Dialogue I

A Reply to Chewning's "God is Infinitely WISE: We Have Access to His Wisdom"

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The article "God is Infinitely WISE" by Dick Chewning looks at the epistemology of wisdom. Chewning appeals to a trilogy of concepts, including knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, in that order. Later, he elaborates the topic of his paper — wisdom — with further distinctions. He purports that knowledge and understanding are the antecedents to wisdom, having the implied premise that wisdom is built up rationally on these two other concepts. In so doing, the author seems to suggest that the egg(s) came before the chicken. By the way, have you ever figured that one out yourself? In all my years, I have never heard a definitive answer to the riddle. Have you? Do knowledge and understanding come *before* wisdom, leading to its development; do they come *from* wisdom; or do knowledge and understanding come *after* wisdom? The answer to the riddle may be that the chicken came before the egg because God made the chicken and then the chicken went about her business of laying eggs. Don't overlook that the hen might have become pregnant as a part of her creation.

Wisdom came first because wisdom is intrinsic to God and He is the Creator of all things. He came first. Nobody can learn wisdom, although it is commonly believed that wisdom can be learned, and one can't build a conceptual ladder up to wisdom because wisdom is a stand-alone concept (that is, if we are looking through God's eyes). Wisdom is given by God to whom He desires.

We know that in the account found in Genesis, the knowledge of good and evil was explicitly prohibited (Genesis 2:17). Only wise obedience to carry out the tasks God had planned was necessary, and these tasks were specifically described. Are knowledge and understanding prerequisites for wisdom? I don't think so.

Wisdom alone was sufficient for Adam to be a steward over the earth and its creatures (Genesis 1:26). But Adam and Eve decided that wisdom alone was insufficient. This, in effect, represented a disagreement with God. They wanted more. What Adam and Eve desired was forbidden knowledge (Genesis 3:6), not knowing that real knowledge was only contained in wisdom. After they willfully disobeyed God, the first insight they achieved was that they had become sinners. They were ashamed (Genesis 3:7). The type of knowledge and the way they obtained it turned out to be foolish. As it turned out, wisdom should have been sufficient. God is wisdom, as Chewning explains, and He may *give* the *gift* of wisdom, but knowledge and understanding are not precursors to wisdom; they are implicit in wisdom.

A point made in Chewning's article that answered a long-standing question for me was his brief discussion about the often misunderstood issue of the hardening of human hearts (Exodus 4:21). I have long been unclear about this, as I'm sure many others have been. Does God harden hearts? That is hard to understand, if you excuse the unintentional pun. But what does this mean? Chewning teaches us here that God gives each individual one kind of heart or another. The kind of heart depends upon the type of material it is made of, according to Chewning. He illustrates by saying that if we have been given a heart of wax, our heart will become softer when it is heated. A waxen heart can even melt, I guess. He continues with this illustration by saying that if God gives a heart made of liquid concrete, the heart will become hard when heated instead of soft like the wax heart. Generalizing, then, we can see that it is not the hardships in life that necessarily harden some hearts. It is not even God hardening hearts per se. Chewning's point is that human hearts become hardened because of the kind of material from which they were made. It is not the hearts themselves that determine if they become hard or soft. Chewning explains that it is the qualities intrinsic to the heart in combination with life's circumstances that determine if a heart will become hardened or softened. God does not directly intervene to harden or soften any individual heart. He does, however, determine the type of heart that people have, according

to Chewning, which has an indirect bearing on the condition of a human heart at any given point in time. Surprisingly, Chewning's discussion of the nature of hearts gets into the age-old issue of free will vs. predestination. I found it interesting that these two ideas could be related to the condition of hearts. According to what Chewning implies, it has already been predetermined how each individual heart will react to life's trials by the type of material it was made from initially. By inference, a wise heart is always made of wax. This was a useful insight that I had not expected, but was glad to have come across.

Chewning builds the early part of his paper on the premise that the foundation of wisdom is knowledge and understanding. Knowledge and understanding are associated with wisdom, but that view seems to conjure up a sequential model of wisdom bound by time and space. It seems too limited to describe the nature of God's wisdom. Chewning acknowledges that God is not bound by space and time, yet seems to contradict this when he suggests a model of wisdom which necessarily rests on knowledge and understanding. A model relying on such antecedents is necessarily bound by space and time, but God is unlimited. Or is it being said by Chewning that the Holy Spirit rests on the "legs" of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding? If this is true, then this is a much more elegant model, since it is consistent with the boundless nature of God. If this is the interpretation, it sounds similar to Hill's (1997) model of business ethics which has three legs: love, justice, and holiness. According to Hill, sound business ethics are practiced only when there is a balance among these three concepts. Otherwise, according to Hill, the stool will not support the weight put upon it. It will turn over. Hill's model is like Chewning's in that the capstone concept rests upon other foundational concepts, but it is different in that the foundational concepts are not antecedents leading up to the capstone concept.

