

# Wise Stewards of the Mysteries

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## INTRODUCTION

In Jeremiah 3:15 the Lord promises to give his people shepherds after his own heart who would fill them with knowledge and understanding. This promise echoes the words of Ezekiel, that God would set over his people one Shepherd, a new David who would lead, feed and pastor his flock (Ezek. 34:23; 37:24). In effect, by so doing, the Lord himself says that he would show himself to be the true Shepherd over his people, caring for them directly in the face of the delinquency of his appointed under-shepherds and the antagonism evident among the sheep themselves (they are not an innocent flock!). In Ezekiel 34, the preponderance of first person personal pronouns in relation to this action is astounding.

It is clear that the fulfilment of the promise stretches beyond its own historical setting, to the coming of Messiah himself. There can be no doubt that passages such as these stand behind Jesus' self identification as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14). For those who had ears to hear in Israel,<sup>1</sup> Jesus' statements would have been a clear reference to the fact that he himself was the Lord incarnate, fulfilling the promises made through his prophetic messengers. It also means that the current and future care of the flock of God (the church) has been given into the hands of the Son. While the Father is undoubtedly the Shepherd in view in Psalm 23 (cf. Isa. 40:11; 1 Pet. 2:25),

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<sup>1</sup> The emphasis on obedient hearing is indeed significant through out the Scriptures (e.g. Deut. 32:46; cf. Mark 4:23; Luke 8:18; Heb. 2:1; James 1:19–25; etc.), not least in the wisdom literature (e.g. Prov. 2:2–4). Given this emphasis—which finally is rooted in the eternal relationships within the Trinity and expressed in our being made in God's image—there is a real sense in which I believe the church has been sold a pup regarding the mode and manner of its communication. Promotion of our services and events which is built around the *style of communication* (e.g. 'relevant', 'exciting', 'stimulating', 'dynamic', 'heart warming' worship experience, now at a congregation near you!) is finally faithless. In Jesus' 'he who has an ear to hear' type statements we have a strong exposition of the moral/spiritual demand that hearing the word of God makes. This moral demand should not be confused with 'challenging application', which in the end is no different from the demands of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. The morality of hearing is far deeper than that, because true hearing kills our religious flesh and starves our profligate flesh. In an ironical way, postmodern literary and communication theorists (e.g. Stanley Fish and others) have pushed us to see the importance of the hearer. The difference is that in such interpretations of the event-that-is-communication all weight has been given to the hearer/reader in the sense that the Author is now dead (Barthes, Derrida)! In effect the reader becomes the Author . . . and in a blink we are back in Genesis 3!

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the Psalm may also apply to Christ,<sup>2</sup> who has been commissioned by the Father as the Chief Shepherd of the flock (1 Pet. 5:4; cf. Heb. 13:20).

There can also be no doubt that the great reality under which the New Testament communities lived was the ascended Lordship of Jesus the Messiah. The Messianic-kingship Psalms (especially Ps. 2 and 110) and theologically related themes and passages (not least those related to the Abrahamic covenant) formed the interpretive grid through which all events were seen. Pentecost was the declaration of Jesus' ascended Lordship, with the newly ascended King giving gifts to his subjects to enable them to declare the reality of his reign. They were to be heralds to the nations of Jesus' accession to the throne of heaven. All events in the subsequent spread of the gospel are shown to unfold under his hand. The last sight that the disciples had of the Lord was with his hands upraised over them in blessing (Luke 24:50–51). The reality of Jesus' resurrection body and the nail marks therein (Luke 24:36–43) meant that when he blessed the disciples in this way they could be assured that the content of the Old Testament priestly benediction of Numbers 6:22–26 was in fact fulfilled. In this way they knew themselves to be living under the eternal benediction of their ascended High Priest, in whom they knew the Father's face to be shining upon them. Moreover, Jesus' priestly blessing was also his royal commission, so in being blessed in/by him, the disciples knew that the Abrahamic covenant was now full steam ahead for the nations, over which Jesus was (and is) King.

Putting these things together, it is clear that it is the Lord Jesus who grants the ministry gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor/teacher to his church (Eph. 4:11), as ascension gifts from his throne for the blessing of his people. These *persons* (they are not abstract or disembodied gifts) stand as under-shepherds, with (and over) the flock (so 1 Pet. 5:1–4), again by direct appointment of the Great Shepherd of the sheep. All the ministries mentioned in Ephesians 4 and related passages are ultimately commissioned by the ascended King to feed his flock (cf. John 21:15–17).

