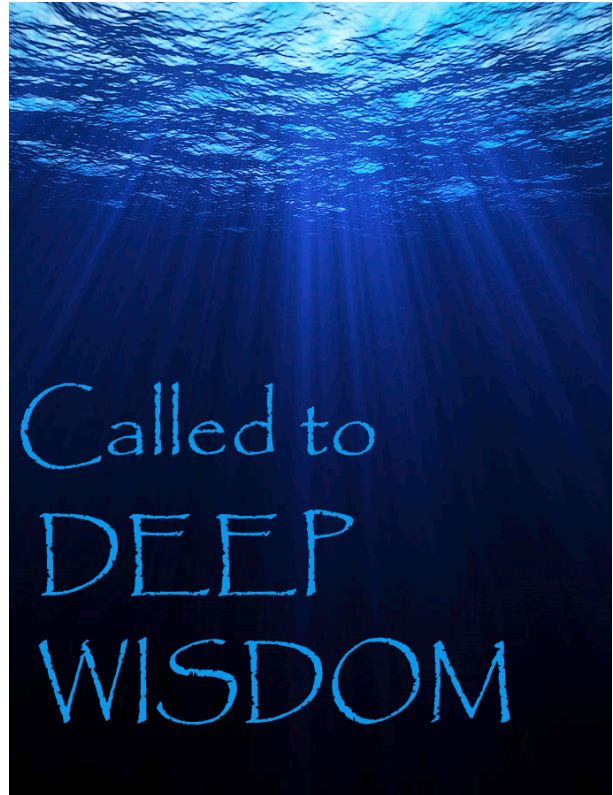


Lent 3, 7 March 2021  
1 Corinthians 1:18-31  
Called to Deep Wisdom  
First Mennonite Church

Do any of you listen to Under the Influence on CBC radio? Under the Influence is a Canadian radio documentary series about marketing and advertising presented by former adman Terry O'Reilly. I really like listening to it because I enjoy learning about how companies develop ideas and then craft advertisements that speaks to our hopes and dreams, our wants and desires—all so that they can sell more products to us, the consumer.



The church has borrowed some of the



strategies and messaging of the business world in its effort to attract people. Have you ever heard preachers say that God wants to shower you with all sorts of financial blessings if you only believe in Jesus?

Or, your marriage can be so much better, your family so much more harmonious if you follow Jesus. You don't need to suffer from depression; your cancer will disappear if you just have more faith. Come to our church and you will find belonging, unity, and happiness.



The Church in Corinth was one of the faith communities begun by the apostle Paul. When Paul arrived there in the year 51, Corinth was a strategic commercial city controlling two major harbours where trade between Asia and Rome took place. Corinth was a Roman colony, and in Paul's day, was the largest and most important city after Rome, Alexandria, and Ephesus.

Corinth was a city brimming with immigrants from all parts of the Mediterranean world. Egyptians, Syrians,

Jews, Italians, and Greeks all brought their different religions, food, and practices, creating a diverse city. Through Paul's preaching, people from these different cultures found themselves together in the church.

The Corinthian Church was a first-generation community. As these communities were often small, they met in homes. They had no church traditions, no history of being Christian. Most of these first-generation believers had no Christian parents, grandparents or relatives who had taught them the gospel.

As a first-generation church, they had to decide how they were going to organize and structure themselves, how they were going to live as Christian men and women, as Christian families, and as Christian citizens.

But how do you do this? How do you know when you're following God if you've never had someone to show you?

So, they sent Paul a letter asking. The only reason we know about this letter is because Paul made reference to it in 7:1: *Now concerning the matters about which you wrote...* Here Paul acknowledged this letter. We, however, have no idea what the contents of it were because it's been lost. All we have is Paul's response which we know as 1 Corinthians.

These new Christians in Corinth organized the church and lived their lives as Christian men and women based on what seem right to them. When the Mennonites moved from Russia to Canada, they built villages according to how they had built them in Russia. They named these villages with names they used in Russia: Altona, Chortitz, Rhineland, and so on. They knew how to farm in Russia; this is what they did when they moved here. They did what they knew.

We often simply copy what is done in our society. Several years ago, Jeanette from MC Canada hosted a group of Chinese pastors here. During one conversation, the Chinese pastor's marvelled at our commitment to democracy, because of how seriously we practiced it in the church! It's true. Though you would be hard pressed to find anything about voting in the Bible, you find it in today's church, because this is something we do in our society. We've simply borrowed this and other things from the wider society, often uncritically. Canadian Mennonite congregations are also organized according to Provincial borders. This is how things are done in our society; this is how we'll do things in the church.

While these ways of doing things may provide stability and help us cope in times of turmoil and stress, they may not be the best ways of discerning the mind of God. When children grow up and become parents and are faced with an uncooperative child, they often parent the same way their parents did, even though they vowed to do things differently. I'm not surprised the church in Corinth organized themselves according to what was culturally familiar to them.

What is the wisest and best way to live, worship, and communicate the gospel? Those from the Greek culture believed that the best way was through its rich philosophical culture. The Greeks had contributed to field of learning through persons such as Plato and Aristotle. So, communicating the gospel was best done through sophisticated arguments and debates, intellectually deep and well thought through sermons, witty slogans and sermon titles, and special answers to hard questions. The wisest way was the Greek way.

