

## STUDY 18

# ‘The Utterance of Wisdom’

*Deane Meatheringham*

### THE DISTRIBUTION OF WISDOM

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit . . . (1 Cor. 12:7–8).<sup>1</sup>

Delivering a word of wisdom to God’s people is among the variety of gifts, services and operations distributed to the members of Christ’s body (1 Cor. 12:12–13). A congregation will always need the message of wisdom as it matures in service and worship. The gift is indispensable for the continuing proclamation of the gospel, and deals with opposing forces. This will be especially the case as the people of God are on the move in a culture of seductive ideologies and competing wisdoms.

The word of wisdom is linked with the word of knowledge in 1 Corinthians 12:8. This is the motto of Proverbs 9:10 and 1:7: ‘The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is insight’. Wisdom is more than an ability to think logically, rationally, or even correctly. It is in having a right relationship with our covenant God. In this relationship we love, worship, trust, and fear God above all things. In everyday affairs of social and political life, we ‘Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy; let him be your fear, and let him be your dread’ (Isa. 8:12–13). The God we fear is the one who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Our knowledge of God comes from above and not below. ‘Knowledge’, in the full sense, is dependant on revelation. Wisdom is an enriching source for the life of the congregation (1 Cor. 1:5; 14:6). The emphasis in 1 Corinthians 12:8 is not exactly on wisdom itself but on the *speaking of wisdom*. With the gift of wisdom, we are given the knowledge to see to the heart of a matter by knowing things as they really are. This leads to taking right action (Eph. 1:8ff.).

### THE REVELATORY POWER OF WISDOM

Various views are given about the gift of the utterance of wisdom. Some regard it as an inspired, spontaneous charismatic gift given for a particular crisis or specific situation. Others regard it as being acquired by the gift of Christian discipline and

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

## *'The Utterance of Wisdom'*

experience. The fruit of such learning is then given in a message to the people of God. For example, Charles Hodge articulates a classical Reformed view that 'wisdom is the gospel, the whole system of revealed truth, and the *word of wisdom* is the gift of revealing that system as the object of faith'. Hodge's contribution is that since the apostles were endowed with wisdom as a characteristic gift of their office then the gift of wisdom is the exposition of the apostles' doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Arnold Bittlinger on the 'word of wisdom' says, 'In a difficult or dangerous situation a word of wisdom may be given which resolves the difficulty or silences the opponent. It is not innate wisdom as a personal possession which is described here, but rather a word of wisdom given to someone in a specific situation.' Amongst biblical passages quoted to support this view, he uses Jesus' promises to his followers: Make up your mind not to prepare your defence in advance; 'For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict' (Luke 21:15).<sup>3</sup>

My considered view is that the utterance of wisdom is an essential gift given for the edification of the church and for its mission. Ministry will not be able to withstand the assaults made upon it from postmodern culture by only repeating past orthodox doctrine or by cocooned biblical commentary. In situations of opposition, we will not have time to prepare a response. Nevertheless, the disciples had already learned from Jesus and the wisdom they had already gained would be innate. To deliver wisdom they would need the Spirit to bring this knowledge to their remembrance and to deliver it as a revelation from God. A word of wisdom is not only true for ad hoc crises but also when we are preparing and delivering the Word of God. I find often that it is in the times when I'm drawn to speak from beyond my prepared material that people hear a message that makes an immediate contact and impact. When this occurs, it is a demonstration of the Spirit's activity in our midst (1 Cor. 12:7).

