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'Wisdom', the Preacher and the Theologian

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The problem

Christians, especially evangelical Christians, are sometimes annoyed when a preacher stands up and gives a moral homily, when he dispenses 'good advice', and worldly wisdom (in the pejorative sense of that word!) based on his own experience, or the general experience of humanity, or common sense, and not on the word of God found in the Bible. The pulpit, we feel, is not the place for this. A sermon should seek to transmit the word of God, should mediate the revelation of the salvation and will of God found in scripture to the present congregation.

If we are theologically minded, we may reflect that such 'common sense' sermons smack of natural theology, the view that man's unaided mind can work out securely much of the truth about God and his will for his creatures, so that revelation's task is to confirm, clarify and supplement this natural knowledge. If we stand strongly in the Reformed tradition, this will make us yet more critical of such preaching.

Is this reaction correct? Are we right to reject so firmly this 'common-sense' preaching, and natural theology? If we are to do so, then we must justify our own position with respect to the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, for at first sight this seems to vindicate 'common sense preaching' and some degree of natural theology.

Wisdom as a prop of natural theology and 'common sense' preaching

The Old Testament contains much material which belongs to this tradition of wisdom. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job are wisdom books. Solomon was famed for it. Certain psalms reflect it (eg, 34, 37, 49). Its forms and ways of arguing, at least, influenced some of the prophets (eg, Amos 1). The narratives of Joseph and of the later years of David are often attributed to the tradition. In the Apocrypha, the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus are wisdom books, and other Apocryphal books are partly concerned with it. This list shows wisdom's wide influence in the Bible, but also its diversity. Its support for natural theology and 'common sense preaching' can be argued from its background and origins, and its classical expression in the book of Proverbs.

The point about its background and origins is that it was international, being found throughout the ancient Middle East, in Egypt, Edom, Canaan,

and Mesopotamia. Indeed, it was the basis of their education, and the formation of their 'civil servants', the clerks and administrators who ran their governments. It was thus not specifically Israelite, and, since it existed before the appearance of Israel, clearly the other nations did not borrow it from Israel.¹ The evidence clearly suggests, however, that Israel's wisdom was dependent to some extent on that of other nations. Sheer similarity of tone and content would argue this. Part of the Proverbs 22:17-23:14 is also found in the Egyptian text 'The Wisdom of Amenemope'. Many scholars believe that Proverbs copied the Egyptian work, and such a conservative scholar as R. K. Harrison feels that both may have depended upon Mesopotamian originals.² Furthermore, the Bible itself seems to bear witness to Israel's debt to her neighbours in the matter of wisdom. Job and his three comforters are not portrayed as Israelites, but as 'people of the East' (Job 1:3). It is not clear where Job's home, 'the land of Uz', was, but his friends seem to come from the region of Edom, a people famous for wisdom. Thus this great wisdom debate is attributed to the gentiles. Furthermore, Agur and Lemuel, to whom sections of Proverbs 30-31 are attributed, appear not to be Israelites. If the text does indeed describe them as 'of Massa' (Prov. 30:1, 31:1), then they were Ishmaelites. Even if the term is read as 'the oracle', still we are left with a King Lemuel who would be non-Israelite, unless 'Lemuel' is a pseudonym.

Further, Israel's borrowing of international wisdom is suggested by the fact that Solomon is seen as the great wise man of Israel. It is true that his wisdom is portrayed as a gift from God (I Kings 3), but we may believe that he employed this gift with the wisdom skills of the international community. Solomon inherited the new empire of David, and so for the first time Israel needed the sort of civil service nurtured by the wisdom tradition and schools of Egypt. Solomon looked to Tyre for help in building the Temple, and to Egypt and other foreign lands for wives, and regrettably he also imported foreign cults. Doubtless he also employed the international wisdom tradition, with a skill, says the Bible, which impressed the Queen of Sheba.

If Israel's wisdom incorporates material from foreign sources outside the historical process of revelation to Israel, does not this suggest that we may build some form of natural theology apart from revelation?

