

This morning I would like to do some myth busting...

There are a handful of myths associated with the Gospel lesson today that I am fond of busting. I'm betting you've already had some of these myths busted before, but just in case you haven't, let's get down to it...

Myth #1 – The wise men visited Jesus in the manger.

Based on the Gospel record, it is all but certain that the wise men did not visit Jesus on the night of his birth. It is probable that they visited at least a month, perhaps up to two years after that first Christmas night.

In our house, we make sure that the wise men and manger scene are on opposite ends of the piano ☺.

Both myths numbers 2 and 3 I chalk up to the poor Bible-informed but still popular song *We three kings of orient are*.

Myth #2 – There were three wise men. Yes, there were three gifts given, but check the sources, there is no mention of the number. There could have been two, or could have been 10 and the just went splitsies on the gifts.

Myth #3 – The wise men were kings. Again, from the song, and most wise men I've seen in manger scenes have crowns. Wise Men were not kings. The Greek word is *Magoi*, which was a title for royal advisors in the Persian government. They were not kings. They served kings.

Myth #4 – The wise men got to Jesus on strength of their own wisdom.

Ok, maybe that isn't a widely held belief, but Epiphany gives us the chance to bust a pretty common myth from life in general.

The visit of the Magi, the message of Epiphany teaches us that Jesus came not just for good Jews like Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, and the Shepherds, but that the came for all people. It also teaches us what true wisdom looks like and where it comes from.

You see, we have a myth problem when it comes to wisdom. I would go so far as to say we have an idolatry problem with wisdom.

Idolatry, of course is not simply bowing down to statues of wood or stone. Idolatry is trusting in anything or anyone other than God to give you what only God can. We make all sorts of things into idols. John Calvin famously said that the human heart is an idol factory – we idolize money, careers, cars, clothes, food, family. Whenever you trust in something or someone to give you something only God can give you, you are worshiping an idol.

I'm convinced one of the great idols of our time is human wisdom – I'm speaking of wisdom in the broad sense, all the combined data, information, expertise, that fields like science, medicine, and engineering utilize in a whole host of ways.

So, we used to travel on land and water, now we can fly through the sky. We have harnessed the power of the atom to power our cities and deter our enemies. We have all but eradicated diseases like polio and smallpox – diseases that ravaged the world in the past. When I was a kid, I remember getting volumes of an encyclopedia

from the grocery store. I was such a nerd that I would spend time just paging through each new volume we got. Now our kids carry access to infinitely greater knowledge in their pockets.

And all of that human wisdom can be used for incredible good. But it also creates a temptation to trust and worship what humans accomplish rather than our God.

We live in a world that worships at the altar of human wisdom – a temptation even we Christians face.

So, let's talk about some Wise Men today in Matthew 2 where God shows us two things, first the problems with human, or worldly, wisdom, second, the beauty of heavenly wisdom.

Matthew tells us, “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.”

Magi, as I mentioned, is a title for the royal advisors to the Persian king. They were the intellectual elite during that time. They were men who would have separated themselves from their peers at an early age. As young boys showing an uncanny aptitude they were plucked from their homes and families and trained in all the wisdom mankind had to offer so that when they grew up they could be advisors to kings.

Many of you probably know the four most famous Magi... Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – you can read about them at the beginning of the book of Daniel. They were Magi, they were plucked from Israel at a young age because of their intellectual prowess, placed in special training, and eventually, in Daniel's case, rose to be a chief advisor to multiple Babylonian and Persian kings.

These were men whose only job was to be wise. They had access to the best teachers, the best schools, the best data, the best human wisdom had to offer so that they could advise the most powerful men in the world at that time.

Now, how could all that wisdom a bad thing?

It's not... not when it is kept in its proper place. The problem comes when we start to trust that wisdom to do for us what only God can do.

Human wisdom, for all its impressive accomplishments cannot replace God. Human wisdom always comes up short for two reasons: first, all human wisdom is quickly dated, and second, human wisdom is always deficient.

First, quickly dated.

It is not a coincidence if you hear the name Magi and think *magic*. These men, the smartest men in the world at that time, the intellectual elite, also believed in astrology. They thought that the layout of the stars and planets had an actual effect on what happened on earth. Today, most people know that horoscopes are for the intellectually weak, but back then, that was cutting edge. Reading the heavens was the pinnacle of human wisdom. The Magi are just one proof that even the best of human wisdom today is quickly dated.

C.S. Lewis loved to say that all that is not eternal is eternally out of date.

All it takes is a cursory study of the history of human wisdom to see the truth of that.

At one point, one of the smartest men to ever live, Isaac Newton, taught the world about gravity. What he logically deduced was thought to be true for hundreds of years until another smart guy named Einstein came along.

At one point, the smartest men in medicine thought that if you were sick it was because your bodily system was out of sync. So, let's balance things out by letting you bleed. For almost 2000 years what they logically deduced was thought to be true until a guy named William Harvey proved the ineffectiveness of bloodletting.

