

SKY-WAY MESSAGES



Pointing People Heavenward

Internet Bible Materials

SKYWORD

BOOKLET 2

The Preaching of the Cross

by Martin Girard



1 CORINTHIANS

CHAPTER 1

17. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel; not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. 18. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. 19. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." 20. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21. For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. 22. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: 23. But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; 24. But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. 25. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

26. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 27. But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; 28. And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: 29. That no flesh should glory in His presence.

30. But of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption; 31. That, according as it is written, "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord".

CHAPTER 2

1. And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. 2. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. 3. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. 4. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: 5. That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

The Preaching of the Cross

For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel (v.17)

In the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians Paul makes some powerful statements. One such statement is found in the above verse. We must not misunderstand Paul. He is not saying that baptism is unimportant, nor is he seeking to deviate from the Great Commission given by our Lord to preach the Gospel throughout the world and to baptize those who believe (Matt.28:19). Paul is at pains to ensure that no party grows up around him with adherents declaring a personal allegiance to himself. For this reason he is thankful that he did not baptize many followers, for fear that they might say that they had been baptized in his name (v.15). Paul did not want followers for himself - though by the Spirit he did encourage others to imitate him inasmuch as he imitated Christ (1 Cor.11:1). His burning concern was “to preach the gospel” to lost sinners, and none other than the Risen Christ had “sent” him on this mission.

“To preach the gospel”: the task remains with us still. Until the last believer is added to the Church and the Lord comes again we must “preach the gospel”. There are many ways in which this can be done. The verse may initially make us think of the message that goes forth from the pulpit or in the open air - but it does not stop there. By personal witness, in work among children, through visits to old people’s homes, by literature, by radio - the list is endless. It goes without saying, of course, that the means used must glorify God and not in any way trivialize the message. In addition to this, we must ensure that it is “the gospel” that is preached.



What, then, is the gospel? Paul answers that question in this very same letter, telling us that it concerns the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, which we must believe (1 Cor.15:1-4). The message commences with God (Jn.3:16) and is centred in what **He** has done. A study of Paul’s preaching in the book of Acts does not reveal a “softly-softly” approach but a powerful unfolding of the truth with a clear command to obey in the light of coming judgment (Acts 17:22-31). Yet, although Paul preached “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,” he was not harsh in manner and often had tears in his eyes (Acts 20:21,31). He fully believed the awful fate awaiting those who refuse the message of salvation.

We must never be swayed by the pressure of pragmatism - using something because it “works”. In today’s success-orientated culture we often forget that

“results” must *never* be at the expense of truth. If the message being preached is in any way defective, then the results may be deceptive. If something resembling the gospel is preached, the outcome may be something resembling a Christian. We cannot afford to trifle with eternal things. The only results worth having are those wrought by the Spirit of God - for salvation is *His* work. Our simple task is to “preach the gospel”.

THE CROSS ALONE

...not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect (v.17)

Paul’s readers in Corinth needed to understand that he had been commissioned by the Lord Jesus Christ to preach the gospel, not to baptize. As we have already said, Paul did not consider the baptism of believers to be optional or unimportant. He could name some individuals whom he had baptized. But he was concerned that a personal allegiance to himself should not develop, with people saying, “I am of Paul,” so he stressed that he had never baptized an individual in his own name. He had been sent “to preach the gospel”.

Someone might ask the question, “How did you preach the gospel, Paul?” The answer that Paul gives is an important one for us to grasp today. The first thing

How is it done?

that he tells us about his method of proclamation is negative: “not with wisdom of words”. The Greeks were great orators and loved to debate matters. Many a philosopher could stand outside and gather a crowd, or impress the students in his class with his ability in the realm of reason. Paul was an intellectual giant. He had been brought up at the feet of Gamaliel and had perfect understanding of the law (Acts 22:3). He could well have used his brilliant mind and skilful rhetoric at Corinth to outwit his opponents and thus demolish their arguments.

Instead we find Paul doing none of this. The “wisdom of words” did not feature in his proclamation of the gospel message, and Paul gives just one reason for refusing this approach. He refrained “lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.” In other words, the cross of Christ must stand alone. It does not depend upon human wisdom. Actually, human wisdom is damaging to the message of the cross for it deprives it of its power.

Christ Himself is “the power of God” (v.24). Salvation is found only in Him. Human effort has no part to play. On the cross the Lord Jesus bore our sins and dealt a blow to human pride. We are saved by repentance and placing our faith in Him. The power is in the Saviour and in the work that He accomplished - and never in the impressiveness of the message preached.

Where do we stand today? In many churches the pulpit has been replaced by the stage. Instead of a message being heard, some kind of theatrical performance is enjoyed by the audience. In many “missions” nowadays, a carnival atmosphere prevails - with balloons, comedy, laughter, and fun. Let us be quite clear: the gospel is no laughing matter. It is deadly serious, for it concerns righteousness, sin, judgment, and (against that background) the love of God. Just as clever arguments rob the cross of its power, so entertaining sketches divert people from the awful solemnity of their guilt before a holy God. Both impressive rhetoric and entertainment can rob the cross of its power. How we need to pray that an unadorned and unadulterated message will go forth today.

