8,9).. Faith is not of ourselves, but was received from God as a divine gift. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Ep.2:10). Created anew in Christ Jesus by God’s grace, all good works that the redeemed accomplish are not of their own ability. Rather, the works were foreordained and enabled within us by the presence of the Holy Spirit of God for us to accomplish in his Name. Over many centuries, many men and women have heard and accepted the good news contained within the Gospel with great joy and have placed their trust in Christ looking forward to life everlasting. This then is the redeeming power of the Gospel. Nevertheless we find that saving faith has not been universally imparted by God to all men. Although the invitation of the Gospel is made available to all mankind, we find that the redemption received through faith in Christ is limited only to those who have received the gift of faith from God, having been born anew in the Holy Spirit. While limited atonement (cf. Newsletter article July 2014) is a difficult doctrine for many to contemplate, the undeniable evidence of that truth can be observed all around us in today’s world.

Incredibly, most men and women are so enamored by their sinful lifestyle, that they totally reject this amazingly good news of the Gospel; preferring instead to wallow in their iniquity in open defiance of God – even as his inevitable judgment is hanging over them. In doing so, they have put to shame the Savior of mankind, Jesus Christ. Along with their shameful treatment of Him, they have relinquished all hope for eternal life, in exchange for temporal illicit pleasures, which they consider their due. What they have inherited long-term by their prideful rejection of the Gospel is the certainty of eternal condemnation in which eternal life has been forfeited. This, then, we discover is the condemning power of the Gospel: that having heard the good news, men and women have rejected it out of hand as if it were meaningless nonsense.

This ever-present conflict inherent in preaching the Gospel was clearly stated by the Apostle Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthian church. Oddly enough, the Corinthian church had become divided over the validity of ritual baptisms that had been administered by various men, whom they had rigidly identified with themselves to the exclusion of all others. Paul’s text refuting this partisan baptismal exclusivity is recorded in First Corinthians

Chapter 1, verses 10 thru 16. Their quarrel over the practice of baptism was much like the euphemism that we use today regarding “arranging the deckchairs on the Titanic” – as it was about to sink into the ocean, drowning most all of its crew and passengers. The fact is, that the Christian tradition of ritual baptism is not efficacious; it is but symbolic of the recipient's declared unity within the body of Christ – regardless of who administers it. It's credibility is found solely within the mind of the recipient, not within some special ability of its human administrator to confer anything of spiritual value (cf. Newsletter article, August 2012). Nevertheless, all of that discord over ritual baptism provided Paul with context and purpose to discuss what is truly important: the Gospel, which he had received from Christ to deliver to them. Paul quite frankly spoke of the restriction the Lord had placed upon him in preaching the Gospel, as well as the opposing responses that he should expect to its message. Let us now examine the text of his dissertation as it is found in Chapter 1 verses 17-31.

“For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect” (1Co.1:17).

Paul describes his commission here by stating that he was not called by Christ to baptize anyone, but to preach the Gospel; the receiving of which is not only efficacious, but absolutely imperative to eternal salvation. This is essentially the very same commission Jesus had conveyed upon his eleven apostles just before his ascension (cf. Mt. 28:18-20; Mk.16:15,16). We have no direct mention elsewhere in Scripture of Paul having received this commission. Nevertheless, his commission to preach the Gospel is strongly stated by him in this verse as having come from Christ. Without question, this commission was forced upon Paul in a blazing light along the Damascus road, as he saw the glorified Christ and immediately recognized Him as Lord (cf. Ac.9:3-6) .

