



According to Wisdom

1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Looking at many changes in the thought of the church over the centuries, one notes that as the society changed its way of thinking, the church adapted to those realities. Slavery was accepted within the church until forces from the outside demonstrated the inadequacy of the practiced concept. Racism between blacks and whites points to another example of the same phenomenon in which the church has learned from the larger society. The role and value of women indicates another example of social transformation. Too often society transforms the church, when the church should be the agent of change.

This is not a complete picture of the church, for many of those promoting social transformation were people of faith. The worry, however, is that in so many cases, those outside the church adopted such transformation of thought, many times coherent with the gospel, far before the majority of our religious institutions. We often follow a step behind society while we should be marking time for the world around us to follow.

Such should not be the reality of the church. God's plan is distinct and transformational. Paul speaks of a wisdom from which we should act in contrast to the pace of the society in which we live. It is from this greater wisdom that we should act as agents of positive transformation in this world. For this, Paul preached and worked in the cities of the Roman Empire. He was an agent of transformation in the societies through which he passed. The difference was that he did not use the tools of force and power that were so common among others. He lived amid a people who thought much of power, but Paul acted to effect change by accepting suffering and love as appropriate means of transformation. His wisdom was counter-culture and counter-intuitive.

Paul did not seek to transform the world through the vehicles of power and politics of the Roman Empire. He did not seek to take advantage of force, wealth, and coercion to effect change. He sought rather to transform the world one life at a time. This is not the pattern of our society, but it is the pattern of the gospel. Paul sought to have the church utilize the patterns and transformational motifs of divine wisdom to affect a new reality.

He was not ready to accept that the church learn from society. Beyond the church there were too many intrigues, conflicts, and searches for power and control. There was much unbridled living in search of wealth and power. There was violence on all sides, on the physical landscape, as well as on the emotional and economic ones. Lacking was love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Missing was the bridling of carnal passions and the controlling of momentary impulses. There was little desire to work for justice and integrity in dealing with the dispossessed and powerless. Empathy toward others was not the social norm, but the eventual rarity.

Very little did one think of Jesus Christ. Very little did one understand his walking in love, grace, mercy, and pardon. Very little did one accept hearing that God was ready to interact with humanity in an intimate and direct way. For many, God was impossibly far out of human reach. They thought somewhat badly of majority of their gods, viewing them as untrustworthy and temperamental. They acted according to their fear of the heavenly realm, seeking to avoid the attention of their gods, other than through well-established rites to gain positive attention. The gospel Paul lived and preached was a very different way of life. It transformed lives like Paul's, but also sought to transform the world.

At first blush, the gospel was foolishness. There we find Paul tortured once in a while, imprisoned or at least expelled from one more city. Many of the Jews persecuted him as well as others who had accepted his word of God's grace in Christ Jesus. It was not an attractive life for many. It was disconcerting to recognize that persecution awaited those who listened to the good news. It was torturous to accept that a believer would work for the good of others, expecting those others to attempt to harm the same believers. There was a cost to being an agent of transformation. There was a cost in accepting life according to divine wisdom which countered human wisdom.

The essence of this wisdom was already visible in the life of Christ Jesus. His character and his attitudes were demonstrations of God's plan and wisdom regarding our living and interacting on earth. He was the transforming agent in our coming before God, as well as of human interaction through His love and grace. He came to offer us a new model for living. He came to demonstrate the supreme example of valuing all peoples without concern for the social distinctions so many valued.

In Corinth there was a particular problem with social distinctions. In the scope of his letter to Corinth, Paul addresses himself to dealing with the problems occasioned by their system of placing one group ahead of another. There were conflicts regarding speaking in tongues, following one or another church leader, and economic classes. Paul had to stop to remind these brothers and sisters that all had been called by Christ into one body. Their distinctions were worthless in the face of the gospel. Their distinctions and arguments had much to do with the worries of society, but had nothing to do with the gospel of Christ Jesus. The grace of God ignored all these distinctions, for it considered that all without exception were in need of the very same grace and the same equalizing forgiveness of Christ.

The gospel did not arrive in the molds of power and authority according to the wisdom of the world. It did not follow the patterns of wealth according to social economics. It did not stop to trace distinctions between slaves and free, men and women, Jews and Gentiles. It recognized that, without exception, each one had the same need before God. One's knowledge did not matter. One's economic situation, skin color, number of children, marital status, and social class did not matter. There was nothing to gain with having political resources and access. None of that mattered before God. What mattered was giving oneself into God's hands to be transformed from within.

In this internal transformation, began the process of transforming society all around. It was not through political means or the social institutions that this change arrived, but through the change in individual lives. Transformation passed from one to another until in a few decades it would transform the society such that the people would stop participating in the pagan worship and sacrifices throughout the region. On living with Christ, Jesus' way of life flowed into individuals, influencing others.

They transformed society as they allowed Christ to transform their way of interacting among themselves and with others. They allowed the example of Christ Jesus be seen in their lives. Giving the example of his unrestricted grace and love, their society could see in them a distinct mode of operating, a distinct pattern of offering others God's grace and love. This was not the norm of society's wisdom, but it was living according to a divine wisdom, sufficient to transform the world in accordance with the life of Christ Jesus. Are we ready to exchange mundane wisdom for that of Christ? It is the only way to advance the transformation we truly need, transforming us into agents of God's transformational grace. That is living according to God's wisdom.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*