We can reinforce this contention from the content of the book of Proverbs itself. Much of its material has a theological reference; God's power, providence, and judgment are stressed. The particular Israelite name of God is repeatedly used. But there is no reference to God's saving acts which are the central theme of the Old Testament, nor, indeed, to any details of the cult, which is very little mentioned. Certain aspects of the law, such as God's detestation of false weights, (Prov. 11) emerge, but these

1 See, eg, D. Kidner, *Proverbs, an Introduction and Commentary*, IVP, London 1964, pp 16-21.

2 Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Tyndale Press, London 1970, p 1015.

can often be paralleled from the wisdom of Israel's neighbours. The stress is on morality, prudence, human experience and education in virtue. Common-sense advice and observations, as well as God's will and questions of right and wrong, bulk large; piety, uprightness, a *savoir faire*, are seen as going together to produce a recipe for a successful and contented life – and it is this which seems to be the chief aim. God is the guarantor of morality, so the wicked man is a foolish man; he will be punished. Proverbs, however, like the wisdom of other ancient Near Eastern countries, includes some cynical observations about life too (eg, 17:8, 19:7, 20:14, 21:4).

All this, indeed, is very like the wisdom of Israel's neighbours. That too mingled prudence, morality and piety. If it could make cynical statements, on the whole it demanded a sober uprightness. It was, indeed, as aware as was Israelite wisdom of the limits of human understanding. It regarded the gods as guarantors of morality, as Israel's sages claimed of YHWH; it too was largely unconcerned with cultic life. As Israel's wisdom ignored God's acts in history, pagan wisdom largely ignored mythology. The Egyptians spoke of wisdom as a goddess, but without a cult or myths. Thus wisdom avoided contamination with the more noxious aspects of paganism – doubtless this was why Israel was able to adopt it, and even, metaphorically at least, personify it (Prov. 8).

If the common content with pagan thinkers and the lack of appeal to revelation seems to give support to natural theology, then the prudence, the common sense, and the experiential character seems to give some justification for the sort of sermons mentioned at the beginning of this article. Is this a true conclusion? Can these things be defended from Israel's wisdom and the book of Proverbs?

It is true that the prophets often attacked the wise men. They were alarmed when prudential political calculations led kings to trust to foreign alliances rather than faith in God. These attacks, however, while warning us that wisdom can be misused, cannot be used against wisdom itself. The true prophets of the Old Testament also denounced false prophets and priests, so the attack on the misuse of wisdom is no greater than those on other aspects of human life and religion. The fact remains that Proverbs, the deposit of the wise men's teaching, is in the canon of the Old Testament. Any argument against claims based on wisdom thus cannot take the form of an attack on wisdom itself. Rather, our discussion must take the form of a fuller examination of the development of the wisdom tradition throughout the Bible.

The development of the wisdom tradition as a veto on natural theology

1. Theocentricity and Christocentricity

First of all, we may say that the tendency in the Bible is to centre the understanding of wisdom more and more completely on God, and, indeed, to find it ultimately in his revelation. As we have said, wisdom was from the

earliest time linked with God. The early chapters of Proverbs, which were probably written to introduce the several collections which make up the rest of the book, to some extent underscore this. 'The fear of the Lord', says Proverbs 1:7, 'is the beginning of wisdom', a text which could stand as a summary of our investigations. Wisdom was, increasingly, associated by the Jews with the Torah, God's revelation. The intertestamental book of Baruch, found in the Apocrypha, is quite explicit about this (Baruch 3:9-4:1), and it is indicated in several psalms, such as Psalm 1 and Psalm 119, which stand in many ways in the wisdom tradition, but centre upon the law of God.

The New Testament drew also on another developing tradition about wisdom. The personification of wisdom in Proverbs 8 shows wisdom present and probably assisting in the work of creation, wisdom's straight ways (vv.9, 32), her truth (v.7) and her inseparability from life (v.35). This personification was developed in certain Jewish circles, as can be seen from the book *The Wisdom of Solomon*. In wisdom, says chapter 7:22, there is an all-powerful, all-penetrating spirit. Wisdom is described as a breath of the power of God, an emanation of his glory, a reflection of eternal light, and an image of God's goodness. Chapter 7:22 describes wisdom as the shaper of all things, echoing Proverbs' view of her role in creation; chapter 8:1 shows wisdom as orderer of all things, and seems to speak of her sustaining power. Chapters 10 and 11 see wisdom as protector and saviour of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses and the Israelites. In other words, wisdom is seen as God's agent in all his dealings with his people. The New Testament clearly identifies Christ with this wisdom. A reading of Hebrews 1:1-3, Colossians 1:15-20, and a comparison of Matthew 23:34 and Luke 11:49 will make this clear. The Jews having already linked wisdom with God's written *Word*, the Torah, John's prologue (John 1:1-18) is also a wisdom Christology. It may be noted that the Greek word *Logos*, word, could also be translated *reason*, and is itself very close to the idea of wisdom. Some of John's 'I am' sayings, we may add, such as the Way, the Truth and the Life, also show Jesus as God's Wisdom. This is clearly of great importance to Christian doctrines of Christ's pre-existence and divinity. Our concern here, however, is that wisdom is firmly centred in God's revelation, God's gracious gift, rather than in human knowledge, acquired by 'native wit' and unaided effort.

