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The Foolishness of the Cross, Part Two

In 1 Corinthians chapter 1, Paul argues that God's purposes in the world are accomplished "through the foolishness of the message preached." The message that the cross of Jesus Christ saves those who believe—this is what is well-pleasing to God. There is no "gifted program" in heaven. There is no fast track. There is no special education class. When we get to heaven, we will have a perfected knowledge. We will no longer see through a glass darkly, but once glorified, we shall see him face to face. But until then, we have to recognize that God uses intelligence and wisdom, but only the intelligence that He has sanctified, and only the wisdom He himself gives. It is a counter-intuitive wisdom—a wisdom that runs entirely counter to the wisdom of the age.

Wednesday, April 26, 2006

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Paul sets all this in his own historical context in verse 22, "For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness." We must look at this sympathetically. First of all, from the perspective of the Jewish mind, the cross was not the answer to their theological equation. They did not see what we can see, and in humility we must admit that we are looking with 20/20 revelation hindsight. We do not read Isaiah without already having read the gospel of John. We must understand that what we now clearly see, they did not understand.

In John chapter 6, after the feeding of the 5000, the crowd comes to Jesus and demands that He give them signs. In response, Jesus tells them there would be no signs, because they were all looking for the wrong *kind* of sign. According to their own messianic expectations, the Jewish people were looking for One who would come in power, One who would come in glory, One who would make Rome tremble—not one who would die upon a cross.

Similarly, the Greeks were searching for wisdom—but again, it was not the wisdom manifested in the cross of Christ. For most in our culture, it is this Greek pattern of thought that is the major stumbling block. So far as the sophisticates and the philosophers of our age are concerned, the cross is foolishness. It is madness. What kind of sophisticated philosophy of life is this? Compared to Socrates and Aristotle, where is the *ethos*, the sophisticated intellectual structure of this message of the cross? Besides, Socrates had world famous disciples, including Plato. Even Aristotle was a tutor to Alexander the Great. But who followed Jesus? Fishermen, almost assuredly illiterate ones. Surely, they thought, this message of a cross is simply ridiculous.

And yet it is not only Corinth in the first century, but also America in the post-modern age which thinks in such terms. A stumbling block and foolishness—to so many, even today, that is all the Gospel of Jesus Christ represents. But in verse 24, Paul says, "But to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

It is not only the foolishness of the word of the cross Paul proclaims, but also the witness of the church: "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame

the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

Have you ever considered the fact that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a witness to the power of the gospel? For what but the gospel could explain how we got here? What but the gospel can explain who we are? The church is a witness, and it is so in a very strange way. According to worldly wisdom, if you want to do something great, if you want to transform the world, you go after the “A” list. You go after the rich and the powerful and the beautiful. You go after those with social status and standing. You go after people who have a constituency—a following. You go after celebrities.

And yet Paul proclaims here that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is not the fellowship of the rich, powerful and beautiful. It is not a convention of the celebrities of the age. Consider what Paul says in verse 26: “Consider your *calling*, brethren.” Similarly in verse 24, he says, “But to those who are the *called*, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.” And back in verse 2, he says, “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by *calling*.” Here is the doctrine of the effectual call, and it is so important for our understanding of the church, as well as of the gospel. We are the ones whom God has *called*. We didn’t bring ourselves here. We didn’t see a recruiting poster and sign up. We were *called*. And to those who are the called, brethren, consider your calling. There were not many wise, mighty, and noble. Not here. Not in the church.

In the Greco-Roman world, beauty, brains, and brawn were considered the ways to success. It is still pretty much that way today. It is interesting here that we have a clear reference from the apostle Paul back to the Old Testament, to Jeremiah, chapter 9, verse 23-24: “Thus says the Lord, let not a wise man boast of his wisdom and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for I delight in these things, declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Jeremiah’s trio here is the *wise*, the *mighty*, and the *wealthy*. Paul’s trio is the *wise*, the *mighty*, and the *noble*. In Roman culture, nobility was virtually everything, even more than wealth. In fact, there were those who were able through their expertise or skill or craftsmanship to amass money, but they could not buy status. They could not get on the inside or buy a name. They could not buy a family heritage. Of course, this is still very important. We still have our dynasties. We still have names. Heredity still counts for something. And yet Paul says here, “As I look around at the church, I don’t see many who are the wise, according to the flesh. I don’t see many who are powerful, not many who are noble.” And why? Because God has *chosen* the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God calls the church and then says to the world, “Look at that,” and for all its wisdom, might, wealth, and nobility, the world is shamed.

Of course, understanding this truth rightly does take an eschatological vision. We look forward to that day of judgment when the mighty will be told that they are not mighty after all. Those who consider themselves wise will see the emptiness of their false wisdom, and those who were noble will discover that there is no social status in heaven. God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God has chosen the base things of the world, and even the despised things of the world, and even things that are not, in order to shame the things that are.

In verse 29, the reason for all this is made clear: God chooses the weak to shame the strong “so that no man may boast before God.” This boasting was at least a part of the factional sin and conflict in the Corinthian church. When they said, “I am of Paul,” “I am of Cephas,” “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Christ,” they were boasting in their brand name, in their team colors. Paul retorts that you really cannot boast in anything but the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. You can boast only in God. You can boast only in that which undercuts any human boasting all together.

The word *boasting* that is used here is unusual. In the Greek world, there are some who suggest that it should be more understood as *trust*, rather than as boasting in the traditional way we think of it in our English parlance. Actually, it probably means both of these. And in either case, if we boast in ourselves, that is sin, and it is obvious nonsense. But to boast in God, on the other hand, is altogether different. “Let not the rich man boast in his riches,” Jeremiah said. “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. Let not the mighty man boast in his might, but let us boast in the one true and living God.”

The church is not the “A” list. We are not here by clique, by elite, or by hierarchy. We are not the beautiful people, the philosopher kings, the titans of industry, or the cultural elite. The Forbes list? Not here. *People Magazine* doesn’t have a

weekly column on the church. No, God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.

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