

South Africa is in need of God’s wisdom – Reading 1 Corinthians and James¹

Elma M. Cornelius
Northwest University, South Africa
Elma.Cornelius@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

In 2022, South Africa’s president was accused of corruption (Bloomberg, 2022). South Africa is in a deep political crisis and urgently in need of solutions as South Africans have had enough of the incompetence, indecency and selfishness that defines the leadership of the country (Brkic 2022). Theft, corruption, violence, murder, and other forms of crime in South Africa play a role in the crisis. Sociologist Heinecken (2020) says that violence is facilitated by lawlessness, corruption of the justice system, police brutality, and “an ideology that embraces ... the use of violence as normal and desirable”. Psychologist Samenow (2022) says crime results from people’s thinking patterns. South Africa thus needs new thinking patterns. In 2012 (News24), former president Zuma acknowledged that South Africa needs wisdom. In 2016, after the “Save SA March”, SA religious leaders prayed inter alia for wisdom for South Africa (News24Wire 2016). South Africa is in dire need of wisdom. Wisdom is an attribute of God, and all human wisdom originates from God as His wisdom is a communicable attribute. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is addressed to a Christian church in Corinth with unique challenges in their community and Paul was angry with the Corinthians for clinging on to human wisdom and clinging on to immorality and conflict and disputes. In an argument in the letter-opening, Christ is presented by Paul as the wisdom of God. Paul states a contrast between human wisdom and the cross of Christ, between worldly patterns and the Christian message. What does God’s wisdom look like? James 3:17–18 gives seven characteristics of God’s wisdom: pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. This article offers a reading of 1 Corinthians and James with a focus on God’s attribute of wisdom and how wisdom from God can benefit South Africans.

Keywords

Wisdom; spiritual wisdom; worldly wisdom; 1 Corinthians; James; South Africa

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1. Introduction

In 2015 BusinessTech reported that the three top problems facing South Africa (SA) then were crime, a lack of employment opportunities, and corruption. In 2021, Shoki addressed the question why SA was in a deep political crisis at that stage and said that racial tension, communal mistrust, and corruption was “on full display in the rainbow nation”. On 26 October 2022, Bloomberg stated that “the laundry list of challenges confronting South Africa is a massive headache” for the president who was then accused of “concealing the theft of foreign currency”. On 17 November 2022, Brkic said the people of SA are in dire need of solutions as they “have had enough of the incompetence, indecency and selfishness that defines the “leadership” of” the country.

Theft, corruption, violence, murder, and other forms of crime in SA are normally attributed to poverty and inequality. Although these do play a role in the crisis, sociologist Heinecken (2020) says that violence is facilitated by lawlessness, corruption of the justice system, police brutality, and “an ideology that embraces the use of violence as normal and desirable”. Psychologist Samenow (2022) states that crime results from people’s thinking patterns. In 2012, former president Zuma acknowledged that SA needs wisdom, when he said that older people are the ones with the experience and wisdom that South Africa needs (News24 2012). In 2016, after the “Save SA March”, SA religious leaders prayed *inter alia* for wisdom for South Africa during a short prayer service at Cape Town’s St George’s cathedral (News24Wire 2016).

Adam (2014:8-9) mentions that we as humans and believers need wisdom to live our lives and this wisdom is “morally and behaviourally demanding” – as it demands “prudence, discretion, self-discipline, integrity, humility, sound judgment, hard work, acceptance of correction, keeping promises, generosity and wise and honest speech” (Proverbs 8 & 12; Psalm 15). He explains that the heart of this wisdom is to fear God, to live in dependence on God (Adam 2014:12). It will thus definitely be beneficial for South Africa if our leaders can become “agents of wisdom” (Adam 2014:12).

In the first letter to the Corinthians and in the letter from James, two categories of human wisdom come to the front:

- A worldly wisdom (“wisdom of this world” σοφία τοῦ κόσμου τούτου 1 Cor. 3:19, “wisdom of humans” σοφία ἀνθρώπων 1 Cor. 2:5 and “a wisdom not from above, earthly, unspiritual, devilish” οὐκ ἔστιν αὕτη ἡ σοφία ἄνωθεν κατερχομένη ἀλλ’ ἐπίγειος ψυχικὴ δαιμονιώδης James 3:15); and
- A wisdom from God (θεοῦ σοφίαν 1 Cor. 2:7 or “a wisdom from above” ἡ σοφία ἄνωθεν James 3:15,17).

