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Sermon Study on 1 Cor. 1:21-31

Th Laetsch

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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the Neronian persecution, during which he also suffered death as a martyr of the faith.

This, by the way, is also in its essential features the position taken by Luther in his conclusions on the subject, especially in his writing *Auf das ueberchristliche, uebergeistliche und ueberkuenstliche Buch des Bocks Emsers zu Leipzig Antwort Dr. M. L.* There we read: "Although I hold that St. Peter was in Rome, yet I should not want to die on this as on an article of faith. . . . It is no article of faith, and no one is a heretic on this account whether he does not believe that St. Peter was ever bishop at Rome [*zu Rom je gessen habe*]." (18, 1334.) Luther rejects the bishopric of Peter in Rome absolutely, especially that of an alleged twenty-five-year period, and he rightly concludes that, with the inability to prove the episcopacy and the primacy of Peter, all papal claims fall to the ground. And that, after all, is the only interest we have in solving this question, without overshooting the mark, in a dispassionate, objective discussion of available facts.

P. E. KRETZMANN.

Sermon Study on 1 Cor. 1, 21—31.

(Eisenach Epistle-lesson for Quinquagesima Sunday.)

This interesting and timely passage is part of an argument against strife and dissensions which threatened to disrupt the congregation at Corinth. Instead of laying the stress where it properly belonged, on the preaching of Christ Crucified, the Corinthians attached themselves to the personality of the various preachers and extolled the special gifts and characteristics of these men and at the same time despised the other teachers and their adherents to such an extent that they were in danger of losing sight of the unity of the Gospel of Christ, of creating schisms and disruptions. The apostle had called their attention to the fact that Christ was their one and only Savior, v. 13. He then brings out in an extended argument that those very matters which they placed foremost, human personality, oratory, learning, etc., were by God studiously neglected in His plan of salvation. Far from taking into consideration human wisdom, God rather conceived His plan of salvation with a view to destroy the wisdom of the wise, v. 19. The apostle had asked, "Where is the wise?" etc., v. 20. Not only cabalistic and sophistic quibblings, even the honest efforts of the world's philosophers to understand God by their own wisdom are futile, yea, made to appear as foolishness by God's plan of salvation. This assertion, made in the form of a rhetorical question, is now proved by the apostle in the opening verse of our Epistle-lesson, which links up with v. 20 by *ῥᾶε*, for.

V. 21: *For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom*

knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. Evidently the two phrases "in the wisdom of God" and "by the foolishness of preaching" stand in sharp contrast to each other. This manifest contrast at once points the way to the correct interpretation of the first phrase. If "the foolishness of preaching" means that which the world regards as foolishness, then the "wisdom of God" must mean that which the world regards as wisdom. 'Ev, in the sphere of, in that field in which the world recognizes a manifestation of God's wisdom, in the field of God's creation. The manifold works of creation indeed show forth the wisdom of Him who has made all things, Ps. 104, 24, just as they show His kindness, Acts 14, 17, and His eternal power and Godhead, Rom. 1, 20. This revelation of God was made for the purpose that men should seek the Lord if haply they might feel after Him and find Him, Acts 17, 27. This wisdom of God the world recognizes as wisdom, and loving wisdom, regards this as the proper sphere of its activity in searching after God. Does this course which the world has chosen as the only wise course to find and know God lead it to the desired goal? The apostle answers in the negative. The world in the wisdom of God knew not God. The fact of the matter is, the world does not even know and understand the works of God, though they are before its very eyes, ready to be studied and explored, examined and analyzed. The wisdom of God as displayed in creation is unfathomable to human wisdom. The more deeply science penetrates into the nature of created things, the profounder the mysteries become, the more puzzling the problems. Time and again science must and will confess its ignorance of the nature of creation; or if it presumes to have found an answer completely solving the mystery, closer research will discover problems overlooked and still waiting for solution. If the works of God are past finding out, how can man through the study of the wisdom of God in creation hope to know the Author and Creator of all these wonderful things? Though He is not far from them, though in Him they live and move and have their being, Acts 17, 28; though the knowable things of God are evident to them, Rom. 1, 19; though there is such a thing as the natural knowledge of the true God, Rom. 1, 19—21, it is nevertheless true that the world in the wisdom of God did not know the true God, τὸν θεόν, the God besides whom there is none other. That God who is the Triune God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, who through the atoning sacrifice which His own Son brought on the cross of Calvary was reconciled to a sinful world, is beyond the ken of the world. In Athens, the city of the wisest of the wise, whither scholars flocked from every country, where human wisdom and learning had reached its zenith, stood that altar with the inscription "to the Unknown God," mute, yet eloquent witness to the truth of the apostle's word, "In the wisdom of God the world by

wisdom knew not God." Did not God indeed make foolish the wisdom of the world?