### **A WISDOM FLOWING FROM CHRIST CRUCIFIED**

Although I dealt with the wisdom of God that is revealed in the preaching of Christ crucified in study 10, we must now connect this with the utterance of wisdom. God's wisdom revealed in Christ is not just a matter to be talked about but also a way of life to be lived. Wisdom is not an abstract system of ideas. Karl Barth warns of making this mistake:

Divine wisdom is obviously the meaning and ground of creation and therefore of the sphere in which man can live. The whole art of living and understanding of life consists in heeding and accepting divine wisdom and in this way becoming wise.<sup>4</sup>

Further on Barth criticises the following statement of F. Schleiermacher: 'The divine wisdom is the principle which orders the world for divine-self communication active in our redemption'. Barth says:

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Hodge, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1959, pp. 245f.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Bittlinger, *Gifts and Graces: A Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12-14*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1968, pp. 28f. For a full treatment of the utterance of wisdom, see James Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians As Reflected in the N.T.* (SCM, London, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *CD*. II. 1, pp. 430-3.

## *'The Utterance of Wisdom'*

This separation between the divine self-communication and a special principle ordering and fashioning the world to that end is untenable. 'All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made' (Jn.1:3). The definition must be corrected to read as follows: 'The divine wisdom is the self-communication ordering and determining the world for itself'.

The Greek idea of wisdom was a sophisticated, intellectual concept of human existence, a principle or a structure separated from God. It could also be a mystical form of escape. This made it a power to be leveled at the gospel. Clearly, it was this idea that had caught on at Corinth. Paul calls it the wisdom of this world.

Paul seems to be rescuing the utterance of wisdom from the Greek view. Today a view of the gift of wisdom is seen as an immediate revelation of the deeper things of God that is abstracted from the incarnation of Christ and his death.<sup>5</sup>

This reasoning had caused the church at Corinth to regress into parties that were attached to personalities:

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? (1 Cor. 1:11-12).

To deal with this destructive affair Paul takes up one of the favourite words of the congregation. The congregation was using it in terms of their culture and not of the gospel. Paul must cause them to see wisdom in its biblical form. He is asking them why they are turning back to an abstract and false form of wisdom and power if they now have their life in Jesus Christ—in his wisdom and salvation. Did we come to know God through theological cleverness? He says the wisdom of the world is closed off to God's wisdom.

Their use of the wisdom of the world led to different parties in the congregation gathering around particular leaders. By lifting a preferred leader to the status of having a higher form of clever ideas to define us, we will lose out. These preferred people and ideas did not bring us to faith. What did these people do? One sowed the Word of life and another watered it, but the growth came from God. Idolising personalities or Christian parties will not bring us to the goal of faith anymore than it commenced it. Our problem, when we operate like this, is that we are still thinking and behaving in terms of human wisdom. God destroys this kind of destructive wisdom in its own coils. Our very cleverness catches us out (1 Cor. 1:19). If we want true wisdom we need to stay with Christ crucified for it is in him, in his weakness, that God saved the world.

In identifying with one or other of their leaders, people imagined it would give them added knowledge; such deeper insight into the depths of God would provide more power and recognition. However, Paul says that these men they had elevated are servants of God appointed by him to serve the whole congregation. When we become party minded, we cut ourselves off from the riches that other teachers would bring us. In doing this, they were missing out on the wisdom of God. God's wisdom and power is demonstrated in the redemptive justice and mercy of the cross. Only this action testified to God's wise governance of the world. Therefore, don't brag about certain

---

<sup>5</sup> See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1987, pp. 591ff.

## *‘The Utterance of Wisdom’*

leaders or belonging to particular sects. Don’t look for security and status by aligning yourself with any of them.

The utterance of wisdom will be in seeing into the truth of things with the eyes of one who has been crucified with Christ and living now in communion with him and his vicarious life (Gal. 2:20).

### **ALL THINGS ARE YOURS**

Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God . . . So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God (1 Cor. 3:18–23).

To bring a word of wisdom to the people of God we should not cut ourselves off from all the treasure God has given us. ‘All things are yours.’ What things? All godly teachers are gifts given to us with the gifts Christ gives the church. In Romans 8:31ff., we hear that God is for us. This is shown in God not withholding his only Son. With his Son, will not God give us everything else?

