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We Preach Christ Crucified — Wisdom of God

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In his letter to the Christians at Ephesus, St. Paul referred to himself as “the very least of all the saints” (Eph. 3:8). He echoed this self-assessment in his first letter to the Christians at Corinth. He wrote those words in order to emphasize that God had called him to his role in the church by grace, not by merit. So it is for all of us, and so I feel it acutely for myself as I stand before this convention. Still, just as God gave St. Paul the grace to carry out his call, He who calls me provides me His grace. May my words today reflect His grace and edify the church to the glory of God in Christ Jesus.

Our text is 1 Corinthians 1:18–25:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 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? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

The specific focus of this essay is *Christ the wisdom of God*. The essay begins with a brief unpacking of how we should understand Christ crucified in terms of both Law and Gospel. Next, the essay addresses the importance of Christ the wisdom of God in what we Lutherans sometimes call the right hand of God’s reign, which is to say importance in the economy of salvation. The essay then turns to the importance of Christ the wisdom of God in what we Lutherans sometimes call the left hand of God’s reign, which is to say importance in earthly matters. This section occupies the bulk of the essay, and in particular shines a light on the chaotic outcomes we see from societal abandonment of God’s wisdom. Finally, the essay concludes with the great Lutheran question, “What does this mean?” — and specifically what it means for us as those who are in Christ and therefore in God’s wisdom as we make our baptismal journeys through this tear-stained vale of chaos.

I.

To say that we preach Christ crucified is to say that we preach the whole counsel of God, both Law and Gospel. When we see our crucified Lord, we see the full force of the Law. We see the death that we deserve, the death warranted by our fallenness and slavish devotion to sin (John

8:34; Rom. 3:23). More importantly, however, we see also the full mercy of the Gospel. We see the God who takes on our punishment, our suffering and death, so that we are reconciled to God the Father in spite of our sin and brought into new life in the Holy Spirit, through whom we love God and serve our neighbors, as we look forward in confident hope to everlasting life with Christ (Rom. 5:8–10; Rom. 8:9; 1 Thess. 4:17). In both aspects, Law and Gospel, we see the love of God. It is not a cruel god who gives law and a loving god who gives gospel, but rather the one God who is love (1 John 4:8) giving both Law and Gospel, and by whose grace all things work together for our good (Rom. 8:28).

II.

Christ crucified is the wisdom of God, with all the fullness of God's loving Law and Gospel. It is obvious that this fullness includes all manner of things related to the right hand of God's reign, that is, things related to salvation. Christ is the wisdom of God both in His person as the bridegroom of the church and in His work as the maker of that happy exchange whereby the bridegroom receives the squalor of the bride and the bride receives the glory of the bridegroom (Eph. 5:31–21).¹

Following St. Augustine, Luther in his lectures on Romans states that “the wisdom of God is that wisdom by which He contemplates all things in Himself,” things knowable “by faith alone or a rapture into heaven,” as opposed to things that are outside of Himself and created.² The center of all that is known only to faith is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Earlier in the same lectures, Luther states that the wisdom of God is “that by which He makes us wise,” just as His righteousness is that by which He makes us righteous.³ We are wise to know that the Law condemns us, and therefore we can place no hope in miraculous signs like the Jews do or in worldly wisdom like the Gentiles do. Our hope, the only true, eternal hope, is in the fulsome grace of God, Christ crucified, the wisdom of God. That wisdom is a stumbling block to Jews because they expected a powerful messiah, not one “crucified in weakness” (2 Cor. 13:4) and obviously cursed by God because He hangs on a tree (Deut. 21:22–23). Likewise, God's wisdom is foolishness to Gentiles, who mocked Christians as worshipers of a dead man.⁴

Moreover, in his letter to the Christians at Colossae, Paul refers to Christ as God's mystery, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). Whatever one might seek in terms of wisdom and knowledge can be found in the person and work of Jesus.⁵ That includes the life of good works flowing from the “fear of the Lord,” that is to say, from faith, as that life is described in various places throughout the Book of Proverbs (see, for example, Prov. 3). It's also described in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians, where he prays that they will be filled with spiritual wisdom “so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him” (Col. 1:9–10). Fear in faith, as Deterding describes in his Concordia Commentary on Colossians, “moves and empowers one to live a life of wisdom.”⁶ Moreover, in

¹ Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2013), 25–26.

² Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 25 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 432.

³ Luther, *Luther's Works*, 249.

⁴ Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 70–71.

⁵ Paul E. Deterding, *Colossians* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 85.

⁶ Deterding, *Colossians*, 39.

his letter to the Christians at Ephesus, Paul admonishes them to be careful to walk in wisdom (Eph. 5:15–16; Col. 4:5–6).

All of the foregoing, from knowledge of the Law’s condemnation, through Christ’s atoning sacrifice, to our walking by God’s grace in a manner worthy of the Lord, is the right-hand importance of Christ the wisdom of God.

III.

