



Roanoke, Virginia

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## ***“Broken Wisdom”***

Wisdom Sermon Series Part IV

*I Corinthians 1:18-25*

**George C. Anderson**

Dick Guerrant, the subject of this week’s *Wisdom Video Series*, talks about how he sees science and religion as two separate forms of inquiry, with potentially tragic results when one ignores the other.

His challenge to people of science and faith today is to consider what evolution has taught us. Biologically, there might have been a day when our species survived because of winning the competition of *The Survival of the Fittest*. But the world evolves. Consider sickle cells, once helpful in fighting off malaria, now just harmful with malaria not a threat. Well, we have an aggressive trait that makes us want to dominate others for our own benefit, a trait which biologists say once helped us survive. In this world of international trade, our weapons of destruction, and the limited resources of our earth, that aggressive trait, however helpful in the past, may destroy us.

Dick, as a man of science and of faith, hopes that we will see that we have evolved to the point where we recognize the trait most needed for our long-term well-being is *empathy*. Empathy has been held up as a virtue by Christians and other faiths for millennia, but now maybe scientists who study evolution can come to see that for the sake of the world and our future, this character trait needs to become more dominant.

How odd that would be, if the foolish wisdom of the cross that Paul speaks of in the passage I soon will read—

- the selfless sacrifice for the welfare of others,
- the vulnerability of admitting your limits, faults, and wrongs,



- and the practice of reconciliation, can become the wisdom of world-wise scientists who study evolution. Let's go to what Paul says in chapter 1 of I Corinthians.

<sup>18</sup> For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

<sup>20</sup> Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of the proclamation, to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> For Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Broken wisdom.

We've seen it. We've lived it. Life transitions are all about how adaptive one can be in moving from what worked well in one stage of life to what will work well in another stage of life. Many years ago, I heard someone say that he remembered the moment when he realized that he had to come up with a different strategy for living—that living as an adult was going to be different than living as a kid. It was on the first day he moved into an apartment on his own for the very first time, most of his possessions still in boxes. The moment came when he realized that no matter how long he waited, *no one was going to call him to come to dinner.*

Most of you know that my oldest daughter, Paige, had a baby a couple of weeks ago. She and Ansh are entering into a life where wisdom has to change.

- Time is now to be measured in nap lengths.
- They will need to get used to their car smelling of snacks, throw-up and desperation.
- They will need to recognize the sound of a pacifier hitting the floor from three rooms away.
- And, they need to understand that their needs will be met best when their baby's needs are met first.

For them to try to live as they used to live, but now with a baby, simply won't work. That would be living by a broken wisdom. Accept the new reality, develop those parent brains, and live without resenting how the baby won't cooperate with how things are supposed to be.

I know that "broken wisdom," isn't a phrase to be found in parenting books, and it is a phrase that is not found in books about business either. Yet it applies. Some CEOs and corporate boards are going to have to live with being the main characters of cautionary tales in books, lectures and podcasts about not adapting business models to meet new realities:



- **JC Penny** failing to adapt to the reality of online shopping.
- **Blockbuster** failing to respond to the rise of digital streaming services thinking people would not choose to watch movies online when they can drive to a store where all the copies of that movie may already have been checked out.
- **Kodak**, a pioneer in digital photography, not embracing what they developed because they wanted to protect their film business.
- **Nokia**, once the leader in mobile phones, not offering its own smart phone.

Businesses failing because they live by a wisdom that once worked but now is broken.

It happens to entire societies. Folks going on the May Scotland trip with Elizabeth and Ben are meeting by zoom to prepare for the experience. I was asked to come to one of the meetings to talk about the Scottish Enlightenment. I told them that when they walk up the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, the mile that stretches from the Holyrood Palace at the bottom to the Edinburgh Castle at the top, to notice the names on plaques along the way. In the span of four decades in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many of the world's leading intellectuals lived along that crowded mile—intellectuals like the philosopher David Hume and the economist Adam Smith.

One of the giants was the jurist Henry Holmes, who went by his honorary title, Lord Kames. Lord Kames lived outside Edinburgh but commuted into town to hear cases and join others for drink and conversation.

- He presided over some of the most important cases of his day,
  - but he is not famous for his rulings.
- He was a big colorful personality who said outrageous things who might have been a better choice than Judge Judy for Reality TV,
  - but he was not famous for his personality.

He was famous for his scholarship. He wrote about the relationship of Law and History and changed forever how both are understood.

Do you remember learning in Middle School the four stages of human history?

- the Hunter-Gatherer Stage
  - where humans survived on wild plants and what they could kill;
- the Pastoral Stage
  - where humans domesticated animals;
- the Agricultural Stage
  - where humans developed farming;
- the Commercial Stage
  - where humans developed trade, industry and markets?