The apostle here refers not only to Greek philosophers; he is speaking of the world. The Platos and the Philos, and the Bacons, and the Schopenhauers, and the Edisons, and the Burbanks, and the Fosdicks, — none can by wisdom know God. Mark the contrast *ὁ κόσμος — τὸν θεόν*, and we at once see the hopelessness, the futility, of human effort to know God by human wisdom even from the book of nature. The one the creature, the other the Creator; the one finite, the other the Infinite; the one, man, the other, Jehovah. If man by his wisdom would or could know God, then not God, but man would be the master mind, the person and mind of God would be exhaustible, fathomable by the superior mind of man. God would no longer be the Holy One, Is. 40, 25. 28. But it ever will remain true that the world by wisdom knows not God. Man's reasoning power is a splendid gift, yet as far as the knowledge of God and the way of salvation is concerned, it is made folly by God.

But this is not the only nor even the chief way in which God made foolish the wisdom of the world. This thought only serves to introduce the main argument of the apostle: "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." *Εὐδόκησεν*, it pleased. He, the self-determining Lord, chose in His own good pleasure, without as much as consulting the wise and learned of this world. He pleased to *save* man, to bring mankind to a saving knowledge of God, to deliver him out of the darkness of ignorance and uncertainty, of sin and perdition. "By the foolishness of preaching." *Κήρυγμα*, used twice of the preaching of Jonah, Matt. 12, 41; Luke 11, 32, and six times by Paul, 1 Cor. 1, 21; 2, 4; 15, 14; Titus 1, 3; 2 Tim. 4, 17; once with the addition "of Jesus Christ," Rom. 16, 25. However, even if this object of preaching is not added, there is for Paul but one *κήρυγμα*, one proclamation worthy of the name, that message which had been entrusted to him as the herald of God and Jesus Christ, that preaching which he had called the preaching of the Cross, v. 18; see also vv. 17. 23; 2, 2; 2 Cor. 5, 18—21. By the preaching of this message, God purposed to make foolish the wisdom of the world. For, alas! the world, professing to be wise, regards this message as folly, foolishness. While in the book of nature the world at least recognizes a superior wisdom, in the preaching of the Gospel it sees only the very opposite of wisdom, the greatest folly conceivable. How can this message save? Why should a crucified Jew be the only Savior, the only Hope of mankind? Anything but that folly! Yet it pleases God in His inscrutable wisdom to make just this piece of folly the divine means of salvation. Salvation is found not only *in* this message, but *by* this preaching. The Gospel does not only *contain* saving knowledge, which man must by his

own wisdom seek and find, so that, after all, he would owe his salvation in a measure at least to himself. No, God saves *by* the foolishness of preaching. He *gives* saving knowledge by means of that which is regarded and rejected by the world as folly. The folly saves! O wisdom of the world, how foolish you appear! Unable to recognize the means of salvation! Decrying as foolishness that which alone can save!

In still another way does God render foolish the wisdom of man. *How* does the message save? Again, not through wisdom and reasoning power. The Gospel does not by its inexorable logic finally convince the mind of man. It does not take up each and every objection and argument of man in order to refute them logically, so that man is finally obliged to accept this message as saving tidings or at least can fully understand and grasp and fathom it by his intellect. No, this folly of God does not save those who understand, who grasp and comprehend; it saves them that believe, that simply accept as true what they are told, whether they see and understand or not, Heb. 11, 1. The wisdom of this world is left out of consideration altogether in God's plan of salvation. The infant believes and is saved, Matt. 18, 3, 6, saved by the same faith which saves all believers. True, to expect salvation by simply believing, simply to pin one's hope in life and death to a crucified Savior, to bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ, to accept every word of the Bible as God's own revelation, all this, in the view of the world, is folly supreme, unpardonable foolishness, a procedure unworthy of men of science. And yet these "foolish" people are *saved*, brought to that knowledge of God which is eternal life, John 17, 3, saved by the folly of preaching while the wise men perish in their wisdom. Strange wisdom of God! Folly saves!

The apostle had called the Gospel folly; this thought is expanded vv. 22, 23. He had called this folly a saving message; that is brought out vv. 24, 25.