Wisdom is an attribute of God, and all human wisdom originates from God. God’s wisdom is expressed in both his works of *creation* and *salvation*. In his wisdom, God created the world, orders and rules this world, and saved us through Christ (Adam 2014:4–5).

1 Corinthians’ focus is on *God’s wisdom* expressed in the salvation of humankind through *Christ*. Typical of “the most practical book in the New Testament” (Gundry, 2012:516), the letter of James does not offer any teaching on the wisdom of God but exhorts its readers to ask God for wisdom (James 1:5) and shows how a “wisdom from above” can benefit humankind (James 3–5). Kangas (2020:18–21) believes there is a difference between Paul’s wisdom and James’ wisdom. According to Kangas (2020), wisdom in the letter of James is a character trait given by God, while for Paul, wisdom is the person of Christ himself. One can say that Paul focuses in 1 Corinthians on wisdom as God’s attribute in the person of Jesus and how it was expressed, while the letter of James focuses on how a wisdom, coming from God, can benefit humankind in their lives.

In the current SA situation, wisdom is necessary for the improvement of lives in SA, and in order to understand human wisdom coming from God, it is also necessary to understand God’s attribute of wisdom, and how it affects humankind. The focus falls on 1 Corinthians for its explanation of God’s wisdom in Christ and the way it affects humankind. The letter from James is interpreted to determine if a wisdom from God can benefit South Africans in their daily lives.

The relevant texts from 1 Corinthians and James are interpreted by using an interdisciplinary method of interpretation, focussing on the socio-historical background of the texts, interpreting the structure of the letters, doing a lexical-syntactical analysis, considering the use of stylistic devices and persuasion strategies, and doing word studies.

2. Wisdom in James

Was this letter written by James, the brother of Jesus, or by an amanuensis after his death? McCartney (2009:14–30) discusses the different views among scholars regarding the authorship and dating of this letter. Gundry (2012:516, 519) is of the opinion that James, the half-brother of Jesus, most probably wrote this letter and that we should “content ourselves with an indeterminate date before James’ martyrdom” in AD 62. In spite of the ongoing debate whether the readers of the letter of James were real or fictional, McCartney (2009:32) believes the readers were the “diaspora congregations” “scattered through the Mediterranean world” with real circumstances. Gundry (2012:518) says the quotations of and allusions to the Old Testament and the Jewish idioms *inter alia*, make it more likely that the readers were “Jewish Christians living outside Palestine”. Davids (2014:47) argues that the author “does not seem to be conscious of a Jew-Gentile division among the followers of Jesus” and therefore regards the readers of the letter of James to be all scattered followers of Jesus outside of Palestine.

What were the circumstances of the implied readers? Moo (2002) states that these readers had to leave Jerusalem to take up their lives elsewhere and from the letter of James he describes their circumstances as experiencing trials because of their faith, being poor (James 5:1–11), being taken to court by the wealthy (James 2:6) and being oppressed by landowners (James 5:5–6). These readers thus seem to have suffered because of corruption, exploitation and perhaps violence.

According to Davids (2014:62, 70–71), one finds in James 5:19–20 a statement which seems to be the purpose of the letter, namely, to exhort the readers to help those who have wandered away from the truth and this is in line with the rest of the letter where James points out ways to come back to the truth. Moo (2002) regards the main theme of the letter to be that the readers (as believers) must commit themselves to God. Commitment to God seems to be the main point as it guarantees a wisdom coming from God, in order to live a good life.

After the greeting in James 1:1, this letter contains a list of practical exhortations, “dealing with Christian conduct in church meetings and

everyday life” (Gundry 2012:520)². The topics dealt with are how to handle trials and temptation (James 1:2–4; James 1:12–18), where to find wisdom, two kinds of wisdom, what these look like in everyday life, and final exhortations to choose the best wisdom (James 1:5–8; James 3:13–4:10), how to look at wealth and a warning to rich oppressors (James 1:9–11; James 5:1–6), how to react to the word (James 1:19–27), warning against favouritism (James 2:1–13), the relationship between faith and good works (James 2:14–26), advice to teachers about speaking (James 3:1–12), about judging others (James 4:11–12), boasting (James 4:13–17), being patient in suffering (James 5:7–11) oaths (James 5:12), and how to relate to fellow believers (James 5:13–20).

