

## LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH: 1 CORINTHIANS

### Week 3: The “Foolishness” of the Gospel

#### ANALYSIS

#### I. INTRODUCTION, 1:1–9

A. Salutation, 1:1–3

B. Thanksgiving, 1:4–9

#### II. A CHURCH DIVIDED: INTERNALLY AND AGAINST PAUL, 1:10–4:21

A. The Problem: Division over Leaders in the Name of Wisdom, 1:10–17

B. Reasons for the Problem, 1:18–4:21

1. Misunderstanding of the gospel message, 1:18–3:4

a. The foolishness of the gospel, 1:18–2:5

The cross is not something to which one may add human wisdom and thereby make it superior; rather, the cross stands in absolute, uncompromising contradiction to human wisdom. Human wisdom has not led people to the true God, but actually away from God. The cross is considered foolishness to wisdom humanly conceived; but it is what we might call God’s “foolishness,” foolishness that is at the same time his wisdom and power.

(1) It is foolish in the content of the message, 1:18–25

*(1:18) For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

Human wisdom and the message of the cross are mutually exclusive. This exclusivity can be seen in how it divides mankind into two groups: “those who are perishing” and “those who are being saved.” Both the “perishing” and the “being saved” are a present process.

*(1:19) For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”*

Paul now moves on to argue that this “foolishness” of God, with its message of the cross, is in fact God’s way of doing what he said he would do in the Old Testament—set aside and destroy human wisdom of fallen creatures. Paul’s proof is found in Isa 29:14.

*(1:20) Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*

These questions in v. 20, continue the point of the quotation in v. 19. Paul is expressing the sarcasm of a passage like Isa 19:12, in which the prophet asks in light of what God was about to do, “Where *now* are your wise men?”

The cross is considered foolishness to those who are perishing (v. 18), but the very message of the salvation through the cross-work of Christ has made foolishness out of the world's wisdom, which is based entirely on human self-sufficiency.

*(1:21) For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.*

Paul now sets out to explain ("for") to the Corinthians how what he has just said is true. He begins with a statement on which he assumes he and they will agree, namely that "the world through its wisdom did not come to know God."

"In the wisdom of God" means "in God's wise plan." Paul says all along it was part of God's providential plan that he so arranged things.

Paul says, "God was pleased" to bring people into a proper relationship with himself "through the foolishness of what was preached."

*(1:22) Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,*

Paul divides the "perishing" into two basic groups, "Jews" and "Greeks," which illustrate the primary idolatries of human beings.

"Jews demand signs." "Show us a sign," they repeatedly demanded of Jesus.

"Greeks look for wisdom." This too was a national characteristic. As early as Herodotus (5th century B.C.), it is said of them: "All Greeks were zealous for every kind of learning."

Illustration: The general theory of evolution teaches that all the living forms in the world have arisen from a single source which itself came from an inorganic form. This is the classic theory of evolution taught in biology courses in many schools. According to the late, famous Harvard evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, it "functions with or without a creator, so long as the creator works by natural laws."

*(1:23) but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,*

Instead of giving the seekers of signs and wisdom what they wanted, God gave them something shocking: "But we preach Christ crucified." Rather than giving them the signs and wisdom they demand, they get weakness and folly. "Christ crucified" is a contradiction in terms, of the same category as "fried ice." From a human point of view, it is impossible to have a crucified Messiah.

To the “Gentiles” the message of “Christ crucified” was a “pernicious superstition” according to the Roman historian Tacitus (A.D. 56–117) and “a perverse extravagant superstition” according to Pliny the Younger (A.D. 61–112).

*(1:24) but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

From any merely human perspective the central message of the Christian gospel must always appear as foolish. But to people from both groups whom God has called to salvation this foolishness turns out to be “the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

*(1:25) For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.*

Paul now concludes his argument with a theological principle: God is both wiser and more powerful than mere human beings. The message of the cross appears to be foolishness to human wisdom, but it ultimately turns out to be wiser since it brings salvation. Thus, what appears to be weakness, a crucified Messiah, is actually more powerful than any human power.

(2) It is foolish with respect to the recipients of the message, 1:26–31

Not only is the gospel message viewed as foolish by an unbelieving world, but we believers who receive the message of the gospel are also viewed in a similar way. This is because of kind of people whom God normally chooses for salvation.

