

FIRST CORINTHIANS

The Foolishness Of The Cross I Corinthians 1:17-24

At this very moment, there is in this world a struggle for the minds of men. Will people seek God's wisdom or man's wisdom? Will they go God's way or their own way? Will they accept humanism or theism? Will they acknowledge secularism or Christianity? Will they yield to naturalism or supernaturalism? Will they make God their god or man their god? Whether one follows the wisdom of God or the wisdom of man is directly related to what he does with the Cross, where one of the ugliest, most repulsive and gruesome scenes in history took place—the ignominious death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why would fairly intelligent, more or less normal human beings, give themselves over to this crucified Christ? The answer to this question is found in First Corinthians 1:17-24.

The Corinthian church was torn into pieces by division within its own ranks. They were following men. Some followed Paul, glorying in their Gentile liberty. Others followed Apollos, who was the epitome of the Hellenistic intellectual culture. Others followed Peter (Cephas), who liked a traditional Jewish approach to Christianity. Then there were those who were super-pious, an exclusive party who claimed to be followers of Christ only. The problem at Corinth was that the Christians were impressed with the wisdom of men. The church was quarreling over what Paul called the "words of human wisdom" (I Cor. 1:17). They found it particularly stimulating to enter into debates about all kinds of theories and speculations centered around certain dynamic personalities. When people began to glory in human wisdom, they began to glory in leaders, and when they began to glory in leaders, there were divisions (schisms) within the church. They were exalting leaders because they were playing intellectual games which always leads to pride. In First Corinthians 1:10-17, Paul established the fact that there were divisions at Corinth. In First Corinthians 1:18-3:21, Paul deals with the causes of those divisions. The first cause was their glorying in human wisdom.

In First Corinthians 1:17, Paul declared emphatically he had been called to preach the gospel. "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1:17). The gospel was central for Paul. What is the gospel? All people are sinners, separated from God, under His wrath, lost, and headed for eternal judgment in hell. God sent Christ to die for sinful people who could not save themselves by any human works or acts. Christ died in the sinner's place, a substitute for the sinner—his sins, curse, judgment and hell. Christ then rose from the dead, showing He is victorious over sin, death and hell. Now all who receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord by faith, believing He died for them, will be saved. That, my friends, is the gospel and it all centers around the Cross of Christ.

In First Corinthians 1:17, Paul also declares the Cross is not to be preached in the words of human wisdom or the Cross is stripped of all its power to save. "Not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (1:17). The Greeks placed tremendous emphasis on eloquence, excellent rhetoric, good diction, high sounding words; colorful language, and oratorical ability. The Greek professional men of wisdom had a methodology that embellished all of their messages with flowery eloquence. In many cases, the Greeks would rather hear something said beautifully than something said clearly. Paul's message was not the message of the Greek philosophers, who engaged in all sorts of speculations and disputations over theories and hypothesis. Rather, Paul's commission was to preach the gospel, the message of the Cross, the good news of the crucified Christ. He preached plainly, clearly and bluntly the Cross of Christ so people could understand it. To approach the gospel philosophically or to couch it in high sounding terms would empty the Cross of its power. Flowery wordings and philosophical reasoning in preaching no longer make the Cross a cross. Why? The Cross, by its very nature, is an offense to men. It says man is nothing; he is depraved, a sinner by imputation, nature and acts, and he is in need of a Savior because he cannot save himself. The Cross says man is absolutely, totally, helplessly, and hopelessly lost. The moment preachers put the Cross in high sounding phrases, in man's wisdom, in philosophical terms, this appeals to man's mind and feeds his pride. The gospel then evaporates into a system, a principle, a theory. The gospel is not a system, but a person, not a principle but a salvation. Remember, Paul himself was a learned man, educated in Tarsus, and he sat under the famous Gamaliel, but in preaching the gospel of Christ he set his secular learning aside. He preached Christ crucified in plain language.

The central aspect of Paul's preaching was the Cross of Christ. The cross has become a modern day symbol for Christianity. People wear the cross around their necks. The cross is displayed in most church buildings and it stands high on many a steeple. We become so use to seeing the cross that it has lost meaning for us, and we certainly do not understand the cross as the first century Christians did. To them it was a horrible symbol of the death of a criminal.