Davids (2014:45) subdivides these topics into different epistolary sections: letter-body-opening, introducing the major themes of the letter in James 1:2–18; letter-body-middle in James 1:19–4:10; and letter-body-closing in James 4:11–5:6. As the letter-body-opening serves to introduce the major themes in the letter-body-middle, one expects to find something about “wisdom” in the letter-body-opening to introduce the theme of wisdom found in James 3:13–18. And then indeed, “wisdom” is mentioned and discussed in James 1:5. The letter-body-opening is introduced with a discussion on trials and temptations in James 1:2–4. In the face of these trials, James exhorts his readers to ask God for wisdom if needed (James 1:5) and he promises that if it is asked in faith, that God will generously and ungrudgingly give.

- In the letter-body-middle in James 3:13–18, James makes it clear that there is a wisdom “from above” (ἡ σοφία ἄνωθεν 3:17) and a wisdom “not from above” (οὐκ... ἡ σοφία ἄνωθεν κατερχομένη 3:15). This wisdom (σοφία) refers to “the capacity to understand” and as a result “to act wisely: – to be “prudent”, to have “insight” (Louw & Nida 1988:384–385).
- A wisdom “not coming from above” is earthly (ἐπίγειος), unspiritual (ψυχική), and devilish (δαμονιώδης) and results in envy (ζήλος), selfish ambition (ἐριθεία), disorder (ἀκαταστασία), and wickedness (πᾶν φαῦλον πρᾶγμα). Nystrom (1997:158) says this earthly wisdom

2 Davids (2014:45) identifies a letter-body-opening in 1:2-18, a letter-body-middle in 1:19-4:10 and a letter-body-closing in 4:11-5:6.

marked by selfish ambition, refers to a desire for status, and a pursuit of political power, and is the opposite of godly wisdom marked by humility (James 3:13). Gowler (2014:220) focusses the attention on James' use of the word δαιμονιώδης, preparing his readers to understand that the devil is the source of evil, of envy and selfish ambition, of conflict and disputes in communities. Nystrom (1997:158) describes this earthly wisdom as an “acid force” with “corrosive effects”. It is a wisdom which destroys society.

A wisdom from above, however, results in gentleness. McCartney (2009:197) explains that this wisdom “from above”, this wisdom coming from God, is not about “knowing how to get along in life”, but about “*walking with God*”, and “*fearing God*”. Moo (2002) defines this wisdom as “the ability to understand God’s ways and to live in light of his purposes and values”, something that will guarantee “peaceful relations” and a “godly lifestyle”. McCartney (2009:197) mentions “genuine wisdom proceeds from genuine *faith*”. Kangas (2020:17) adds that, according to James, wisdom is a character trait given by God to “enrich and uplift” the believer.

James gives seven characteristics of this wisdom in 3:17: “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure (ἀγνή), then peace-loving (εἰρηνική), considerate (ἐπιεικής), submissive (εὐπειθής), full of mercy and good fruit (μεστή ἐλέους καὶ καρπῶν ἀγαθῶν), impartial (ἀδιάκριτος) and sincere” (ἀνυπόκριτος) (Table 1).