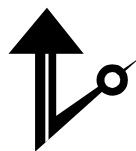


THE POWER OF GOD

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God (v.18)

Paul, the apostle, had received a divine call to preach the gospel. He refers to this privilege and responsibility in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians. Renouncing all human wisdom, Paul relied entirely upon the power of God as he made known the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Skilful rhetoric may impress and even sway an audience, but it cannot impart spiritual life. As the work of preaching the gospel is a *spiritual* one, human effort will achieve nothing lasting. Spiritual means must be used in the great task of making known the way of salvation.

It has often been said that the cross is the great divide. No neutral ground exists beneath it; we are either on one side or on the other - either for Christ or against Him. In 1 Corinthians 1:18 Paul compares two very distinct groups of individuals: those who perishing and “us” who are saved. At one time *we* were perishing as well, but God in His great mercy intervened and saved us by His grace. What was it that made us aware of our need and brought us to salvation? It was “the preaching of the cross”.



This is the message that the world needs to hear. Nothing else can provide effective help. People are perishing. Many humanitarian agencies are at work today, endeavouring to raise standards and provide clean water, nutritious food, improved housing, and better education. While these efforts are not to be despised and the motives behind them may be good, the results are only temporal. There is nothing of eternal value in them. Only the message of the cross can bring real hope. Yet many have no sense of need and regard the message as “foolish”. They ask: “How can we be saved without *doing* anything? How can the death of a man on a cross two thousand years ago help us today?”

The Son of God stepped out from eternity and took upon Himself a human body. He lived here on earth as a man - fully human, but without sin. Although truly Man, He never ceased to be God. Upon the cross He gave His spotless life as a sacrifice and shed His precious blood that there might be forgiveness for lost mankind. Those who regard the preaching of the cross as “foolishness” because it calls for no self-effort, prove by their own refusal of the message that they are **no other way** perishing. Without Christ there is no hope. But when a lost sinner trusts Christ as Saviour and rests entirely on what He has done, the message of the cross becomes “the power of God”. The Crucified One, now risen and glorified in heaven, is the source of power for His people. It is a message of power because only in this way are souls set free from sin and enabled to live their lives for the glory of God. By the Holy Spirit’s enabling, we must continue to preach the true message of the cross today. There is no other way to be saved.

THE FOUNDATION OF SCRIPTURE

For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. (v.19)

A great responsibility lay before Paul. He had received a divine commission to preach the gospel, making known the way of salvation to sinners who were lost and guilty before God. In fulfilling the task, Paul assiduously avoided any methods that might generate results of the wrong kind. Convincing arguments, skilful rhetoric, and fluency of speech might persuade listeners intellectually, but Paul rejected such means - for they deprived the cross of its power. Souls are saved by the preaching of the cross and no other way. Those who regard such preaching as “foolish” are perishing and destined for a lost eternity.

It is important that our practices should always be supported by Scripture. To demonstrate the correctness of his conviction, Paul referred his readers in Corinth to the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah. (See Isaiah 29:14.) Centuries before, Sennacherib king of Assyria posed a threat to the people of Judah. Seeking deliverance from the imminent danger, some of the “wise” in Judah advised turning to Egypt for help. Political or military considerations might warrant such a scheme - but this “wisdom” did not have the approval of a Sovereign God and would only result in their confusion and humiliation (Isa.30:1-5). Foolishly, they thought that their counsel could be hidden from the Lord, for while recommending such a course of action they continued to honour Him with their lips and professed to be trusting in Him alone. Revealing the hypocrisy of their hearts, God declared that the wisdom of such wise men would perish (Isa.29:13-15).



A parallel situation existed in Paul's day. Just as God's people of old were devising their own "wise" plans, some in the days of the early church were seeking to "improve" the message of the gospel. All who attempt any such thing will fail as miserably as the wise in Israel did. God will utterly destroy the wisdom of those considered to be wise and will make completely void the understanding of those who appear to be endowed with sagacity. Their "wisdom" is empty, for no one can improve upon the message of the gospel. A sacrifice for the guilty has already been made. The holy Son of God, as Man, took the sinner's place and accepted the sentence of judgment from Almighty God. Through the death of His Son, God has been glorified. Man has nothing to boast about when he simply accepts by faith what Christ has done. This is what makes the gospel unacceptable to so many people.

no "improvement"

Like Paul, we must stand upon the firm foundation of Scripture. Renouncing worldly means which *cannot* produce eternal results, we must pray that God's Holy Spirit will work in darkened hearts making sinners aware of their lost and helpless condition and drawing them to trust in Christ alone whose death is the sole basis for our salvation.

SOME QUESTIONS

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? (v.20)

It was time to throw down the gauntlet. Paul had been rebuking the Corinthian believers for their worldly ways and the divisive spirit that marked them. Strange as it may seem, he was thankful that he had baptized so few. A sect of "Paul-followers" was something he never desired. As he fulfilled his primary calling (preaching the gospel), Paul had never resorted to human wisdom. Instead, he relied upon the power of God as he proclaimed the message of the cross. As for the Corinthians - their values were all wrong. They were continuing to place too much emphasis upon worldly wisdom - and this is why Paul issues his challenge at this point.