V. 22: *For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom.* How often do we meet the Jews demanding signs in the gospels, and how often had Jesus reproved this fault! Matt. 12, 38, 39; 16, 1, 4; 24, 3; Mark 8, 11; Luke 11, 16; 29, 30; John 2, 18; 4, 48; 6, 30. Instead of believing the Word of Jesus, they wanted to see, to have tangible and visible proof, evidence that they could see with their physical eyes, Mark 15, 32. The Greeks, on the other hand, sought wisdom. They would accept only what they could see with the eye of their mind, what seemed plausible and reasonable to them. Whenever any one came with a new theory, they were willing and anxious to hear him, Acts 17, 21, always ready for a debate — a clash of wit and reason, a display of rhetoric and oratory. Needless to say, the apostle does not mean to assert that only the Jews demanded

signs, while only the Greeks sought after wisdom. He merely points out the outstanding characteristics of Jews and Greeks.

Did Paul in the preaching of the Gospel accommodate himself to these sign-seeking Jews and wisdom-crazed Greeks? True, he performed signs in great numbers, Rom. 15, 19, also in Corinth, 2 Cor. 12, 12; yet he did not come as a miracle-man, nor was the performance of miracles his purpose and aim in life. This was, and ever remained, the preaching of Christ Crucified, 1 Cor. 2, 2. True, again, he presented his message in clear, logical style and at times in a form highly rhetorical, Acts 26, 24, 28. Yet he did not come to feast his hearers by a flow of oratory, to please their ears with well-turned phrases, to reason it out with them. To the Greeks he preached the same Jesus that he proclaimed to the Jews.

V. 23: *But we preach Christ Crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block and unto the Greeks foolishness.* To the Jews indeed a stumbling-block, Is. 8, 14; Luke 2, 34. A crucified Messiah, what an offense to them! Mark 15, 29—32. The modern Jew may acknowledge that Jesus is a wise and learned Rabbi, worthy to be classed with the great teachers of humanity; yet to acknowledge this crucified Jesus as their only Savior—perish the thought! To this day Jesus is to the Jews, though they were at one time the chosen people of God, an offense, a stumbling-block. “And unto the Greeks foolishness.” Cp. their remarks Acts 17, 18, 32; 24, 24, 25; 26, 24—28. To this day the Gospel is to natural man foolishness, a fairy-tale, at best a legend, a myth, superstition. Its plan of salvation is criticized as inadequate by the one, as unjust by another; it presents barbarian ideas of God as a bloodthirsty tyrant, says a third. Why should mere belief in that dead Jew save, while unbelief condemns? asks a fourth. (See Pieper’s splendid article in *Lehre und Wehre*, Vol. 67 [1921], 328 ff.) However, though to Jews the Crucified was an offense and to Greeks folly, Paul preached to both Christ only and Him *crucified*, since he knew that this preaching, folly though it seemed to the world, was indeed wisdom and power of God.

Vv. 24, 25: *But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God, because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.* Truer words were never written. Human philosophy answers many a perplexing question, but in the crucial test it fails man. When conscience awakes, when the sins of the past life accuse and threaten and condemn, then all the schemes of man’s wisdom break down, collapse completely. It is then that the folly of the message comes into its own. It is then that the Cross of Christ towers above the wreckage of human philosophy. While all other ground is sinking sand, here is wisdom and power, power of God, wisdom divine. Ah, the foolishness of preaching wiser than men,

the weakness of the Cross stronger than men! The Son of God forsaken by God Himself, He who called Himself the Resurrection and the Life, unable to save Himself from His enemies, crucified, dead, buried, conquered by that very death which He set out to vanquish — what weakness! Salvation from the cross, life out of death, immortality out of the grave — what folly of follies! Yet by this very death, this weakness of weaknesses, He destroyed him who had the power of death, that is, the devil. What superhuman strength, what power divine! And by His very humiliation unto the grave, what folly! He redeemed them who through fear of death and the grave were all their lifetime subject to bondage, Heb. 2, 14. 15. What wisdom supreme, divine wisdom!

