

## THE HOLY WISDOM OF GOD

The Roman persecutions of the early Christians ended when Emperor Constantine was converted about A.D. 315. This Emperor fortified Byzantium, renamed it Constantinople, and made it his capital. He also built a church, and the number of Christians increased.

Later the church building was torn down and another Emperor built what is perhaps the most wonderful church building the world has ever seen. It was called Saint Sophia, that is, it was dedicated to the Holy Wisdom of God. Unfortunately the building is now used as a Mohammedan mosque. Nevertheless, today I wish to preach on the Holy Wisdom of God to whom the building, St. Sophia, was originally dedicated.

When Christianity first was proclaimed throughout the Roman empire, a competitive belief that hindered its acceptance as a form of wisdom. In I Cor. 1:17 Paul says that he preached the gospel “not with wisdom of words lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.” And a few verses later he deplores the fact that “the Jews require a sign and the Greeks seek after wisdom.” (1:22) The great era of Greek philosophy lay 300 years in the past, but even in the decadent first century the Greeks and Romans professed a love of wisdom, a philosophia. This Greek appeal to wisdom took two forms. There was a religious movement, somewhat like our spiritualistic and theosophical groups today, which professed to have a secret knowledge of angels. The most important angel was Wisdom or Sophia. Since these people incorporated into their teaching some Christian elements, the New Testament gives brief warnings against them. There was, however, another Greek and Roman view of wisdom. In particular the Stoics, who are mentioned in Acts 17, descendants of the school of philosophy founded 300 B.C. by Zeno, had as their foundation principle something they called the Logos. Logos means Reason: and John's Gospel identifies Christ as the Logos or Reason of God. The Stoics, however, had never heard of Christ until Paul preached to them on Mars Hill. Their Logos was the Reason or Wisdom exhibited in the universe. When they studied the earth, sea, and sky they saw how marvelously the universe is constructed. The order of the planets, the bones and muscles of animals, the succession of the seasons and the growth of plants, man's ability to speak and to organize society – all this sort of thing impressed upon them the orderly and wise arrangement of the world. For them this was wisdom.

In philosophical language, Wisdom was the immanent principle of the universe. Immanent means indwelling. The Stoic Wisdom was not a God distinct from the universe, not a creator, not a separate or transcendent Being, but it was the immanent principle or arrangement of things. The Stoics were pantheists.

The Bible also talks about wisdom; but it does not mean what the Stoics meant. In the Old Testament, and we shall begin to canvass the Bible's view of wisdom by starting with some passages in the Old Testament, wisdom is the wisdom of God, not the wisdom immanent in the world. The Old Testament connects the wisdom of God with God's work as Creator. "The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens." (Prov. 3:19) God is not a phase or arrangement of the world, he is separate or transcendent. God is the world's Maker or Creator. And after its creation, God is the World's ruler and governor. In the Old Testament therefore wisdom is connected with God's original act of creation and his continual providential care over it.

But while the Old Testament very clearly teaches that God created the universe, and in various ways refers to God's marvelous construction of stars, plants, and animals, the emphasis on God's wisdom is not such as would lead us in the direction of astronomy, physics, or zoology. The Greek philosophers, Stoics and others, were deeply interested in the study of nature, or as we would say today, in science. But the Old Testament puts its emphasis on human conduct. Wisdom is a voice, a prophetic voice, calling to man. "Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice in the streets; she crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates ..." (Prov. 1:20-21). Like an open-air evangelist, wisdom accuses man of sin: "How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity, and the scorners delight in scorning, and the fools hate knowledge" (Prov. 1:22). Then this evangelist wisdom calls for repentance: "Turn you at my reproof;" and offers salvation "I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you" (Prov. 1:23). But as so often happens in open air evangelistic meetings, the offer of salvation is rejected, and wisdom threatens judgment: "Because I have called, and ye refused ... I also will laugh at your calamity ... when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind ... Then shall they call upon me, and I shall not answer" (Prov. 1:24-28)

For those, however, who accept the words of wisdom, there is a promise of comfort: "Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding ... She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her, and happy is everyone that retaineth her. For the Lord shall be thy confidence, and

shall keep they foot from being taken.” (Prov. 3:13, 18, 26)

If we listen to the words of wisdom, we shall be wise and the promise and comfort of the previous verses will be ours. There is such a thing as true wisdom in man. It is possible for you and me to be wise. But to have this wisdom we must seek it in the right place. Job 28 speaks of finding silver in a mine; iron is taken out of the earth; we must look among stones to find sapphires; and although all these are hidden in darkness, men find them and bring them to light. But, says Job 28:12, “where shall wisdom be found and where is the place of understanding? ... The depth saith, It is not in me and the sea saith, It is not in me. It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof.”

Undoubtedly this passage from Job implies that the study of minerals, the study of geology, indeed all academic study is not the method of obtaining wisdom. In college young men and women may obtain knowledge; and by knowledge they can accomplish their aims in life far better than they could without knowledge. But whether their aims in life are wise or foolish, good or evil, is an entirely different matter. A man may know physics and mathematics, but no knowledge of mathematics will teach him how to make use of his mathematics. In college I learned a lot of French, but no college course taught me whether I should use it in the Folies Bergeres or in the study of theology. College will give one knowledge, but not wisdom.

The last verse of Job 28 puts us on the right track. “Behold the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil, that is understanding.”

It is therefore essential to recognize that wisdom is not to be studied like courses in college. Wisdom is a gift of God. Prov. 2:6 says, “For the Lord giveth wisdom; out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.”

It is of great practical importance, it contributes to our comfort and peace, to know that we may obtain wisdom from God. “If any of you lack wisdom,” says James 1:5, “let him ask of God, who giveth to all liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him.”