Natural theology's reply

The argument so far does not, however, dispose of our natural theology or our 'common-sense' preaching. Both these views can accept the primacy of God's gracious gift, and even of revelation, but go on to argue that man's own wisdom and experience confirm and agree with these. They will appeal to wisdom's role in creating and sustaining the whole universe, and interpret this as showing that Christ our Wisdom, as our creator, can be known and understood to some extent by the power we have because we are created through him in God's image. This argument was used very

early by Christian theologians, and is central in the views of the Apologists of the second century AD. Such views accept that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom', but assume that such fear is within our natural God-given power. We may feel that these views beg the question of the effects of man's fallenness on his ability to acquire wisdom, but they can reply that the doctrine of wisdom reveals the limits of the Fall's effects.

Our natural theologians and preachers can also take on board those stories that show the superiority of God's wisdom, given by revelation by special gift, to unaided human wisdom. The stories of Job and of Daniel make this point, and thus proclaim the shortcomings of that international wisdom which Israel and God had laid under tribute in the development of the wisdom recorded in the Bible. They will accept that natural theology needs to be supplemented by God's revelation, God's self-giving, but they can reject the claim that the stories imply the futility of unaided wisdom by arguing that Joseph and Daniel were recognisable as wise men of Egypt and Babylon, and in fact they, like Solomon, were beating such people at their own game by God's help.

Our natural theologians will also (and rightly) reject an argument from the history of the tradition of wisdom which relies simply on appealing to the direction it was moving as time went on. The latest expression in time is not by definition the highest. Such a view is a result of people being mesmerised with ideas of progress and evolution, and seeing these examples of human wisdom as the key to understanding truth. This is hardly to rest on God's grace and revelation, and our natural theologians will be quite correct to refuse to let us beat them down with a piece of hypocritically unacknowledged natural theology. They can furthermore reply to any use of the book of Wisdom with an appeal to that other Apocryphal book, also written late in the development of wisdom, Ecclesiasticus. Its author, Ben Sira, expresses that 'common-sense', experience-based, moralising even more thoroughly than does Proverbs itself. Our argument from the development of the tradition was and will be rather to see in the end how it meets and comes to centre on Jesus Christ. He, not some doctrine of development or tradition-history, must be our key to understanding both the Old Testament and human wisdom. That is what the New Testament's confession of him as God's Word or Wisdom means. Nevertheless, we have yet to find arguments which show that the view of Christ as Wisdom means a rejection of natural theology.

The wisdom tradition against natural theology

2. Human wisdom negated by itself

To do this, we may turn first to the other central expressions of wisdom in the Old Testament, Job and Ecclesiastes. These books in fact show the *failure* of Wisdom.

Ecclesiastes is in some ways the strangest and most difficult book of the Bible, full of contradictions, and repeatedly stating bitterly pessimistic con-

clusions. The contradictions within it presumably arise because the book represents the preacher's debate with the wisdom tradition and with himself about the meaning of life. The book is clearly written under the character of Solomon, Israel's greatest wise man, although it avoids using the name. Thus the author writes from the point of view of wisdom at its most penetrating and capable, yet he is unable to reach any sure foundation on which to build his hopes, 'Vanity of vanities'. 'Emptiness, emptiness', is the beginning and end of his attempt to grasp at the truth of man, God and existence by the power of human wisdom. He may continue to counsel prudence and piety in the tradition of wisdom, yet here the cynical remarks that injustice and chance seem often to be the prevailing influences on the world leave even these conclusions shaky, if based on human wisdom (Eccles. 8:10-14, 4:1, 9:11). He is unable even to establish securely that wisdom is better than folly (Eccles. 2:12-16).

The book of Job seems to point in the same direction. Job's friends defend wisdom's conclusions that God is just, that he rewards the good and punishes the evil, and that repentance is the way to win his favour in suffering. Eliphaz the Temanite, indeed, appeals not only to sober 'common-sense' wisdom, but to religious experience, in visions of the night (Job 4:12ff). Human wisdom, like natural theology, can cast its net wide. Against these vindicators of God Job appears angry, rebellious and complaining, challenging God, proclaiming the impossibility of understanding and explaining why he, Job, is suffering. It is little wonder that Elihu rebukes the friends for not silencing Job, and accuses Job of 'drinking up scoffing like water' (Job 34:7). How is it, then, that Elihu is entirely ignored when God finally intervenes, and Job's three friends are told, 'You have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has'? More difficult still, God's speeches in chapters 38-42 seem to agree with some of what the friends have said.