This power and wisdom, inherent in the Gospel, though hidden to Jews and Greeks, is evident to them "which are called," v. 24. In sharp contrast to the seekers of signs and searchers after wisdom the apostle speaks of *αὐτοῖς δὲ τοῖς κλητοῖς* (*αὐτός*, "self to the exclusion of others," Thayer). Natural man will ever be offended at the Gospel; *only* those that are called will recognize its true nature. This knowledge on the part of the Corinthian Christians was not due to any natural endowment. They were by nature exactly like their countrymen, Jews or Greeks. God *called* them out of their state of spiritual darkness and death, called them through the preaching of the Gospel, and, behold, by this foolishness they were saved; cp. v. 21. Since these called ones have experienced in their own lives the wonderful power and wisdom of the Gospel, this message is no longer foolishness to them, but indeed the power of God and the wisdom of God. No longer do they require signs or seek wisdom; no, for them, like for Paul, to live is Christ. Again a rebuke to the Corinthians and their foolish overestimation of non-essentials. Why regard that which cannot save, wisdom and logic and personality, why regard these follies so highly as to overlook the one thing needful, the only wisdom? Are you not in danger of losing the true wisdom because of your foolish quarrelings and bickerings?

V. 26: *For ye see your calling*, — rather an imperative: "Look at, turn your eyes to, regard, your calling"; calling, *κλήσις*, here does not denote the state into which the Corinthians have been called, but, as usually, the active calling of God, the divine invitation which came to you, — *brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called*. In calling the Corinthians into His kingdom, God did not take into consideration wisdom or rank and power or nobility of birth. Rulers of this world will choose with such considerations in their mind; not so God. Just look at your calling. How many wise and influential and noble men will you find? Is there anything of which you could boast, any qualification to which you could point with pride, any merit on your

part which could have induced God to call just you? Surely not, unless folly and weakness and ignobility are things of which to boast and baseness and nothingness (v. 28) are matters to be proud of. What a scathing rebuke! What a death-blow to the foolish pride and silly self-exaltation of the Corinthians! Yet with what consummate tact does Paul administer this reproof! And this tact flows from a heart truly humble, at the same time overflowing with love to his fellow-Christians. "Brethren" he calls them. Before administering his rebuke, he places himself within their ranks, speaking as a brother to brethren. This is not merely diplomacy on his part, an effort to gain their good will; it is the language natural to a heart filled with such humility as imbued the apostle. He is actually not ashamed to include himself with these "no-account" people. Similarly when he speaks of himself as the chief, he is not speaking of noble and honorable men, but of sinners, 1 Tim. 1, 15. When he calls attention to his untiring work, he does so only while praising the grace of God and after having called himself unworthy of the apostolate, 1 Cor. 15, 8 ff. See also Titus 3, 3 ("we ourselves"). What a lesson in true humility and pastoral tact and wisdom for every pastor!

Vv. 27, 28: *God hath chosen, ἐξελέξατο.* The middle form is used to point out that the only motive for this choice was in God; His own free choice, good pleasure, v. 21. And His purpose in His choice was to confound, *κατασχύρη*, to put to shame, and to bring to naught, *καταργήση*, render inoperative, deprive of force, influence, power, whatever the world thinks worth while. We see that the apostle has not lost sight of his purpose to prove his statement in v. 20 that God made foolish the wisdom of this world. With this in mind, God chose the foolish things. "The neuters indicate the category generally, it being evident from the context that what is meant are the *persons* included under that category" (Meyer). God has chosen that which the world regards as foolish or those whom the world regards as fools, the uncultured, unschooled, oftentimes unlettered, common people, who in the eyes of the world are fools indeed. We remember the sneering remarks of the Pharisees: "This people, who knoweth not the Law, are cursed," John 7, 49. We think of the oft-repeated stock phrase of the worldly wise: "Of course, no scientist would be foolish enough to accept the creation record of the Bible. Of course, no intelligent man believes in the bodily resurrection of Christ." These "fools" God has chosen to put to shame the wise. Cf. Matt. 11, 25. These fools have found the way to heaven; their feet have been placed on the highway of holiness, in which the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err and which leads whither? Read Is. 35, 10. Blessed fools! The wise of this world, on the other hand, spite of all their wisdom and learning, continue to grope in darkness. See Is. 8, 19-22; 59, 9 ff. Again, God has chosen the weak, those of no power