"It (the cross) was for these early Christians, and for those among whom they lived, a horrible symbol. If you had used it then as a symbol it would have made people shudder. We would get much closer to it today if we substituted a symbol of an electric chair for the cross. Suppose we had an electric chair mounted on our wall here, with its straps and its atmosphere of death and shame? Wouldn't it be strange driving across this country to see church steeples with electric chairs on top? We would get much closer to the meaning that the cross had in the minds of first century people if that were true" (Roy Stedman, First Corinthians).

It is interesting to note that the cross had such negative connotations that it was not used as a symbol for over a hundred years in the early church.

COMPLETE FOOLISHNESS OF THE CROSS 1:18

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. There are two basic reactions to the Cross. First, the unsaved, who are in the process of perishing and will perish for all eternity unless they turn to Christ by faith, look upon the message of Christ as foolishness; that is, they see the gospel as stupid, silly, absurd and nonsense. The Greek word "foolishness" is the word from which we get the English word "moron." The unsaved man looks at the Cross as moronic. Perhaps you can now understand a little better the way your unsaved family or friends or business associates react to you when you talk about Christ to them. You appear to be a moron because "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing." The unsaved man sees no point to the gospel at all. "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (I Cor. 2:14).

Whenever we witness to a very self-sufficient, self-made man and tell him all of his impressive record or achievement is worth nothing in the sight of God, that it does not make him one degree more acceptable in the sight of God, that it is nothing more than wasted effort, we immediately feel the sting of the offense of the Cross. He will say, "You mean to tell me all this impressive array of knowledge and wisdom that has been accumulated for centuries, with all the great achievements of mankind in the realm of relieving human misery and the technological advances of our day, that all this is worthless and that God will not take this into account in the area of salvation. Nonsense!"

But to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Another reaction to the gospel is by believers in Christ who are in the process of being saved; they are not yet perfect (far from it) but they are on their way to final salvation. For the saved, the gospel is the power of God. This message of Christ brings deliverance from the guilt of sin. It breaks the chains of the bondage of sin in daily living, and it promises complete deliverance from the presence of sin the future. It is the Cross which releases all the spiritual blessings of life; it is the basis for all true peace and joy.

The gospel is not simply good advice to men, telling them what they should do, nor is it a message about God's power. It is God's power! "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Rom. 1:16). The gospel is a declaration not a system.

Notice carefully how Paul divides all humanity into two classes of people--the saved and the unsaved, those perishing and those being saved. There is no middle ground! Every person is either on the way to eternal judgment or on the way to an eternal heaven. The difference is one's attitude and commitment to the message of the Cross, which is nothing more than commitment to the person and work of Christ alone for salvation. Now we may be beginning to see why the Cross was so important to the Apostle Paul. Human wisdom, philosophy or man-made speculations will never save a soul. The gospel message alone can save men, women, boys and girls, for it is the power of God.

CONDEMNATION OF HUMAN WISDOM 1:19-20

Man's Reason Is Insufficient Because of Scripture (19-20)

For it is written. These Corinthians were starting to glory in human wisdom. There is nothing wrong with human wisdom in certain categories, but human wisdom has its limitations. There is one category where human wisdom plays absolutely no part—the salvation of a man's soul. The message of the gospel alone brings men salvation and a knowledge of God. Paul introduces four propositions in First Corinthians 1:19-31 to prove that human wisdom has no part in salvation. The first reason is scriptural and he quotes from Isaiah 29:14,

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

God proved in the Old Testament that He denounced all human wisdom as folly. Men have always thought their way was right, but God reduces their reasoning to nothing. He destroys it.

"There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death" (Prov. 14:12).

Where is the wise man? What human wisdom could Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome add to God's wisdom and His way of salvation? None. The wise man may be a general reference to secular scholars who think they have all the answers to difficult problems.

Where is the scholar (scribe)? The Jews approached wisdom and knowledge from a study of ancient writings and Scripture. This would correspond to scholarly people, men and women, of letters in our society. But what can they add to God's way of salvation in Christ? Nothing.

