

'Cross-shaped wisdom'

A Biblical Theology Briefing

1 Corinthians 1

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I recently preached at the commissioning of two dear friends of mine who have now gone as missionaries to work as ministers in a church in Malaysia, serving the gospel of our Lord. These people have left their comfort, their lifestyle, their careers; they have moved away from those they love (and many of those who love them, like myself). I am told that Christian work in Malaysia is like this: it's hot and humid, they get paid barely enough to live on, husband and wife are expected by their church to work tremendously long hours with only a few hours of sleep a night (the wife is expecting her second child), and nobody respects them really because they're not doing anything worthwhile or socially respectable. Furthermore, if it's proved that they have spoken about Jesus to a Muslim, then they risk jail under the laws of the Malaysian states who interpret the constitution.

Frankly, it's insane, it's senseless and it's irrational. These people are foolish... in the eyes of the world. But I preached on wisdom, from 1 Corinthians 1. And we discovered, as we looked at this text in its Old Testament context, that they are doing the *wisest*, most sensible, sane, reasonable, prudent, practical thing they could possibly be doing.

1 Corinthians 1 in literary and theological context

Smit has outlined a helpful structure for 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21, based on syntactical considerations.¹ Following an introduction, in which the themes of 'Word' (λόγος) 'wisdom' (σοφία) and party strife (especially between Paul and Apollos) are introduced, there are four major sections. Each section has a rhetorical argument followed by a personal address from Paul to the Corinthians. Section I (1:18-2:5) is about 'word' (λόγος): Paul contends that his initial visit to Corinth was in conformity with God's reason, not human reason. Section II (2:6-3:4) is about 'wisdom' (σοφία): Paul contends that the Corinthians themselves lack God's wisdom, whereas he, Paul, has God's wisdom. Section III (3:5-4:5) seems to shift ground to an argument about Paul and Apollos: Paul challenges the party strife by contending that they all belong to Christ, not to individual men. Once this is established Section IV (4:6-21) is Paul's attempt to show that he does, indeed, have authority over them in Christ. The sections are linked by important keywords. Smit's structure shows that the relationship between 'word', 'wisdom' and party strife is the major concern of the discourse.

What is 'wisdom'? The word covers a broad range of concepts. In the OT, it was used to refer to reflective thought, articulate discourse and skilled action.² These three aspects are also present in 1 Corinthians: thought (1:19), discourse (1:17; 2:1, 4, 6, 13; 6:5; 12:8), and skill (3:10). Thus when applied to God, wisdom can refer to God's plan for salvation (1:21)³ or to the actual enactment of this plan, the 'stuff of salvation' (1:24, 30; 8:6).⁴ Paul's inclusion of the cross in his discussion of wisdom (1:17-18, 23; 2:2, 8) is striking given that wisdom and crucifixion were utterly antithetical in the ancient world. Hengel's detailed study shows that crucifixion was widespread, extremely cruel and inflicted mainly on the despised lower classes as a deterrent against the undermining of law and order. It was the most extreme form of public humiliation (social and ethical). Hence the 'folly' of the cross is not metaphorical: the cross would have been a sharp, provoking instrument for Paul's preaching that would have met with real opposition in the mind, speech and action of his listeners.⁵

False trails

Much of the scholarship (discussed below) is interested in trying to find out what the exact situation was in Corinth. The theory seems to be that if we can find out exactly what was happening then, we can look for parallel situations now and apply the text to those situations. This isn't necessarily a bad place to start. But in this case, there are two problems with this approach. Firstly, it's notoriously difficult to work out what was happening in Corinth. The scholarship has ended up with a host of rival theories rather than helpful applications. Some believe Paul was countering Gnosticism, others that he was trying to unite Jew and Gentile, others that he was trying to defend himself against adherents of Apollos who were undermining his ministry, others that he is just trying to keep the peace like a good statesman. But more importantly, this approach generally doesn't reckon with the way that Paul actually ends up solving the problem—by the use of the Old Testament Scriptures.

Another temptation for the preacher might be to fail to capture the breadth of the biblical idea of 'wisdom', and so to reduce the word 'wisdom' in this passage to a single idea, like practical know-how or ethical action or political prudence. In that case, the centrepiece of the passage (i.e. the cross of Christ) would have little to do with the application (e.g. be good, be united, etc.).

The difference the Scriptures make

The fact that Paul deliberately quotes from the OT using the word *γέγραπται*, 'it stands written' (1:19, 31; 2:9; 3:19) with the perfect tense (denoting ongoing relevance) should not be treated lightly.⁶ This is further enhanced by Paul's description of the purpose (*ἵνα*) of his discussion (*ταῦτα*): 'that you may learn in our [case]: "Not beyond that which stands written" (*τὸ μὴ ὑπὲρ ἃ γέγραπται*)' (4:6). This has been variously explained,⁷ but the most straightforward reading is that Paul's discussion has aimed to show (*ἵνα*) that the Scriptures, particularly those he has referred to, are necessary and sufficient for the prevention (*ἵνα μὴ*) of strife.

Williams has undertaken an important study into Paul's use of Scripture in this section of 1 Corinthians, showing that it is a significant factor that must be taken into account alongside the historical situation in Corinth.⁸ Paul uses Scripture (primarily Isaiah, and also Jeremiah and Daniel) with a high respect for its original context, but interprets it in relation to 'the Christian time era or the Christ event.'⁹ Oropeza's study shows that 1 Corinthians 1-4 is imbued with Isaianic themes, and that this is consistent with Paul's thinking in terms of apocalyptic time frames (1 Cor 1:4-9; 15:20-28, 51-55; 16:22) with its characteristic 'temporal dualism'.¹⁰ Paul is fighting against a wrong eschatology, which was leading to moral misbehaviour and divisive conduct.¹¹ As we shall see, both 'wisdom' and 'rule' are significant motifs in each of the scriptural contexts from which Paul draws his teaching.