Some commentators try to solve these problems by saying that the book is made up of originally separate parts, and thus is at odds with itself. Job, however, seems to demand to be understood as a single whole book; it is not just a collection of prophecies or proverbs, but a continuous work. What unifies the prose prologue and conclusion, the debate between Job and his friends, and God's speeches, is the fact that human wisdom is unable to plumb the mysteries of suffering, and the meaning of life. Perhaps, then, the fact that Job and his friends are non-Israelites is of central significance to the meaning of the work. As such, they cannot appeal to God's revelation. They only once use the revealed name of God, YHWH, and this may be a textual corruption. The Book of Job, then, is denying the power of men to fathom by thought, experience and religion, the truth about God, his providence and his judgments, unless God first comes to meet them, and reveals himself and his truth to them. As we have it in the Bible, the book of Job culminates in God himself answering Job, and thus an interpretation of the biblical book, as opposed to its sources, must give them a central place. They say little or nothing in the way of a positive answer to

Job; they are rather a ruthless crushing of the pretensions of human wisdom and experience—man cannot make sense of nature, let alone God.

One of the most apparently non-Israelite sources of Proverbs incidentally makes the same point. Agur of Massah in Proverbs 30:1-6 echoes verbally God's challenge to Job, in another confession of man's lack of wisdom, and goes on to praise God's words, and to advise that one should not add to them. To this catalogue of testimonies to the ultimate failure of wisdom we may add the ultimate failure of Solomon himself. He was the ultimate exponent of this wisdom, and empowered with it by God himself, yet his reign ends in disobedience and ignominy. His wisdom did not keep him true to God. In the light of all this we may be disposed to lay greater stress on the difference than on the similarity between the wisdom of Joseph and Daniel and his friends and that of the wise men of Babylon and Egypt. We may feel that the failure of these wise men – and, in the book of Daniel, their hostility to the bearers of God's wisdom, is actually a vital part of the message of these stories.

Wisdom against natural theology

3. Human wisdom negated by Christ

But our agreement must centre and be based on Jesus Christ, the true and ultimate Word and Wisdom of God. We mentioned God's speeches in Job actually repeating to Job some of the views of the comforters who are later condemned by God, and that God's speeches do not really give an answer to the problem as argued in the rest of the book. The book of Job, standing alone, thus seems an unsatisfactory thing. God's real answer to Job's impassioned cries is found, for the Christian Bible, in the suffering love of Jesus and in the promise of the resurrection. But these are *not* the coping stone completing the edifice of natural theology and understanding. Job and Ecclesiastes show that this natural understanding, this wisdom, even if God-given, *collapses*. Even though Job's comforters have said things that are in themselves true about God (for God's speeches echo them), still their answers are declared wrong when God appears. They are not built on the foundation of God's word, God's presence, God's revelation; and God's word, presence, and revelation are ultimately Jesus Christ. Unless our wisdom is based and centred and secured there, then it cannot finally stand; indeed, for all its apparent agreement with God, it ultimately opposes God.

This is the witness of the New Testament. Paul testifies to the futility of human wisdom in I Cor. 1:17-2:16 and 3:18-21. He contrasts human wisdom with wisdom in Christ. The rulers of this age, holders of its wisdom, not only could not recognise God's true wisdom in Christ, but they crucified him (I Cor. 2:6-8). God, says Paul, opposes and shames human wisdom (I Cor. 1:19; 27). No doubt Greek wisdom, or philosophy, was a different phenomenon from that of the Near East, of which Old Testament wisdom was a part. Nevertheless it too was the finest flower of the effort of human understanding of its age, it too often reached ethical and even spiritual

heights. It too seemed in many ways to accord with God's revealed truths, as generations of Christian theologians, at least from Justin Martyr and the other Apologists of the second century on, have observed. It formed the chief basis, in the Middle Ages, of the scholastic views of what nature could know about God. Yet Paul opposes it, and claims that Christ cancels it.