and influence in this world, to put to shame the mighty ones of this world. The weak of God succeed in doing what is impossible to the most powerful rulers of this world — they rule themselves. They hold in subjection and crucify their flesh and its sinful lusts and passions; their faith is the victory which overcomes the world, 1 John 5, 4, yea, sin and death and hell, 1 Cor. 15, 55 ff.; Rom. 8, 37, while the mighty ones of this world are miserable slaves of sin and Satan, Rom. 6, 16 ff., all their lifetime subject to bondage, Heb. 2, 15. — God has chosen base things, *τὰ ἀγενή*, of no noble birth, those who are not members of the blue-blooded aristocracy, not men and women of society. "Things which are despised," *ἰξουθενήματα*, the perfect participle denoting the state of being utterly despised, of no account. In the eyes of the world they are hopelessly out of society, the unmentionables. "Yea, and things which are not." For the world they simply do not exist. With haughty pride the world sweeps past them. They are indeed like so much thin air, the unmentionables not only, but unmentioned. These God has chosen to bring to naught things that are. These base people are born of God, John 1, 13; children of the Highest, Luke 6, 35; sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty, 2 Cor. 6, 18. Can nobler birth be conceived? These people of no account are they whose names are written in heaven, Luke 10, 20. Can greater honor be desired? These people who in the view of the world "are not," they alone "are," they alone live and enjoy their existence; for they live in Him who is Life and Light and Joy and Bliss; while those who "are" shall not know life in its highest sense, neither in this world nor in the world to come, they are not of His own. They shall hear their verdict on the Last Day, Matt. 7, 24. Shame and everlasting contempt shall be their lot, Dan. 12, 2.

V. 29: *That no flesh should glory in His presence.* No flesh, no man, can boast before God: not the worldly wise and powerful, for they have been confounded and brought to naught, their wisdom has been put to shame, their strength made of none effect; not the called and chosen of God, for they were foolish and base and weak and despised.

V. 30: *But of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us Wisdom, and Righteousness, and Sanctification, and Redemption.* Ye are in Christ Jesus. Though aware of their manifold imperfections, the apostle regards his hearers as still united with Christ. This union is, however, not of their own making; no, it is of *Him*, *ἰξ*, out of Him, originating from Him. God called the foolish, etc., but not because their foolishness, etc., had merited the grace and pity of God, was in any degree meritorious. No, salvation originates solely in God, who was pleased to save whom He saves, v. 21.

"Who of God" — again it is God alone who is the Author of our salvation — "is made unto us Wisdom, and Righteousness, and Sanctification, and Redemption." "Unto us"; again the apostle includes himself. As he was not ashamed to call the Corinthians brethren, v. 26, although there were not many wise, etc., so he cannot refrain from numbering himself with those to whom Christ has become Wisdom. The words added by the apostle, "righteousness and sanctification and redemption," in our opinion unfold the wisdom found in Christ. He is above all "Righteousness." That crucified Savior procured for us perfect righteousness by His active as well as by His passive obedience, Gal. 4, 4; 2 Cor. 5, 19. From the cross of Calvary flows that blood which cleanses us from all sin, 1 John 1, 7; Eph. 6, 25 ff. "Sanctification." From that cross we obtain strength to lead a holy and God-pleasing life. For is He not the Conqueror of all our enemies? John 16, 33; 1 John 3, 8; 1 Pet. 1, 18, 19. Therefore in His strength we are more than conquerors, Rom. 8, 37; 1 John 2, 13; 5, 4. "Redemption," deliverance from all evil. For has He not carried our sorrows? Is. 53, 4. Does not from His cross flow into our hearts that peace which passeth all understanding, yet which is so familiar and precious to every believer? Will He not deliver us from every evil work and preserve us unto His heavenly kingdom? 2 Tim. 4, 18.

Jesus Christ, the Crucified, is He foolishness, as the world regards Him? Ah, no! He, our Righteousness, He, our Sanctification, He, our Redemption, He is Wisdom indeed, and Power, the Power of God, and the Wisdom of God.

V. 31: *That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let Him glory in the Lord, not in man's wisdom, rhetoric, personality. No; "all glory be to God on high." That is the final purpose of all works of God, that the final purpose of His glorious plan of saving mankind: Soli Deo gloria!*

A few outlines. — *How May a Christian Congregation Guard against Strife and Factions?* By considering 1. the nature of the Gospel, vv. 21—25; 2. the nature of their calling, vv. 26—31. — *Why do So Many Reject the Gospel?* Because they do not recognize in this Gospel the wisdom of God and because they refuse to give all glory to God. — *God has made foolish the wisdom of this world.* 1. The world by wisdom knows not God. 2. The world does not recognize in the Gospel the wisdom of God. — *God's Plan of Salvation Folly to Man.* 1. For He saves by the foolishness of preaching. 2. He saves through the folly of faith. — *To God Alone All Glory!* 1. He has made Christ Wisdom, vv. 21—23. 30 b. 2. Of Him we are in Christ, vv. 26—30 a. — *Christ the True Wisdom.* 1. Righteousness; 2. Sanctification; 3. Redemption. T. L.