Unsurprisingly, there is also left-hand importance of Christ the wisdom of God. That is to say, there is also earthly importance, importance in matters other than salvation. If all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ, then knowing and being in Christ the wisdom of God entails practical, day-to-day wisdom, such as that found in Proverbs 11. As Deterding describes, the wise one “will also live his life with ‘common sense,’ for wisdom includes a practical aptitude for life in the real world. It is life lived in harmony with the order, moral and otherwise, which God has placed over and through this world.”⁷

The converse can also be true; rejection of Christ the wisdom of God often leads to chaos and disarray, a life that lacks concord with God’s order. As the Epistle of St. James informs us, “where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice” (James 3:16). And similarly, Paul describes the Gentiles as “darkened in their understanding” and therefore “callous” and “greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (Eph. 4:18–19).

This is not just an individual reality, but it can and does occur on a societal level. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul describes the last days: “For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:2–5).

Even a casual observer of modern American culture can attest that this description of the last days fits our society entirely too well. Under the appearance of godly concern for others’ feelings and for peace, it is now socially unacceptable to affirm that God created us male and female and that the sexes are distinct from one another; that sexual interaction is God’s good gift to a man and a woman in holy matrimony, and that any other use of the gift is abuse; and that there is transcendent truth, especially transcendent moral truth. Our society celebrates those who celebrate themselves and their base impulses, extolling pride and selfish ambition while deriding the humble and the selfless. We excuse envy and treachery, protecting the so-called rights of those who take or destroy the property of others. In our lust for power and vengeance, we whitewash the evils of those who represent what we perceive to be our side. We have turned slander into a national pastime, destroying the reputations of our social and political foes as if Christ did not die for them. We brutally kill the weakest and voiceless among us, using forceps or acid or drugs that target our babies like infections.

If our current time is not the last days, it is a good imitation. Still, we should not be surprised, as if this cultural moment fell upon us out of the clear blue sky. The societal ills of America and the

⁷ Deterding, *Colossians*, 39.

West may seem to have burst upon us in a few years or perhaps half a century, depending on one's perspective, but the groundwork has been laid gradually over the centuries by influential thinkers whose ideas have eroded, and may have destroyed, the foundations of Christian civilization in the West. Their ideas — ideas that reject Christ the wisdom of God — have been spread through our educational institutions, institutions that we and our forebears foolishly thought we could trust. The beginning was not 2015 or even 1967. We have been building toward our current decadence since before the founding of our country.

Recall what was stated earlier about Christ crucified. It was stated that in Him we see the God who takes on our punishment, our suffering and death, so that we are reconciled to God the Father in spite of our sin and brought into new life in the Holy Spirit, through whom we love God and serve our neighbors, as we look forward in confident hope to everlasting life with Christ. This sentence contains three fundamental aspects of human life that have been undermined explicitly and intentionally by influential thinkers and their followers over the last few centuries. The fundamental aspects are the following:

1. Human beings are sinful and indeed enslaved to sin.
2. We reach our true end or goal in the next life, not the current one.
3. The purpose of this life is to love God and serve neighbor.

The broad societal rejection of these three truths of Christ the wisdom of God has developed in fits and starts, easily here and against great resistance there, gradually and seemingly inexorably. As we unpack the ideas that have been adopted in place of these truths, it will become obvious how we have arrived in our current state of decay.

Our journey away from wisdom begins in 17th-century Europe. The Thirty Years' War wracked Europe through most of the first half of the 1600s. The war was quite worldly, but because it dealt in great part with a confluence of religious affiliation with the quest for geopolitical domination, it will forever be thought of as a war of religion. This combination of truth claims with widespread destruction left behind a mood in Europe that was decidedly doubtful about whether religion was the right place to look for real understanding about the nature of humanity and the world. The mood among many was to look elsewhere, and that mood corresponded in time with the beginning of an age of great scientific discovery and technological innovation. Hence, the great merger of technical advancement with spiritual reversal that we now know as the Enlightenment.

An idea that began to take hold during this era was that humanity is not fallen or enslaved to sin, but rather is basically good. As the 18th-century Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau described,⁸ man in his primitive state of nature is good, loving self only in the sense of meeting his own needs, having natural impulses of justice and of compassion for others, and possessing perfectibility. It is only through the corrupting influence of civilized society, and especially of private property, that man has become duplicitous and ruthless. Reformed author Carl Trueman, whose work *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* I highly recommend, summarizes Rousseau's view this way: Man is "at his best — he is most truly himself as he should be —

⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *(On the) Equality Among Mankind* (Hoboken, N.J.: Generic NL Freebook Publisher, 2000).

when he acts in accordance with his nature.”⁹ It is difficult to overstate how broadly and deeply this idea of basic human goodness has penetrated the modern consciousness.¹⁰

This denial of bondage to sin is really denial of Christ the wisdom of God. And while the denial of bondage to sin poses a grave danger to one’s soul, at the societal level it can also have devastating effects in the here and now. We see those effects all around us, as Dr. Trueman aptly describes.¹¹ Because our nature is widely seen as good, self-restraint is seen as unhealthy or hypocritical, while self-indulgence and embracing one’s impulses are celebrated as authentic. Because society breeds falsity, societal constraints on morality are distrusted, while defining oneself according to one’s feelings is the highest good and must be respected at all costs. The resulting disorder, and ultimately the persecution of those who would seek to bring order under God’s Law, is unsurprising to anyone who knows the depravity of the human soul.