Four questions are fired in rapid succession. It would seem that Paul had been meditating upon the prophecy of Isaiah at the time of writing this letter. Having already quoted in verse 19 from Isaiah 29, two of the questions that follow can be found in that same Old Testament book. "Where is the wise?" he asks. Where is the philosopher? Will he please step forward and defend his position! In Isaiah 19:12 the wise men of Egypt were sought. What did they know? What powers did

Isaiah

they have to reveal the purposes of the Lord of hosts? They were unable to declare what would most surely take place. Their wisdom was useless in discovering the purposes of God Almighty!

The second question rings out: “Where is the scribe?” Where is the man of letters, the teacher of the law? What does he know? The same question is found in



Isaiah 33:18. God would arise as a devouring fire to deal in judgment with “the sinners in Zion” (Isa.33:14), but the righteous would “see the king in his beauty” (Isa.33:17). What did the scribe know, and what could he write down about such things? In the gospel context, the one who thinks he is qualified to teach is invited to explain what he can about the way of salvation. The men of

letters could only pour scorn upon the message that Paul preached. Thus his third question follows quickly: “Where is the disputer of this world [age]?” Can any learned person dispute these matters and explain the simplicity of the gospel? The philosopher and scribe had not devised it; no more could it be disproved by any learned disputant.

The fourth question forces all these men to sit in silence on the same bench. Has not God made the wisdom of this world to appear foolish? Indeed He has! The

not intellect intellectual genius has no part to play: he is redundant. He cannot improve upon the message. The gospel does not require human intelligence; it is profoundly simple, so much so that a child can believe it. By our wisdom we cannot discover God. (Job was aware of this fact many centuries before: Job 11:7). Praise God, He has revealed Himself to us in His own Son, for Jesus declared that he who has seen Him has seen the Father (Jn.14:9).

GOD'S WISDOM

For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. (v.21)

In the mind of Paul the apostle, there were two kinds of wisdom - the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God. The two are so different from one another that they are poles apart. Man’s “wisdom”- in its essence - is of a completely different kind from the wisdom of God.

Throughout human history man has always been ready to display what he perceives to be his own wisdom. The floor of this earth is, figuratively speaking, littered with the wrecks of countless schemes that rose into the skies with meteoric splendour only to crash ingloriously to the earth a short while later.

Solutions have been proposed to resolve social dilemmas, and politicians have endorsed the “wisdom” of such schemes. Yet how soon the much-acclaimed success was seen to be nothing of the kind! Man’s wisdom in the field of education constantly fails. New tests and standards are eventually seen to be inadequate - so further changes are proposed. The wisdom of man has failed to stem the rise in crime. Overcrowded jails simply demonstrate that the current methods of dealing with offenders are no deterrent to those who are about to embark upon a criminal lifestyle.

Mankind’s wisdom is only *supposed*: it is not genuine. God declares that it is utterly foolish! Man’s philosophy is that salvation is something for which we must work. Corrupted forms of Christianity all teach us to do our best, to love our neighbours, to include some forms of religion in our lives and hope that one day we will have done enough to pass the test. The “wisdom” behind this kind of salvation is unable to tell you precisely *how much* you must do in order to be saved. The sense of “doing the best I can” produces self-sufficiency, complacency, and pride. Rather than God accepting us on these grounds, however, the Bible is resoundingly clear: salvation is “not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph.2:9).

By its own wisdom the world cannot know God. He is invisible to mortal eyes and could never be known without revealing Himself to mankind. In His wisdom God ensured that the world could *never* find Him by its own wisdom - and God determined (again, by His wisdom) that the only way to be saved would be by believing a message preached. Paul calls this “the foolishness of preaching”. Preaching is not a foolish *activity* for God has commanded us to preach. Rather, the *message* proclaimed is foolish to the mind of proud man who would rather work for his salvation than accept the free gift of God’s grace. The work of salvation is God’s work alone. Our task is to “make the message clear and plain” so that those who hear may be aware of their desperate need and simply accept what God has already provided through the death of His own Son at Calvary.



THE UNCHANGING MESSAGE

**For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom:
But we preach Christ crucified... (v.22-23)**

We can learn much from Paul as we see how he undertook his service for the Lord. Paul was a student - both of human nature and of the Holy Scriptures. He was aware of the racial and cultural differences that existed amongst the people he was seeking to reach with the message of the gospel. He also knew how to apply the unchanging principles of God’s Word to the situations that confronted him.

Being adaptable is a necessary requirement in our service for the Lord. Methods and procedures can change from time to time. In the Gospels, for instance, we find the Lord instructing His disciples to go about their fishing in a different way. When they obeyed Him, success was experienced in their service. However, although a certain amount of adaptability is necessary, we must always ensure that in adapting to situations we do not distort the message we proclaim.

In the opening verses of 1 Corinthians, Paul emphasizes his own calling to preach the gospel. In declaring it, Paul was very sensitive to the fact that nothing should deprive the message of its power. The world, by its wisdom, would invent its own way of salvation; God, by *His* wisdom, determined that salvation should only be possible by the death of His own Son upon the cross.