The book of Isaiah has a discernible 'trajectory' which takes place across the book as a whole and within its individual sections.¹² This trajectory takes us from the existing world order (with its ruling powers: Israel, Assyria and Babylon) to a new world order established by God. It takes place via demolition and reconstruction, judgment and salvation, in that paradoxical order. Its crucial transformative event is the forgiveness that comes through the discipline of a suffering servant, and it climaxes in God's Spirit-empowered servants being sent out (e.g. Isa 61:1) to preach the same two-edged message which divides the world into two groups: the judged and the saved.¹³

In Isaiah, there are therefore two types of wisdom: human and divine. Both types of wisdom are ultimately attempts at salvation.¹⁴ There is the human 'wisdom' of the nations (*ἔθνη*, cf 1 Cor 1:23): their rulers (Isa 10:12-14, *ἄρχοντες* 19:11 cf 1 Cor 2:6) and their advisers (*σοφοὶ*, Isa 19:11-12), which will be brought to nothing (cf 1 Cor 1:20). There is also the human 'wisdom' of those within Israel who recommend trust in foreign rulers, the advisers (*σοφοὶ* and *συνετοὶ* Isa 29:14, 1 Cor 1:19) and scribes (*γραμματικοί*, Isa 33:18);¹⁵ this, too, will be brought to nothing (1 Cor 1:19-20), for they are, in fact, oppressive enemies of the Messiah and God's people.¹⁶ Perhaps Paul's intention in his

series of three questions in 1 Cor 1:20 is to identify the debater of his own era of salvation-history (συζητητής τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου) with these ‘wise’ enemies from Isaiah’s time. Aligning one’s self only with a human preacher is, in fact, a disastrous human attempt at salvation.¹⁷

Divine wisdom is also on show in Isaiah. There is a messianic figure introduced in 11:1, a ‘shoot from the stump of Jesse’, whose first characteristic is that the Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel and might will rest upon him (cf 1 Cor 2:10).¹⁸ Even though the ‘wise’ in Israel were blind and deaf (Isa 28:7, 12; 29:9-14; 30:9-11; 33:18), when Israel is restored and her righteous king reappears, the blind and deaf will see and hear again (Isa 29:18, 30:20-22, 32:1-5, 33:17-22).¹⁹ This king will put into effect God’s plan of salvation, which is independent of human wisdom (Isa 40:13-14, quoted in 1 Cor 2:16). But, significantly, this salvific plan will come about in a strange and marvellous way. A suffering servant will come, and will suffer vicariously as a sacrifice for the sins of the people. This servant shall be wise (συνήσει, Isa 52:13), and by his knowledge (συνέσει) he will justify many (Isa 53:11). In this way, he will silence and amaze the rulers of the nations (Isa 52:15, alluded to in 1 Cor 2:9).²⁰ So the eschatological judgment, salvation and vindication of those who wait patiently for God is an amazing, unheard-of, unimaginable act of God’s wisdom (Isa 64:6, cf 1 Cor 2:9).

Von Rad is surely right to see an eschatological development of the Wisdom motif in the Jewish apocalyptic literature (including Daniel).²¹ The apocalyptic hiddenness of God’s wisdom, which must be revealed in dreams to the apocalyptic seer, is a theme of Daniel, especially 2:19-23 which contains many of the themes in 1 Cor 2:6-11.²² The Messiah, disguised to those who are not God’s people, is the chief figure of salvation.²³ The rulers of this age in Daniel are human kingdoms; in Paul they are human authorities.²⁴ In Daniel, the mature (cf 1 Cor 2:6) are those who look towards the endpoint of God’s plan, the outcome of the conflict between human kingdoms and God’s kingdom.²⁵ Paul has combined two strong apocalyptic motifs: special revelation to the apocalyptic seer, and the fact that historical events are the carrying out of God’s powerful plan.²⁶

Space forbids an exploration of Paul’s use of numerous other Scriptural quotations and allusions in 1 Corinthians 1-4. In 1:31, he quotes from Jeremiah 9:23-24, which has similar themes to those in Isaiah. In 3:19-20, he quotes from Israel’s wisdom literature itself (Job 5:13 and a ‘wisdom’ Psalm 94:11) to show the supremacy of God’s wisdom over human wisdom. These Scriptural references combine with those from Isaiah and Daniel to give the unmistakable impression that Scripture, interpreted in the light of the cross of the suffering servant / Messiah Jesus Christ, is necessary and sufficient to understand how Christians should think and act in the present age (4:6).

The ‘wisdom’ that discerns this world order is different, and even opposed, to the God-given wisdom that discerns God’s new world order. Thus human ‘power’ in speech and factionalism is the antithesis of God’s new world order, brought about by the cross. In this new world order, one cannot say “‘I am of Paul”, or “‘I am of Apollos”, or “‘I am of Cephas”, or [even] “‘I am of Christ”” in the style of factions (1:12). Instead, God’s wisdom, supremely demonstrated in the death and resurrection of the Suffering Servant, has turned the times and powers and authorities upside down and placed them all in submission to Christ and his people. Hence, ‘everything is of you: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; everything is of you; and you are of Christ; and Christ is of God.’ (3:21-23). This is the wisdom of God; the wisdom of the cross.

