



Discerning a Call to Ministry— Part II

A calling to the learned ministry

By Susan R. Garrett

Why should Christian leaders seek worldly wisdom? If a person is truly called by God, won't the Holy Spirit supply what is needed? And the Apostle Paul did say that God has "made foolish the wisdom of the world" (1 Cor 1:20). So, why go to seminary? Closer study of Paul's words to the Corinthians will help us to answer this question.

In the opening chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds his readers repeatedly and in various ways that they are called. He identifies them as ones "called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." He also says that they are "called into the fellowship of Jesus," and called to recognize Christ as both "the power of God and the wisdom of God."

God makes all these same claims on our lives. It doesn't matter whether we are in or plan to go into full-time ministry. First, God calls us to be saints, persons set apart and holy—persons sanctified by the Holy Spirit working in our lives. Second, God calls us into the fellowship of Jesus. "Fellowship" here doesn't refer to the coffee hour after church, or Wednesday night Bible study. The Greek word for 'fellowship,' *koinonia*, could perhaps better be translated as "partnership," or "sharing." God calls us to be partners or sharers with Jesus—partners in ministry, partners in suffering, partners in the present power of the word to save those who are perishing, and one day partners in the resurrection and sharing in the glory of God. Third, Paul calls us to know Jesus Christ as the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The third point is the one that the Corinthians seem to have had the most trouble with, and so it is where Paul spends most of his time. He knew that the Corinthians' trouble in recognizing Jesus as the power of God and the wisdom of God wasn't unique to them. On the contrary, many or most people who first heard the Gospel message had a hard time understanding and accepting it. The message of the cross was offensive or preposterous to many who heard it. The Corinthian Christians had seen past the scandal and the absurdity of the message, and had accepted Paul's word about Jesus' cross as the wisdom of God. But some members of the church were having trouble keeping that knowledge in their hearts.

Apparently there were a few among the Corinthian leaders who possessed a good command of the rhetorical and philosophical knowledge of the day. Paul calls them, somewhat facetiously, "the Strong"—strong and competent, that is, on the scale by which most people of that day measured human worth: according to wealth, high birth, and all the civic and intellectual accomplishments that such privilege could afford. The trouble was, the pride that the Strong took in their own humanly acquired wisdom was keeping them from seeing that God's ways and God's wisdom are different from ours. Just one example: when the Corinthians came together to celebrate the Lord's supper, they carried their habit of flaunting status into their gathering. The wealthier members were bringing their own food and drink, like suburbanites

at a tailgate party, while the poorer members were going home hungry. "Nothing wrong here," the Strong must have thought. It was quite customary in those days to underscore different grades of status at public and semi-public functions: by serving better wine to more important guests, for example. But Paul considers such behavior a disgrace.

So right at the outset of his letter, he makes a kind of pre-emptive strike against Corinthian pride. He writes, "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God."

The veil concealing this indictment of the few privileged leaders among the Corinthians is thin. They consider themselves wise, but Paul says that God has chosen what is foolish to shame the wise. They consider themselves strong, but Paul says that God has chosen what is weak to shame the strong. They consider themselves as ones well born, fit for leadership, but Paul says that God has chosen what is low and despised in the world



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to take down any human claims to status or reasons for boasting.

On the other hand, those in the church who were “weak” (meaning less educated and of lower status) would have heard the message rather differently. I believe Paul wanted them to hear this message: God has called you to be an example to the world. By the pattern of your life you show forth Christ, who precisely as the crucified one, precisely as the weak and low and despised one exemplified the power of God and the wisdom of God. To the world—and even to the Strong in your own church—you look foolish and weak. But God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. God’s ways cannot be understood by the power of wisdom, Paul says—or we might add by the power of reason, the power of scientific inquiry, or even the power of critical deconstructive theory. God’s ways and God’s wisdom are shocking and amazing to the world.

Paul’s critique of human wisdom puts us in a rather embarrassing position. If even God’s foolishness is so much wiser than human wisdom, and if human wisdom is incapable of discerning God’s ways, then why should anyone bother to become a learned person? What call is there for learned ministers? Why steep yourself in Greek, and Hebrew, and theology, and church history, and pastoral counseling, and theories of psycho-social development, and all these other subjects that are the product of human reflection and study? Why study preaching when Paul says that he himself was sent to proclaim the Gospel not in lofty words of wisdom but in weakness and in fear and in much trembling? Why a seminary education? Maybe we have all failed to reckon seriously with Paul’s words undercutting human wisdom.

Maybe—but maybe not. When I say that Paul undercuts human wisdom and learning, I mean that he relativizes it. He puts it into a different perspective. He does this because

the Corinthians are overestimating its importance. But Paul does not eliminate the call for human understanding or human knowledge and wisdom. I base this conclusion on three observations.

First, Paul uses the terms for “foolish” and “foolishness” as references to the apparent absurdity or nonsense of a particular message. The message of the cross appears as foolishness to the Gentiles, meaning that they find it incomprehensible. But divine foolishness is not the same as ignorance. Paul does not give blanket approval to ignorance in general. Ignorance can take many forms, of course: it can be a refusal to seek relevant information when problem-solving, or the incapacity to imagine oneself in the place of another, or being subject to every fad that comes along because one has never engaged in deep reflection on one’s commitments and one’s tradition, or determination to maintain one’s own position and power at any cost. Divine foolishness is not any of these things.

Second, when Paul denies his own use of human rhetoric in proclaiming the message of the cross, he does not suggest that rhetoric is inherently wrong or inherently useless. He suggests, rather, that rhetoric might just be too successful. If the preacher tries to dress up the message of the cross with fancy rhetoric, the rhetoric can empty the word of its power by concealing its scandal. The power of the word we preach is in the scandal, Paul says. It is the power to bring about a crisis of separation between those who are saved and those who are perishing. What happens when you take away the scandal? The power disappears. Oh, church attendance may go up. But people are being shortchanged. They are getting Gospel Lite. They aren’t being told the truth, which is that the cross is the means by which we are reconciled to God.

Finally, there is Paul’s own practice. He disavows human wisdom and rhetoric even as he shows his consummate skill in using it. He is a “holy fool,” a “fool for Christ,” but he is a learned man, and he uses his learning to serve God. For one thing, he knows the Scriptures, meaning the Jewish scriptures, backwards and forwards, inside and out. His knowledge of and insights into Scripture came through years of study and reflection and formal training. For another thing, Paul knows contemporary Greek philosophical wisdom and rhetorical practice. He demonstrates his expertise in these subjects again and again, in all his letters. In 1 Corinthians he is strutting his very best philosophical stuff in order to win over the Corinthian wise guys—the few who think that they are pretty darned smart. Paul shows them that, despite his protestations, he is a learned man. He can hang with the best of them. Paul is a fool, but he is never ignorant. He is a fool because he preaches a message that is foolishness to the world. But he is wise because he preaches it using every resource at his disposal.

All of us are called to be saints, called to share in the fellowship of Jesus, called to believe the truth of God’s foolish message that Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God. Some of us—perhaps you—are being called to particular forms of Christian ministry. I exhort you to continue seeking God’s specific vocation for your life. Persevere in prayer, speak to those who have gone before you, reflect on whether and how immersion in the study of Scripture, tradition, and human learning might equip you to answer God’s call. Then act in faith, trusting that God can use whatever decision you make to fulfill God’s purpose for your life. Whatever path you take, remember that God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus. May Jesus’ name be praised.

Susan R. Garrett’s “Discerning a Call to Ministry—Part 1, Vocation or Call as a *form of desire*” was published in the December 2005 issue of *Futures*. Download it at www.lpts.edu/admissions.

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