Those are just a few examples from history, how about modern human wisdom... are eggs good for you, or not? Or is it just the yoke that is not good for you? I honestly can't remember where we stand on the whole egg thing. I still remember a few years ago a *Time* Magazine cover with a decorative swirl of butter with the heading *Eat Butter: Scientists labeled fat the enemy, why they were wrong...* The smartest minds in the world, using all the latest data, and science, and wisdom are changing their minds constantly.

Or how about this, at one point the smartest minds in history floated the idea of a big bang to explain the world we live in – one giant accident. But did you know that some of the smartest minds in science today are talking about things like aliens planting the seed of life in the cosmos because the chances all of this existing by pure accident defy human logic?

All that is not eternal is eternally out of date. The one guarantee of science and human wisdom is that the reigning paradigms of today will be overturned or at least tweaked by the wisdom of tomorrow. All human wisdom is quickly dated... a lesson from the Magi.

The Magi are also proof that all human wisdom is deficient.

Following the star and all their learning, they had deduced that a king had been born in Israel. That led them to Jerusalem, the capital city, to the throne room of King Herod, where a new-born king would logically be found, but no human wisdom could have led them from Jerusalem to a baby born to a blue-collar couple in Bethlehem.

To find Jesus, they needed divine revelation. They needed to hear the God-given words of the Prophet Micah to know that the king would be found in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem.

Human wisdom can get you to Jerusalem but not to Bethlehem. It can get us part of the way but not all the way.

Human wisdom can identify much that is wrong with this world, and realize that we need help to fix what is broken, and it can create solutions that remove many of the inconveniences we suffer, but it is always deficient. Human wisdom cannot identify the true problem, nor can it solve it.

A potentially touchy example from the world of politics: Let's talk poverty. We've got lots of poor people even in America. How do we fix that?

Generally, human wisdom in America divides people into one of two camps. You know the very simplistic message of each camp: either poverty will be fixed by taxing the "haves" at such a level so that the federal government can supply the needs of

the "have-nots;" or, the federal government gets out of the way, enabling the "haves" to spend their money which will then trickle down to the "have-nots."

The problem is not that either one of those camps lacks human wisdom and logic. You are listening to the devil if you think that those opposite your preferred political solution are idiots for what they believe. There are incredibly wise democrats and incredibly wise republicans.

The problem isn't that one party is wise and the other dumb. The problem is that human wisdom is deficient.

Do you want to know what Pastor Hoff thinks about poverty in America? To be rather blunt, I think you are the idiot if you think that human wisdom can eradicate poverty.

Jesus himself said, **"The poor you will always have with you."**

Human wisdom can identify the problem: we have poor people. It can suggest some ways to alleviate the symptoms: enter capitalism or socialism. But human wisdom is deficient because it does not realize that the underlying cause of poverty is the sinful greed of every human heart (where the "haves" think they earned what they've got and are reluctant to let it go, and the "have-nots" think they deserve more than they have just because they exist). Poverty is a symptom of sin, and so unless your solution is getting rid of sin, "the poor you will always have with you."

And I think you know that even if all humans realized that sin was the problem, human wisdom can't get rid of sin.

Human wisdom is quickly outdated, and always deficient at both identifying the root problems and fixing them.

This is myth busting 101 – I know it, because I have access to all of the accumulated human wisdom, too... I know how easy it is to think that if I can just apply human wisdom the right way I can fix _____. The problem is, human wisdom is not God. For all of the good things human wisdom offers, it is quickly out of date, and always deficient.

Because of that we need a higher form of wisdom... thankfully; the Magi show us that too.

"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh."

One commentator on Matthew points out how truly amazing this account is: Most of the people who believed in Jesus were people who heard him preach an amazing sermon, or saw him perform one of his jaw-dropping miracles. These men, without seeing or hearing anything this Jesus would say or do when he grew up, bowed down and worshiped him. They believed that Jesus was worth worshipping without seeing any evidence or logic to support that conclusion. Why?

It certainly wasn't human wisdom that led them to get down on their knees and part with incredibly expensive gifts for this little baby in Bethlehem. We don't know how, maybe through God's word and promises in the Old, or through direct revelation,

but somehow God led them to believe that in that child was the meaning of life, something worth worshipping – not human, but holy wisdom.

The Magi are an awesome example of our God who reveals to those who think they are wise, what true wisdom looks like.

True wisdom looks like Jesus.

Did you know that Holy Wisdom (Αγία Σοφία) is one of the titles given to Jesus in the Bible?

How is Jesus Wisdom personified?

Well, I just spent a lot of time pointing out that human wisdom isn't worth worshipping because it is quickly outdated, and deficient because it does not identify or solve the underlying problem of sin in this world... quickly outdated... doesn't solve the problem of sin... can you see why Jesus deserves the name Holy Wisdom?

Unlike human wisdom, Holy Wisdom is never outdated, and never deficient. Holy Wisdom not only identifies what is truly wrong with this world, but has the power to do something about it.

This is why Epiphany is such a long-standing Christian holiday... We see in this account of the Magi what true Holy Wisdom looks like.

Find in your Jesus a wisdom worth worshipping!