



Walking the Way of the Cross with Paul

SESSION 2

The foolishness of our proclamation

Introduction

Paul tells us, “God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21b). What is it that is foolish about the Christian proclamation? We might be tempted to think that any expression of belief in God or hope in Jesus, or any call for morally disciplined living, is considered foolish today. But that is not what Paul is talking about here. Most people in Paul’s time believed in divine beings, and there were certainly philosophers who insisted on the importance of virtue. Therefore, in those days, respect for the divine and for virtue was considered wise, not foolish. Paul had something else in mind when he spoke of “the foolishness of our proclamation.”

The key, in fact, comes two verses later: “we proclaim *Christ crucified*, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (emphasis added). It is the specific content of Paul’s proclamation—the crucified Messiah—that made it seem foolish. That is what we are considering in this session.

What Was a Cross?

A cross today is often an ornament more than anything else. Churches have crosses in them or on them or in front of them. People have them in their houses or wear them as jewelry or put them on their cars. They can be reminders of faith, of salvation, of discipleship. They can be mag-

nificent works of art, or they can be mere trinkets, fashion statements, bling (i.e., flashy, ostentatious jewelry).

A widely told story about Clarence Jordan, author of the *Cotton Patch New Testament* translations and founder of the interracial Koinonia community in Georgia, tells how a minister friend of his was showing Jordan

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his newly built church, complete with imported pews, beautiful stained glass, and other elegant touches. Stepping outside, he pointed to the steeple, where a spotlight showed up a large gold cross. “Dr. Jordan, that cross alone cost us \$10,000.” Jordan looked up at the cross, looked back at his hosts, and said, “You know, friend, there was a time when crosses were free.”¹

It was that free kind of cross that Paul was talking about. It was not an ornament, and it was not a religious symbol of any kind. It was definitely not bling. It was a symbol of power, but not the power of the person upon it. For those who lived in fear of it, it was an object of shame, of horror, of terror.

You probably know this already. You know that the Roman Empire used crucifixion to punish rebellious slaves and insurgents. You know that it was a deliberately public form of execution meant to instill terror in those who were to be kept in subjection. The death of

Jesus, or of anyone, on a cross was the ultimate in physical and mental torture available in that day; and to the torture was added the horror of being publicly displayed, naked and disgraced—as agonizing as the physical pain in a culture that valued honor and dignity above all else.

To be crucified was to be exposed as helpless and defeated, the opposite of messianic power. It was also the opposite of wisdom, literally ridiculous—part of the point was precisely to hold the victim up to ridicule (Mark 15:29–32). Who would choose such an end? Who would promote a crucified man as messiah? A crucified messiah was an absolute contradiction in terms.

The Foolishness of Our Proclamation

It may be that the greatest miracle in the early years of Christianity was that anyone believed in it at all. Who could accept such a message? “Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, recently crucified a Jewish man named Jesus. We are telling you that this man was raised from the dead and is a savior sent from God.” What?

Paul tells the Corinthians that he “did not come proclaiming the mystery of God . . . in lofty words or wisdom,” but rather “decided to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” His message was “not with plausible words of wisdom” so that their faith “might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:1–5). When we read this together with 1 Corinthians 1:18–31, in the light of what crucifixion was and what it signified, Paul’s meaning becomes abundantly clear. The proclamation of a crucified Messiah was anything but “plausible words of wisdom,” and anyone who was convinced by it must indeed have been persuaded “not [by] human wisdom but [by] the power of God.”

There was no shortage of traveling teachers, philosophers, and proclaimers of one school of thought or another in the ancient world. In an age without mass media, such public speakers could be both educational and entertaining. They studied and practiced how to shape their messages according to the standards of rhetoric and persuasion so as to be both credible and convincing. Whatever their message might be, however, it was at least expected to make sense. The philosophers’ reaction to Paul in Acts 17:18 (“What does this babbler want to say?”) would be the obvious response to a discourse about a crucified and resurrected Messiah.