While elders in particular are nominated as shepherds of the flock of God (e.g. Acts 20:28) we must never lose sight of the fact that the flock is *God's own personal possession* (Exod. 19:5; Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Mal. 3:17; cf. Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9). The church has been purchased with his own blood (or the blood of his own [Son], depending on how we translate Acts 20:28), and such is his love for his people that he has appointed under-shepherds to watch, guard, tend and serve the flock. However, in so doing, God has never relinquished his authority over the flock, nor, properly understood, has he even delegated it.<sup>3</sup> The ministry gifts granted to the church by her

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<sup>2</sup> The Psalm may apply in a double direction. On the one hand, as the Messianic King, Jesus is able to take Ps. 23 on his own lips, as his own confession of trust in the Father who has appointed him to be the King–Shepherd of the flock. We gain a very dynamic view of the nature of the Messiah's life and ministry by taking Psalm 23 and reading it as though it were being spoken from his lips to the Father. On the other hand, from the flock's point of view, we may legitimately look to Christ and come to him as our personal and corporate Shepherd. One of the points being made in John 10 is that Jesus has the authority to be the Shepherd of the flock because he has been given authority from the Father to do so. His devolved authority to be the Shepherd stands in contrast to the shepherds-so-called (the hirelings) who have no legitimate claim to the flock, and to the destructive intent of those individuals and spiritual powers which may want to prey on the flock.

<sup>3</sup> We are very familiar with delegated authority in the political/administrative sense, since in human systems of government or administration such delegation is an absolute necessity for them to function. In these systems, delegated authority is linked with clearly defined hierarchies. Delegated agents may act effectively (e.g. in matters of finance or decision making) because of the sanction that the hierarchical authority confers. Delegated authority

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ascended Head are all with the purpose that *his* voice may be heard. In so doing, his Father is glorified and the body is built up through the Spirit's fullness (which cannot be separated from the hearing of the gospel), to participate in the faith, hope and love of the Divine life.

### **STEWARDS OF THE MYSTERIES TO SERVE THE PEOPLE OF GOD**

The question naturally arises: By what power and in what way is this demanding ministry to be conducted? In view of all that we have seen in this School, the answer must be that such ministry is only possible in and by the wisdom of God. However, it is not simply that we are called to conduct the ministries to which we have been called in practical wisdom, but that we are called to equip the people of God with heavenly wisdom (i.e. the word of Christ and him crucified). In this wisdom they are enabled to be the Father's wise people in the midst of the nations—always recognising that the world's wisdom will regard the wisdom of the Father and his children as foolishness. The description of Israel in Deuteronomy 4:6 is surely no less true of God's New Testament *laos periousios* than of his Old Testament *'am segullah*. As was the case with God's Old Testament people, Israel, this wisdom would be known morally, ethically and relationally; and all under the umbrella of covenant. This covenantal relationship was only established through the word of God, and so the New Testament people of God likewise stand in relation to him by the Word, who himself is the guarantee of the new covenant, sealed in his blood.

### **The Content of the Mystery**

The stewardship of the mysteries of God is not for the sake of preserving esoteric wisdom, but for the salvation of the nations and for the equipping of the people of God. Such equipping does not consist of giving 'hints and tips' to achieve success in business, to make progress in the world, or to overcome one's enemies (or any of the many related themes that form the substance of mere human wisdom). Rather, it relates to being enabled by God to proclaim the full mystery of Christ (in whom is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge of God) and to live in the reality of our new grace-faith union with him.

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allows for objectives to be reached efficiently and for policy to be implemented in responsible ways. In my view it is clear that the Lord has placed authority-bearing hierarchies in the church and the world (e.g. Heb. 13:17; Rom. 13:1-7), but that these do not operate in precisely the same way as our delegated systems. On the one hand, in the church, all the members of the body are in *direct union* with Christ, shepherds and flock alike. He indwells all his flock, and they him. The shepherds are called to shepherd the flock of God *among* them (1 Pet. 5:2) and this means that the manner and modes of their shepherding ought to be in tune with *his active care* of the flock. On the other hand, submission to the governing authorities is ultimately a sign of one's personal submission to God himself. Even in submitting to Pilate, Christ knew himself to be receiving all things from his Father. Such elements as these will not allow a mere transposition of the notion of delegated authority in the political/administrative sense onto the church. Where such a transposition happens we find that the systems thus generated become in the church a means for the operation of the flesh as much as they do in the world.