Sermon structure

First, I raised the issue of wisdom in the concrete situation of my friend who were going as missionaries to Malaysia (I’ve called them X & Y)

I want to ask you a question now about X & Y. You don’t have to answer out loud. But please think about your answer to this question. The question is this: Are they being wise?

I know there's lots of other things we could call them: Kind, generous, bold, admirable, courageous, inspiring, good-looking ... But are they being wise? Are they being sensible, sane, reasonable, prudent, practical, in their decision to go to Malaysia?

We should expect them to be wise, of course. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says that:

'It is because of him [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.'

Christ Jesus is wisdom from God. So those who believe in Jesus, those who are righteous and holy and redeemed, should be wise. So are these our brother and sister being wise?

I went for a quick biblical definition of wisdom, trying to capture the scope of the OT concept.

The bible talks a lot about wisdom. Wisdom in the Bible is really the art of 'Understanding the shape of the world and acting appropriately'. A wise farmer knows the right season to plant his crops. A wise builder knows what sort of foundation to build his house on.

But a truly wise person doesn't just understand the shape of the physical world. A truly wise person will also understand the shape of the society around him. Wisdom isn't just what you know but who you know. The wise person knows who's in charge. Who calls the shots. The wise person knows who pours the tea [A Chinese illustration!]. The wise person knows how to be in the right place at the right time. To make sure that he or she is seen by those who call the shots. To do the work, to get the favours. Wisdom is power in this world we live in.

Now some context from 1 Corinthians, with a little explanation of what I thought was the historical background (although my application is not absolutely tied to this theory).

In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul was writing to people who thought they were wise. The city of Corinth made a big deal about powerful speakers. People who wielded power through winning debates and giving persuasive talks. These speakers built up big followings, fan clubs, and in Corinthian society, what really mattered was which celebrity speaker you belonged to. The social shape of the world was built around these celebrity speakers and their clubs.

In fact, the Corinthians who Paul was writing to were even treating their own Christian teachers like celebrity speakers. See 1 Corinthians 1:12:

'What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."'

The 'wisdom' of Corinth was all about following powerful speakers

Then I tried to broaden the application

What is the wisdom of our world like? We do sort of have celebrity clubs, but our world has other sorts of wisdom too.

There's the wisdom of the family: The father or the mother is in charge, the sons and daughters need to submit and obey.

There's the wisdom of the career: it's the company bosses who are in charge, and the 'wise' career builder needs to understand the shape of the business world. They have to go to the right school and study hard, go to the right university, live in the right country, join the right company, work for the right boss, to get ahead and get the money and the power and the toys

There's the wisdom of lifestyle: following the right trends, having the right kitchen

There's also the wisdom of social order: the wise person knows how to keep the peace, not rock the boat. The wise person will follow the directives of Prime Minister John Howard and Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. The wise person will not do or say anything to cause

disharmony. The wise person will quietly remove himself from tense social situations to live a more peaceful quiet, pleasure-loving life

That is the wisdom of our world

Then I introduced Paul's discussion of wisdom in the context of the cross

But you see, Paul was talking about a completely different type of wisdom.

'It is because of him [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.' (1 Corinthians 1:30)

Paul is talking about wisdom from God. Not the wisdom of celebrity clubs, or career, or lifestyle, or family, or social order, but the wisdom of God.

God knows the shape of the world better than anybody, and God had revealed his wisdom to Paul. Paul knew the true shape of the world. Paul understood that God is the creator of the world. God has the ultimate power, far beyond any celebrity speakers or Prime Ministers or career bosses. Paul also understood that human beings have rebelled against God, as they play their power games. Paul understood that God will judge the world—He has set a day when he will call all people to account. He won't let human power games go on forever. He'll demand a personal account for the life of every human being

More than that, Paul understood that God has already taken charge of this world. God has sent his Son Jesus into this world, and Jesus has shown himself to the world as God's king, the one who really calls the shots.

But the thing is, Jesus acted completely differently from all other human powers. Jesus didn't come to be a celebrity speaker or a career boss.

But Jesus came to suffer. Jesus came to suffer. To die to take God's anger for our rebellion upon himself. Then to rise as the ruler of this world. So that those who follow Jesus will be rescued from God's anger

God had revealed this wisdom to Paul, and Paul was proclaiming it

I then looked back at Isaiah 52-53, which speaks about the ministry of the Suffering Servant in terms of 'wisdom'

Now God had predicted this wisdom, hundreds of years before, through the prophet Isaiah

Isaiah says this:

*'See, my servant will act **wisely**. He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him—His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man And his form marred beyond human likeness— So will he sprinkle many nations, Kings will shut their mouths because of him ...*

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. Yet we considered him stricken by God. Smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. And by his wounds, we are healed ...

it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, And though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering he will see his offspring and prolong his days and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

*After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied, and by his **wisdom** my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities...' (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)*

This is the wisdom of God. This is the shape of the world according to God. The person who's in charge of the world is God's suffering servant, Jesus, who suffered to rescue us, to make us right with God. And so Paul says 1 Corinthians 1:30

'It is because of him [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.'

Then an explanation of how this is seen to be foolish by the world

So God displays his unbelievable cleverness, by sending his suffering servant Jesus, in a way that the powerful people of this world would never, ever have guessed. Right under their noses, God has pulled off his ultimate act of power, his ultimate rescue. Not by the wisdom of social order. Not by the wisdom of celebrities or kings. But by the wisdom of suffering. The wisdom of suffering.