Common to the Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 3 passages are death, life, things present, and things to come. In Romans, these things are our enemies, while in Corinthians he says these things belong to us:

In one way Paul is saying that there is nothing in all creation which is not ours, and in another there is nothing that we cannot control . . . Doubtless it was because the spiritually stunted Corinthians did not know all these things were theirs that they pursued the pathetic hunt for so-called wisdom. They believed this would make them into something. How wrongly they had read Paul, Apollos and Cephas!<sup>6</sup>

For the utterance of wisdom, this means that through the cross of Christ and in him, we have the gift of wisdom. It also means that the resources of the world have no control over us or our wisdom. In being over the world we can subject its thinking to the wisdom of God and, in this way, benefit from it. We are free of the past but we can use the past as we wish. Because death has been defeated in Christ’s death, it now belongs to us. All these gifts belong to us. We do not understand what a human being essentially is from psychology, but our essential understanding may be enriched by this gift as a wise Christian may use his learned trade skills to enrich people’s lives. We gladly bring every thought captive to Christ.

### **NOTHING BEYOND WHAT IS WRITTEN**

After Paul says that he is not judged by any human court, but only by the Lord, he adds that through this we may learn ‘the meaning of the saying, “Nothing beyond what is written”’ (1 Cor. 4:6). This may have been a written catchword, meaning not

---

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *All Things Are Yours*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1996, pp. 207f.

## *'The Utterance of Wisdom'*

to go beyond the terms of your calling to ministry. It appears more likely to mean Holy Scripture, that is, beyond scriptural precept or example. Holy Scripture commands us not to glory in ourselves, but in the Lord. No flesh can glory in the presence of God. From this God, Christians have their life in Jesus Christ:

The whole truth is that in spite of all appearances to the contrary, Holy Scripture has more power than all the rest of the world together. The whole truth is that all other world-principles are already unmasked and delimited in Holy Scripture, that they are already overcome for all supposedly final and absolute validity, that their power is already surpassed and their triumph outstripped.<sup>7</sup>

Through reading the Bible comprehensively and learning to live in the wisdom of the Bible, Christians gain a theological instinct that can discern truth from error. It gives to believers an antenna for knowing what has to be said and done.

### GIVING THE WORD OF WISDOM

The temptation in considering how this utterance is given is to ask, 'How?' This question is a reversion to worldly wisdom where the power remains with our intellectual capacity or eloquence. Faith does not begin with the question of 'How?' but 'Who?' Faith has come from Christ and believes that Christ crucified is the wisdom of God. Jesus is the true sage who, from his relationship with the Father, revealed the knowledge of God and man. Having been baptised into Christ's body by one Spirit, we have been given the mind of Christ. Out of that faith the mouth speaks. When we speak the Word, it will be wisdom prophesying. We do not have to renounce what God has given to us from Holy Scripture or from life's experiences and the accumulation of wisdom. However, it takes the power of the Holy Spirit to deliver a wise message to bear upon a situation. In emergencies, the utterance is given for the crisis. Faith means speaking by faith, not by the sight of our affectedness. Nor is it by piping when there is piping, or lamenting when there is lamenting. In other words, it is not according to the command of the cultural tune (Matt. 11:16–19).

Wisdom is uttered in a relationship with people. This is often after dialogue and having listened in order to understand the issues that are confronting the people of God or of a troubled soul. Wisdom is given in the situation and not in a pre-packaged recorded fashion (e.g. Acts 15:1–22).

In a mainline congregation in the USA, a minister friend of mine was asked to preach at a service where they were to celebrate the Lord's Supper. He was told the members of the congregation who were Afro-American would be served after the white Americans and separately. What was he to say? What wisdom would he bring from God? He told them that through Christ's death on the cross for all humankind there was no longer any dividing line between humanity. No one has been left outside the pale. Therefore, the people of God cannot separate what Christ has joined. His answer was not a rehearsing of sociology even though some of its behaviorist ideas coincided with Christianity. Rather, it was an utterance of wisdom given in the power of the Spirit for the good of the whole body.

---

<sup>7</sup> K. Barth, *CD*. I. 2, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1978, p. 678.