The Chewning article shifts gears to be more in line with a view that God IS wisdom: past, present, and future. As Chewning later concludes, God is infinite. God's model, as it is later acknowledged in "God is Infinitely WISE," is one where wisdom has its own set of characteristics. The Bible seems to convey that God's wisdom is the sine qua non of what we commonly call knowledge. Could it be that knowledge is a concept meant to approximate God's wisdom? To know means to have information, to be informed. Can more information develop a more weighty concept of wisdom? No, because wisdom is weighty without additional information. If we define understanding as interpreting meaningful information that produces insight, does that insight produce, or at least support, wisdom? I believe the world would say it does, but I believe God would say it does not. Wisdom is much too weighty a concept to stem from knowledge or understanding or both. We must not forget that wisdom is God's, and He gives it to us if He so desires. Humans can't develop wisdom. Wisdom is sought, not developed. We will have wisdom only if God wants to give it to us.

Chewning provides a detailed view of wisdom by breaking it down into three core components — right ends, appropriate means and circumstances, and right ends nurtured by the right reason — and two environmental components, which include God's complete foreknowledge and the idea that His creation always has free will (which Chewning calls "true freedom"). One wonders how this reductionism improves insight into the nature of a gift such as wisdom. Can we break down wisdom into separate pieces to better understand the concept? I'm not even sure wisdom can be explained or analyzed. Maybe that's the only method that can capture the nature of wisdom. Perhaps wisdom can be captured better through exemplars. A case study pointing out examples of wisdom might enrich a student's interest. Perhaps that student would then pray for God's wisdom and receive it.

As noted earlier, Chewning moves away from the idea of a sequential-temporal model to a non-sequential model of wisdom. He also moves from an endorsement of unfettered free will to an acceptance of determinism. A question remains: Which is more consistent with God's wisdom? If man has totally free, self-centered will, meaning he is out of fellowship with God, he would not have wisdom in the godly sense. That is because man, being in a wrong relationship with God, could not receive wisdom. If man has free will, but a will that was predestined to be

conformed to God's holy plan, then that man could receive wisdom. This view is more consistent with the nature of God's wisdom. But I would say it is impossible to know or understand who has been predestined and is therefore wise; and so, it would be improbable to know or understand how to develop wisdom in any way other than to seek God's favor.

Yes, God *is* wisdom, as Chewning points out, and He may choose to whom He will give His wisdom, even beforehand. In the author's parsing of the concept of wisdom into components, criteria, levels, etc., the concept becomes clouded in reductionism. I believe wisdom is more parsimonious than that. Wisdom is simply God's gift to man, not something man can easily figure out through reductive analysis.

If there is no fear of God, there necessarily can be no wisdom.

The author purports that knowledge and understanding precede wisdom, but the only item that really precedes wisdom is *fear*, and this is what is missing in most discussions of wisdom. It is "the fear of the Lord [that] is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10). Job 28:28 even goes so far as to say that "the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom ...". Knowledge, understanding, and all the other characteristics of wisdom stem from this fundamental fear (reverence) for the Lord. If there is no fear of God, there necessarily can be no wisdom. It is the loss of this kind of fear in our society that has led to the weakening of the American church and most other institutions. Christian colleges would by no means be immune from this influence either, nor would business corporations or government.

But perhaps this loss of fear is not so new after all. For example, the account provided in the book of Genesis about Adam and Eve suggests that the couple lost much of their fear of God when, or before, they succumbed to Satan's temptations. Obviously, Adam and Eve had already abandoned the fear of God (wisdom) to fall for such a trick. So wisdom is all about fear — not malignant fear, but healthy fear — reverence.

