

Scattering the Darkness: Age of Enlightenment

I Corinthians 1:26-31 (NIV)

²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

Have you ever heard the phrase “The Age of Enlightenment”? It refers to a European intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries. It relegates God to being kind of a watchmaker who set everything up and now pays no attention to his creation nor is he involved in our day-to-day life. Instead, it proposes that humans, who are blank slates – neither good nor bad – can use their intellect to make a better life, a better world.

Now, I’m not going to give you a history lesson on the Age of Enlightenment; I just want you to understand the core of it. The worldview from the Age of Enlightenment assumes that we are the best and smartest of humanity and that we will figure out how to make this life better. By math, reason, logic, we can figure out the answer to the great question: what is the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. (Spoiler: the answer is 42.)

This worldview is still very much alive today. We look to those who are a part of Mensa - the high IQ society - as the smartest people of the world, the pinnacle of intelligence. We look at people who score high on their SATs and ACTs and at members of the National Honor Society as those who can make this life better. Truth be told, a lot of these people with high IQs are not Christians. Many of them are atheists, and they have a lot of influence when speaking about how they think the world gets better.

But who are we? Are we the smartest? Do we have the most influence? I know that I was a part of National Honor Society in high school, graduated college with high distinction (magna cum laude). But I’m not a part of Mensa. I know people with higher ACT scores, higher GPAs, than me. It pains me to admit that I’m not always the first one to get the joke. It often takes me longer to do and think through things than others of you. And I know that there is a lot of knowledge that I don’t have, things that you do better, quicker, more efficiently than I do. You do not have the smartest pastor.

Where do you put yourself? Do you put yourself in the upper echelon of intelligence and intellectual achievements? Maybe some of you here are a part of Mensa. (If so, let me know after worship. That would be interesting to know.) Or do you have to admit like me that, honestly, I’m not the smartest. People at work don’t think of me as the wisest. Some people may look to me for answers, but definitely not everyone. In fact, some people think I’m stupid, naïve, foolish even.

We relate more with the Corinthian congregation than with Mensa, don’t we? “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.” (verse 26) We probably don’t have the highest IQs here in Utah, let alone in Layton. We don’t have massive influence with 1 million subscribers on Youtube. I’m not aware of any nobility lineage among us today.

Even moreso, we are part of a minority religion here in this state. The majority of people around us think that we have it wrong when it comes to the human condition, as to how we improve, how we get better, how we get saved. They seemingly know their faith so well and so many believe it, follow it, practice it. This makes us timid, afraid even, to share what we know because the others around us seem to know the answers and most people are following that set of beliefs instead of ours.

It’s hard to admit that we’re not the pinnacle of humanity, the top of the IQ charts. We are called fools, ignorant, naïve, sheeple. We are weak, lowly, despised. Why? Because we worship a God who died, died like an awful, horrendous mass murderer as he was convicted and killed on a cross – the worst form of capital punishment the Romans could devise. We claim that this same God who died like a horrible criminal came back to life. But when have you ever observed someone coming back to life? As some of Mensa would tell you: “Dead people don’t come back to life. I’ve never seen that. How can you believe that?” Then we also say that this bloodied and beaten Jesus - who didn’t put up a fight, who was restrained by average strength Roman soldiers, and who did not do any miracles to avoid this gruesome death - he is Almighty God, Creator of the heavens and earth, who rules all things, and who takes away all our sins, that his payment for our sins gives us a perfectly clean slate cleansed from all our blemishes and imperfections, all of our sins, all the awful things that we have thought, said, and done. And we believe that we are actually perfect

right now because Jesus lived a perfect life for us in our place, substituted his life for ours. And when we tell people that we get all this with no charge to us, no catch, nothing we need to do or could do to make him do this or give it to us, they shake their heads. That isn't logical to them. That's not how the world works. Therefore, your beliefs can't be right.

Those of the Age of Enlightenment look at us who believe in the message of the cross as fools. We are looked down upon, dismissed, thought to be weak and needy, a people who can't think for themselves and are naïve sheeple who just do what they are told no matter how ludicrous it is. It's like we're nothing compared to the rest of the world, people stuck in the dark ages during this Age of Enlightenment, people clinging to old, outdated, foolish ideas.

Then we hear Paul writing to the lowly Corinthian Christians about their status in the world, that what they experience, what we experience, is, in fact, what God intended. "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him." (verses 27-29)

God specifically chose a way of fixing people, improving them, saving them that contradicts what the smartest people of the world come up with. Those following the Age of Enlightenment think that they can improve the human condition through reason and intelligence, but reason and intelligence is not how God and his salvation for the whole world is revealed. It has to be a knowledge given because it goes against what we think should happen. God flips the thoughts of the highest IQs, the prized intellectual pursuits of this world, the things we praise the most, the things that the world looks to for salvation, on their heads. He picks the lowly, the despised, the weak, and the foolish things – the people who can't save themselves. He shows them a wisdom of relying completely on God to show up and save them, to cleanse them of their sins, to cover them with his perfection. None of it comes by any effort or intellectual pursuit on our part, but entirely by God working on us.

We are saved by the "foolish" message of the cross. "It is because of [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." (verse 30) This is not something we figure out. This is wisdom given to us by God the Holy Spirit, as we confessed earlier today: "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian Church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers." (Martin Luther's explanation to the 3rd Article of the Apostles' Creed)

Salvation, forgiveness, covered with Christ's perfection, eternal life in heaven – these gifts are not dependent on how high our IQs are. Instead of an intellectual enlightenment that we achieve through our problem solving skills, through our math or reasoning skills, this is an enlightenment that comes through simple words in a book, plain water applied to a person with those simple words of God, of bland bread and wine that is given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of your sins. God uses these simple, lowly, unimportant, despised things to make you right with him, cover you with his holiness, his perfection, and cause you to live differently for God out of thanks to him. God has taken us – the weak, the lowly, the despised, the foolish – and made us wise for salvation while those stuck in the darkness of the Age of Enlightenment scoff at us.

Like the Corinthians, we're not the wisest by human standards, not the most influential, not of nobility. Own that. Own that we are poor and needy and weak and despised. Own that we absolutely need God because he is something bigger and better than our intellect or even the smartest intellect could ever think up or achieve. Our worth, our being, our salvation is completely dependent on God. This vulnerability of not being the smartest, of being weak and lowly, will bring more people to the light than by being the smartest person in the room. This is true enlightenment, true wisdom, from God.

So, we join with Paul and the Corinthians: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." (verse 31) We don't boast in our intellectual intelligence, our high IQs, but entirely on what God does for us through the foolish and despised things of the world. When we show that God has taken the foolish and made us wise for salvation, this is the kind of light that enlightens others. This is the light that scatters the darkness of the Age of Enlightenment. Amen.