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In 1 Corinthians 4:1, Paul speaks of himself and his apostolic colleagues as ‘servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God’. He indicates that this ministry consists of making known the ‘secret and hidden wisdom of God’, such wisdom now being openly revealed through the proclamation of the cross. This is clear from 1 Corinthians 2:7 where Paul says, ‘we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory’. Given the wider context in which this statement takes its place, this can only refer to the preaching of Christ and him crucified. It is *this* preaching of Christ that therefore constitutes the (now revealed) secret mystery of the wisdom of God (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:9; 3:3–9; 6:19; Col. 1:25–29; 2:1–3; 4:3; etc.).<sup>4</sup> It is this preaching that is the power of God (e.g. Rom. 1:16–17; 1 Cor. 1:18, 24; 2:5), and it is this which also destroys all human ‘wisdom’ (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:19; cf. 3:18–20; 2 Cor. 10:3–6).

In Ephesians 3:3–9 this mystery is evidenced in the fact that the Gentiles are now fellow-heirs of the promises. This is only possible because of the prior reality that Jews and Gentiles alike had been formed into one new man through the action of the man, Jesus on the cross (Eph. 2:13–18). This new man stands in a new place of Triune communion. Access to *the one Father* (whom they worship as his new Temple) is granted to both Jew and Gentile *through the Son* (in whom they have been bound together via the work of the cross and the adoption that this makes possible) and *in one Spirit* (in whom the reality of that union is communicated to each through the Spirit leading the whole family to cry ‘Abba, Father’). The people of God are thus held in Trinitarian bonds, for ever. And all of this is only found in and through Christ, which is why he is the seminal content of apostolic preaching.

There can be no doubt that the apostles taught much about the results of Christ’s gracious action for the Christian community, and they proclaimed these clearly (e.g. justification, adoption, sanctification, etc.). We, too, must proclaim these great evangelical doctrines, but never as freestanding dogma. They should not be presented as though they are somehow detached from our grace-faith union with Christ. And, in like manner, they should not be presented in any way which allows them to be detached from *the Christ of the cross*, who is the only Christ we have. It is this actual proclamation of Christ in his person and work on the cross, which God has appointed as the means by which they are so in a person’s experience.<sup>5</sup>

There is no other means by which men and women are saved, but through the cross. There is no other means by which men and women may have their guilt removed, their shame reversed, and their worship truly realigned. The proclamation of the mysterious wisdom of God—that is, the proclamation of Christ and him crucified—is the only means by which men and women will be brought into faith-union with Christ, and by

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<sup>4</sup> The last couple of decades have seen an explosion in the number of books, teaching seminars and other resources that address the twin concepts of ‘wisdom’ and ‘mystery’. A cursory examination of any bookshop (Christian, secular or ‘New Age’), or an Internet search on these terms, will yield an astronomical (or perhaps, better, astrological!) number of results. By far the most commonly identifiable thread is that both ‘wisdom’ and ‘mystery’ will be related to almost anything *other* than the cross. By this criterion alone the vast majority of books on wisdom (even those in Christian bookshops!) are neither biblical nor apostolic.

<sup>5</sup> The church has had a long and unhappy history of separating Christ from his benefits. The greatest safeguard against this constantly present inclination is the Spirit anointed preaching *and hearing* of the believer’s grace-faith union with Christ. Likewise, if and where such a separation has taken place, this is the only antidote to the toxic flesh-religion which always fills the gap.

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which the power of Satan will be broken in their lives. The apostolic gospel is the only saving gospel there is.