While Paul was aware of the differences between the Jew and the Greek, he refused to adapt his message to suit their needs. The Jews, in order to be convinced, frequently demanded some kind of “sign” when the Lord was on earth (as for example in John 2:18). This attitude still characterized them when Paul wrote to the Corinthians. The Greeks, on the other hand, had a different weakness.



They were fascinated by “wisdom” and wanted everything explained in a logical manner. If it made sense, and if it fitted in with their philosophies, they might believe. Knowing these innate tendencies, how did Paul respond? Might he not achieve greater success if he gave the Jews the sign they were seeking and offered the Greeks the wisdom that appealed to them?

Paul did not arrive at *that* conclusion! “The Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom - so we’ll just preach Christ crucified!” he exclaimed. This was something alien to the minds of both - but Paul would present nothing else. He would preach Christ, the Messiah; and he would preach about His crucifixion, explaining what His death means for lost and guilty sinners.

Things have not changed very much. Many today are sceptical and demand a sign in order to convince them. Others make intellectual demands. We might add that yet others have emotional needs that crave satisfaction. While we recognize such differences, our responsibility is to “preach Christ crucified” for there is salvation nowhere else.

“POWER” AND “WISDOM”

But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. (v.24)

Paul was well aware of the pressures that could influence his ministry. He knew

how the cultural backgrounds of his listeners could cause them to react adversely to the message that he preached. The Jews were sceptical and demanded signs that they could see; the Greeks, on the other hand, were attracted by the philosophical reasoning and wisdom that they could hear. If Paul sought to cater for one, he would fail to satisfy the other! What could he do? Setting aside the argument of expediency, Paul simply preached the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit - and in so doing gave both Jews and Gentiles the very things they did not want to hear!

Paul's theme was "Christ crucified". There can be no gospel without the preaching of the cross. In the many schemes that abound today for spreading the gospel, is the cross central? Paul knew that the message of Christ's death upon the cross was "a stumbling block" (a snare that causes an unsuspecting victim to fall) to the Jews, for it aroused their prejudice. They were expecting a mighty military deliverer who would free them from Rome's oppression. In their eyes a crucified Saviour demonstrated weakness, and they stumbled over the fact of His crucifixion. The Greeks, from their perspective, wanted a philosopher. It seemed absurd to them that salvation could be found through the death of one hanging silently upon a cross. To have to lay aside their "wisdom" seemed intellectual folly! Knowing that his preaching would arouse such reactions, Paul still refused to alter his message. "Christ crucified" remained his one unchanging gospel theme.



In looking at Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 1:24 it is interesting to discover that those who believed the message found it to be exactly what they had been looking for in the first place! In the church at Corinth were both converted Jews and Gentiles - **both needs met** - and they had all found Christ to be "the power of God, and the wisdom of God." If Paul had set out to give them what they were seeking, they would never have discovered the superior power and wisdom found in Christ. The gospel, centred in Christ, is God's power unto salvation (v.18), and it is Christ who gives us the power we need to live for Him. He is also the source of wisdom for the believer, being our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (v.30).

It is all too easy to succumb to pressure in a concern to see people respond to the gospel. We must be aware of this danger. When the Lord Jesus was on earth we read of those who "loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (Jn.12:43). Paul was not one like that. In our Christian service it is vital to please God - and we can only do this when we rely on Him for the results. If we go out of our way to seek a favourable reaction from the unsaved, nothing of eternal value will be achieved.

THE PARADOX OF THE GOSPEL

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (v.25)

At first this seems rather a strange statement. How can the Almighty God have “weakness”, and how can “foolishness” be connected in any way with One who is omniscient? The context supplies the answer to this question. That which *seems* to be foolish or weak on God’s part is both wiser and stronger than anything man can produce.

Wisdom and strength are two things that man often takes pride in. Academic achievements are valued highly and some (perhaps justifiably) are proud of their status in society. Others, who have not achieved such excellence in education,



may have become famous through their sporting abilities. Spectators can be impressed by a display of muscle, strength, stamina, or skill.

When Paul was writing to the Corinthians, the Jews wanted “a sign” which they could *see* in order to convince them. The Greeks, on the other hand, felt the appeal of “wisdom”. If something conformed to their logic, they might believe, (v.22). In discussing these qualities, Paul refused to abandon his theme of “Christ crucified”. Those who believe the message of the gospel, find in Christ both wisdom and strength of a much higher quality than can ever be found in the world.

“The foolishness of God is wiser than men.” The word used by Paul in this verse is not the same as the word (also translated “foolishness”) used earlier in the

a wiser "foolishness" chapter. Here Paul is considering a foolish thing: something God has done appears very foolish indeed to man. The matter being

considered by Paul is the salvation of mankind. If man had devised that salvation, it would have been based upon achievement or effort. Some would have qualified by their own abilities while others would have failed. God, in His wisdom, planned a salvation that would depend not upon an individual’s ability but upon His own grace. A person would be saved through faith in Jesus, without any effort on their own part. This salvation would be open to all; hence it was wiser than anything man could have imagined.

“The weakness of God is stronger than men.” The Jews would remember God’s salvation centuries before when, in a great display of strength, God rolled

a stronger "weakness" back the waters of the Red Sea and then caused them to return - engulfing their enemies. How different the salvation

worked out at Calvary! A Man, giving Himself over to His enemies and allowing

them to crucify Him does not seem an act of strength. Truly He was “crucified through weakness” (2 Cor.13:4), but those who condemned Him did not recognize Him as “the Lord of glory” (1 Cor.2:8). In reality there was a superhuman strength in that act of surrender, for through His death He has power to save all who call upon His Name.