Right now, that wisdom looks foolish to the rulers of this world. To the kings, to the celebrities, to those climbing the corporate ladder, to those who are going to be judged by God and don't know it. To those who think that the world is all about human power and money and prestige and comfort and order. To them, Jesus' death on the cross doesn't look like wisdom at all; it just looks like absurd, senseless, incomprehensible garbage. This is what Paul says verses 18-25:

'For 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. For it is written [in Isaiah]:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate"

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.'

X & Y, they believe in Christ crucified. They know that the world is cross-shaped. They are proclaiming a cross-shaped message, and they are living cross-shaped lives. They are leaving their comfort, their lifestyle, their careers, They are moving away from those they love, and many of those who love them. And that distance fills us with grief.

I followed with a description of how tough it is to be a minister in Malaysia (see introduction, above)

And frankly, it's insane, senseless and irrational. It is foolishness ... to those who are perishing. Because it is not the wisdom of the world. It's the wisdom of God. It's the wisdom of Jesus Christ.

X & Y are cross-wise. They have truly understood the shape of the world. That God's world is a cross-shaped world. They know who is in charge, and it's not the company, the country, the elder, the bishop. It's the man who suffered and rose from the dead, it's Jesus. And as they preach about this man who suffered, their lives are a living witness to their message

Of course, the world's rulers will see their wisdom. On that day, when God judges this whole world through Jesus, every eye will see, every knee will bow, every tongue will confess, whether willingly or grudgingly, that Jesus Christ who died on the cross is Lord. The kings of the earth will see, the celebrities will see, the CEO's will see, the Prime Ministers will see. One day they will all see. They will all know, that X & Y are doing the wisest, most sensible, sane, reasonable, prudent, practical thing they could possibly be doing. They are proclaiming Christ crucified to a

world that doesn't want to know, but a world desperately, desperately, needs to hear. Because Christ crucified is the world's only hope of salvation

Then I tried to apply this wisdom to the hearers. I was not trying to work out how their situation was exactly the same as the historical situation of the Corinthians (e.g. avoid disunity; don't be a Gnostic, etc.). Rather, I was trying to help them apply the 'cross-shaped' wisdom from God to their current situation—whatever it was.

Let me ask that question again. Do you think that X & Y are being wise? Or do you think they are fools? If these people do look like fools to you, Then it may well be that you are perishing

'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.' (1 Corinthians 1:18)

So if you do think that it's foolish to suffer for the sake of this message, it's probably because you think the message itself is foolish. And if you think that the message of Jesus' suffering for us on the cross to pay for our sins is foolish, then you've rejected the one person who can save you from God's anger. And that means that you are perishing.

But if you believe they are wise, then the wisest thing to do would be to wise-up and follow their example, wouldn't it? What is wisdom? 'Understanding the shape of the world and acting appropriately' The world, friends, is cross-shaped. Acting appropriately means trusting in the one who died for us on the cross, and living the life of the cross. And it's not just for missionaries, is it?

It could be you need to rethink that career you are chasing. Why do you want it? Is it because you think that the world is all about working for the right person, living in the right country? Is it because you want a comfortable life, a happy existence? Jesus has proved that that way of thinking is completely senseless and foolish. X & Y need people to help them proclaim Jesus. And I'm sure if you could get a job in Sydney, you could get one in Malaysia, couldn't you? Maybe lower paid, maybe harder, maybe not as fun. But of course, you'd be working for the right person then, wouldn't you? You'd be in the service of Jesus, the king of the world.

Wherever we are, whatever we are doing day by day, we need to give thanks for these our friends, our brothers and sisters. We need to pray for them. We need to tell them that we know, we understand, why they are doing this. We need to support them and share with them whatever we can. We need to keep remembering that X & Y are wise, they are wiser than their elders, wiser than kings. They are going to a world that needs to be saved from God's anger, and they are bringing that salvation through their message and through their lives.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. (1 Corinthians 1:25)

A discussion of the resources I used

While it is difficult to pin down exactly what the situation in Corinth was, there is a wealth of material out there to help, and we can have some degree of confidence in the results. The following discussion should be treated as an appendix to this Biblical Theology Briefing.

Older solutions to the problem of the historical situation at Corinth proposed that Paul was aiming to counter a form of Gnosticism or proto-Gnosticism. Horsley, for example, argues that Paul is facing a teaching based on the Jewish wisdom tradition that believes in a spiritual salvific power called Sophia.²⁷ Eloquence was an important element of this tradition (especially in Philo), even though empty Sophistry was rejected.²⁸ Hence 'words of wisdom' (1:17, 2:1, 2:4) are eloquent words imparted by Sophia.²⁹ The eloquent Apollos had not helped matters. 'Through [his] ministry some of the Corinthians apparently had come to regard the (Christian) gospel as wisdom, the leaders as teachers of wisdom, themselves as wise'.³⁰ However, Paul does not want to be viewed as a wisdom teacher, because he is concerned with Christ crucified, not eloquence (1:17-18). His

solution is to take Gnostic language and turn it on its head. So, for example, in 2:6, when Paul says that he speaks wisdom among the ‘mature’ (τέλειοι), he is using a Gnostic term that means spiritually advanced souls, but ironically referring to those who listen to his gospel message. Conversely, he refers to the Corinthians using the Gnostic terminology for less advanced souls, ‘infants’ (νήπιοι, 3:1).³¹

Kovacs rejects this theory, because it has to assume that Paul got too carried away with his Gnostic parody to the point of sounding Gnostic himself.³² For Kovacs, 1 Cor 2:6-16 is Paul’s own *apocalyptic* interpretation of the death of Christ, not a parody of hidden Gnostic wisdom. The ‘cross’ is the key to the passage, not the idea of ‘the mature’.³³ Thus

‘The hidden wisdom of which Paul speaks in 1 Cor. 2.6ff. is not, as in Gnostic texts, a speculation on the origin and destiny of the elect soul, nor is it concerned to identify a Christian elite, as several interpreters suggest. It is concerned with God’s plan for salvation and judgment, a plan carried out in the arena of history.’³⁴

The core problem, according to Kovacs, is not Gnosticism but a wrong eschatology which is countered by the proclamation of the cross of Christ (as we have seen already from Isaiah).