*(1:26) Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.*

Paul invites the Corinthians to consider or think about what they were like when they were called to salvation. “Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.”

Although Paul says “not many,” he was, of course, aware of the fact that some in the church were in fact well off by human standards (e.g., Crispus, Gaius, Erastus, Stephanas).

*(1:27) But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. (1:28) God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,*

A look at the Corinthian church demonstrates that the majority of them were not part of elite of this world, but were just common folk. The reason for this makeup is now made clear. “God chose” people from a particular socio-

economic background in Corinth to be saved for a particular purpose—in order to shame the world, and finally to bring it to nothing. Except for the word “wise” all the adjectives are neuter in the original Greek (“things”). Paul is describing the Corinthians with these terms. The idea is something like “the help” or the “hired hands”—no one of importance.

Instead of the “wise,” God chose the “foolish things of the world” or “what the world counts foolish.” Instead of the “influential” God chose the “weak things of the world.” Instead of those of “noble birth” God chose the “lowly things of the world.” What God did in the cross and in calling the “lowly” Corinthians illustrates that he is not beholden to the world. Thus, he is not only not accountable to the “wise” of this world, but by his gracious activity in Christ he has actually “shamed” the wise.

*(1:29) so that no one may boast before him.*

With this clause Paul expresses the ultimate purpose of God’s plan: “in order that no one may boast before God.” God deliberately chose the foolish things of the world, the cross and the Corinthian believers, so that there could be no boasting in his presence.

*(1:30) It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. (1:31) Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”*

It is totally “because of [God]” and his electing grace (“God chose,” v. 27) that the Corinthians are Christians (“in Christ Jesus”). Paul asserts that God made Christ to become true “wisdom” for us—which is then immediately interpreted in salvific terms, “that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”

So we see that there is “wisdom” with God, but it is opposite from the human wisdom that Corinthians currently delight in and squabble over. Wisdom does not have to do with “getting smart,” nor with status or rhetoric. God’s wisdom has to do with salvation through Christ Jesus.

(3) It is foolish with respect to the minister, or preacher of the message, 2:1–5

*(2:1) And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.*

To conclude his argument, Paul reminds the Corinthians about the character of his own preaching when he was among them, both its form and content. In the plan of the cross and in choosing the Corinthians, God in effect eliminated human boasting, so that the only boast left is in the Lord. And when Paul came to Corinth, he demonstrated the same reality. He was totally stripped of self-reliance, so that God’s power could be manifested and so that the Corinthians’ faith might rest on God alone.

*(2:2) For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

Paul did not attempt to distinguish himself in either eloquence or philosophical reasoning because he had already “resolved to know nothing...except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” “To know nothing” does not mean that he left all other knowledge aside, but rather that he had the gospel, with its crucified messiah, as his singular focus and passion while he was among them.

*(2:3) I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.*

Paul continues the description of his preaching; but now it focuses less on the form of preaching and more directly on the preacher. It is impossible to know the exact nature of Paul’s coming to them “in weakness.” He is most likely referring to some observable physical condition. Probably the best we can do is take “weakness” to refer to his “sufferings,” “hardships” and whatever can detract from the standing and dignity of someone in the estimation of other people.

The main point is that for Paul there was a genuine correspondence between his own personal weaknesses and his gospel (Col 1:24). At the heart of his preaching stood “weakness of God” (1:25), the story of a crucified Messiah (v. 2). His own weaknesses served as a further visible demonstration of the same message, but even more to demonstrate that the message was of divine, not human, origin.

Along with “weakness” he adds “with great fear and trembling,” but it is not at all clear what this means.

*(2:4) My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, (2:5) so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.*

Paul does not glory in his weaknesses for the Corinthians’ own sake; he does so to remind them that the real power in Gospel transformation does not lie in the person or presentation of the preacher but in the work of the Spirit. “My message and my preaching” refer to the content and form of Paul’s actual delivery. He deliberately avoided the very thing that now fascinates them, “the persuasion of wisdom.”

What accompanied Paul’s preaching was “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.” Paul’s point is that even though he was weak and his preaching lacked rhetoric and wisdom, the Corinthians very coming to faith demonstrated that it did not lack power.