Table 1: Word studies of the characteristics of wisdom

ἀγνή	Through a word study of the word ἀγνή in Louw and Nida (1988:746), it becomes clear that godly wisdom will lead to conduct “being without moral defect or blemish”. Nystrom (1997:160) translates ἀγνή with “considerate” and for him it means that one’s behaviour should show the character of God while it is associated with justice and not with the abuse of power.
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ειρηνική	Louw and Nida (1988:315–316) translate this adjective with “peaceful”, “free from worry”, free from “anxiety and inner turmoil”. This implies that God’s wisdom can indeed be helpful in times of conflict and that it can bring reconciliation between people and healing to a broken society. Neufeld (2017:310–302) reminds us that Jesus came as an “evangelist of peace” and as a “maker of peace” as he killed enmity and hostility to create a new human liberated by grace. Jesus came as God’s wisdom and miracle of love and peacemaking should always be “participation in God’s love”, expressed in Jesus (Neufeld 2017:299). When Neufeld (2017:294–296) discusses the “peaceable” characteristic of wisdom, he refers to different strategies – to obtain peace by either being passive (non-resistance) or active (positive engagement and an active stance of “peace-teaching”, “peace-making”, or “peacebuilding”). Neufeld (2017:295) considers the active stance as the celebration of wisdom. McCartney (2009:203) is of the opinion that this characteristic of wisdom means that this kind of wisdom brings peace and wholeness within the community, creating “an environment that eventually yields righteousness” for the whole community. Nystrom (1997:25) says this wisdom is linked to “peace and health within the community”.
ἐπιεικής	By using this adjective, James communicates that God’s wisdom will create “gentle, gracious” and “forbearing” behaviour (Louw & Nida 1988:749).
εὐπειθής	This quality of a wisdom from above refers to “being easily persuaded”, “being open to reason”, being “willing to listen” (Louw & Nida 1988:423).
μεστή ἐλέους και καρπῶν ἀγαθῶν	Having God’s wisdom will guarantee a person to “show ἐλέους – kindness or concern” for those in need, to “show mercy” (Louw & Nida 1988:751). This godly wisdom will guarantee good behaviour.
ἀδιάκριτος	Being ἀδιάκριτος means to be “impartial” and to be “free from prejudice” (Louw & Nida 1988:768). This characteristic rules out favouritism and prejudice.
ἀνυπόκριτος	Louw and Nida (1988:675) translate ἀνυπόκριτος with “being genuine and sincere”.

James makes use of the persuasion strategies of both *logos* and *pathos* in his argument on wisdom. Not only does he offer logical reasoning (*logos*) about the benefits of such a wisdom, but he also affects the readers (*pathos*) by giving them hope in the midst of their trials. Neufeld (2017:298–299) explains that the strain of wisdom found in the New Testament, is a wisdom of “hope amidst despair”, of “faith and fruit in the face of doubt”, of “love amidst hostility”, of “violence subverted through suffering”, of “deliberate vulnerability as combat against powers”, of “baffling patience”, of “persistent hope”, of “urgent anticipation” and of “eschatological confidence and flexibility”. The letter from James shows that a wisdom coming from God can have life-altering implications for believers. The question is, where does “wise living” begin? James exhorts his readers to begin with asking God for wisdom (James 1:5).

When one reads 1 Corinthians, it becomes clear that wise living starts with faith in God. 1 Corinthians makes it clear that with the crucifixion of Jesus, God’s wisdom triumphed as He secured humankind’s salvation in Christ. God secured new lives for all who believe. 1 Corinthians includes an exhortation to have an identity in Christ.

3. Wisdom in 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians is probably Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, written from Ephesus during his third missionary journey around AD 54 (Gundry, 2012:413; Garland, 2003:36; Verbrugge, 2008: Introduction). This letter is addressed to a Christian church in Corinth with unique challenges in their community. These people were exposed to the Roman culture and the Roman religion (Gill 2002:39–41) and this was a challenge on its own. Gill (2002:42) explains how ambition and status were emphasised in these areas. The Corinthian society was consumed by “competitive individualism”, and it also spilled over to the church with the result that “self-important individuals” dominated the church with their power, status and wisdom (Garland 2003:26). Paul thus wrote to a church who tried to find their feet in this culture. Gundry (2012:413) mentions that “two events prompted the writing” of this letter – the oral reports of the household of Chloe and “the coming of the delegation from the Corinthian church”. Paul heard that some Corinthians had reacted negatively to his previous instructions to