Nevertheless, though this promise be of great importance to us, the wisdom as we receive it becomes our human wisdom. Behind this human wisdom stands the divine wisdom, the holy wisdom

of God. We have seen in Proverbs that wisdom is a Person who speaks. Not only does wisdom say “By me kings reign” but also, “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, ... before the hills was I brought forth... When he prepared the heavens I was there ... Then I was by him as one brought up with him, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him.”

What does this mean? What is this Personal Wisdom alongside of God who rejoiced before God and was daily his delight? Who is this that says, “I love them that love me and those that seek me early shall find me” (8:17), and “whoso findeth me, findeth life” (8:35).

To understand these O.T. passages, it is necessary to turn to the fuller, clearer, and more explicit message of the N.T.

In I Cor. 1:24 it is Jesus Christ who is identified with the power of God and the wisdom of God. God possessed this wisdom in the beginning of his way; “When he prepared the heavens, I was there”. As the opening verses of John's Gospel say, In the beginning was the Logos or Reason of God; the Logos was with God, rejoicing always before him, and that Logos, Reason, or Wisdom was God. Thus it was Christ himself who spoke the words of Proverbs: those that seek me early shall find me, and whoso findeth me, findeth life. Or as John says, “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.”

Against this background, against the identification of the wisdom of God as Jesus Christ, Paul in I Cor. 1:17,18 contrasts the preaching of God's wisdom with the foolishness of men. The preaching of God's wisdom, i.e. the preaching of the cross, seems like foolishness to perishing unbelievers; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God. How can an unbeliever evaluate the Cross of Christ? He rejects the Resurrection as superstition, and in the crucifixion, which of course he is willing to admit as an historical event, he can only see the injustice and meaninglessness of human history. Thus it was that the supposedly wise men of Athens mocked Paul and said, We will hear thee some other time. In thus turning from the Gospel, they fall under God's judgment, quoted in I Cor. 1:19 from Isaiah 29:14 “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of the world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

The Stoics and Epicureans, to whom Paul preached on Mars Hill, and in general all the Greek

and Roman philosophers of that century, were not so much physicists and astronomers, not so much scientists, not so much investigators of nature, as they were moralists. They made claim to a wisdom in living. They made claim to prudence. Theirs was what today is called a philosophy of life. Indeed some of them, the Stoics rather than the Epicureans, claimed to find God through their ethical endeavors. But is precisely at this point, precisely as they think they have found God, that their wisdom is revealed as foolishness. For it is not possible to find God by studying nature, nor by studying human nature. God is found and known only in his own wisdom, Jesus Christ. Thus it is that Paul says, Since, in the wisdom of God, the world by its wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by what seemed foolishness, the foolishness of preaching, to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified ... the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For this reason what often appears to be an unfortunate weakness in the Church turns out to be an indication of its genuineness. We often lament the fact that so few of the world's greatest people are found in the Church. So many scholars are not Christian. So many of the world's rulers are either not in Church or are in it only for political respectability. We also know many wealthy persons who might abundantly support out most worthy and needy projects. But this situation, which often seems so unfortunate to us is precisely the foolishness of God which is wiser than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called. Who belongs to the church, rich or poor, wise or foolish, is determined by God, and in keeping with the supposed foolishness of the Gospel, "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 despise, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence." (I Cor. I: 27-29) Thus the wisdom of God makes impossible the boasting of man. It is from God that Christians have their life in Jesus Christ. As Paul says, "Of him, i.e. of God, are ye in Christ Jesus" and also of Christ Paul says, "Christ Jesus who, of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." For this reason Paul can well say, "He that glorieth, or boasteth, let him glory in the Lord." In these words applied to Christ, we have the old prophecy of Jer. 9:23: "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."

It is therefore impossible for a man who boasts in the Lord to boast in his own wisdom too. If

he really has the wisdom of God, or, shall we say, if he has the real wisdom of God, he has no room for his own seeming wisdom. The wisdom of God unmask the wisdom of men and shows it to be a false wisdom. It is unmasked as utter folly. And though the people of the world continue to regard the Christian as superstitious, though they turn away with mocking as the Stoics and Epicureans turned away from Paul on Mars Hill, still, the man who has received the wisdom of God cannot wish to forsake God's wisdom to enjoy once more the approbation of the unbelieving world.

The approbation and the seeming wisdom of the unbelieving world are revealed to us as utter folly by one great event which this so-called wisdom of man produced. The wisdom of the world stands condemned by what it brought to pass on one great occasion. We speak of the wisdom of God, says Paul, We speak of the wisdom of God in a mystery, that is, the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory; but this hidden wisdom none of the princes of this world knew, for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. The week before Christ's crucifixion the princes of Israel thought it wise to put Christ to death. Annas, the High Priest, declared that it was expedient for one man to die for the people; that is, it was better to execute Christ than to have the Romans suppress them for acknowledging a new king. Pilate also, troubled though he was in the face of Christ's innocence, thought himself wise in granting the Pharisees demand and retaining his office over them. Such was human wisdom; but had they known the wisdom of God, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory.

For Christ is the wisdom of God and it was Christ whom they did not know. He stood before them, but they did not recognize him for what he was.

Christ stands before us likewise. He stands before us in the preaching of the Gospel, in the message of the Cross, in the presentation of Christ crucified. The sermon may not have any excellency of speech, and the preacher may be with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. But he preaches a faith that does not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. In the message of the Cross, the wisdom of God comes to us all. Can we recognize this wisdom for what it is? Or shall we, in the wisdom of men, crucify again the Lord of Glory?

I trust indeed that none of us shall do so. On the contrary, let us call upon God to make Christ our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, and our eternal redemption.