Where is the philosopher (debater) of this age? This refers to the Greek philosophers who loved to debate the philosophies of their day and it would correspond to all the learned men of our day. But what can they add to God's way of salvation in Christ? Nothing.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? Man's wisdom in God's sight is foolishness. The best of man's wisdom is folly. Even in the categories where human wisdom is valid, it has proven faulty. Human wisdom raises the right questions but does not have the right answers. Human solutions are temporary and not permanent; it sounds impressive, radiates optimism, and does seem to temporarily work in some situations, but ultimately it solves nothing. This is why every generation wrestles with the same problems, and that remains true as far back as we can go into human history. This is why one generation never seems to learn from another. Men still go hungry; there is social injustice; there is war; there is greed; there is political maneuvering. Look at the wisdom of man in the failure of the United Nations. See the wisdom of man in the hopelessness of the ghettos of the city of New York. Watch the panic of the world as it tries to solve a global economic crisis. See the wisdom of man in the USA and western culture as it crumbles away morally, grasping at every straw to solve the AIDS

epidemic. Look at the wisdom of man in the blood-soaked streets of Bosnia. If the wisdom of man is faulty in the categories where it is supposed to work, then this is proof positive that human wisdom most assuredly cannot work in the area of salvation.

“Certain it is that while men are gathering knowledge and power with ever-increasing speed, their virtues and their wisdom have not shown any notable improvement as the centuries have rolled. Under sufficient stress, starvation, terror, warlike passion, or even cold, intellectual frenzy, the modern man we know so well will do the most terrible deeds, and his modern woman will back him up” (Winston Churchill).

Man's Reason Is Insufficient Because of God's Decree (21)

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its own wisdom did not know him. In His plan, God decreed that men, with all their wisdom, would not come to know God through that wisdom. Why has God allowed human wisdom then? To give us prestige? To help us make money? To give us power? To better society? To bring peace on earth? According to Paul, the ultimate purpose of wisdom was to bring people to God. It was allowed to show men the utter futility of human wisdom to save themselves. Human wisdom fails to show men their need of God. Paul is saying that man, by his own reasoning, may try and try but his efforts will never bring anyone to God. Therefore, why should anyone trust in that which is doomed to failure?

Man's wisdom is faulty because it fails to recognize God as He is revealed in Christ through Scripture. God is behind all that exists, and to leave Him out is the folly of follies. This is why God is left out of the American public school system. No one dares to mention God's name, for to do so would be to admit that He is the God of all true knowledge. This is one of the reasons our children should be exposed to Christian education so they can learn to relate God to every area of life. Only an education that is Christian can really do this.

God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. It pleased God, because He has a plan, to bless the message of the gospel. He sovereignly and freely decreed by the foolishness of the thing preached to save those who respond positively to the message. Men look at the doctrine of the Cross and think it is nonsense, but God has decreed that men be saved only this way. This is why human wisdom and philosophy have no part in salvation. God has made a decree: If any person is to be saved, have his sins forgiven, be granted eternal life and a righteousness which will make him acceptable to God, and go to heaven, this person will enter into these blessings through the message of the Cross.

The response of those who are called by God is to believe. Believing does not mean giving assent to. It means taking a risk and putting one's whole trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

Man's Reason Is Insufficient Because of Spiritual Blindness (22)

Jews demand miraculous signs. The Jews (which categorically speaks of any religious person) are blinded to the truth of the message of Christ. They were very much matter of fact and practical. They demanded evidence for everything. Many times the Jews said to Christ, "Show us a sign" and then they would believe. Christ showed them many signs but they still didn't believe because of the hardness of their hearts. The Jews thought they had God all figured out and that He would act in the way they thought He should act; but He did not. They thought the Messiah would come with striking manifestations of power and majesty to deliver Israel from the yoke of Rome. To them a crucified Messiah was a contradiction of terms. They kept asking for more signs before they would believe because they were spiritually blind. They rejected the greatest of all signs—the Lord's resurrection.

The modern religious man is always looking for a sign, always looking for a feeling, always looking for a new experience, always getting security somehow from a miracle or a shrine or a cathedral to confirm his or her faith. A very recent sign of this nature is the Shroud of Turin which is supposedly the burial shroud of Jesus. This has evoked much attention in some circles. Another example is the search for Noah's Ark somewhere in Turkey. Still another is the insatiable desire for miracles (signs and wonders) in our day to somehow strengthen our faith. Why all this fuss over signs? Because something in us says if God will give some sign we will believe. We need no signs, only the crucified and resurrected Christ

And the Greeks look for wisdom. The unsaved, intelligent Greek took great pride in his wisdom and reveled in his speculative philosophy. Herodotus said, "All Greeks were zealous for every kind of learning." He too was spiritually blind. The modern intellectual is much like the ancient Greek who wanted to talk and talk and yet not say much. The more complex and confusing a subject is made, the more leaned it obviously appears. Therefore, the intellectual man rationalizes and talks himself away from God. If the gospel did not make rational, logical sense to the Greek, he wanted nothing to do with it. Any touch of the supernatural was mocked as madness.

