



On Being Wise

I believe in education, I really do. I spent twenty-five years of my life in various schools getting an education, and at least thirty years of my life as a teacher. I am not one of those who denigrates education and those involved in it. I believe that the church needs educated pastors, and I work hard to try to help them learn about their faith and the traditions of Christianity. I am not necessarily anti-intellectual. So whatever I say from here on out, please keep these disclaimers in mind.

But education is not wisdom, not by a long shot. Equally true, lack of education is not wisdom either. Rather it seems that wisdom is a manner of interfacing with people and with the world that takes the knowledge and lessons that persons learn over a lifetime (formally and informally) and integrates it all within a framework built on the love and grace of God. Wisdom, thus, is a relational category that has knowledge and learning, as well as the love to know what to do with these things. Here are some points.

One: Knowledge is not a substitute for life. I have an old *New Yorker* cartoon on my office door. It shows an elderly academic, arms full of books, at the heavenly gates. St. Peter looks at him and says that it is the quality of a person's life that matters, not the quality of their scholarship. Ouch. Learning and education are not a status game in which one seeks to gain status and power by means of the appropriation of knowledge. Much of modern academia seems to fall into this mistaken assumption, where the quality of the schools you attended and the quantity of your publications are the main ways to "score" the game. Many academics moan that the rest of the world does not respect them, but that is because what counts as status among them is an artificial self-construct. (By the way, the same dynamic is true for many church leaders, too.)

Two: Wisdom is more than just knowledge alone. Now, ignorance is not a virtue, but neither is simply amassing bits of knowledge. I sometimes get student tests and papers that are what I call "data dumps"—the student has simply "downloaded" from their head every bit of knowledge they can think of on a particular subject. This is not wisdom. Wisdom is knowing what to do with those things you

have learned, whether they have come through formal education or through the college of hard knocks. Wisdom is learning how things work, how they fit together, why things happen the way they do. Some people without much formal education are very good at reading the room and reading people, and there is much wisdom in this.

Three: Wisdom is more than just an intellectual game. I am sometimes amazed at how ignorant some highly educated people can be. Now, uneducated people can be ignorant too, but it is a distinctive problem for educated people, who sometimes mistake knowledge for wisdom. There are those who can perfectly explain Foucault and Gadamer, yet can hardly function in the world outside of academia. Much of this comes from hubris, the pride in one's accomplishments, and the trust in one's abilities. Wisdom embodies a sense of humility that says, *The more I learn, the more I realize I do not know*. I think of the writer of Ecclesiastes, who observed: "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow" (1:18). Wisdom understands that knowledge is important, but it is not an end in and of itself.

Four: Wisdom is about relations and connectivity. Wisdom builds on the knowledge that one gains in formal and informal ways, and sees how this knowledge works in human relations and in God's world. Marxism is perhaps a wonderful system of thought, but it completely falls apart in practice because it fundamentally misunderstands people and denigrates the God who created the world. Wisdom is ultimately grounded in God and God's creation, and in the people that God loves, even if we are a proud and stiff-necked creation. And wisdom must come in some way to reflect (imperfectly) the love and grace that God shows (perfectly) to us.

In the end, wisdom is the gift of God to a world in desperate need of love and forgiveness. Wisdom is the understanding we crave, even if it is an understanding of how much we do not know, and how much we rely on God, who is, in the end, beyond all human understanding.

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