NOT MANY TOP-OF-THE-RANGE PEOPLE!

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. (v.26)

In the early verses of his first epistle to the Corinthians Paul has been demolishing human pride and wisdom. Rejecting the preferences of both Jews and Greeks, he has demonstrated his own passion to “preach Christ crucified” (v.23). The work of Christ upon the cross displays both the power and the wisdom of God. In His wisdom He has devised a way of salvation that does not depend upon human ability or skill and therefore is open to all who will come. Those who respond to the invitation prove, by trusting Him, that Christ truly has the power to save.

Having declared the purposes of God in the way of salvation, Paul now turns to address the Corinthians directly and to remind them of their own origin and background. We do well to remember where we have come from, for reflecting upon this will cause us to marvel at the grace of God. Isaiah, many centuries before, had told the people of his day to remember “the hole of the pit” from whence they had been taken (Isa.51:1).

The Corinthians tended to pride themselves in their abilities and gifts, but in reality their spiritual state was not good. Paul therefore gently chided them and advised them to remember their calling. What was their state when God had called them to Himself? How would these believers have been viewed by their unconverted neighbours? Their opinions had perhaps become somewhat inflated. In reality not many of them were “wise” according to the standards of men; not many of them were naturally powerful people; not many of them were from the upper classes in society.



Two thousand years later we need to consider our calling too. As we look at the members of our fellowships and consider our own background, how many of us would be counted among the high-flyers in society today?

Clearly the answer is “not many” - though there are exceptions. Rich and influential Christians have often been glad of the single letter “*m*”- for it does ***not*** say that there are “***not any***”! God, in His grace, includes all. Some believers may enjoy high social positions, but most feel that their status in society is insignificant.

not many

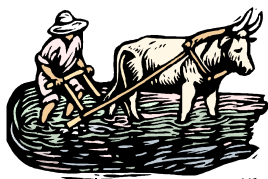
When considering his own salvation, the Christian is often forced to say, “Why me, Lord? I don’t deserve this!” There is no reason outside of the mercy, grace, and love of God. That being the case, we have nothing to boast about. We did nothing at all to deserve our salvation. Human merit does not count for anything with God - and most of us had none of it in any case. Our present position gives us no grounds for boasting either, and any gifts we have been given by God are totally undeserved. Together, as Paul reminds us, we are “brethren” and must seek by God’s grace to live in unity and harmony with the other members of His family.

WHAT GOD HAS CHOSEN

But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in His presence” (v.27-29)

Paul has been reminding his readers in Corinth of their calling. Each of them had been called by God, but their calling did not depend upon any individual merits they possessed as some had supposed. Actually, not many of them had originated from the higher echelons of society. Instead of priding themselves in their own abilities or achievements, they needed to understand that their calling depended upon the merits of *Another*. They had been called simply because Christ, in the purposes of God, had been crucified to obtain their salvation. Behind their calling, however, lay a *choice* - and the choice was not their own: it was God who had actually chosen them for Himself. The word used by Paul does not imply that by this choice others had been rejected. Rather, it stresses the fact that God had chosen them in order that they might be His people.

Three times Paul uses the phrase, “God hath chosen”. How different God’s methods are from our own! If the choice had been left with us, we would have selected those who were wise, strong and significant in society. God has done the opposite. First of all He has deliberately chosen “the foolish things of the world” (literally, *foolishness*) to confound “wise” people. Secondly He has chosen “the weak things of the world” (or *weakness*) to confound the strong and mighty. Then He has chosen that which is “base” and “despised” - or that which is of no account and is



therefore treated with contempt. He has also chosen that which might as well not exist to bring to nothing (or, ***to render useless***) that which everyone notices.

Pause for a moment and consider some of the examples found in Scripture. Trumpets - not swords - were used by the Israelites at Jericho in Joshua's day. Gideon's army was drastically reduced to just 300 men before God gave His people victory over the Midianites. Five loaves and two small fishes seemed an insult - too insignificant to consider when a multitude needed to be fed. But God's ways are not ours.



What is Paul describing here? It is people - like us! The Corinthians had felt proud of themselves, but by the world's reckoning they were not wise, mighty, or noble. We, too, must stand with them and recognize that if we are believers God has chosen us in spite of all our foolishness, weakness, and lack of ability.

The reason for the divine choice is clearly stated: it is "that no flesh should glory in His presence" (v.29). We have nothing to be proud about when we consider our past or when we look at our lives as Christians now. In its entirety, "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). He chose us in eternity and called us to Himself in His own time. Why He should have done this is beyond our comprehension, but it will be the theme of our eternal praise. With Isaac Watts we must say, "Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the cross of Christ my God."



CHRIST - EVERYTHING

But of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: that, according as it is written, "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord." (v.30-31)

At a conference some years ago, a speaker told us of a note he had written above a chapter in his Bible. It was expressed in the form of an equation:

Christ + Anything = Nothing. Christ + Nothing = Everything.