CRUCIFIXION POWER 1:23-24

But we preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to the Jews. To the Jew, the death of the Messiah would be the ultimate contradiction. Why? For them, Messiah meant power, splendor, and triumph but crucifixion meant weakness, humiliation, and defeat. A crucified Messiah was the ultimate stumbling block (scandal). For a person to hang from a tree was for a Jew to be placed under a curse. "...because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut. 21:23). Messiah would be for them a despised criminal -- a total contradiction to the Jewish mind.

And foolishness to Gentiles. To the intellectual Greek, a crucified Christ was a brainless superstition, pure madness, moronic. Any belief in a miraculous death and a supernatural resurrection was folly to the closed Greek mind. The whole story of the

Cross was absurd. Until the intellectual skeptic humbles himself and gives up reliance on his own insight and understanding, the gospel will always be nonsense.

The message of Christ trips up the religious man and it is absurd to the rational man. If the gospel was a stumbling block and foolishness, why didn't Paul water it down and get rid of the offensive elements? Why didn't he make it attractive so he could have a big church? If he would have watered it down, then it would not have been a means of salvation to sinners. To compromise the gospel is to give up the gospel. To give up the gospel is to give up Christianity.

But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. In the word "called" we have the key to Christianity. This refers to the sovereign, efficacious, irresistible call of God to salvation. Christianity is supernaturally based on God's calling of sinners to Himself. We are Christians because God did a supernatural work in our hearts to bring us to faith in Christ. Christianity is not anti-intellectual but it is supernatural. As Christians, we understand that Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God because we are experiencing the effects of the crucified and resurrected Savior in our lives.

CONCLUSION

What lessons are we Christians to learn from this section of Scripture? First, only the gospel of Christ is God's message of salvation, and there is no other way to God except through Christ. Second, human philosophy only empties the Cross of its real meaning; therefore, the gospel should never be presented in philosophical terminology. Third, when preaching the gospel, we must never hide it by toning it down or obscure it by eloquence. Our goal should not be to have people go away from a gospel presentation saying, "What a brilliant preacher! What a splendid personality! What a dynamic orator! Oh, he made me feel so good inside!" No, our desire should be to get the facts of the Cross to people so they might say, "What a guilty sinner I am, and how amazing is the love of God that sent His Son to die for sinners such as me." Fourth, as Christians, we must make a declaration of the whole gospel to men, for the gospel is not a system or a philosophy to be debated, but a message about a person who died for sinners. How often in a gospel presentation are we sidetracked in philosophical discussions, the right or wrong of evolution, or the inequities of social justice in the world, and we forget to present Christ crucified to men. Fifth, while no human reasoning can save anyone, a Christian is not to commit intellectual suicide by throwing out intellectual pursuits. He must be intellectually alert and know the thinking and philosophies of secular minds in order to destroy worldly thinking by showing its inadequacy to save a man. Sixth, we must be careful about wanting intellectual respectability with the unsaved world, for in getting it we will have to compromise the faith somewhere. We are not here to please men but to please God. Seventh, the cure for divisiveness and dissension in a local church is a proper understanding and appreciation of the gospel. Believing the gospel is not only the means by which we become Christians, it is also the means by which we are delivered in our Christian experience from all causes of disagreements, factions and dissensions. The Cross makes us focus on what we Christians have in common and not on our differences on secondary theological issues and petty personal preferences.

If you are not a Christian, I would like to ask you a very simple question. Could human reasoning ever think up this way of salvation through Christ? We see Christ, a crucified, sinless Savior, dying for sinful men who deserve nothing but hell. We see

salvation is not by any human works or acts but purely by God's grace through faith in Christ. This is too great a

concept to think men could have thought it up. Therefore, I ask you, "Are you among those who are perishing?" If you are, I present to you Christ who saves people from the guilt, penalty, power, and presence of sin, If you think the gospel message is nonsense, I can assure you it makes sense to those who are called by God. In fact, the gospel is God's power to save all who believe.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.. ." (Rom. 1:16).