

Being Church God's Way (Values that Determine Vision)

Study 1

Christ

(1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5)

VERSE (to ponder and/or memorize)

"For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25)

WHAT?

1. The Background

This is not intended to be a detailed study of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, but a little background helps us to understand the passage before us. Paul had spent a long time in Corinth and established a vibrant, growing cosmopolitan church in this strategic port-city (Acts 18:1-11). But the time came when he had to move on. While he was in other cities, he received visitors as well as correspondence from the Corinthian church. Not all the news was good. We know of at least five letters that passed between him and the church.¹

As we read his first letter it is obvious that, in Paul's absence, the church was having to contend with some thorny issues (such as attending meals with idolatrous associations, immorality, the abuse of spiritual gifts, litigation among members of the church, inappropriate behaviour at the Lord's table and the denial of a physical resurrection). It was not easy to be a Christian in Corinth. Probably the most disturbing development of all was the emergence of rival factions. Apparently some were putting on airs and graces and claiming to be adherents of particular teachers (Paul, Peter, Apollos and *Christ*) and inevitably

¹ A letter he wrote prior to 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 5:9); a letter he received from the church (1:11); 1 Corinthians, delivered by Timothy (16:10-11); Paul makes "a painful visit" (2 Cor 2:1); he sends "a severe letter" (2 Cor 2:13; 7:13); He writes 2 Corinthians to prepare the way for his third visit (2 Cor 12:14; 13:1, 2).

denigrating others. The problem was not with the teachers but with their would-be followers.

Ironically, the vast majority of the church's members were not drawn from the Corinthian intelligentsia (1 Cor 1:26). Yes, apparently the city treasurer was a member (Rom 16:23), but so were some Jewish refugees and others were former thugs (Acts 18:2; 1 Cor 6:10-11).

It is a relatively short step from this kind of one-up-man-ship to a subtle distortion of the gospel. The same pride that causes people to exalt themselves above others also causes them to downplay or reject those aspects of the gospel that do not appeal to human pride. So, if believing in a physical resurrection is not respectable in Greek society, then why not jettison it? (1 Cor 15:1-20) They would have reasoned that the gospel needed to be adapted so as to make it more accessible to their compatriots. A profound teacher with power and influence is more appealing than one who was crucified in weakness. So why not major on that aspect of Jesus ministry? Sounds awfully familiar, doesn't it?

Here's the thing! It is necessary to present the gospel in terms that are understood by those to whom it is being presented. This takes place in the New Testament itself. Contextualization is necessary but the essentials of the gospel must be retained. The gospel has to be made understandable, not re-invented. So, as different as our situation may be from that of the Corinthians, the issues are very much alive. Now read the passage.

2. The Non-negotiables

There are both doctrinal and ethical issues on which we may hold different opinions and yet remain in fellowship (Acts 15:28-29; Rom 14:1-8). But there are other matters that we cannot jettison or modify without undermining the gospel and denying the faith (1 Cor 15:1-2; 1 Tim 4:1-16; 2 John 7-11).

The Centrality of Christ

In vaunting particular teachers (actually they were saying more about themselves than the teachers), the Corinthians were downplaying the centrality of the one Lord. Even those who said, "I follow Christ" were missing the point. He cannot simply be placed alongside other teachers (1 Cor 8:6; 12:3-6; Eph 2:19-20; 4:3-4; Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:1-5). That's why Paul was so indignant: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (1 Cor 1:13)

If we read between the lines, some, at least, were implying that Paul's gospel could be improved upon. Indeed, they may have been saying that Apollos' presentation was more sophisticated (cf. Acts 18:24-28). Paul does not think his particular style is the only one but he senses that there is another issue here. It really wasn't about him or Apollos at all (1 Cor 3:5-7, 21-23).

One gift Paul had was the ability to take a trend to its logical conclusion. If we wish to modify the gospel *for reasons of pride*, or to make it less offensive to fallen humanity (thereby presenting ourselves as reasonable thinkers), this is likely to be the precursor to a watering down of the essentials of the faith. So Paul makes no bones about it: it was not conventional human wisdom that presented us with the incarnation and the cross. This is the last thing religious humanity would have thought up. Indeed, "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing."

