

### *The Wisdom of the World*

In an article for *MoneyWatch*, Larry Swedroe wrote, “Conventional wisdom can be defined as ideas so accepted they go unquestioned. Unfortunately, conventional wisdom is often wrong. Two great examples are that millions of people once believed that the Earth is flat, and millions also believed that the Earth is the center of the universe. Just because millions of people believe a foolish thing, doesn't make it any less foolish.”<sup>1</sup>

He then went on to catalogue nine bits of financial advice that he felt were commonly accepted, but nonetheless should be ignored.

There can be something deeply satisfying about seeing conventional wisdom turned on its ear.

Perhaps it is because it is because the whole notion of conventional wisdom is premised on never having an original idea.

Or maybe that's just conventional wisdom.

The truth is it is quite easy to get things very wrong, both by ignoring the lessons of history or by adhering to them too rigidly.

Think of the conventional wisdom you encounter every day. Some of it is good advice.

Some of it is just a waste of your time that can send you down a pointless rabbit-trail.

It would be easy to allow our lives to be governed, in large measure, by the conventional wisdom of economics, for example. We might say, if you don't work, you don't make money. If you don't have money, you can't buy stuff. If you can't buy stuff, life becomes difficult to sustain.

It's a simple system. We all understand it. It reflects the wisdom of the world.

But it would awfully easy to translate that into chasing stuff instead of life.

There is no shortage of advice we do well to ignore.

Corinth certainly knew the wisdom of the world. Standing between the Aegean and the Adriatic, Corinth was dual port town, which meant it was a very prosperous place. Life was good in Corinth - the money was flowing, bacchanalia was the order of the day - they even had their own games that ranked right up there with the Olympics. Corinth enjoyed a reputation akin Vegas, but by Paul's day, though, things had calmed down considerably. Rome conquered Corinth, and Rome made Corinth clean it's act up.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/9-bits-of-conventional-wisdom-you-should-ignore/>

Gone were the thousand priestesses of the temple of Aphrodite – Corinth, like Times Square today, had gone respectable.

The spirit of commerce may have been well, but Roman occupation was never known for increasing morale, so if you asked any Corinthian on the street, they would probably let you know that you have to look out for yourself. Income inequality was a real problem in Corinth - Corinth was, after all, the place where Paul had to chastise believers for not sharing their food at communion. Remember: In the early church communion was just a big meal, and in Corinth everybody brought their own food. The rich ate their food, and the poor ate their food. Sometimes they didn't have any, and the rich got in trouble with Paul for not sharing. They'd missed the whole point. Paul fired off this letter to set them straight.

The Corinthians may have been planted as a church by Paul himself, but it was like they searched out problems for themselves.

Culturally, perhaps it was jealousy of Athens and all their thinkers being so close, but the Corinthians had elevated smooth polished speech to the point of idolatry.

I suppose I can understand a little envy when your nearest neighbor produced democracy, Socrates and Plato and you're known for your defunct brothels, but then the fascination with speaking crept into the church. Some of them liked Peter. Fair enough, Jesus himself said that Peter was the rock on which he would build his church. But then, Peter had never actually been there, and Paul had, so some folks like Paul. I can understand that. Paul is likeable in a curmudgeonly, sarcastic, straightforward sort of way. Of course, there's also a smooth-talking slick young Jewish preacher named Apollos - the man was smart and he could preach, and he was reputed not to be too hard on the eyes. They split themselves and their loyalties with one person was saying, "I'm with Apollos all the way," and others replying, "No, no, you've got to go with Peter," and then of course, still others would say "Well, but you know, Paul was our founding pastor..."

They lost the Gospel in the fray. Following the wisdom of the world, the values of the world, the Corinthian church got one thing after another *wrong*.

Paul fired off this angry letter calling them to task.

"For the message of the Cross is foolishness those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written (and here he quotes Isaiah) I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

He goes on "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the gentiles, but to them who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

Paul lays it all on the line - relying on scripture he blasts the Corinthians for empty God-talk and meaningless gestures. He drags Isaiah into the argument - the Jews in the crowd would have

caught that - and reminded the Corinthians that what the Israelites got for relying on their own intelligence and politics and scheming was nothing short of the Babylonian captivity: A generation of slavery in a foreign land. And then he went on to say that the cross, that symbol that dominates our sanctuary, that defines our faith, is a stumbling block to Jews.