Paul makes clear in this current verse that he was not called to preach the Gospel in the manner common to men in an attempt to persuade others by using artfully chosen words of worldly wisdom (cf. 1Co.2:1-4). For if he should fall into this rhetorical trap, the arresting message of the cross of Christ would become greatly diminished, such that it would be rendered ineffective in its ability to convict of sin. Therefore, Paul resolved to know nothing among them, but Christ crucified (cf. 2Co.2:2). Only when one is truly convicted of the sin in their lives are they motivated to eradicate it. Unfortunately, a sinner does not have the ability to do this; they must seek out another whose wisdom and power is far greater than their own. That is precisely what God has offered mankind in the person of Jesus Christ. That said, let us now examine the text concerning the divine imperative of preaching the Gospel to all mankind without discrimination, as Paul wrote about it to them in Chapter 1 verses 18 through 31:

“For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God” (1Co. 1:18).

Here we observe the double-edged effect of the Gospel presented in sharp contrast: To those who are destined to perish, the preaching of the cross is seen as mere foolishness; while to those who are destined to be saved, it is recognized as the power of God to save men. Thus, the Gospel divides men into two sharply distinct groups: the redeemed living, who have embraced it, and the reprobate dead, who have rejected it. We find this exclusive power of the cross of Christ to redeem men and conversely to condemn men graphically illustrated for us in Scripture as Jesus was being crucified between two “malefactors” (i.e. deplorable convicted criminals):

“And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Lu.23:39-43).

Both of these men were vile criminals deserving of the punishment they were receiving. One of them continued to rail against Christ in his agony, while the other recognized Jesus as Lord and implored Him to remember him when He came into his kingdom. This kingdom he was referring to was obviously not of this world, inasmuch as they were soon leaving this world behind. The veil over the “eyes” of this second man had been removed by the Spirit of God allowing him to see beyond that which the other man continued to view as ridiculous nonsense. Thus, we find that one man had been redeemed by Jesus to go with him into Paradise, while the other was left in his reprobate state to go his own way into perdition, as God's justice demanded. We are not told why one man was given saving faith and the other was not; for saving faith is within the sole prerogative of

God to give or withhold. “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will *have mercy*, and whom he will he hardeneth” (Ro. 9:18).

Returning now to our primary text found in Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, we continue to read:

“For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent” (1Co. 1:19).

Here the Apostle Paul is referring to the words God had previously written to Israel found in Isaiah 29:14, which reads as follows: “Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, *even* a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise *men* shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent *men* shall be hid.” The wisdom of the “wise” referred to here is a worldly wisdom, which is based upon an acquired knowledge of men’s surroundings and conditions gained through the five senses of the flesh. Although sufficient evidence of God’s existence is all about them to be seen in all that He has created (cf. Ro. 1:19,20), they remain blindly ignorant of God’s existence as well as his divine wisdom that vastly exceeds all their very limited knowledge. The prudent course, as is determined by the worldly wise, is to reject anything and everything outside of their limited sphere of knowledge. God emphatically states here that He will destroy the secular wisdom of the worldly wise; and their “prudent” rejection of the Gospel, which was based upon their own wisdom, will become meaningless – it will come to naught.

“Where *is* the wise? where *is* the scribe? where *is* the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world” (1Co. 1:20)?

Paul now asks the Corinthian church to look about them within their own company. He first asks them, “where is the wise?” That is, where are the sophists, the philosophers, who claim to have attained great worldly wisdom. They are not to be found within their numbers. Then he asks “where is the scribe?” Scribes were the lawyers of that age. They would not only include the scribes of Judaism, but all Gentiles who sought refuge and safety in a legal system of obedience and enforcement. When the Corinthian church looked about them, these were notably absent, for it had been the grace of God that bound them together, not secular law. Also absent from their numbers were the great debaters of that age, which disputed anything and everything within and outside their narrow knowledge of reality. God has indeed made foolish the wisdom of this world in the stark reality of his perfect wisdom, which exceeds all that we mortals may ever know or think.

“For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1Co. 1:21).

In the wisdom of God, men were not able to come to know Him through worldly wisdom, for it lacked spiritual discernment. This placed the wise as well as the unwise of this world together equally ignorant of Him. So, wisdom or lack of wisdom made no difference in their equally blind unbelief. Therefore it pleased God to use “the foolishness of preaching” to save those whom He chose to redeem. It is not the Gospel that is foolish of course; foolishness only lies within the frail and fallible men, which God has nevertheless chosen to deliver the great truth of the Gospel to the entire world. “To the one *we are* the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who *is* sufficient for these things” (2Co 2:16)? No man is able to grasp redemption: only when the Spirit of God calls the hearer does the Gospel become effectual to salvation.