The Importance of the Cross

In the passage before us (you may like to read it again in another version), Paul shows that God addresses human need in a way that does not appeal to fallen human nature. Jews wanted to stipulate a sign that would satisfy them (Matthew 12:38-42), and Greeks wanted something that would appeal to their intellects. With their pride intact they wished to dabble in a religion of their own choosing. But the all-wise God provided what fallen humanity needed, not what we wanted.

So, we may outline the passage as follows:

- The preaching of the cross may appear foolish, but it results in the salvation of those who believe (1:18).
- Through the cross, God has demonstrated the shortcomings of unaided human wisdom: he has chosen a "foolish" solution to the human predicament (1:19-25).
- The Corinthians themselves provide ample evidence of this principle (1:26-28).
- All that we receive is through Christ, so there is no ground whatsoever for boasting--"Let those who boast, boast in the Lord!" (1:29-31)

The Rationale

There are some fundamental reasons why God chose this "strange" way of saving us. Theologians discuss these reasons for the atonement. I have found

several books particularly helpful on the subject.² You will notice, from the references in the footnote, that the atonement (Jesus' death) cannot be separated from the incarnation (his becoming human). While we cannot reduce the cross of Christ to mere rationalism, it is good to note a few reasons for God's choice of this solution.

- **It deals a decisive blow to human pride.** Pride is our greatest problem. God chose a way that left no room for the sin of human pride. "Let those who boast boast in the Lord." (1:31)
- **It excludes any unfair advantage.** If our standing with God depended on our ability to conceptualize religious ideas in the abstract or to live by a particular moral code, or even our propensity for religion, some people would have an unfair advantage over others. But the ground is level at the foot of the cross. It declares that we are *all* guilty and in need of salvation.
- We don't fully understand why it was necessary for God to go to such lengths. All we can say is that the all-wise God knew that **nothing else could constitute an appropriate ground** for him to remain righteous (and maintain necessary justice in the universe), and at the same time completely justify the sinner (Romans 3:22-26; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 3:18).
- **It reveals what God is really like.** True greatness does not lie in power or brilliance but in character. We do not worship raw power; we are not drawn to God because he is almighty but because he is almighty *love*. I love the way Karl Barth puts it:

God's deity is thus no prison in which He can exist only in and for Himself. It is rather His freedom to be in and for Himself but also with and for us, to assert but also to sacrifice Himself, to be wholly exalted but also completely humble, not only almighty but also almighty mercy, not only Lord but also servant, not only judge but also Himself the judged, not only man's eternal king but also his brother in time. And all that without in the slightest

² Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Dei* (The Incarnation of God); Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why Did God Become Human?) John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*; Donald Baillie, *God Was In Christ*; Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*; Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor*; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*.

forfeiting His deity! He who does and manifestly can do all that, He and no other is the living God.³

Jürgen Moltmann argues that the cross tells us more about God than anything else:

When the crucified Jesus is called the image of the invisible God, the meaning is that this is God and God is like this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity.⁴

SO WHAT?

1. What was the basic problem at Corinth?

Immorality	Disorderliness	Lawsuits	Pride	Immaturity	Factions	Heresy
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2. Is God against *all* human knowledge and wisdom (cf. Proverbs 8:1, 12, 22-36; James 1:5; 3:13-18)? Should we, as Christians, embrace a form of anti-intellectualism?
3. What, then, is the problem with purely "human" wisdom (1 Cor 2:6-8)?
4. Why did Greeks and Jews reject the cross (God's way of saving the world) as "foolishness" and "weakness" respectively?
5. List some reasons why an all-wise and all-powerful God resorted to such foolishness and weakness.
6. In what ways might *we* "empty the cross of its power?" (1 Cor 1:17)

³ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1967), 46.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: S.C.M., 1974), 205.

NOW WHAT?

1. We would naturally be inclined to say: "Jesus is central to all we do as individuals and as a church?" But what does this mean? What does it look like?
2. Why should we emphasise the cross? Jesus died for us. We know that. But he has been raised and is now exalted (Phil 2:5-11). Should we keep referring to the cross? Why? How?