And yet, against all odds, the message of Paul and other Christian proclaimers did stir up faith, at least in a few. Christianity did not win over large numbers of people at first, and the people it did win over were generally not the power holders or opinion leaders. They tended to be “not . . . wise . . . , not . . . powerful, not . . . of noble birth. . . . foolish . . . weak . . . low and despised . . . , things that are not,” as Paul none too flatteringly describes his own readers (1 Cor. 1:26b–28a). They were, for the most part, not the educated, the rich, or the elite, but near the bottom rung of the ladder of social respect in an honor-obsessed society. They had to work for a living in an economy in which the well-off and well-respected lived at ease off the sweat of their slaves and laborers. It was among such people, in Corinth at least, that the miracle of belief first occurred.

God’s Folly, God’s Weakness

We are used to the idea of Christianity as a great world religion with a history of powerful interaction with the wealthy and the mighty, a tradition of beautiful art and architecture, music and poetry. It may pain us a bit to see the lack of respect for Christian faith and Christian institutions today in the media and in the culture at large. Those of us old enough to remember a time when the church carried greater cultural weight may long a bit for those days—may even regret the pluralism that seems to be taking over contemporary society. Any loudmouth on cable, it seems, can get as much of a hearing for his or her views as the Pope or the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches.

Well, welcome to the New Testament! If Christianity seems to get little respect today, it got even less in the first century. It is not fun to watch one’s beloved faith and its institutions slide down the scale of cultural power and admiration. But it may be that in the Western churches at least, we are being offered a chance to get back in touch with our roots, to reconnect with the age of the apostles in all its difficulty and ambiguity. The church, in most places for most of its history, has pretty much ignored Jesus’ advice to seek the lowest place, and as a result it is experiencing the destiny he predicted: instead of being invited to step up, we are, embarrassingly, being made to move downward. “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:7–11).

Where does this decline in respect leave the Christian God, then? Perhaps right where God has chosen to be.

More than ourselves, more than our churches, we want our God to be publicly respected at least, even if not obeyed. We think of God as all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise, and we want others to think this way too. How surprising, then, to hear the apostle Paul speak of “God’s foolishness . . . and God’s weakness” (1 Cor. 1:25)!

This takes us back to a point made in session one, with regard to 2 Corinthians 5:16. Paul, before his conversion, had understood Jesus in accordance with “the flesh,” the ordinary human system of values focused

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on self and self-interest. In those terms, Jesus of Nazareth was clearly a failed messiah, precisely because he was crucified. Paul’s conversion was not just a “salvation experience” of being born again, but a revolution in his theology and therefore in his worldview. Convinced now that Jesus *was* the Messiah, Paul was forced to a completely different understanding of how God operates. A crucified messiah was a contradiction in terms; but this was what God had actually done, so there must be something wrong with the terms!

Paul evidently concluded that the criteria by which he had been calculating messianic validity were false, and they were false because they belonged to the realm of human sin and resistance to God. If his criteria had been in alignment with God’s will, how could they have missed so badly in discerning God’s Messiah? Therefore the criteria themselves—power, success, domination of enemies—were not God’s criteria and did not reflect God’s ways of thinking and acting. They belonged to “the flesh,” the typical human ways of conduct and judgment in a world flawed by sin. Even though these criteria seemed so obvious, so undeniably valid and true, they did not reflect God’s values, the mind and the heart of God. The self-evident superiority of winning over losing was a delusion.

In a contest of power, God’s Messiah had lost. The most powerful nation in the known world had defeated him and hung him on a cross. There were two possibilities: either God is not powerful or God’s power is not where people normally look for it. Furthermore, in Paul’s thinking, shaped by his Jewish heritage and his reading of Scripture, there were no accidents for God. If God’s Messiah was crucified it was because God wanted it so, God chose to have it so. But who *chooses* crucifixion? Only a fool, as anyone thinking in a normal human way knows. Again, there were two possibilities: either God is not wise or God’s wisdom is not where people usually look for it. To send a crucified Messiah was a foolish decision, choosing weakness rather than

strength. And yet God, the one who is the definition of wisdom and power, had done so. The only conclusion Paul could draw is that wisdom and power must be redefined: believers in this Messiah must leave behind the understandings of power and wisdom that are familiar to them, as belonging to the superseded realm of “the flesh.” They must

learn to operate in the new creation, with the radically redrawn definitions of power and wisdom that come from the God of the Messiah Jesus.