Paul seems to make his attack on wisdom against Greek wisdom, yet closely associated with it is the Jewish demand for a sign, a proof. Further, it is the rulers of this world, for all their wisdom, who crucified Jesus. These rulers may refer to angelic, spiritual forces, but also no doubt mean those men who killed Jesus. In this case Paul's attack on wisdom was based upon a consideration of the life and death of Jesus, and his rejection by the Jewish leaders, as well as on the reaction of philosophical Gentiles to Christian preaching.

And it is the case that Jesus' message was opposed by the wise, the learned and the powerful of his own people. Matthew and Luke, indeed, record a saying of Jesus that encapsulates in a sentence Paul's attack on wisdom, 'I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to babes' (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21). This passage, indeed, leads on to Jesus' invitation to men to take his yoke, words which echo the Jewish view of the Law, and show his claim to be himself God's true wisdom. The scribes and Pharisees, with their learned studies of God's law, and the Sadducees, with their political skill and education, were Jesus' opponents. His support came from the ordinary, ignorant or semi-educated disciples and crowds.

The biblical tradition, then, the message of God in Jesus, seems to forbid us to build our relationship with God on wisdom, and thus on natural theology. Job and Paul – and the story of Jesus – forbids us to see Jesus and God's gracious self-giving and self-revealing in him as the completion of what we know naturally. Christ must rather be our *foundation*. We must *start* from him. We could apply the parables of the patch and the wineskins (Mark 2:21-22) to wisdom, as Jesus applied them to Judaism – his objection to the Judaism of the Pharisees was that in it the human wisdom of the scribes and their traditions had usurped the central 'instruction' (Torah) of God to his people through Moses and the prophets. We cannot just add on Jesus to our human wisdom like a patch on an old garment that is incomplete. Our human wisdom cannot contain Christ and the gospel. The gospel shatters it. Rather, Christ himself must be our wisdom. Our thinking must start from him, and must seek always to be guided by him through his spirit. Thus 'natural theology' is completely ruled out.

Conclusion

We conclude, then, that the Bible and God's revelation in Christ will not permit natural theology. Indeed, all theology is warned and chastened by this message of God to our wisdom. Our thinking and reasoning, especially if dignified as 'academic', can easily become an independent activity, in our

own strength, and tainted with pride. It can easily, even without our realising it, also leave following God's self-giving in Christ and hitch itself to some 'self-evident' human understanding. Theology is called to be the handmaid of faith, not the mistress. It must keep watch on itself, lest it fall. The Pharisees, those pious, learned men, who believed they began from God's word, remain a warning to theology as to us all. Yet, though natural theology is ultimately declared impossible, and all theology chastened, theology is also encouraged. God's wisdom is found in Jesus Christ, and is given to us. We are given wisdom and knowledge – and Paul's own letters exhibit hard theological thinking in the light of Christ.

Yet, having registered God's 'No' to wisdom and to natural theology, we also have to say something else, for we are left with the question, 'Why, then, pray, is the book of Proverbs in the Bible?' For, despite the words of Agur, Proverbs as a whole seems to reflect some acceptance of the results of 'natural wisdom'.

Taken as a part of the whole sweep of the canon, the presence of Proverbs can teach us a vital lesson about the relation of our human wisdom and powers to God. This will also say something further on that odd fact that Job's comforters appear to say some correct things and yet be condemned.

Humanity is created in the image of God – in the image of Christ. God ever loves, preserves and cares for us. Christ becomes incarnate as a human being. Yet man is fallen. Christ's incarnation has to be to save and renew us, and when he comes men are unable to recognise him, as Mark stresses. Our true response to God and Christ has to be created by God's saving acts. No full response, even by the disciples, was possible until Christ died for us. Even so, however, man remains God's creation. God's image is defaced and broken, yet it is not totally destroyed without trace.

We may use the picture of a smashed mirror for our situation – and this seems apt when talking of the image of God. The mirror was set up and fixed so that we could see in it God's truth. Our being in the image of God was the mirror. If the mirror were whole we could get a true reflection of God, a true understanding of his truth. But the mirror has fallen and shattered. It is not held in place. The pieces lie about, scattered and even buckled (as if it were a metal mirror), all over the floor. We cannot get a full and proper reflection from these scraps of glass. We can at best see only bits of the reflection, and we cannot see how they fit. Further, we do not know where to stand to get the reflection of the one we want to see, God himself. The mirror was placed so that it reflected God, but now its pieces, lying out of place, may reflect something else, and the buckled pieces may distort a reflection that is of God. Thus we can no longer use the mirror to get a true sight of God. We cannot work out from its conflicting and shifting kaleidoscope of images a true picture. It is, in fact, useless. Nevertheless, at times those pieces, lying loosely around on the floor, as we kick them about and move among them, may and will catch a genuine reflection of something of God's truth. As they move, or we move, it will vanish again. It has no stability in itself, and we can give it none, but it happens.