Frankly, it was.

Paul would have known - he was a Pharisee, as educated as you could get, and he knew you don't have a crucified Messiah! It's contrary to the very definition of Messiah. Messiah translates from the Hebrew as "the anointed."

Anointing is nothing more, functionally, than a smear of oil across the forehead. It's the sign that God gave that an individual would be raised up as a king. David got smeared on, Saul got smeared on, all the great ones were marked out in this way and they all went on to victory - and when they did not, when they died because of their activities as Saul did, it was a sign that God's favor had passed from them.

So, you don't have a *crucified messiah!*

That's the wisdom of the world. A stumbling block for Jews.

But Paul wasn't done yet - he still had the gentiles to get to - *a crucified messiah?* Foolishness! In the Greek pantheon of gods, there isn't one who gets nailed to a tree!

That's the wisdom of the world.

And just to hammer it home, Paul goes on to point out that, by the wisdom of the world, not many of them were wise, not many were of noble birth, not many were particularly powerful - that's sort of the opposite of flattery - but that God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are *not*, to reduce to nothing the things that *are*.

It is a total reordering of importance.

What Paul is saying is that the wisdom of the world *got it wrong*.

And, following the wisdom of the world, *the Corinthians got it wrong*.

How often are we seduced into following the wisdom of the world?

That particular variety of "wisdom" will frequently come up dry.

One year, I decided to take questions from the congregation I was serving at the time for my sermons throughout Lent.

I still remember some of the questions I received. I was asked things like *how and where is God as we live with trauma to ourselves and the world?*

*When we suffer, how do we follow God's lead to live?*

Aren't those still the questions?

They were for the Corinthians also.

When it comes to answering the questions that matter, the wisdom of the world may very well leave you lonesome.

The wisdom of the world might suggest that we are alone.

This is all you get.

Make the best of it, because life is short and suffering is real and soon we die.

The Corinthians could almost be excused for their epicurean approach to life. Governed with fear and intimidation, they would have known to keep their heads down, amass wealth, and hope that their meticulously constructed house of cards didn't come crashing down.

*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.*

To the wisdom of the world, the Gospel answers, *where there is suffering, that is where God is.*

The presence of the cross in our sanctuary reminds us that we follow a crucified messiah, that on the cross, Jesus took on the suffering of the whole world so that no one, ever, should suffer alone, ever again.

To a culture that sometimes worships youth, and success, and wealth, and beauty, and celebrity, the message of the cross may look like, well, *foolishness!*

To that very culture, the message of the cross is the power of God. That in the power of God, the cross of Christ brings *redemption*.

And God calls us to embrace such foolishness.

There are obstacles to such a life of foolishness, of course.

Aren't there always?

The wisdom of the world has even used our own holy texts to advance its agenda. Scriptures that should lead to life are instead used as a proof-text to bludgeon the very people for whom it could offer a word of comfort and hope: Suffering spouses told to stay put in abusive marriages because of the Ten Commandments, LGBTQ+ persons pushed to the margins by scraps of Leviticus, the inhuman institution of slavery upheld by the household codes of the New Testament, which in turn justified generations of Jim Crow and did nothing to force America to reckon with our original sin.

There no shortage of ways that the language of faith is hijacked to serve a wrong purpose.

What Paul knew then, and we have to know now, is that convenient rhetoric without understanding is nothing more than empty God-talk. *Scripture without understanding is just words.* Words without meaning cheapens faith, and robs it of its power to heal and redeem.

I was recently asked by a very earnest person, “How do we understand which passages of the Bible to take literally and which to dismiss?”

I answered, “You don’t dismiss any of it, no matter how odd it seems. But neither do we give it all equal weight.

Christians look at *all* scripture through the lens of Jesus Christ. So when we interpret scripture, we do so through the lens of Jesus Christ. And when Jesus was asked how to interpret the Bible, he fell back on love. Love the Lord your God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself.

At its heart, that is what Paul is saying.

In this very same letter, he penned that wonderful hymn to love that we read in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter. Perhaps you know it?

“Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or rude...”

See, Paul knew something really important about the wisdom of the world – without love, it’s pretty much nothing.

If we need to know how to encounter life of meaning, how to live with *wisdom*, we start with looking at what we think is *wisdom* through the lens of love.

Then, and only then, may we possibly become *wise*.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.