stay away from sexually immoral people, and that they had deteriorated even more (Verbrugge 2008:Introduction). It was also reported to Paul that the Corinthians were divided into factions and that it led to major conflict and legal disputes (Verbrugge 2008:Introduction). Adam (2014:24) shows how it was clear to Paul that the believers in Corinth followed worldly wisdom (1 Cor. 2:6–10, 1 Cor. 3:18–20). Kangas (2020:16) says Paul was aware of the fact that the Greeks sought “persuasive words of wisdom” and “philosophical wisdom”. They became distracted “by the pursuit of worldly wisdom”, states Yoon (2020:59), and the result was that they remained “fleshly infants in Christ”. Paul also wrote this letter to answer the various questions addressed to him from the side of the Corinthians (Verbrugge 2008:Introduction). The purpose of this letter was to “expose the vanity of the wisdom of that age and to disclose the depths of the wisdom of God” (Yoon 2020:59). This letter includes a warning in 1 Cor. 1:19 that God will destroy all worldly wisdom (by using a quotation from Isaiah 29:14). Paul was angry with the Corinthians for clinging on to human wisdom and clinging on to immorality and conflict and disputes.

The word “wisdom” (σοφία) appears 17 times in 1 Corinthians, of which 16 appear in chapters 1–4. This letter can be divided into the letter-opening (1 Cor. 1:1–9), letter-body (1 Cor. 1:10–16:4) and letter-closing (1 Cor. 16:5–24) (see Verbrugge 2008:Introduction). In the letter-body, Paul responds to what he has heard about the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:10–6:20) and to the letter he received (1 Cor. 7:1–16:4). Paul starts off by responding to the reports by the household of Chloe, on four topics: divisions (1 Cor. 1:10–4:21), incest (1 Cor. 5:1–13), lawsuits between Christians (1 Cor. 6:1–8) and immorality (1 Cor. 6:9–20) (Blomberg 1994:10; Gundry 2012:415–416). When Paul responds to the problem of divisions among the people (1 Cor. 1:10–4:21), wisdom is introduced in the discussion.

Here follows a discussion of the relevance of wisdom in the different arguments in the letter-body:

3.1 Paul defends his authority 1 Corinthians 1:10–17

First, the problem of divisions is addressed, and an appeal is made for unity (1 Cor. 1:10–17). Paul appeals to the readers to be united rather than divided (verse 10). As the factions in the Corinthian church were caused by quarrels when the believers aligned themselves with different leaders

(verses 11–12) and as some were against Paul as leader, Paul’s “authority was in jeopardy” (Blomberg 1994:11). This led Paul to conclude his argument in verse 17 claiming that he preached the gospel, not ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου, so that the cross of Christ may be emptied of its power. The words σοφίᾳ λόγου literally mean “wisdom of a word”. The NIV translates these words with “not with words of human wisdom”. Verbrugge (2008:Body of the Letter) translates with “wisdom of words of humans” and explains this phrase as “with words of human wisdom”. For Verbrugge, this phrase communicates Paul’s argument that in his preaching the content mattered more than the eloquence through which it was communicated. Blomberg (1994:12) also considers this as Paul’s way to say that the content of one’s preaching is more important than one’s “oratorical skill”. Garland (2003:65) sees it as the contradiction between a “rhetorically sophisticated speech”, “rhetorical display” or “manipulative rhetoric” and the content of the speech. What is important in 1 Cor. 1:10–17, is that these verses introduce the discussion on the contrast between “what is merely human”, or what is regarded to be wisdom and social rhetorical power by humankind, versus that which comes from God in the verses following in 1 Cor. 1:18–2:5. Blomberg (1994:13) says 1 Cor. 1:10–17 introduces the “key for promoting unity”, namely to focus on Christ rather than “exalting human leaders” (which was the reason for the factions in the church). Clinging onto the message of the cross of Christ is the key to promoting humility – advantageous for unity – instead of “arrogance and rivalry” which feed divisions in a society (see Blomberg 1994:13).

3.2 Jesus as God’s wisdom – 1 Cor. 1:18–2:5

After Paul’s response to Chloe’s report on church division and conflict (1 Cor. 1:10–17), one finds the second argument in 1 Cor. 1:18–2:5 as the message of the cross in the context of the world’s wisdom (Verbrugge 2008:Introduction). It is important to see that this section is introduced by the conjunction γὰρ in verse 18. What follows is thus a motivation for his statement in verse 17 that he himself as preacher focusses on the message of the cross of Jesus. Verse 18 states that for those who are perishing, the message of the cross is foolishness while it is considered to be the power of God by those who are being saved. The quotation of Isaiah 29:14 in verse 19 and the rhetorical questions in verse 20 serve to show that the issue is about

people believing they have the wisdom – being wise by human standards (verse 26) – versus a wisdom of God.