The statement appealed to me, and I wrote it down in my Bible over Colossians 2.

Those words are appropriate too when considering 1 Corinthians 1 where Paul dismisses human wisdom and strength and insists on preaching Christ crucified (v.23). God's wisdom has been displayed at the cross. To Paul's mind, the work of Christ was so important that nothing must detract from it or deprive the cross of its power to save (v.17). Further, God in His wisdom has chosen people men would have ignored that the glory might be His alone. It is clear that the work of

salvation is His entirely, and we have nothing to boast about in His presence (v.27-29).

As the chapter closes, Paul explains that it was God's purpose (not ours) to bring us into Christ Jesus. All our blessings are to be found in Him; therefore Christ (with all that He has provided) is everything. Human wisdom, philosophy, strength, and skill are all ruled out. Christ has now become our source of *wisdom*, for all our confidence now rests upon what He has done. From that blessing, three others emerge.

First, Christ has become our *righteousness*. We who are trusting in the work of Christ are reckoned righteous before a holy God. We can stand in the court of divine justice knowing that the record that stood against us has been cleared. Secondly, Christ has become our *sanctification*. We have been separated to God through the sacrifice of His dear Son and are now able to enter His priestly courts and engage in divine service, worshipping Him. Finally He is also our *redemption*, having paid the ransom price to set us free. As this is mentioned last it probably looks ahead to "*the redemption of our body*" - that ultimate deliverance from sin which is to be experienced at the coming again of our Lord Jesus (Rom.8:23).



It is impossible to fully grasp what Christ has done for us. Clearly, however, the work of salvation in its entirety is His, and therefore the only grounds for glorying are "*in the Lord*" (v.31). Paul is quoting here from Jeremiah 9:24. Through the prophet, the Lord tells us that instead of glorying in any human achievements or supposed "strengths" we should glory in the fact that we have come to know Him.

Nothing can compare with that! By His sovereign will He chose us in eternity long ago and called us to Himself in time, bringing us into all the blessings that Paul enumerates here. Christ is now our *wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption*. God's people may well rejoice in the Lord for the abundant riches of His grace - for with our "nothing" Christ is "everything"!

"we preach Christ crucified"

1 Corinthians 1:23

CHAPTER 2

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God... And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. (v.1, 3)

The visit may have been over, but the memories remained. Paul had not forgotten his time in Corinth - and neither had the Corinthians. What kind of impression had it created in their minds? There could be no doubt that a great preacher had come to the city. Some of the new Christians in Corinth claimed an affinity with Paul (1 Cor.1:12). He was *their* man! Perhaps his style or his methods appealed to them. Others were not so impressed; they preferred the preaching of Apollos or Peter. What did Paul think as he recalled the time he had spent in Corinth?

In the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 2 Paul discloses his heart to his readers and shows them what he was really like. The insight he gives is invaluable. "When I came to you," he tells them, "I came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom." Paul did not see himself in the guise of an orator or a philosopher. He had no superiority over others in his communication skills or in his ability to reason. He had simply come *declaring the testimony of God* - bringing to them God's true witness of Himself.



Neither was Paul oozing with confidence. "I was with you in weakness, and in fear," he tells them. There was a distinct lack of strength in his body; he was a man marked by infirmity! He knew what it meant to have real *fear* in his heart. However, before anyone assumes that Paul cleverly masked his fear, he admits that there was also *much trembling!* Fear may be disguised, but trembling can hardly be hidden! Doubtless he is recalling the hostility encountered in the synagogue in Corinth where the Jews "opposed and blasphemed" (Acts 18:6). The inner fears had caused Paul's limbs to shake before his opponents!

There is great encouragement for us here in these verses. Sometimes we have the mistaken idea that God's servants must be fearless, confident and super-human. Nothing could be further from the truth. God actually chooses vessels that are weak in order to confound the mighty of this world (1 Cor.1:27). In his later epistle Paul reveals that God's treasure has been placed in earthen vessels, *weak vessels* "that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor.4:7). Since the power is His, if anything of lasting value gets done, the glory must be His too. This had been Paul's great concern; if "no flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Cor.1:29), it meant that glorying in Paul was also entirely wrong.

Do you feel your limitations? Have you experienced *fear* and *much trembling* in taking up some work for the Lord? Take heart - you're in good company! God can graciously use us, not only *in spite of* our weakness but actually *because of* our weakness! Carry on, like Paul, declaring the testimony of God, and leave the results with Him.

ONE MESSAGE

For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. (v.2)

In the above verse Paul is recalling the time that he had spent in Corinth. He had been very conscious of his own weakness and was fearful as he stood before his readers. As the Lord's servant he came "declaring the testimony of God" (v.1) to them - making known the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. In case their memories were hazy, Paul reminds them of the resolve that lay behind his preaching. He had made up his mind to keep to one theme and one only - "Jesus Christ, and Him crucified".



Evangelists love this verse! It gives them authority and inspires them in their God-appointed task. What theme can be more precious than this? The Son of God, the promised Messiah, yielded Himself to death upon a shameful cross. No love can compare with that! Like all true evangelists, Paul delighted to speak of the cross. His theme, literally, was *Jesus Christ having been crucified*.

