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# The Foolishness of the Cross, Part One

*The foolishness of the cross underlines the scandalous nature of the Christian ministry. In 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, the apostle Paul reminds us of the fact that the Christian ministry is a scandalous business. It always has been and it always will be. If you are looking for a non-scandalous life, if you hope to preach a non-scandalous message, then the Christian ministry is the wrong place for you. You have heard the wrong call. For what Paul says is that the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God.*

**Monday, April 24, 2006**

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Rhetorically, Paul is up to something here. Martin Hengel is no doubt right when he suggests that the word translated in English here as *foolishness*, might be more properly understood as something like *madness* or *insanity*. The word of the cross, the very substance of the Christian gospel, is absolute madness to those who are perishing. It is irrationality. It is insanity. It makes no sense whatsoever. It is not just that this message is a little off balance; it is not simply that it is in need of a bit of polishing. It is sheer madness. And yet this message of the cross, for all its foolishness, is the very essence of our identity. This is who we are. It may be foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

In verse 19, Paul reaches back to Isaiah 29:14, where the Lord says, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." This indictment of human pretentious wisdom or human pretentious intelligence is crucial for us in this age of information.

What kind of wisdom are we looking for? What kind of wisdom should we represent? What kind of wisdom are we teaching? It is not the wisdom of the scoffer, nor the wisdom of the wise man. It is not the wisdom of the scribe or the debater of this age, nor the wisdom of the professional intellectual. It is the wisdom of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is but one wisdom, for the Lord says He will destroy all other wisdom, all other artificial, creative, pretentious, humanistic wisdom. "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." One of the most dangerous and besetting sins that can fall upon a Christian is the belief that he or she is clever. Cleverness is a danger. Cleverness is a trap which can lead us to re-translate the cross into something a little less offensive, a little more sophisticated, and thus rob it of its power.

In verse 20, it is as if the apostle Paul is looking around the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and saying, "Where are they—the intellectual, the cultural elite, the wise man, the scribe, the debater of this age?" They are not here. And why? Because God has made foolish the wisdom of the world.

In verse 21, the apostle explains, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." We read

these words, and yet as we look around the world, it does not much look like this has happened. In all honesty, it does not yet look like God has made foolish the wisdom of the world, or at least the world does not think so. The fact is, the wise men of the world are not lined up outside our churches to apologize. No one is saying, “We were so wrong—how did we miss all of that?” What Paul gives us here is a word of faith, and yet it is not merely an eschatological promise. Of course it is that, but it is also a present reality, because we must have the gospel audacity to affirm that from inside the arena of faith—to those who are in Christ Jesus—the wisdom of the world does look foolish.

This is also a process of what we might call intellectual sanctification. Over time, as we come out of the world and into the church, we are increasingly and embarrassingly aware of just how foolish our previous thoughts really were. How could we have bought that? How could that have looked so enticing, so exciting?

In verse 21, Paul reminds us of an essential gospel understanding: God did not save the world through its own wisdom. It was not through cleverness or wisdom or intelligence that anyone has come to Christ, including any of us. It is often tempting to think that we were simply smart enough to understand this gospel. When the gospel was preached, we were intelligent enough to grasp it, smart enough to recognize it for what it was. As tempting as such thoughts may be, however, none of us came to the gospel by intelligence. We came because of God’s power working in “the foolishness of the message preached.”

Look a bit more closely at verse 21: “God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.” Many a bad sermon has been launched from a mistranslation of this verse. The King James Version translates the verse to say “the foolishness of *preaching*.” But it is not the act of preaching that is said to be foolish. It is the *message* of what is preached. It is the preached Word, the preached gospel that is foolishness. God was well pleased through the foolishness of the message preached—that is, the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ—to save 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, God uses wisdom, but only the intelligence that He would sanctify and only the wisdom He would give. It is a counter-intuitive wisdom—a wisdom that runs entirely counter to the wisdom of the age.