There can be no doubt that this preaching of the crucified Christ is foolishness to the world, but to those who are being saved it is the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18, 24). Through it we have knowledge of all things that are necessary to life and godliness, since in Christ we receive all the inestimable gifts of God the Father, such as justification, sanctification, redemption, propitiation, forgiveness, adoption, and the glorification of his children and the renewal of the cosmos.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Communication of the Mystery**

It is permissible to think of the cross in two ways: as an event in history and as a preached ‘event’ in the existential reality of the church’s life. Both the historical event of the cross and the preached event of the cross are, alike, a *krisis* (judgement). And both are Christ’s rather than ours. In *his action* on the cross—vindicated and secured (so to speak) in the resurrection and ascension—Christ objectively accomplished all the work he had set out to do in that great event. In it he redeemed and cleansed his Bride, brought all sin and evil to their effective end, and guaranteed the eschatological new creation. In *his preaching* of the cross through his appointed heralds—empowered, sealed and sanctified by the Spirit he has sent—Christ draws his flock together, condemns the ‘wisdom’ of his enemies, and subdues the nations to worship the Father.

We, as preachers of the apostolic gospel, are wise stewards of the mystery of the cross. This is not only in terms of the content of the proclamation (Christ and him crucified), but also in the mystery of its hearing. Recognising its character as *krisis*, we do not seek to measure the effectiveness of the message by trying to calculate (i.e. count) the response. There will always be four sorts of soils, but then there will also always be a harvest, even if it is unseen. The seed grows while the farmer sleeps.

Similarly we do not use the persuasive ‘wisdom’ of the world’s logic to present a case for the wisdom of God. The Corinthian letters reflect Paul’s very long and patient dealings with a congregation where the power/weakness and wisdom/foolishness axes were not only out of scale, but also wrongly aligned. The result was a very inaccurate and misleading graph, where power and wisdom (used in the worldly senses of these terms) were understood to function in a directly proportional relationship to one another *in the church*. The only way to preserve this relationship (and plot one’s own place on the line) is to forego the preaching of the cross because of its inherent foolishness and to minimise/remove its character as *krisis*, by removing the scandal that the cross is and will always be.

So preaching that is apostolic will be both cross-centred and cross-shaped. It is cross-centred in that here, and only here—in the apostolic interpretation of the cross—do we find Christ actually becoming wisdom from God to us (1 Cor. 1:30 in context). This means that any preaching about Christ that does not take its stand in and through the cross of Christ, will not be the wisdom of God. We cannot take the ‘wise sayings’ of the Sermon on the Mount, for example, and give them some

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<sup>6</sup> I would suggest that any other system of wisdom or philosophy will seek to provide such elements for humanity, but without reference to Christ. The alternate wisdom(s) that the world adopts seeks to provide its equivalent of all these things, but without grace and without the need for forgiveness and propitiation.

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independent life other than that which they have from the cross-orientated Messiah who spoke them.<sup>7</sup> But the apostolic ministry of preaching this mysterious wisdom of God in Christ is also cross-shaped. This means that it can only be done in the love of God, that is, in the power of the Spirit. It can only be conducted in the weakness which makes the power of God perfect, and which shows that the grace of God is sufficient for preacher and hearer alike. In Luther's terms, the matter is not just preaching a theology of the cross, but of *being a theologian of the cross*.<sup>8</sup>

### SERVING THE CHURCH BY HEARING THE WORD

The emphasis on true and false hearing is notable in many places in the Old Testament, and is seminal to Israel's understanding of the covenant (e.g. Deut. 6:4–15). It appears again as a recurring theme in the Servant Songs of Isaiah (e.g. Isa. 44:1; 42:23; 48:16–18; 51:4; 55:3; etc.) and is taken up by the writer of Hebrews to expound Christ's life and ministry in the words of Psalm 40:7 (cf. Heb. 10:1–10). In

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<sup>7</sup> For an extended and Christ-centred exposition of what lies behind this point, see P. T. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Luther spoke of two different theologies he saw at work in the church. He named one the theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*) and the other the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*). The terms 'theologian of glory' and 'theologian of the cross' appear in thesis 21 of the Heidelberg Disputation of May 1518, and it is generally recognised that 28 theological theses in this disputation reveal some of the main lines of Luther's understanding of what it meant to be a theologian of the cross. Interested readers should devote themselves to studying this important theme in Luther, and there are some fine works available (e.g. G. O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1997; H. O. Kadai, 'Luther's Theology of the Cross', *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 63, [6], July 1999, pp. 169–204; W. von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1976; A. E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Blackwell Publ., Oxford, 1998; H. Sasse, 'The Theology of the Cross' in *Reformed Theological Review*, vol. 31, Sept.–Dec. 1972, pp. 74–89). For Luther, the cross (and in particular what the event of the cross meant for atonement, justification, reconciliation and peace with God) could not be one topic of a wide range of theological speculations, but it must be the centre from which and through which *everything* must be viewed.