Paul mentions the wise man (σοφός), debater (συζητητής) and scholar (γραμματεύς) in verse 20. According to Louw and Nida (1988:384–385), the “wise” had professional status and was considered as people who could understand “the philosophical aspects of knowledge and experience”. Ferguson (1987:255) explains that in the Hellenistic and Roman period, philosophers “provided a criticism or reinterpretation of traditional religion” and offered “moral and spiritual direction”. The “debaters” were skilled in expressing opinions and differences (Louw & Nida 1988:439) and these rhetoricians at least had education on the secondary level in the ancient societies (see Ferguson 1987:84). The “scholars” were people who “acquired a high level of education in a certain body of literature or discipline” (Louw & Nida 1988:328). Gill (2002:52) says the educated members of society considered themselves to be the wise and influential in society and one can add that these people were powerful in society – were considered to be the sources of wisdom.

In this section, Christ is presented by Paul as the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18–2:5) in opposition to the worldly wisdom. In verse 24, Christ is referred to as the “power of God” (θεοῦ δύναμιν) and “the wisdom of God” (θεοῦ σοφίαν). The “message of the cross” (λόγος γὰρ ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ) in 1:18 is about the role Christ played in God’s power and wisdom. 1 Cor. 1:30 spells out the result of the involvement of Christ, the result of God’s wisdom, namely being in Christ (ἐξ αὐτοῦ δὲ ὑμεῖς ἐστε), righteousness (δικαιοσύνη), holiness (ἀγιασμός), and redemption (ἀπολύτρωσις). Yoon (2020:61) shows how Christ is offered as a “unique solution” to the problems of the Corinthians (see 1 Cor. 1:30). Blomberg (1994:14d) is of the opinion that Christianity is shown here to oppose the sinful world and that it is offered as an antidote to “the self-centred factionalism”.

Neufeld (2017:299) writes that the “connection between wisdom and Jesus is critical”. He argues that the New Testament authors present Jesus as a “liberator”, a “wisdom that is world-generating, world-friendly, and world-befriending”. God’s wisdom is thus to be seen in his love, expressed in Jesus.

Verbrugge (2008:1:18–3:4) argues that Paul draws on the contrast between worldly patterns and the Christian message³. In contrast with the ancient world's ideas of the divine and the powers of the divine, Paul mentions Christ's crucifixion where a powerful God appears to be powerless, "where victory is won by giving up life", not taking life, where "domination of others is discredited", where shame is offered as "the highest path to glory and honour" and victory (Garland 2003:70–71). Is this an example of irony where the crucifixion of the son of God signifies the opposite, namely the power of God? Neufeld (2017:300–301) shows how "the killing of Jesus" as the "emissary and enactor" of peace was a "rejection of divine wisdom" and how "the most intense moment of rejection" became "the most intense moment of reconciliation". However crazy in the eyes of "the world," the cross is nothing less than God's peace-making and saving power of God. The differentiation between God's wisdom and the wisdom of the world, makes one aware of, as Blomberg (1994:14d) writes, two kinds of people in the world – "those perishing" and "those being saved" (1 Cor. 1:18). Believers touched by God's spirit, "will find a godly wisdom and power to transfer their lives" (Blomberg 1994:14d).

This section is concluded in 1 Cor. 2:1–5 by repeating the issue in 1 Cor. 1:17, namely that Paul himself did not come to the Corinthians with human wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power (1 Cor. 2:4). Paul also uses this as the persuasion strategy of *ethos* to defend his own character in the light of the situation of factions where he himself was criticised by some groups. He presents himself as someone who has God's wisdom.