So it is with wisdom – and with the human moral sense, the religious senses, and with human love. All these, typified for us by the wisdom of the ancient Near East, do in fact at times reflect something truly of God's image. Humans do stumble on God's truth at times and in part. That is why natural theology seems so attractive and plausible. We see agreements between our Christian faith and some parts of human life and thought and – to change the metaphor – we believe we have found a firm foundation in 'natural man' to build one end of a bridge that will carry him to share in the gospel truth. But the land will shift, the reflection will alter and vanish. People's moral sense, their experience of religion and their ways of relating to each other will alter. For example, our moral sense, which seemed to chime so well with God's righteousness, was said by nineteenth-century thinkers to forbid us to believe that the innocent Jesus could bear the penalty of our sins. Nineteenth century individualism – or the old proud desire to save ourselves by some virtue? – made the bridge from humans' moral sense fall, the reflection of God's truth in our moral sense become misleading and distorted. So when Eliphaz and his friends tried to use the insights from wisdom, even true ones, to form a systematic answer to Job's problem, they were condemned by God.

Nevertheless, though we cannot use and build on our insights to make a natural theology, whether as a total picture of God or as a foundation for grace, God can and does take up and use our kaleidoscopic flashes of true insight. As a sign of this, those proverbs which could reflect God and truth truly, though partially, were taken into scripture. It is peculiarly apt that it should be *proverbs* which are taken into God's unfolding testimony to himself in his meeting with and inspiration of men. Proverbs are small flashes of insight, fragments which reflect the truth. Much of the book of Proverbs consists of collections of disjointed, and occasionally in themselves apparently conflicting (eg, Prov. 26:4-5), little pieces of insight, and it is the wisdom which begins with – that is founded on – the fear of the Lord which is able to use them. And the true fear of the Lord, for the Christian, is our response to God's gracious initiative in Christ in saving us, renewing us, and revealing himself to us. Wisdom in the Bible, then, vindicates the biblical contention that we are made in God's image, but also that the image is broken, and that it is restored in Christ, the true wisdom and image of God. (The wisdom Christologies of Hebrews 1:1-3 and Colossians 1:15-20 show Christ as God's true image who saves us. Wisdom and God's image are thus closely connected in the Biblical views of Christ.)

Our consideration of Wisdom also illuminates the positive side and the proper limits of the doctrine of 'common grace' – God's care and grace given to all men, non-Christians as well as Christians. Human wisdom, when true, is, to the Christian, a gift of common grace. It shows that God does show himself to so-called 'natural' human understanding, that is, human understanding which has not put its trust in Christ and received the Holy Spirit. But we cannot develop views of 'common grace' to make theories of general human goodness, or to build natural theologies on them.

This also gives us the key to a true understanding and acceptance of a doctrine of total depravity. It does not mean that all men are totally wicked in all they do, but it says that there is no area of human life apart from God's saving grace on which we may build. All parts of human life are affected by the Fall. There is no fixed and reliable fragment on which to build our relationship with God. Our relationship with, our imaging of, God must be restored by his own action in his son Jesus Christ, his true and original image.

But what about those common-sense sermons with which we started this consideration? Any base for them in natural theology has been demolished. Yet we are left with a word of caution about condemning them out of hand. The common-sense wisdom of the book of Proverbs does seem to suggest that such sermons have a place, and Proverbs is part of scripture. But they are no foundation for a ministry or a Christian witness. Woe betide the pulpit or ministry that is limited to them or dominated by them. They may have a place, but it must be a subordinate one. The dominant note of preaching is to be set by God's grace, God's salvation in Jesus Christ. Preaching is a response to God's self-revelation as love in him. It should spring from and lead to the faith, hope and love called forth by Jesus Christ. It calls us to live by God's Holy Spirit, not by our wisdom and experience. The 'common-sense' sermon must be measured against the truth of Jesus Christ, as must all the dictates of our wisdom, reason, instincts, moral and common sense. But for the congregation justly so to measure it, the predominant note of the pulpit must be the declaration of God's acts in Jesus Christ. This should be reflected in the time given. Most sermons should be mostly centred directly on God's word, scripture, and its centre, the ultimate Word, Jesus Christ. If this be so, a little preaching in the 'wisdom tradition' of proverbs may bear its place.

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