The mark of this theology is its contradictory nature. It confounds all natural human wisdom and reason, and in the hidden action of God on the cross we in fact find the centre and sum of all life. Thus, where the world in its wisdom would perceive the cross to be the epitome of shame, weakness, foolishness, and rejection, in reality it is the place of glory, power, divine wisdom and acceptance with God. The *theologia gloriae* is built on natural human wisdom and philosophy rather than divine revelation. It is a theology that operates by sight rather than by faith. It is a theology that prides itself on its successful *ethos*. It is triumphalistic, speculative and attractive, and thinks that it can understand the things of God by looking simply at his works in creation. It is a naturalistic theology, and one that looks for 'proof' (whether this be signs and wonders or the persuasive logic of worldly wisdom). Consequently it is a theology which draws attention to human achievement and merit, and minimises the grace of God in Christ. The outcome of this theology is to seek acceptance with God on the basis of something *in us*, rather than on the basis of all that is in *him*.

What must be borne in mind (and this comes out particularly clearly in Forde) is that for Luther one must not simply hold a theology *about* the cross, but one must *be* a theologian *of* the cross. The 'true theologian' is one who views even his own interior life through the lens of the *theologia crucis*, and who shares in the sufferings of the cross in his own life. As the preacher proclaims the word of the cross in the power of the Spirit, the wisdom of the world reacts against him, just as it reacted against the Christ himself. The deep spiritual battles, personal struggles, temptations and utter weakness of the sinner in the face of such things is part of *being* a theologian of the cross. Just as Paul had to establish his 'reverse *ethos*' (to use Resner's term) in the face of the sophists of his day, so does a true theologian of the cross experience misunderstanding, misrepresentation and rejection in each age. In addition, the theologian of the cross lives from the cross, i.e. living out in his daily life the death to sin that took place there once and for all. In *this very place of suffering* the *theologia crucis* is established and known to be true, though it would never be recognised as such by the world.

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Christ we see the true nature of human life exposed to view, and in him we therefore see the true nature of human ministry revealed in its untainted glory.

What lies implicit in the creation of the first man becomes explicit in the incarnation of the last Man: Jesus' entire life is governed by hearing the voice of his Father. This is seen not only in the temptation narratives and his response to Satan there recorded (e.g. Matt. 4: 4), but also in the day-to-day operations of his public ministry, both in word and deed. While this is made abundantly clear in John (e.g. John 5:19, 30; 7:16; 8:28, 38, 40; 12:49; 14:10; etc.) it is also inescapable from the theological descriptions of Christ as the express image of God (e.g. 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:1–4; cf. John 1:18; 12:45; 14:9).

In addition to this, we have clear descriptions of Jesus' purpose for coming into the world: to do the will of the One who sent him (e.g. Luke 9:48; 10:16; John 4:34; 5:24, 37; 6:38; etc.). The 'sent-ness' and the 'purposiveness' are inseparable and both imply a continually obedient hearing on the part of the Son. In this sense he is truly *the* Apostle of our confession (Heb. 3:1) in that he is *the* Sent One, and all others who are sent are sent through hearing his word.

Given all this it cannot but be true that the first and primary action of all true apostolic ministry is to *hear*. Speaking that is not from hearing is no true proclamation. Christ speaks that which he hears. His servants can only speak that which they hear from him. But, as in all biblical hearing, this is no mere repetition of facts. True hearing means joyful submission, willing obedience, and humble faith. It is the opposite of having a hard heart, or an unwilling spirit. That 'faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ' (Rom. 10:17) is true for us all—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers alike. Indeed we can only speak out of that faith which comes to us in this way, and this in the face of death itself (so 2 Cor. 4:13–15).

### **Stealing God's Words?**

Geoffrey Bingham warns us against a ministry of 'stolen words', warning us that:

... we can peddle God's word, that we can practise disgraceful and underhanded ways in the proclamation of the Gospel, and that we can use cunning, and we can tamper with God's word. We can also use eloquent and plausible words of a wisdom which is not God's wisdom, and we can even make men to stand in such false wisdom, rather than in the power of God. All this should cause us much heart-searching.<sup>9</sup>

Are we professional sermon preparers and adept point makers instead of true and obedient hearers? Do our people hear the voice of him who has spoken to us? Do we really trust his word, alone, as the power of God for salvation? Do we speak, truly, as those who have the oracles of God? Do we believe that, in and through God's amazing grace, we really do speak his word to his people?<sup>10</sup> Or do we give our opinions on the text and seek to enliven them with a few good stories along the way? Do we come from the sanctuary of the Father's holy hill, and speak as those who have

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<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey C. Bingham, *For Pastors and the People*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1989, p. 86.