Let me provide an example of what I mean by the loss of fear (wisdom). A recent work by Peter Wood (2003), an anthropologist who says he cut his academic teeth "studying American religion" (p. 146), gives one plausible explanation or mechanism for this weakening. In his chapter "Diverse Gods," Wood presents a convincing case, convincing to me, at least, that the doctrine of diversity has weakened the church. In his book, Wood shows how the diversity worldview seduces the church into believing that a Christian ought not make judgments about moral integrity. He calls this the doctrine of "moral equivalence" (p. 169). Moral equivalency, also known as relativism, means that all moral beliefs are equivalent in their validity (except, and they won't divulge this very often, those absolutely fundamental Christian beliefs concerning sin, repentance, exclusion, etc.), according to Wood. It is Wood's observation that many church leaders believe it is intolerant for a minister to preach about the exclusion of anyone from the Kingdom of God simply because they are unrepentant sinners. Wood calls those who believe in the concept of diversity (as defined in the liberal sense) "diversiphiles" (p. 17). Diversiphiles, to use Wood's term, argue that repentance is unnecessary and is even an offense (i.e., intolerant) to other "religions" which do not acknowledge or require it because they believe there is no such thing as sin.

The point of mentioning Wood's work on diversity in American society is to illustrate the argument that much of America has lost the fear of God and therefore has lost any possibility of the gift of wisdom. The implicit premise of diversity was probably first smuggled into the minds of Adam and Eve when Satan lied to Eve about the lack of consequences of disobedience to God's instructions concerning the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:4-5). God had earlier made an absolute statement to man about which tree was to be avoided, and He identified the consequences of disobedience.

Genesis 2:16-17 states:

*And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from **any** tree in the garden; but you must not eat from **the** tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die"* (emphasis mine).

Satan then split linguistic hairs with Eve when he redefined

God's absolute statement into a relative, diverse statement, through the use of a simple but misleading question in Genesis 3:1-5:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God ***really*** *say, 'You must not eat from* ***any*** *tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will* ***not*** *surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be* ***like God****, knowing good and evil"* (emphasis mine).

Diversity was expressed when Satan questioned God's instructions and implied an exception to the rule for Eve (relativism), so that she could then have the same high knowledge and understanding as God (inclusiveness) and God would not judge them for eating at the tree (tolerance). Notice the use of the words "any" and "the." The word "any" as it was subtly used by Satan implies a relativistic frame, while the use of the word "the" as used by God implies a definitive frame. Satan subtly took God's use of the word "any," meaning any *other* tree except the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and twisted its implied meaning to be literally any tree, including the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In effect, Satan turned God's "*the* tree" into the equally literal "*any* tree." (Frankly, I think Eve became confused by Satan). Deception, being characteristic of diversity, was obviously used when Satan lied about God's intentional warning by implying that God really intended for Eve to become knowledgeable (3:4-5). Of course, Eve was seduced by the lure of power and authority which may have been the elixir to finally dull her sense of wisdom (3:5).

Diversity subtly smuggles in the notion that there is a wide "gate" (Matthew 7:13) and that there are no absolute truths. Therefore, the argument (deception) goes, there is no need to fear God because, they believe, God does not judge evil, and if He did, He shouldn't have. According to those who *believe in* diversity, every potential moral determination is "relative," not absolutely right or wrong. Similarly, all religions, they say, are equally good, so no particular religion can lay claim to a singular truth such as Christianity does. Any one who does is judged to be unacceptable (intolerant). (It has intrigued me no end to notice that their relative statements hide an absolute worldview which is the very thing they profess to abhor.)

The Bible clearly contends that there should be a healthy fear of God. For example, Matthew 10:28 gives a clue why fear is so important. It says we should "be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." That sure doesn't sound "diverse" does it? But if that's not a wise fear, then I don't know what is. Fear is not necessarily always bad. We *should* fear God, the Scriptures say. Certainly, if there is no reverence for God, there is no wisdom, if we believe that God alone grants wisdom. It is important to revere God so that He may give some of His wisdom to us, not because we understand it or deserve it or have earned it. Wisdom is a gift. He deserves reverence. It is not politically correct to preach or teach about the important value of fear of God, is it? Maybe the bigger fear, and the bigger problem, is the fear of man (Matthew 10:28). Have our fears been misplaced? Perhaps so.

To end, I commend Chewning for writing about one of the most important, yet difficult, concepts in the Bible — wisdom. The author does a good job of addressing the concept and of attempting to move our knowledge and understanding along, but I think the most important contribution he made here was to examine wisdom. Few seem to try to deal with wisdom. Regardless of what I may think, or any other man for that matter, Chewning glorified God over and over and over again in his article. That's what it is all about, if I may use the modern cliché. Actually, with the provision of the various levels, components, and criteria provided in his article, one might have the beginnings of an empirically testable model or some insight in how to integrate wisdom into a lesson plan more effectively. He has courageously called attention to an important yet undervalued concept so that many may see. Hopefully, the important concept of wisdom will receive more attention in the future because of Chewning's important work.

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