“For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1Co. 1:22-24).

Paul states two primary reasons for man’s rejection of the Gospel, which is sharply divided along ethnic lines: The first rejection is by the ethnic religious Jew, and the other by ethnic philosophical Gentiles. The Jew, steeped as the are in ancient ritual, constantly looks for a sign. We find they ignorantly desired a sign from Jesus even as He, the Son of God, walked on earth in their very midst:

“Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mt.12:38-40).

To the Jew the Gospel of a crucified and risen Christ as Jesus depicted it here remains a major stumbling-block, for it was the Jew of Jesus' day who had demanded that He be crucified as a heretic of the Jewish faith.

Conversely, Gentiles, referred to here as Greeks, seek after wisdom; but again, the central preaching of the Gospel is Christ crucified. To the Gentile this appears to be but a foolish absurdity, for it does not fit within their secular worldview. Therefore, the central preaching of the Gospel of redemption received through a crucified Christ has resulted in ridicule of the Gospel from the vast majority of mankind. They continually seek to find an ever-elusive wisdom through human philosophy; and in more recent decades, through a highly corrupted science that has led them to adopt the false philosophy of atheistic evolutionism (cf. Newsletter article, July 2015). This is in a sense a "stumbling-stone" of their own making.

Yet, those whom God has "called" out of this vast sea of unbelief "both Jews and Greeks," discover that Christ is both the power and the wisdom of God. Here we run headlong into the doctrine of divine Election that comes about only through an "effectual calling" of God, which is an underlying theme in all of Paul's writings.

"Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men"(1Co 1:25).

The Gospel, which the Gentiles (Greek) call foolishness, has brought to nothing the folly of man's worldly wisdom, while the preaching of the Gospel, in which God appeared weak speaking through the voices of his frail human spokesmen, has proven to be far stronger, having overcome the remonstrance of the most learned of men over many centuries.

"For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called" (1Co 1:26):

As they looked about them, those in the Corinthian church could see that this was very true. Yes, there were a few that had once been wise men after the flesh that God had called, and perhaps there were also a few that had come from rich noble backgrounds that God had called. Yet, as they looked about them their numbers were very few indeed. Nobility, riches, and wisdom had acted as a barrier that God had to first break down in calling them to the faith. Many of those had suffered severe hardship and anguish as those barriers to their belief were broken down (cf. Mt. 19:16-24). In their humbled state, they had then been called by God to receive Christ as Lord.

"But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, *yea*, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are, that no flesh should glory in his presence. (1Co. 1:27,29):

Man's wisdom cannot fully explain the things of this world, for their wisdom is consistently refuted by the foolish things of this world. Those who preach the Gospel are often the weakest of men whom God has chosen to deliver it. Nevertheless, they have overcome the efforts of the mightiest of men to silence them. God has also chosen inferior things and things that worldly-wise men despise to refute them. Moreover, the many things that those men propose to be true are regularly brought to naught by God as things that do not even exist. God does all of this so that no human flesh should receive glory in His holy presence.

"But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (1Co 1:30,31).

God has made all of those whom He called to be united as one in Christ Jesus. For Christ has been made unto us "wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption" that we all had greatly lacked. All of this has come about by the express will of God. As we read in Paul's epistle to the Romans, "For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be* conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Ro. 8:29,30). The redeemed of Christ receive a glory from God so that through that imparted glory they may forever glorify Christ, who is Lord. For as it is written, "Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty *man* glory in his might, let not the rich *man* glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I *am* the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these *things* I delight, saith the LORD" (Je. 9:23,24; cf. 1Co.1:31). © Arthur J. Smith October 2019