3.3 Understanding spiritual wisdom – 1 Cor. 2:6–16

This section mentions two categories of wisdom: on the one hand a wisdom among the mature⁴ (Σοφίαν... ἐν τοῖς τελείοις 2:6), which is God's secret wisdom (θεοῦ σοφίαν ἐν μυστηρίῳ 2:7), hidden (τὴν ἀποκεκρυμμένην)

3 Gill (2002:48-49) says this is a distinction between "sophisticated rhetorical techniques" and "the preaching of the Christian gospel" as Paul contrasts "the wisdom of the age" (the presentation through rhetorical techniques) with "the message of the cross" (the contents of the presentation). The distinction Paul makes in this letter, however, seems to be more than only presentation and contents.

4 The "mature" refers to those, who in faith, heard and accepted the message of the cross of Jesus (see Gill 2015:56).

and destined (ἦν προώρισεν ὁ θεός) for believers (2:7), on the other hand a wisdom of this age (σοφίαν... τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου) and of the rulers of this age (τῶν ἀρχόντων τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου) (1 Cor. 2:6). Blomberg (1994:141) states that one can regard the “rulers of this age” to include both religious and political leaders. Verbrugge (2008) wants to include the unseen demonic powers who “attempt to gain power over our lives”. For Garland (2003:94) it seems fair to understand “the rulers of this age” as “a collective evil” – all “shadowy forces” behind the behaviour of earthly rulers.

One thus finds here the two categories, namely God’s wisdom versus the wisdom of the powerful among humankind. To explain that God’s wisdom was originally hidden, Paul quotes from and paraphrases⁵ Isaiah 64:4 and Isaiah 52:15 in verse 9. Yoon (2020:60) argues that in Paul’s mind the wisdom of God is involving a mystery not to be apprehended by humans, something only believers can know through the Spirit.

From verses 10–16 the role of the Spirit is discussed. God’s wisdom, once hidden, was revealed to us by God’s Spirit (2:10) and this statement is explained by two truths about the Spirit, namely the fact that the Spirit knows the thoughts of both man and God (2:11). These verses show that the Spirit is the only way to obtain knowledge hidden in the “depths of God” (Kangas 2020:23). This divine wisdom is predestined for the glory of those who believe (Yoon 2020:60).

Verses 13–15 discuss two categories once again:

- Speaking in words taught by human wisdom (ἐν διδακτοῖς ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας λόγοις) versus speaking in words taught by the Spirit (ἐν διδακτοῖς πνεύματος) (verse 13)).
- The man without the Spirit (verse 14) versus the spiritual man (verse 15).

The persons without the Spirit are all who regard the spiritual things as “foolishness”, who find the message of the cross unacceptable, who do not react to the message of the crucifixion of Jesus, who choose not to have a relationship with God (Verbrugge 2008), people in an unredeemed state

5 Verbrugge (2008) reminds us that no single OT text contains the complete quotation – Isaiah 64:4 can be relevant or perhaps Isaiah 52:15, or even some unknown apocalyptic writing.

(Blomberg 1994:14m). Only through faith, believers have access through the Spirit to God's wisdom.

3.4 Recognising equality of religious leaders – 1 Cor. 3:1-23

In this section, Paul returns to the Corinthians' problem (mentioned in 1 Cor. 1:12) of factions in their midst due to their invalid evaluation of their religious leaders and teachers. He explains in 1 Cor. 3:5-9 that all religious leaders serve the same God, and in this argument, he recognises the equality of all religious leaders. The concepts of wisdom and foolishness resurfaces in 1 Cor. 3:18-20. A command follows in verse 18 to the Corinthians not to deceive themselves and Paul encourages them to be wise and know that the wisdom of the world is foolishness in God's sight (1 Cor. 3:19). Paul quotes in 1 Cor. 3:19 from Job 5:13 and in 1 Cor. 3:20 from Psalm 94:11 to make his point that "human thoughts are not hidden to God" (Garland 2003:116). A conclusive command is then given in verses 21-23 not to boast any longer about humans. "Boasting should only be in the Lord" as only Jesus "gives the Corinthians believers their identity" (Gill 2015:64). After persuading the readers of the equal status of all believers, Paul then moves on to another section on how to treat leaders appropriately in 1 Cor. 4:1-21.

