

AlbertMohler.com

The Foolishness of the Cross, Part Three

Every person will be one kind of fool or the other. We are going to be one variety of fool—the fool who rejects the knowledge of God—or the other kind of fool, who is foolish before the world because of allegiance to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Which is better? To bear the scorn of the world as a fool and to know the wisdom of the cross, or to embrace worldly wisdom and be shown to be a fool on the day when every act and deed and thought will be revealed and all things will be made known to all?

Friday, April 28, 2006

Every person will be one kind of fool or the other. We are going to be one variety of fool—the fool who rejects the knowledge of God—or the other kind of fool, who is foolish before the world because of allegiance to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Which is better? To bear the scorn of the world as a fool and to know the wisdom of the cross, or to embrace worldly wisdom and be shown to be a fool on the day when every act and deed and thought will be revealed and all things will be made known to all?

We will be one kind of fool or another. That is a liberating knowledge, because most of us would like to look foolish only when necessary, and hopefully not at all. Paul seems to think that this foolishness is right at the heart of the Christian gospel, that this is not just some episodic experience of occasional embarrassment, but rather the constant ongoing foolishness of those who will not be deterred from preaching the message of the cross. We need to hear this. God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. He has chosen us in order to shame the powerful. He has chosen fools for Christ's sake out of those who are fools in the world.

In verses 30 and 31, there is a final theme. Here is where boasting in the Lord is made clear. As we are reminded, "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, 'let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" By *His* doing. We need to know that. It is His doing. It is not our doing. God is the actor. We are not merely passive participants, but we are the ones who are the called. It is God's doing. He didn't submit the plan of the cross to us for our ratification. He *did* it. In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son. It was God's doing. It was God's doing in the beginning, God's doing in the middle, God's doing in the end—it was His doing. By His doing, you are in Christ Jesus.

For Paul, this understanding of the mystical union of the believer in Christ is so important. We are in Christ Jesus by His doing. By our redemption we are in Christ Jesus. And who is He? This is Christ Jesus who became to us, and who is wisdom from God. He is not wisdom as the world would understand wisdom, not wisdom as the sophisticates would expect, not wisdom as handed down from the elite universities in the ivory tower, but wisdom that is handed down from heaven—the *logos* of God—the one who was the Lamb born to die. He has become our wisdom, and that wisdom is demonstrated in three very profound realities.

First, our righteousness. It is the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to the believer. He has become unto us righteousness. Second, sanctification, which is work that Christ is even now doing within us to call us unto holiness, to transform us, to call us into obedience to the Word and to conform us to His image. Third, redemption. And all of this is in the cross. We are redeemed, we are saved, we have escaped the wrath that is to come by the redemption that is His wisdom.

All this adds up to an affirmation of the scandalous nature of the Christian ministry. This is a message of irreducible wisdom and tremendous urgency to those who will be ministers of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to be agents of scandal. The foolishness of the cross means that the ministry is essentially and irreducibly scandalous, and there is nothing we can do about that. There is nothing that we should *try* to do about that. We can't manage scandal. We must

bear it. The cross of Christ stands at the center of our ministry.

Paul was concerned not only with the church at Corinth, but with the church throughout the world and throughout the ages. This is a crucial insight for understanding the Christian ministry, and for understanding its temptations. Not long after the apostle Paul wrote this, Celsus, an early enemy of the church argued that if you look at the church, you will notice that they are not attracting the smartest people, nor the noble, nor the mighty. The philosophers aren't becoming Christians, he said, and that should tell us everything we need to know.

Fast forward to Friedrich Nietzsche. His disdain for Christianity was directed at two things. First, the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, and second, the church. *Look at whom they worship*, Nietzsche said. *Look at this God whom they worship. How foolish and imbecilic to follow one who died, and then to claim that that death is victory! There is foolishness and there is foolishness*, Nietzsche argued. *There is madness and there is madness, but to call death victory is the ultimate madness of all. This is a pathetic deity and he is followed by a pathetic people.*

The temptation comes to us to think that perhaps we can undo some of this. Perhaps we can negotiate some of this and come up with a formula for reducing the shame and removing the scandal. Friedrich Schleiermacher subtitled his seminal work on religion as *Lectures to the Cultured Despisers of Religion*. I think that we can understand the apologetic impulse behind what Schleiermacher was trying to do. He wasn't trying to eviscerate Christianity—he was trying to save it. He wasn't trying to replace Christianity with something else—he was just trying to update Christianity so that it would make sense in a post-Enlightenment world. And yet, what Schleiermacher did was to rob the cross of Christ of its power. He said to the culture despisers of religion, *You know, it looks pretty messy, but we can make it less messy. These doctrines are pretty rough, but we can sand them down. This whole system of revealed truth is pretty demanding, but we can lessen the demand. You can still be cultured and not have to despise the cross.* And yet, that move ends in theological tragedy—the abandonment of Christianity—all in the name of removing the reason for the despising.

For the called, it is very different. We must bear the scorn, the dishonor, the scandal. If you are unwilling to bear this scandal for the rest of your earthly lives, if this is not what you think you signed up for, then go home. Paul was called an idle babbler in Acts 17:18, and he was called worse, and he was treated worse. If you do what God has called you to do, you are going to be called worse and treated worse, too. We can address ourselves to the cultured despisers of religion, or we can preach the gospel. We cannot do both. We can negotiate the faith or we can proclaim the faith. Those are the choices. We can try to maneuver our way through doctrine or we can simply teach the faith once for all delivered to the saints. That is our choice.

If you go to Wittenberg, that great seat of the Lutheran Reformation, and you go into the Wittenberg church, you will see one of the greatest pieces of art of the Reformation—the altar piece in the Wittenberg Cathedral. Looking at that altar piece you will see three different panels. But the central panel, when it is all closed, visible to the congregation at virtually all times, you see a beautiful painting of Luther preaching. On the far right of the panel, Luther in his pulpit preaching, and he looks like Luther in full Lutheran mode: Arms out, mouth open. On the other side, the far left, there is the congregation. What is fascinating is to see how the artist painted them with such eagerness to hear. They are leaning forward over the rail. They are inclining their ears. They are wide-eyed and alert. And in the middle between Luther and the congregation there is a cross, and on that cross there is a depiction of Christ. Luther is dressed up. He is in his teacher's robe. The people are in their congregational finery and the cross is there in its crudity and (humanly speaking) in its ugliness.

The artist explained that he painted the work in that way because of Luther's doctrine of the preaching of the cross, which, I believe was Paul's doctrine of the preaching of the cross. The preacher of the gospel is to preach the Word so that what becomes evident to the congregation is the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to present it just as it was and just as it is and let it just be there, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Brothers, if you preach such a message, you will be scandalous. If you teach and hold to such a gospel, you will become a scandal to the world. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world to shame the things that are strong. 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. By His doing, we are in Christ Jesus, who has become to us wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.