<sup>10</sup> Reformed theology has habitually spoken of the doctrine of the word of God in the threefold way: Christ Jesus as the Word incarnate; the Scriptures as God's written word; and the public proclamation of the gospel (preaching) as God's spoken word.

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seen the face of God? None of us can judge another in these things, but they are questions that take us to the heart of truly apostolic ministry.

### **Quarrying for Sermons?**

The (temporarily) buoyant bubble that is the Australian economy has been kept afloat by the precious metals, gems, and useful ores that God hid in the depths of the earth when he laid the foundation of the world. Politicians, mining magnates, bankers and business people alike are all glad that these can be dug up and sold. However, we who are preachers of the apostolic gospel must take heed that we do not have a resource exploitation mindset when it comes to the Scriptures. We are not called to be prospectors and entrepreneurs, but *hearers* of the word. P. T. Forsyth warns us against a view of ministry which approaches the Bible as a ‘sermon quarry’. Rather we must speak ‘from within the silent sanctuary of Scripture’, from the place of being immersed in the word.<sup>11</sup> Only in this way may the preaching be the authority it needs to be in the world:

The press is there for information, or for suggestion at most, it is not there for authority; but the pulpit is there with authority; and the news it brings is brought for the sake of the authority. The press may offer an opinion as to how the public should act, but the pulpit is there with a message as to whom the acting public must obey and trust. The press is an adviser, but the pulpit is a prophet; the press may have a thought, the pulpit must have a Gospel, nay a command.<sup>12</sup>

### **PREACHING CHRIST TO THE GLORY OF GOD**

We have no other mandate as preachers of the gospel than to preach Christ, who is God’s word and gift to the world. Preaching Christ brings glory to the Father, as Jesus is the embodiment of his glory (Heb. 1:3; John 1:14; 2 Cor. 4:6). The latter part of Paul’s closing doxology in Romans 16:27 links the wisdom and glory of God, but both of these are with the preaching of the gospel to the nations and their resultant obedience of faith (Rom. 16:25–26). In 1 Corinthians 2:6–12, Paul speaks of a wisdom that the rulers of this age do not understand, but which is revealed in the preaching of the apostolic gospel. In this wisdom, the nature of Jesus as the Lord of glory is made plain, and we find that God has purposed his saving acts to be for the glory of us, his people. Though ‘eye has not seen, nor has ear heard what God has prepared for those who love him’, believers are taught these things inwardly by the Spirit. In 2 Corinthians 1:20, Jesus is clearly shown to be God’s ‘Yes’ to the world, in whom all the promises are secured. The apostolic preaching of the gospel brings the knowledge of this Divine ‘Yes’ to the world, and the believing response (‘Amen’) through Christ brings glory to God (so also 2 Cor. 4:15). In 2 Corinthians 4:4 the gospel reveals the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, while in 4:6 God has ‘shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’. In Philippians 2:11, Jesus is declared Lord of all, to the glory of God the Father, and

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<sup>11</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1993, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 28f.

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Paul's simple benediction in that letter is: 'To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.'

References such as these could be multiplied, but the point is clear that the stewardship of the mystery of the gospel is for the glory of the God whose gospel it is. This means that the preacher's glory is of no consequence. Indeed, as is made plain in the Corinthian letters, the theologian of the cross (to use Luther's term) has no glory in the world's eyes. The difference between Paul and the 'super apostles' hinged on this very point. The hope that we have in Christ is, by definition, eschatological. So, too, is the glory to which that hope attaches. It is neither right nor safe to secure either of them in this life. If we were to attempt this we would need to use the evaluative principles of the world. And how could we calibrate their scale to measure the radiance of the glory or the dimensions of our hope in Christ?