3.5 The Corinthians' problem of sexual immorality – 1 Cor. 6:12-20

When Paul focuses his attention on the problem of sexual immorality among the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 6:12-20, he says in 1 Cor. 6:17 that one who unites himself with the Lord is one with Him in Spirit. Garland (2003:200) writes that the concern here is that such a sexually immoral act violates one's relationship with God. One who is joined to the Lord in one spirit, will live according to the Spirit, being dominated, governed, directed, moved and led by the Spirit (Kangas, 2020:25). One can conclude by saying that wisdom – being led by the Spirit (see 1 Cor. 2:13-15) – will cancel such immoral actions as believers belong "body, soul and spirit" to God.

Verse 20 says "you were bought at a price". This means the Corinthians are reminded that they have been redeemed by the blood of Christ – a reference to the wisdom of God (discussed in 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5). That is why they are exhorted in verse 20 to honour God. Because we belong,

we should glorify – it means our behaviour should reflect the glory of God (Verbrugge 2008).

3.6 The issue of spiritual gifts – 1 Cor. 12:1–11

1 Corinthians 2:6–16 makes it clear that being wise is being a spiritual person. In 12:1–11, Paul argues that the Spirit gives a variety of gifts to believers according to various purposes for the benefit and unity of the whole community (Garland 2003:450). Verse 3 argues that one being led by the Spirit will not curse Jesus, but rather acknowledge Jesus. Proof of the Corinthians' genuine commitment to Jesus will be if they do not reject Jesus by cursing him (see Verbrugge 2008). Being led by the Spirit also guarantees that one will receive the gifts to fulfil one's purpose in life – the message of wisdom, message of knowledge, faith, gift of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues (1 Cor. 12:8–10). Garland (2003:456) is of the opinion that it is possible that faith stands at the head of this group of gifts because all the other gifts are related to faith and depend on the power of faith. This makes sense in the light of the complete letter, where it is made clear that faith in God means access to a new life in Christ (1 Cor. 1:18–2:5), being guided (1 Cor. 2:6–16) and gifted (1 Cor. 12:12:1–11) by the Spirit to be able to proclaim the message of wisdom (the message of God's activity in the crucified Christ⁶) or knowledge, to heal or prophecy, or other miraculous powers. Faith guarantees a wisdom from God that can help humankind.

3.7 Conclusive

Kangas (2020:25–26) points to 1 Corinthians revealing “that a believer can be one of three kinds of persons”. One can be a “soulish” person directed by one's own mind, will and emotions (1 Cor. 2:14), or a “fleshly” person under the influence of the nature of the flesh (1 Cor. 3:1,3), or a “spiritual” person governed by the Spirit (1 Cor. 5:3–5, 1 Cor. 6:17). These three categories can be reduced to the two categories of the wise and the foolish – those clinging on to human wisdom and those clinging on to God (who has all the wisdom) in faith – those stuck in human traditions and ideas and those

6 See Garland, (2003:455).

renewed in Christ – those suffering alone and those being guided through the Spirit.

The implication of God’s wisdom is life-altering. God’s wisdom has power and is revealed in the plan he made to save humankind, in his sending of Jesus to be crucified in order to redeem humankind and make them righteous in the eyes of God. God’s wisdom made it possible for humankind to ask God in faith for wisdom.

Conclusion

God’s attribute of wisdom can be a life-changer for humankind if the second opportunity given to humankind in God’s wisdom, is accepted in faith. Humankind always has the option of a new identity in Christ, an opportunity to ask God for his wisdom. The deliberate choice to serve God as the ultimate power – to walk with him fearing him and being guided by his Spirit, can change the behaviour of believers into a godly lifestyle. This can heal society. South Africa needs God’s wisdom! We need South Africans to be pure (ἀγνή), peace-loving (εἰρηνική), considerate (ἐπιεικής), submissive (εὐπειθής), full of mercy and good fruit (μεστή ἐλέους καὶ καρπῶν ἀγαθῶν), impartial (ἀδιάκριτος) and sincere” (ἀνυπόκριτος). South Africans have the option to be directed by their own minds, will and emotions (1 Cor. 2:14), or to be governed by the Spirit (1 Cor. 5:3-5, 1 Cor. 6:17) – to be wise or foolish, clinging on to human wisdom or clinging on to God in faith, to be stuck in human traditions and ideas or to be renewed in Christ, to suffer alone or to be guided through the Spirit.

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