The power and wisdom of God disclosed in Jesus Christ look like folly and weakness to “those who are perishing,” those who see neither wisdom nor power in a crucified Messiah. Paul accepts this and doesn’t try to argue against it on the world’s terms. Yes, he says, God has been shown to be foolish and weak. Yet that folly is wiser than our best wisdom, and that weakness is more powerful than our greatest strength. The God of Abraham, the God of Israel, the God of Moses, the God of the prophets and psalmists, has always been known as one whom human eyes cannot or dare not perceive, whose thoughts and ways are far beyond our own (Exod. 3:6; 33:20; Isa. 55:5–9). Now, in the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah Jesus, this transcendence of God has reached a kind of climax: now it appears that God’s wisdom is so far beyond our own, so different from our own, that we cannot recognize it as wisdom at all.

Boasting in the Lord

“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor. 1:20d). For anyone who believes in Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, the answer to this question is

certainly yes. But it can be a very difficult yes to say, day in and day out. It may be even more difficult in our day, now that “the wisdom of the world” comes pouring into our eyes and ears almost every waking moment, from television, the Internet, movies, radio, magazines, newspapers, MP3 players, and so on. Unless we watch, read, and listen to nothing but Christian media (and we may need to be selective even in that), we are going to be slammed with the wisdom of the world pretty much 24/7. How can we unmask it? How can we reveal its foolishness, first of all to ourselves and then to others as well?

Paul would say that we have to start from the right starting point, “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Christian spiritual teachers down through the ages add that we must return to that beginning point again and again, day after day. “Test everything,” Paul writes in another letter, “hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:21–22). Whatever we read or hear or see—including our own thoughts and desires—is to be tested against the criterion of the cross, the standard of the new creation that reveals the mind of Christ. What do we want? What are we trying to do? What does this news story, that advertisement, some TV show or movie or Web site, want to persuade us to think or desire or do? And how does it stack up against the cross?

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:22–24). Bear in mind that Jews on the one hand and Greeks/Gentiles on the other encompass the entire human race! We *all* want signs, powerful deeds that will prove whose side God is on. We *all* seek out wisdom, something that makes sense or, perhaps more importantly, something that has

been declared to make sense by the most or the loudest voices around us. It is when we remember our calling that we are able to hear a different voice. The wisdom and power of God create a *called* community, a human group summoned to walk the way of the cross, to take a stand apart from everyday human wisdom, in the land of holy weakness and among the holy fools.

The Bible, the history of the church, and our own life experience offer us examples of people who have heard and answered that call. We ourselves have heard it and surely have had moments when we have known that we were, for once, in the right place, however strange a place it might seem in human terms. Those are the people, those are the moments, that can help us discern the foolish wisdom and powerless power of God. Looking for that which has no explanation and no standing in the world, something we could in no way boast to anyone about, can guide us as well. When we find that inexplicable path and are drawn into it, then we are on our way to the place where all the boasting we have left will be the “boast in the Lord” that Paul commends.²

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Jerrod H. Huguenot, “Telling Stories about the Cross (Matthew 10).” July 2, 2011. <http://www.fbcbennington.org/sermons/jhh/2011/7/2/telling-stories-about-the-cross-matthew-10.html> (accessed October 27, 2011).

2. Paul in 1 Cor. 1:31 is quoting Jer. 9:23–24, where the prophet also counsels against the usual boasts in wisdom, power, and wealth, in favor of boasting in acquaintance with God who chooses justice and faithfulness.