Another, related, set of solutions to the puzzle stems from the hypothesis (given great impetus by F. C. Baur in the nineteenth century) that one can discern a fundamental division between followers of a Jewish, Law-based, Petrine Christianity and those of a Hellenic, Law-free, Pauline Christianity.³⁵ Grayson, for example, posits that the Cephas/Christ party was treating the words of the historical Jesus (λόγος) as a new Torah (νόμος). They were basing wisdom (σοφία) upon it, and rejecting Paul and Apollos whose teaching centred on the liberating freedom that comes through the preaching of the cross. But for Paul, wisdom is not based on Jesus’ instructions (1:17, οὐκ ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου) but on the proclamation of the cross (1:18).³⁶ Davis’ thesis is similar, but identifies λόγος directly with the law. Documents from the Jewish wisdom tradition (Ben Sirach, Qumran, Philo) show a common theme: wisdom is identified with Torah, is only available to certain elite groups via the Spirit, and is associated with eloquence.³⁷ Davis detects an argument against this ‘nomistic’ wisdom in 1 Corinthians. It has been superseded by an entirely new Christological wisdom, for the judgment of the law has fallen on Christ.³⁸ Schnabel, too, sees the ‘wisdom’ in Corinth through a Hellenistic Jewish sapiential matrix, which relativises the cross of Christ, strips it of its uniqueness and so empties it of its effectiveness (1:17).³⁹

There are a number of problems with this reconstruction. Firstly, although λόγος could possibly be taken to mean instructions from the Torah or Jesus, its cognate verb λέγω is applied to a variety of speech acts, even to the words of those who follow Paul and Apollos (1:10, 12, 15; 3:4). Secondly, it is difficult to detect any direct diatribe from Paul against law-based Christianity. The vocabulary he uses elsewhere to denigrate reliance on the law (such as ‘law’ and ‘works’, Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; Rom 3:20, 27-28) is completely absent from 1 Corinthians 1-4. Later in the epistle, when he does refer to νόμος, he draws positive ethical applications (9:8, 9; 14:21, 34). Finally, the reconstruction requires a ‘hidden agenda’ on Paul’s part, for he does not attack Peter (Cephas) as he does in Galatians 2:11-16. Rather, he picks up on the name Apollos (3:4-6). Goulder, who seeks to defend this view, argues that Paul used Apollos as an ‘easy example’ of unity and left the Corinthians to draw their own conclusions about Cephas (3:22).⁴⁰ However, as Tuckett observes, Goulder’s extensive thesis breaks down under the weight of complexity. Again, it is much simpler to see a wrong eschatology as the Corinthians’ problem, and to take Paul’s critiques at face value.⁴¹

Ker and Smit take Paul’s discussion of Apollos seriously, and believe that the primary problem in Corinth was that adherents of Apollos were undermining Paul’s authority.⁴² Smit believes that Paul’s founding visit was being criticised for lack of philosophical finesse (2:1, 3; 3:1-2); Apollos was the logical, philosophical one (Acts 18:24, an ἄνθρωπος λόγιος); his adherents loved his wisdom based on human reason (σοφία λόγου, 1:17). Paul’s gospel, however, was denigrated because it was one of paradox (1:18-31) and hiddenness (2:6-16).⁴³ Ker believes that Paul ultimately favours the

‘Paul party’ (1:12).⁴⁴ Smit is more balanced—Paul is at pains to express both the unity (3:5, 7-9, 22) and the right order between himself as founding father and Apollos as guardian and waterer (3:6, 10; 4:14-15).⁴⁵ However, both agree that in a volatile situation, Paul cannot assert his fatherly authority outright. He must be covert and indirect.⁴⁶ Paul thus employs a wordplay which subtly compares Apollos’ adherents (ΑΠΟΛΛΩ, 1:12) to those who are perishing (ΑΠΟΛΛΥΜΕΝΟΙΣ, 1:18) and the wisdom that God will destroy (ΑΠΟΛΛΩ, 1:19).⁴⁷ His subsequent references to two types of ‘wisdom’ are then references to the human wisdom of Apollos’ adherents (1:20-22; 2:1, 4-5, 13; 3:19) and the paradoxical wisdom of Paul’s proclamation of the cross (1:21, 24, 30; 2:6-7).