If, as asserted by Rousseau and so many other thinkers since the 18th century, humanity is good but societal influences are evil, then it would make sense that earthly life could become paradisaical if only we could correct the societal forces. There would be nothing about humanity itself that would prevent an earthly paradise. And so, the last three centuries have witnessed one urgent quest after another to engineer society into a perfection that allows humanity to enter into bliss. This is not the heavenly bliss of eternity with Christ, of course; it is earthly bliss. And this is the second rejection of a fundamental aspect of Christ the wisdom of God — the rejection of the notion that our ultimate destination, our ultimate joy, is to be found not in this life, but the next.

Perhaps the most famous and societally destructive philosophy that aims toward earthly bliss belongs to Karl Marx. He saw private property as the fundamental evil plaguing humanity and preventing the realization of universal bliss. If there were no private property, there would be no want. Neither would we have need of any exclusivity (such as marriage) that leads to jealousy, nor would we need religion to help us to feel better because we would already feel better, since there would be no material or social alienation. The solution, then, is for the working class to overthrow the owners of property and factories and such. Eventually the government will wither away from lack of use, and all people will live in the harmony of communism.¹²

Tens of millions of people have died around the globe because of the pursuit of this unattainable chimera of universal peace, of earthly bliss. They have died because people have exchanged their eternal inheritance in Christ the wisdom of God for the bowl of pottage that is communist bliss. And we should not imagine that Marx’s ideas have no purchase here, for whereas he focused on dismantling the economic system, others in the last 100 years have applied his ideas instead to dismantling sexual ethics, dismantling the family and even dismantling language. Essentially, any distinction that could be perceived as placing one group above another is subject to

⁹ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2020), 123.

¹⁰ For more on the ideas and influence of Rousseau, see Trueman, 116–28, and Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. VI* (London: Search Press Limited, 1960), 65–69.

¹¹ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph*, 124–28.

¹² For an incisive and brief treatment of Marx’s philosophy, see Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy, Vol. VII* (London: Search Press Limited, 1963), 305–34.

destruction — or as the sanitized vocabulary has it, deconstruction.¹³ We must not delude ourselves: American society has embraced the quest for earthly bliss, and much of the aggressiveness of the movement toward moral disorder is explicable in this way. Those of us who are in Christ the wisdom of God, living out our baptismal pilgrimages toward our ultimate home in the next life, stand squarely in the path of those who are pursuing earthly perfection.

The embrace of the notion of a worldly paradise in rejection of the life to come leads, almost inevitably, to a rejection of the third fundamental aspect of Christ the wisdom of God upon which this essay focuses. That is, we see all around us the rejection of the truth that the purpose of life is loving God and serving neighbor. What we see instead is the widespread adoption of ourselves as the purpose of this life. In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche, “One thing is needful: namely, that man should *attain to* satisfaction with himself.”¹⁴ And who among us has not been taught by Abraham Maslow and his famous hierarchy of needs that the highest of human needs is self-actualization? That might be the most influential idea in America today. It drives our consumer culture, our need to define ourselves (even against our own nature), our extreme sensitivity to criticism, and our need for participation trophies and bucket lists and constant entertainment. Self-actualization may feel like the ultimate human need, but it is an evil need. It is a need that is mired in our fallen nature. It is, quite simply, pride. We were not created for pride. God does not call us to actualize ourselves. God calls us to love Him and to serve our neighbors. Indeed, He calls us to become as Christ, suffering all for the sake of our neighbors.¹⁵ If I may take a linguistic liberty, we are called in Baptism to actualization in Christ the wisdom of God.

IV.

There are, of course, other fundamental aspects of Christ the wisdom of God that are rejected by the modern world. Among the obvious ones are that God created the world and everything in it, and that marriage is an image of the relationship between Christ and His church. The rejection of these also feeds the moral disorder of our world. Whatever aspect one chooses to emphasize, the problem is the same: rejecting Christ the wisdom of God jeopardizes the soul and visits moral chaos upon society. That chaos is mounting with breathtaking speed. So, what does this mean for us? How are we to respond to so much obvious evil and decay? The answer is unsurprising. We respond with Christ the wisdom of God. We respond with the Law, spoken in love because the Law is a loving gift from God. We respond with the Gospel, also spoken in love and for the same reason. We respond with Christ crucified. It is not the job of the church to take back this country for Christ or to follow some other triumphalist path that places the moral law above the Gospel. Whatever our context — in the family, in the church and in our communities — we speak in love the transcendent and powerful truth of the whole counsel of God. We speak Christ, the wisdom of God.

¹³ Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph*, 232–36. See also Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories* (Durham, N.C.: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020).

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 224, emphasis original.

¹⁵ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 38–39.

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