Lord Kames came up with that. Now, when scholars talk about our living in a *fifth stage* of human history, the Information Age, where the economy is driven by digital technology, data and knowledge,



they are building on Lord Kames' work.

In talking about how Law and History intersect, Kames explained how what is wise in one age doesn't work so well in the next. His best example is the **Dark Ages**. Here's how Lord Kames explains why those years are called "**dark**."

Under the Roman Empire, Western Europe moved into a **commercial age** (where the whole world would move eventually), where bustling markets made wealth as mobile as the merchants who traveled the trade routes. But, as the central government rotted from within, the Empire crumbled. Most of Western Europe was overtaken by tribes whose customs went back to earlier times—Visigoths, Vandals, Franks, Saxons and the like. They forced Western Europe to return to a **pastoral age**, where wealth went back to being measured by cattle and crops.

This regression led to a **feudal system**. Lords and vassals, kings and knights, peasants and serfs all played their *fixed* part in a society where land and holdings were the source of wealth and power. For Kames, the term "Dark Ages" aptly describes this era because *creativity, intelligence, innovation* and *initiative* were stifled.<sup>1</sup> The people of Western Europe lived largely by the wisdom of an earlier age, and it was *broken wisdom*.

We don't have to remain in Social Studies Class to speak of broken wisdom. We can just ask plenty of people in this room, those who have had to faithfully adapt to major life disruptions that came with great loss:

- losing a partner through death or divorce,  
and figuring out how to live on one's own;
- losing a job and then taking one with lower pay,
  - and figuring out how to live happily with less;
- losing a friend because of religion or politics,  
and figuring out what went south, and even how one played their own part;
- losing trust in a person or a system you once counted on,  
and figuring out where you now need to place your trust;
- losing the physical ability to live on your own,  
and figuring out life after moving to a place that offers help.

Too many examples? I thought of so many more, and if we jump to other places where an earthquake or flood has destroyed one's home or one's once stable and peaceful country has been invaded, then the examples multiply even more.

There is a phrase that might be over-used, but I think is so helpful in talking about how to move forward. It is living into a "new normal." Your old wisdom about how to live in the world won't serve you anymore because your world has changed. The only healthy way forward is to figure out how things are now and deal with them well.

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<sup>1</sup> These were often the gifts of the Jews of diaspora who were ahead of others in being savvy in commercial skills, but who often were persecuted by those whose wealth depended on their holdings rather than their personal gifts.



The Bible is all about this. Some say it isn't, that when it comes to the Bible as the Word of the Lord, wisdom doesn't get broken. It is *fixed*. Only then you read the Bible and you see that wisdom is not something fixed but is fluid. That fluidity has been called the work of the Holy Spirit, the dynamic presence of God that speaks new words for each new day.

- The Holy Spirit helped escaped slaves learn that the day of the master providing shelter and meals is over and then helped them learn how to live as independent nomads wandering in the wilderness;
- and then the Holy Spirit helped them learn how to live in a land where houses were to be built, crops to be planted, and fences built to hold sheep and cattle;
- and then the Holy Spirit helped them learn how to live as a nation that serves a king;
- and then the Holy Spirit helped them live as exiled communities serving foreign kings.

The New Testament is a lot more condensed than the Old and covers a shorter amount of time, but even within the New Testament, you see the Holy Spirit using to help Christian Jews understand that Gentile Christians are going to live by different rules.

My point today is very simple, but I have made it over and over again because it is *biblical* and it is *pastoral*.

Before I make the point one final time, I want to remind you how much I also believe that some of the best wisdom we can live by is old wisdom.

- Two Sundays ago, I made the point that often the old tried and true ways are the best ways, that new conventional wisdom too easily dismisses traditional wisdom.
- In a sermon before that, I talked about how the church needs to remember the one essential message that should never change: the saving grace we come to know in Jesus Christ.
- And before that, I preached a sermon that talked about some things that should remain daily duties no matter what changes: being stubbornly humble, grateful, honest about yourself, forgiving and living with grace.

You see, *I* listen to my sermons.

What I really mean is that "new wisdom"—conventional wisdom—can also be broken when it forgets the abiding truths that remain as relevant today as ever. We know that.

But let's now understand that the Bible agrees with worldly wisdom in one regard: wisdom is not about clinging to the past but discerning how to live in the present with the future in mind. Accept that change is a constant and what is wise today may be broken tomorrow.

But let's honor the wisdom of the Bible and invite God into the conversation. Let's keep as a constant the foolish wisdom of the cross and bear witness to a reconciling love that

- prioritizes the good of others over self
- and the needs of future generations over the desires of the present.

Hmmm. Maybe that is not only being biblical—but also evolved.