Unfortunately, this solution also suffers from a tendency to subvert the plain meaning of the text. ‘At one level of reading the text there is no problem [. . .] But there are other possibilities’.⁴⁸ One wonders if Ker and Smit should have taken more seriously the saying ‘not beyond what is written’ (4:6) in their own reading of Paul! Apollos is never denigrated by Paul; he is simply given his rightful position, united in purpose and distinct in role (3:6-9). Apollos is Paul’s ‘brother’ (16:12), which is a characteristic term of warmth and Christian unity (1:1, 10-11, 26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 5:11; 6:5-6, 8; 7:12, 15, 24, 29; 8:11-13; 9:5; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6, 20, 26, 39; 15:1, 6, 31, 50, 58; 16:11-12, 15, 20) despite Ker’s plea that this verse sounds a bit chilly.⁴⁹ On the contrary, Paul’s own *self*-denigration is intriguing (1:13-16; 3:4-5, 22; 4:1). Elsewhere, Paul is not afraid to openly command allegiance to his own teaching and put others’ down, even in the face of opposition (Gal 1:6-9, 2:11, 5:10-12, 6:12-13; Phil 3:2; 2 Cor 11:4, 13-15). But here, he distances himself from such allegiance. Something else is going on.⁵⁰

There is evidence that we should take the plural σχίσματα (1:10) and the mention of four names (1:12) at face value and admit more than one fault line in the Corinthian community. There are places where Paul admits distinction between himself and other authorities, but deliberately closes off any suggestion of division. For example, he admits the existence of two sources of teaching: ‘the Lord’s’ (7:10, cf. 7:25) and his own (7:12, 25), but then goes on to assert their complementarity (7:35) and equal authority (7:40). He also admits two sorts of post-resurrection appearance of Christ: that to Cephas then others (15:5-7), and that to himself ‘as to one abnormally born’ (15:8), but then goes on to assert that the resulting proclamation and belief is the same in either case (15:11). It would be too much to claim definitively that these are the respective issues behind the ‘Christ’ and ‘Cephas’ parties (1:12), but it does show the existence of other divisions undermines the identification of a wisdom-loving ‘Apollos party’ as the sole source of division.

We might seek for an answer in 4:6, where Paul himself explains the procedure (μετεσχημάτισα) and purpose (ἵνα [. . .] ἵνα) of his previous discussion (ταῦτα). Unfortunately, this verse has proved notoriously difficult!⁵¹ The possible use of a well-known rhetorical device called λόγος ἐσχηματισμένος ‘figure of speech’, or ‘covert allusion’ has been noted,⁵² apparently providing a license for us to read between the lines in the previous discussion (as many have done). However, if it is such a device, Paul is not using it in the traditional way—by naming it its covert nature is nullified!⁵³ Also, the word is not σχηματίζω but μετασχηματίζω which in all its other occurrences means either ‘transform the shape’ or ‘disguise’. If it meant ‘covert allusion’, then this would be unique.⁵⁴ We prefer to translate literally, ‘I have transformed the shape’ of the previous discussion. That is, Paul has transformed a discussion of σχίσματα in general (1:10-3:3) to focus on a particular σχίσμα—a fault line between Paul’s and Apollos’ complementary ministries (3:4-17)—and then widened the discussion again to σχίσματα in general (3:18-23), applying it to the issue of how to view any leader—as a servant of Christ, not a hero to be examined or applauded (4:1-5). In this way, *nobody* may be puffed up on account of *any* particular leaders against any other (4:6).

Other solutions see the very existence of σχίσματα as the root problem in Corinth. Welborn downplays doctrinal differences in favour of a sociological model based on conflicts in Greco-Roman city-states.⁵⁵ His analysis is based on a comparison of Paul’s terminology with that used by Greco-Roman historians. Paul’s goal is not the refutation of heresy, but the prevention of *στᾶσις* (strife, discord, uprising or rebellion).⁵⁶ 1:10 is ‘a mere call to consensus [. . .] hence his use of

καταρτίζειν'.⁵⁷ In 1:20, the 'debater' (συζητητής) is the clever 'rhetor' who creates discord in the Greek city state.⁵⁸ 'Wisdom' is a claim by the rhetors to possess higher knowledge, which led to an elitism that reflected itself in political struggles. Paul had to claim wisdom for himself in order to regain his position as teacher and guide, so that he could call for an end to the factions (2:6-16).⁵⁹ Welborn's study is a helpful reminder that human politics cannot be separated from theological disputes, but he is too quick to dismiss any possibility that the problem is more than sociological. In 1:20, he notes that the use of 'wise man' and 'scribe' from the OT background. However, it is only the third term, 'debater' (συζητητής), that has any significance, proving that '[t]he σοφία which Paul fears will undermine the community is nothing other than rhetoric'.⁶⁰ Welborn also notes a theological move by Paul: 'The strife of the factions is no petty quarrel [. . .] but a mirror of the cosmic conflict between the rulers of this age and the power of God.'⁶¹ However, Welborn is not impressed by this 'eschatological gesture' which masks 'the reality of political conflict'.⁶²

Pogoloff and Winter have provided a more convincing model for the situation at Corinth, following the patterns of Greco-Roman rhetorical / sophistic rivalries. Pogoloff argues that σοφία λόγου (1:17) means 'cultured speech'.⁶³ The wisdom that Paul is opposing is rhetorical skill, which was seen as the possession of certain individuals who formed cult followings. Paul and Apollos, among others, had therefore become foci of divisive rivalries over status. This had theological implications: 'rhetoric enhanced by practical skills' empties the cross because it stops the cross from being an act of pure grace that any social class can access.