In stark contrast to Greek wisdom were those of Jewish background. Jewish Christians had little interest in the wisdom of the Greeks. Rather, they thought the wisest and best way to live, worship, and communicate the gospel was through signs of **power!** We need to have public demonstrations of healings. Has the Holy Spirit convicted you enough so that you can speak in tongues? Speaking in tongues proved not just spiritual maturity, but was visible evidence of God's power in your life. The wisest way was the Jewish way.

But there were problems. Not only were some excluded and alienated, but there were conflicts and divisions as well. Paul had heard about some of these issues in the letter the Corinthian Church had sent him, but he also received more information about what was actually going on in the Corinthian church.

*For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. (1 Corinthians 1:11)*

It appears that an influential woman named Chloe, had some significant behind the scenes insights about what was actually going on. She shared this information with Paul. Paul simply lumped all of this information under the word, quarrels.

Quarrels. If you've ever read 1 Corinthians, using the word, quarrels, is an understatement. I suspect Chloe's report to Paul contained unflattering reports that the Corinthian church might have preferred Paul not know about. Reports about the local gossip, including what derogatory things people were saying about whom: who

was sleeping with whom, who was taking whom to court, that some were consorting with prostitutes, and who was behaving badly in worship, and specifically the exclusions and divisions between different factions at the Lord's Supper.

These aren't issues most churches like to have readily available for public viewing. Who's going to come to our church to build a stronger marriage if we have divorced people in our midst? That's not wise. Who's going to come to church seeking a more harmonious family if the pastor can't keep his kids in line? That's not wise.

Paul wrote this letter to the church saying, "this is no way to live as Christians, no way to organize the church." God's wisdom does not mean measuring yourself against your cultural traditions; seeking God's wisdom requires you to look to Jesus, to the cross. Christ is your measuring stick for your faith and life.

And what picture does Paul paint of Jesus? It's a scandalous one. And it's here I will remind all of us that our very holy bible is full of scandal. I won't repeat the long litany of nefarious characters and flawed heroes that make up the pantheon of biblical personalities, but just remind you that there was Jacob the cheat all the way to the chosen twelve disciples, one of whom was a coward and another a traitor. Then there is God's scandalous choice of Paul. Paul started out as a persecutor of Christians. He assisted in the stoning of Stephen. When God told Ananias that he was to anoint Paul as his "chosen instrument," Ananias said, in effect, "Lord, you must be mistaken." It seemed foolish, scandalous.

Paul then pointed out the most foolish, scandalous thing God could ever do: God came into the world as a peasant carpenter from the backwater town of Nazareth.

We recall that Jesus was born into scandal: from his parents' unconventional marriage, born in a stable, then as a refugee, escaping to Egypt. Jesus grew up in a place of which they said, "Nothing good comes from there," then became a friend to prostitutes, tax collectors, and working-class roughnecks.

Paul calls Jesus a "stumbling block to the Jews." He meant that the idea of God coming as a suffering servant was such a scandalous thing the Jews couldn't believe it. They expected a powerful military ruler, a king, a superhuman. Instead, they got someone from Nazareth, who was tried as a criminal of the state and unceremoniously hung and killed on a cross.

What was the reaction to Paul's statement? I imagine it was shock! Jesus, the Son of Humanity from Galilee, without power, without rights, and without a home suffered a criminal's fate? How do you measure success from that?

We live in a very different time and culture than did the Christians in Corinth. We are not living in the Roman Empire in the year AD 51; we are living in Canada in 2021. Yet, like the Christians in Corinth so long ago, we too face many parallel struggles. In fact, every day we are bombarded via the radio, TV, social media, and by those around us, with messages on how we are to live, how we are to act, how we are to relate to one another. When the messages are so smooth and slick, are flying at us so fast, how do we know what is of God and what isn't?

And dare I say, preachers are forever tempted to tell people if you follow Jesus, things will go better in your marriage. Or, if you come to church, you will fulfill your potential. Jesus becomes yet another technique for getting what we want.

I suggest that seeking the wisdom of Christ may be the beginning of our problems, rather than their solution. For everyone whom I've known, for whom Jesus was being the answer to their problems, I can name you a couple more for whom Jesus has been the beginning of their problems. They never would have had these problems if they hadn't met Jesus!

Jesus does not promise us that by following him, things will go better for us. Rather, he promises that nothing worse will happen to us than happen to him. We follow Jesus not because he will make us feel better. We follow him because he is true, he is the way to God.

Unfortunately, what tends to happen is Christians, like those in Corinth, shift their focus away from the gospel to the best and most successful way to run the church. I dare say that the church is often at odds with the gospel. The late Anglican priest Robert Capon, once said that the universal message of the gospel is that God has come to show care for and acceptance of **'the little, the lost, the last and the least'**. When we talk about the church, we tend to focus on the institution, the constitution, the structure, the rites and practices. 'Church' tends to be identified with words such as 'My church believes the Apostles' Creed or the Schleithem Confession'. 'My church practices believers' baptism'. 'My church is the Mennonite Church'.

Such statements tend to obscure the gospel which is the indiscriminate gift of grace that God in Christ has given everybody. 'Church' tends to limit, to draw boundaries.

By doing so, we forget that we are not a structure but a community of fallible people whom God has entrusted with the gospel, the good news: without boundaries, without limits, without restrictions.

Can we become a people like the Spirit who lives within us? Yes, but it requires wisdom, deep wisdom, God's wisdom. Amen