That once-for-ever event stands central in history. A man who understands its significance wants no "excellency of speech or of wisdom" (v.1). With simplicity, sincerity and passion his one burning concern is to make known what God has done. His desire is to magnify Christ and His work and to seek to draw lost souls to Him.

Does this verse mean that other things are unimportant? Not at all. This very epistle to the Corinthians contains some of the most controversial topics to be found in the New Testament - dealt with by Paul himself! If they were

YES to progress unimportant they would not be found on the pages of Holy Scripture. We need "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) which Paul preached during his ministry in Ephesus. When souls are saved they need to be built up in their most holy faith through the teaching of the Word of God. We must not mishandle this text and use it in a way that was never intended. It is not telling us always to remain at a simple level. Other passages of Scripture make it abundantly clear that we must

progress from milk to the solid food of God's Word.

Having made this point, let us not miss what Paul is saying. In evangelism we must concentrate on basics. Our message must not start with man and his felt needs. It is to be centred in Jesus Christ and His death upon the cross. We must focus upon His Person and His work. Men and women must be shown their need of Him. We must not be sidetracked and led along blind alleys. The cross is God's answer to man's desperate need. Once we grasp the wonder of it, other things will fall into place - even controversies. Our fellowship with one another as believers does not depend upon our understanding of some of the finer points of doctrine where the views of Christians may differ. It depends entirely upon Christ and upon His work at the cross. We must remember that.

basics

DRIVING HOME THE MESSAGE

And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. (v.4)

It almost seems as if Paul is repeating himself in these verses. The matter before him is so important that he needs to drive home the point - and repetition can give emphasis to the argument. Paul is recalling his visit to Corinth, recorded in Acts 18. He has already told his readers (v.1) that he did not come to them as an orator or as a philosopher. He brought no "excellency of speech or of wisdom".

Some at Corinth might disagree. Paul may not have come as a great orator or philosopher, they reasoned, but when he began his preaching it was a different matter. He was not entirely honest in his approach, they said; he wanted people to join his cause. Recalling his ministry among them Paul emphatically declares: "My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom" (v.4). The message he preached had nothing to do with *human* wisdom. The very words he used were not deliberately chosen in order to persuade men. Rather, in his preaching he relied upon the Holy Spirit and the power that He supplies. Indeed, in preaching to them Paul had demonstrated that spiritual power. It was this that gave authority to his ministry.



The method must still be the same. Christian apologetics may have their place. We appreciate well-reasoned arguments and admire those who have the ability to convince us of the truth by lucid, logical explanations. But nobody can ever be saved by argument. Human wisdom may win the battle intellectually, but conversion is more than that. It is "the testimony of God" (v.1) that we preach.

The resources of God must therefore be used in making it known. Of course we must be winsome, and there is no need to be deliberately unattractive. But what is needed above all else in preaching the gospel is the power of the Holy Spirit. We must rely upon Him. He alone can convict of sin and bring new life to the soul. Therefore *He* must speak to the listeners. The words must come from Him. The servant of God must be Spirit-filled and must simply be His mouthpiece.

Repetition is not unscriptural, and perhaps there is no need to apologize for repeating the point. We ought not to favour some course or the latest method in presenting the gospel. God, in His grace, may use such, but if we are persuaded by the merits of an approach of man's devising, we are starting off on the wrong foot. Intellectual persuasion is not enough. A person may be convinced in the mind by a reasoned presentation of the gospel - *and that may be as far as it goes*. How tragic if a soul believes in the mind but remains unregenerate in the heart because the work lacked the divine touch! Only the Holy Spirit can bring life and salvation. It is vital therefore for God's servants to be filled with *His* power and to depend upon *Him alone* in this life-giving work.

STANDING IN GOD'S POWER

That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. (v.5)

It is always important, especially in the Lord's service, to have good reasons for what we do. Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, justified the method he adopted in proclaiming the gospel. A clear motive lay behind the reason for his particular approach.

At Corinth, during his second missionary journey, Paul had employed no underhanded methods. He had not resorted to skilful oratory or clever philosophy in his presentation of the gospel. His preaching was undertaken in human weakness and with fear. It lacked that which, from a human standpoint, might have impressed his listeners. As he stuck to his theme of "Christ crucified", one thing in particular characterized him. His preaching was carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit. What was the reason for this approach?

Paul's great concern was for his listeners' spiritual well-being after he had left them. Would their faith stand the strains and stresses of life in a godless society? If it was bolstered by human wisdom and man's philosophy, it would, ultimately, cave in. A better kind of human "wisdom" might soon come upon the scene and

disprove the earlier “wisdom” that they had embraced! If that happened, their new found faith would not “stand”. One thing only could sustain it - and that was the power of God.

It does not take long to discover that in Paul’s ministry *the power of God* played an important part. His preaching was undertaken in that same power (v.4). In earlier verses in this epistle he explains that it is the despised way of salvation through a crucified Saviour that brings the power of God to a believer. In our service all is centred in Christ who is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor.1:18, 24).

The message of the gospel has not changed, and the method of *preaching* is still the means that God has ordained for His servants to use. We need to grasp what Paul is saying here and ensure that we present the message in such a way that souls are left with a faith that stands “in the power of God”.