Winter provides a more comprehensive picture of first century sophistry, and argues that Paul's discussion of wisdom is a point-by-point refutation of aspects of sophistic behaviour. Possibly Apollos' own use of rhetoric at Corinth had incited sophistic-style factionalism.⁶⁴ Sophists (σοφισταί), when they came, announced their own renown, extemporised, and used rhetoric with great flair.⁶⁵ They inspired a particular commitment and zeal for themselves amongst their disciples.⁶⁶ The terms ζήλος and ἔρις (1:11, 3:3) are terms for Sophistic discipleship, also used by Philo to oppose Sophists' love of form over content.⁶⁷ But Paul turns all the sophistic and rhetorical terminology on its head.⁶⁸ He needed no 'topic' to extemporise upon and so prove his rhetorical superiority (2:1); he had a message already to proclaim (2:2). He had no renown, but used weak, afraid, trembling oratory (2:3). He inspired confidence (πίστις, 2:5), not by the 'power' (δύναμις, 2:5) of 'persuasion' (πειθώ, 2:4) or rhetorical skill, but by the 'clear proof' (ἀπόδειξις) of the work of the Spirit in the listeners (2:4). He reverses the pattern of sophistic boasting (3:18-23)⁶⁹ and urges the Corinthians to 'imitate' him and 'boast' in him (as the Sophists did their leaders)—but in sufferings and afflictions, in the way of the cross (4:6-21).⁷⁰ Rhetoric would empty the cross (1:17) because sophistic methods would overshadow the message itself.⁷¹

The picture of sophistic-style factionalism at Corinth is a convincing one, but it should be noted that Paul is not *just* dissociating himself from a sophistic valuing of form over content.⁷² For 'in the mind of the first-century Graeco-Roman listener, education and eloquence were bound together'.⁷³ Hellenistic Jews, too, would agree that 'by speech (λόγῳ) shall wisdom (σοφία) be known' (Sir 4:24). Rather, Paul is arguing against the whole worldview (σοφία) expressed by the speech pattern (λόγος) of sophistry; a worldview that exalts human power in both form and content. The cross is the power of salvation that appears as weakness, and the speech pattern (λόγος) of the cross therefore takes a cruciform shape.⁷⁴ In order to nullify any human attempt at self-salvation, God 'chose a means of revelation actually contradictory to [human] wisdom—the foolish proclamation of a crucified Savior (1:21b).'⁷⁵ Instead of explaining human logic by human means, in 2:13 he explains spiritual things (πνευματικὰ) by spiritual means (πνευματικοῖς). Therefore, the truth of the cross 'cannot be *achieved* through the best of human intellect and strength but must be *received* as a gift in the humble submission of faith and trust.'⁷⁶ In fact, Paul's own writing is highly rhetorical, but its rhetoric subverts sophistic speech and therefore sophistic wisdom.⁷⁷

The existence of sophistic factions, therefore, is a spiritual, theological problem *in and of itself*. It is not *just* that the Sophistic divisions were in *danger* of falsifying Paul's doctrine by their *potential*

for men to rely on rhetorical skill rather than the gospel message.⁷⁸ Grindheim explains this theological problem in terms of the mysterious and irresolvable ‘paradox’ between human wisdom and God’s gospel. The gospel is all about the reversal of values, and must therefore be received in the paradox of Christ crucified by those who abandon attempts to excel by worldly standards.⁷⁹ Grindheim rejects any notions of redemptive history in Paul’s account.⁸⁰ However, redemptive history is hard to escape in 2:7-8: God’s wisdom is described as ‘predetermined before the ages’; and God’s purpose in hiding it is to ensure that a specific historical event (the crucifixion of the Lord of Glory by the rulers of this age) takes place. The connection between the sophistic factions and wisdom must be explained in terms of redemptive history and eschatology, as we have already alluded to above.⁸¹ This connection can be seen much more clearly when we examine Paul’s use of the OT Scriptures. In fact, as we have seen, 1 Corinthians presents a Scriptural answer to sophistic factionalism.

¹ Joop F. M. Smit, “‘What Is Apollos? What Is Paul?’: in Search for the Coherence of First Corinthians 1:10-4:21”, *Novum Testamentum* 44/3 (2002): 231-51.

²² E. J. Schnabel, ‘Wisdom’, in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin & Daniel G. Reid; Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 967-68.

³ Charles K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (2nd ed.; Black’s New Testament Commentaries; London: A & C Black, 1971), 53.

⁴ Barrett, *First Corinthians*, 56.

⁵ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*. (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1977), esp. 86-90.

⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 576.

⁷ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 351-56.

⁸ H. H. Drake Williams, *The Wisdom of the Wise: The Presence and Function of Scripture within 1 Cor 1:18-3:23* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 335-36.

⁹ Williams, *Scripture*, 337.

¹⁰ B. J. Oropeza, ‘Echoes of Isaiah in the Rhetoric of Paul: New Exodus, Wisdom and the Humility of the Cross in Utopian-Apocalyptic Expectations’, in *The Intertexture of Apocalyptic Discourse in the New Testament* (ed. Duane F. Watson; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 89.

¹¹ Oropeza, ‘Echoes of Isaiah’, 90, 103.

¹² Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester: IVP, 1996), 30-31.

¹³ Webb, *Isaiah*, 30-33.

¹⁴ Williams, *Scripture*, 88-100.

¹⁵ Oropeza, ‘Echoes of Isaiah’, 97-98.

¹⁶ Williams, *Scripture*, 88-100.

¹⁷ Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 189.

¹⁸ Oropeza, ‘Echoes of Isaiah’, 98.

¹⁹ Oropeza, ‘Echoes of Isaiah’, 98.

²⁰ Williams, *Scripture*, 159-65 fails to pick up this allusion.

²¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology Volume II: The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1965), II.306-15. He oversteps the mark, however, by severing the connection between the prophetic and apocalyptic literature.

²² Williams, *Scripture*, 157-208.