### WISDOM AND THE APOSTOLIC CALLING

#### Syncretism vs. single-mindedness

Paul's letter to the Colossians has much to do with the concepts of wisdom and mystery. This emphasis is largely necessary because (by a sort of reverse engineering) we can adduce that the problems in the Colossian congregation related to distortions of the ideas of wisdom and mystery. The wider socio-religious context of the letter is a world in which esoteric wisdom formed a way to ensure safe living in a cosmos full of hostile powers.<sup>13</sup>

In Colossians 1:24–2:3, we have a compact description of the means and goals of apostolic ministry. This passage is dense with material relating to the theme of our study and this School, but if we keep the syncretism of the Colossians' situation in mind it leads us to some helpful conclusions.

Firstly, syncretism by definition undermines the uniqueness of Christ and the finality of the revelation he has brought (or better, the revelation, which he is). By so doing, it draws him into our human systems of philosophy and religion. In particular we seek to draw him into our own systems for our own ends, in that we attempt to bring the (now modified) person and work of Christ into a system by which we may gain his benefits without organic faith-union with him.

Secondly, syncretism offers an alternative understanding of the universe and the way in which we are called to live within it. This alternative understanding finally is shaped by the wisdom of this age rather than the age to come. Its drift in this regard will be twofold. One the one hand it will lead to utter pragmatism (how do I use this

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<sup>13</sup> There have been numerous attempts to reconstruct/understand the issues with which the letter to the Colossians must deal (e.g. proto-Gnosticism, Gnosticism, Jewish mysticism, Middle Platonism), but there is widespread agreement among commentators that the approach the Colossians were moving to (or had adopted) was syncretistic. In my view, C. E. Arnold has done a pretty convincing job of showing that the 'best explanation for the Colossian "philosophy" lies in the quite general classification of folk religion', particularly in its use of 'so-called magical texts' (Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 5). Almost by self-definition, folk religions are syncretistic, but even if the background to the Colossian letter is something other than folk religion, its syncretistic character seems inescapable.

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system to get what I want?) and on the other it leads to an interpretation of the person and work of Christ which is ‘from below’ rather than from above (i.e. the weight falls on *interpretation* not revelation).

Thirdly, syncretism confuses our worship (just take the Old Testament high places as one example!). Wherever this trend emerges, the purity of worship in Spirit and in truth is undermined. The church is given competing (and finally, mutually exclusive) bases of trust, which then rob God of his glory and lead astray the hearts of the Bride to shower their affections on other lovers.

### **Colossians 1:24–2:3: Apostolic Means and Apostolic Goals**

There are two seminal statements here, around which all else revolves. In Colossians 1:28, Paul says: ‘*him* [i.e. Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ’. And in Colossians 2:2c–3, he says that his aim is that his hearers might be fully encouraged in love and in full assurance of understanding to attain ‘the knowledge of God’s mystery, *which is Christ*, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’. A wider reading of Colossians indicates that the apostolic teaching which forms the heart of the letter relates both to the person of Christ (e.g. Col. 1:15–20; 2:9) and to the work he has accomplished in the cross (e.g. Col. 1:13–14; 2:9–15). All of this is from the Father and for his glory (e.g. Col. 1:2, 12; 3:17).

In both these statements (Col. 1:28 and 2:2–3) there is content (Christ as wisdom) and there is a goal (Christian maturity, which is equivalent to being knit together in love, having a full understanding and assurance of what God has accomplished in Christ). The goal is inseparable from the proclamation of Christ, both in his person and his work. For this reason the maturity of the congregation could only ever be achieved in having the word of Christ richly dwell within (among) them (Col. 3:15–17).

The wider context of this section is, again, the theology of the two ways. Colossians is a manifesto for walking in the wisdom of Christ, as opposed to walking in the ‘wisdom’ of the world. Having begun to walk in the Son, the Colossians were in danger of being knocked out of step, and to find themselves again captive to the hostile philosophies and elementary principles of this world’s wisdom. This, indeed, is the constant nature of the battle in which the people of God are engaged. It has been thus since the ‘wisdom’ on offer from the Serpent drew us into his fold in Genesis 3, and will be so until the ‘wisdom’ on offer from the Dragon–Harlot–Beast coalition is finally put out of action with the Son’s appearing. In all of the different permutations that this ‘wisdom-so-called’ appears, it is only the full proclamation of Christ that will keep the church from its clutches and, more positively, bring the people of God to the mature goal of being the Father’s wise family among the nations.