Some methods today fall flat at this point. Listeners can be persuaded intellectually and be grounded simply in “wisdom”.

Others have some kind of “spirit experience” that is mistaken for the real thing and are lulled into a false sense of security, believing that all is well with them. Our work is spiritual and therefore must be done in God’s way. Christ alone can *save* a lost and guilty sinner, and He alone can *keep* those who come to Him - by the power of His indwelling Spirit.



Surely we want people to be able to “stand” after accepting the message of the gospel! Paul’s reasoning is clear. If, ultimately, they are to stand in the power of God, we must, in the first place, present the message to them with that same power. The folly of adopting worldly methods in presenting the gospel will be clear when this important principle is understood.

THE PREACHING OF THE CROSS

Having examined these verses in the early part of 1 Corinthians, it is time to summarize the teaching and draw some relevant applications for our day.

The message of the gospel is one of life and death, and therefore it cannot be trifled with. If an individual hears and believes the message, they pass at once “from death unto life” (Jn.5:24). Knowing this fact, Satan will seek to do all that he can to *distort* the message so that an unsaved soul remains firmly in his grip - even though they may have made some kind of response to a message that *resembles* the gospel. We must never forget that Satan is the master of deception and is capable of presenting his strategies under the guise of “an angel of light” (2 Cor.11:14). Thus it is vital that God’s servants remain vigilant.

DESPERATION

In a culture that is increasingly anti-Christian, many churches today have reached the conclusion that in order to be effective, their methods must change. People have no interest in the gospel and see no relevance in the Christian faith, therefore we must somehow “sell ourselves” to them. We must show that we are “ordinary”



people with very similar interests and that “church” is a place where they are welcome. In order to accommodate them and ensure that they are not bored, the programme must be changed and must be less traditional. The world and media that they are familiar with can be used so that they will feel comfortable sitting with us. To achieve such things, a relaxed atmosphere becomes necessary. A good business maxim is to give the customers what they want - and this principle has been adopted by many modern churches. Clearly this approach is not Bible-based.

PRINCIPLES FROM PAUL

A number of significant principles have emerged from Paul’s epistle:-

- ✚ **The message of the gospel must be preached.**
- ✚ **That message concerns the work completed at the cross by the Lord Jesus Christ.**
- ✚ **Human wisdom has no place in God’s salvation.** Salvation is of the Lord: He devised the plan without consulting mankind and the glory is therefore His alone when a soul is saved.
- ✚ **We must comply with God’s methods in proclaiming the message.**
- ✚ **God’s servants must depend upon the power of the Holy Spirit.**
- ✚ **If the message is not delivered correctly, people will not be saved.**
- ✚ **If man’s wisdom is relied upon, a spurious “faith” may result which does not equate with true salvation.**

WARNING SIGNS

Looking at the methods that are often employed today, we see at once that they seriously conflict with the principles that Paul has laid down. Certain observations, which give great cause for concern, can be made.

(1) To give people what they want is disastrous. Paul never resorted to this pragmatic approach. He refrained from dosing his Jewish listeners with “signs” and his Gentile listeners with “wisdom” because he **real needs** knew that this would rob the cross of its power. What we **want** is not necessarily what we **need**. It is **wrong** to pander to people’s preferences. Models from the business world are incongruous in spiritual and eternal matters. The **real** need, defined by God, is salvation because people are lost, and the message of the cross must therefore be preached.

(2) While it is **right** to welcome all who are interested in hearing the gospel, it is **wrong** to expect unbelievers to feel “comfortable” as they sit with us. **The gospel message is anything but comfortable!** It tells us that we are guilty, lost and hell-deserving. It is no laughing matter either - and anything that helps to relax people is therefore dangerous. Being saved or lost is extremely **atmosphere** serious, so a “fun” atmosphere is utterly inappropriate. If we set out seeking a favourable reaction - with unbelievers “enjoying” their time with us - nothing of eternal value will be achieved.

(3) We cannot “improve” upon the message of the gospel. The power is in the Saviour and in His work at the cross - and never in a clever presentation. **Whatever robs the cross of its real power power must be avoided.** The message must be preached in the power of the Spirit, for He alone can bring about a work that lasts.

(4) “Success” is a human yardstick. Lasting results depend upon God - not upon us. Faith must stand “in the power of God” (2:5). Only when **God’s work** is done in **God’s way** can results be expected. A scheme of man’s devising may depend upon technique rather than upon the Holy Spirit. **a lasting work** As we have said, it may result in an intellectual or an emotional response which may be mistaken for genuine saving faith. **Life and salvation can only be brought about by the Holy Spirit.** It is vital therefore that God’s servants should to be filled with **His** power and depend upon **Him alone** in proclaiming the gospel.

The conclusion reached earlier is worth stating again. Surely we want people to be able to “stand” after accepting the message of the gospel! If, ultimately, they are to stand in the power of God, we must, in the first place, present the message to them with that same power. The folly of adopting worldly methods in presenting the gospel will be clear when this important principle is understood. The need of the hour is for the unadorned and unadulterated message of the cross to be proclaimed, for God’s glory, in the power of the Spirit of God.

**"my preaching was ...
in demonstration of the Spirit and of power"**

1 Corinthians 2:4