²³ Williams, *Scripture*, 203-4.

²⁴ Williams, *Scripture*, 204-5.

²⁵ Williams, *Scripture*, 205-7.

²⁶ Judith L. Kovacs, ‘The Archons, the Spirit and the Death of Christ: do we Need the Hypothesis of Gnostic Opponents to Explain 1 Cor. 2:6-16?’, in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of J. Louis Martyn* (ed. Joel Marcus and Marion L. Soards; Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 24; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 228

²⁷ Richard A. Horsley, ‘Wisdom of Word and Words of Wisdom in Corinth’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39/2 (1977): 224-39.

²⁸ Horsley, ‘Wisdom of Word and Words of Wisdom’, 225-29.

²⁹ Horsley, ‘Wisdom of Word and Words of Wisdom’, 231.

³⁰ Horsley, ‘Wisdom of Word and Words of Wisdom’, 232.

³¹ Horsley, ‘Wisdom of Word and Words of Wisdom’, 232-34.

³² Kovacs, ‘Gnostic Opponents?’, 217-18.

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- ³³ Kovacs, 'Gnostic Opponents?', 218.
- ³⁴ Kovacs, 'Gnostic Opponents?', 219.
- ³⁵ James A. Davis, *Wisdom and Spirit: An Investigation of 1 Corinthians 1:18-3:20 Against the Background of Jewish Sapiential Traditions in the Greco-Roman Period* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 141.
- ³⁶ K. Grayston, 'Not with a Rod', *The Expository Times* 88/1 (1976): 13-16.
- ³⁷ Davis, *Wisdom and Spirit*, 9-62.
- ³⁸ Davis, *Wisdom and Spirit*, 141-48.
- ³⁹ Schnabel, 'Wisdom', 969.
- ⁴⁰ Michael D. Goulder, 'ΣΟΦΙΑ in 1 Corinthians', *New Testament Studies* 37/4 (1991): 516-34., 516-34.
- ⁴¹ Christopher Tuckett, 'Jewish Christian Wisdom in 1 Corinthians?', in *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder* (ed. Stanley E. Porter, Paul Joyce and David E. Orton; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 201-19.
- ⁴² Donald P. Ker, 'Paul and Apollos: Colleagues or Rivals?', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 77 (2000): 75-97; Smit, 'Coherence', 241-43, 246-47.
- ⁴³ Smit, 'Coherence', 244-47.
- ⁴⁴ Ker, 'Paul and Apollos', 79.
- ⁴⁵ Smit, 'Coherence', 241-43.
- ⁴⁶ Ker, 'Paul and Apollos', 84; Smit, 'Coherence', 242-43.
- ⁴⁷ Smit, 'Coherence', 243.
- ⁴⁸ Ker, 'Paul and Apollos', 75.
- ⁴⁹ Ker, 'Paul and Apollos', 94-96.
- ⁵⁰ Stephen M. Pogoloff, *Logos and Sophia: The Rhetorical Situation of 1 Corinthians* (SBL Dissertation Series 134; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 99-100.
- ⁵¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 349-51.
- ⁵² Benjamin Fiore, "'Covert Allusion" in 1 Corinthians 1-4', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47/1 (1985): 85-102; Bruce W. Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 196-97.
- ⁵³ Fiore, 'Covert Allusion', 95.
- ⁵⁴ F. Danker, 'μετασχηματίζω', *BDAG* 641-42.
- ⁵⁵ L. L. Welborn, 'On the Discord in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Ancient Politics', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106/1 (1987): 86.
- ⁵⁶ Welborn, 'Discord in Corinth', 89-90.
- ⁵⁷ Winter, *Sophists*, 181.
- ⁵⁸ Welborn, 'Discord in Corinth', 102.
- ⁵⁹ Welborn, 'Discord in Corinth', 103-6.
- ⁶⁰ Welborn, 'Discord in Corinth', 102.
- ⁶¹ Welborn, 'Discord in Corinth', 109.
- ⁶² Welborn, 'Discord in Corinth', 110.
- ⁶³ Pogoloff, *Logos and Sophia*, 99-127.
- ⁶⁴ Winter, *Sophists*, 177-78.
- ⁶⁵ Winter, *Sophists*, 144-47.
- ⁶⁶ Winter, *Sophists*, 185-87.
- ⁶⁷ Winter, *Sophists*, 175-76.
- ⁶⁸ Winter, *Sophists*, 149-50.
- ⁶⁹ Winter, *Sophists*, 195-96.
- ⁷⁰ Winter, *Sophists*, 195-202.
- ⁷¹ Winter, *Sophists*, 188.
- ⁷² contra Winter, *Sophists*, 188.
- ⁷³ Ker, 'Paul and Apollos', 77.
- ⁷⁴ Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 157.
- ⁷⁵ John B. Polhill, 'The Wisdom of God and Factionalism', *Review and Expositor* 80/3 (1983): 329.
- ⁷⁶ Polhill, 'Factionalism', 330.
- ⁷⁷ Smit, 'Coherence', 247.
- ⁷⁸ contra Winter, *Sophists*, 188.
- ⁷⁹ Sigurd Grindheim, 'Wisdom for the Perfect: Paul's Challenge to the Corinthian Church (1 Corinthians 2:6-16)', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121/4 (2002): 689-709.
- ⁸⁰ Grindheim, 'Wisdom for the Perfect', 698-99.
- ⁸¹ Kovacs, 'Gnostic Opponents?', 219; Tuckett, 'Jewish Christian Wisdom?', 201-19;