

What is Real Wisdom? **1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s droves of young people left their homes to live in communes. They claimed to be fed up with many things in conventional and conservative society and they started to explore alternative lifestyles. Many also experimented with hallucinatory drugs. Various names were attached to them – hippies, the flower people, and so on. In Australia, many gathered on the far north coast of New South Wales at a place called Nimbin. In America, many gathered in the coastal communities of southern California.

Of the ones in southern California, several stories are told of some of them becoming Christians. As new converts, they turned up to church one Sunday evening – just as they were, in torn jeans and bare feet. Generally, they weren't accepted by the churches they tried. How could someone coming to church in bare feet be a real Christian? And so they stopped coming – until someone started a church where they were welcome.

The Message of the Gospel

In dealing with this problem of the "parties" within the Corinthian church, Paul (as usual) comes back to the gospel itself. What implications does the gospel have for the issues causing their quarrels? Verse 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. For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;

the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where

is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 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. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Paul refers to the *foolishness* of the *message of the cross* – the gospel. We need to allow the truth of that statement to sink in. We live after twenty centuries of the gospel being preached. We're used to this so-called foolishness of the gospel. Indeed, I suspect we're so used to it, we face the danger of losing the sense of it being foolish.

Think back to the first century. Many so-called gods competed for people's attention. Their followers made all sorts of claims about what their gods could do for you. In the religious sphere, there were many competing claims being made. Into that market place, the Christians come with their God. What's their message about their God?

- Our Messiah – the One who will save the world and establish God's kingdom – was crucified on a hill outside Jerusalem.
- Our God was taken by the Jewish leaders and sentenced to death by the Romans. He was hung on a cross outside Jerusalem until He died.

Can you feel something of the sheer madness of such a message? Why should people turn to a god who can't

manage to stop himself being arrested and killed by mere mortals? Why should people accept a message with the execution of a god at its very centre? Such a gospel is too humiliating for a "real god".

These days, Christians wear gold and silver crosses on chains round their neck. Others have crosses as lapel pins or tie-pins. We put crosses on our churches – crosses that gleam in the sun. The cross is now a badge of honour. We've lost something of the horror of the cross. Imagine asking your friend about the interesting piece of silver on a chain round her neck. "Oh," she says, "that's an electric chair." What sort of reaction will you have?" It's all a bit strange and different and weird. It's bad taste. In the first-century:

- Crosses weren't badges of honour.
- Crosses weren't something you joked about.
- Crosses weren't made of polished metal.

They were instruments of cruel execution – it's what they did to the worst criminals. In the first-century world, the message of the gospel was both scandalous and foolish.

Furthermore, this wasn't a message expected by people of that time – either Jews or Greeks. *Jews*, says Paul, want *miraculous signs*. God acted powerfully in their past.

- When they were slaves in Egypt, God sent miraculous plagues on the Egyptians, until the Pharaoh eventually said they could leave.
- Then, God opened the Red Sea so they could walk through the middle of it, and closed it on top of the Egyptian army when they tried to follow.
- God miraculously fed them in the Sinai Peninsula.

The Jews expected it to be the same when the Messiah came. The Messiah would restore their former glory by

acting powerfully on their behalf – even more powerfully than Moses. The Messiah would establish a great kingdom with His capital in Jerusalem. The Messiah was a figure of power. When Jesus came and claimed to be the Messiah, they demanded He perform some miraculous signs. That would validate His Messianic claims. They'd been under the power of foreign armies for a long time and they wanted a powerful deliverer.

On the other hand, says Paul, *Greeks look for wisdom*. The Greeks exercised power under Alexander the Great, but their great contribution to the ancient world was their culture and philosophy. Even after they lost their world empire to the Romans, still they exercised huge influence through their cultural centres. They emphasised wisdom and philosophy. They thought through the various issues of life. They came to reasoned decisions about the world, the gods, human existence, and the issues of life. They enjoyed debate. Human reason was the important thing. Coming to wise and rational conclusions was their aim.

Neither approach gets you to the cross. The Jews reject the cross because of its obvious weakness – what power has a crucified Messiah? The Greeks reject the cross for its stupidity – what wisdom has a God who dies? To both Jew and Greek, the gospel message is foolish.

The problem is that both approaches are idolatrous. Both approaches begin from the human perspective and create their own god.

- For the Jew, God must function as the all-powerful God on their terms and for their benefit.
- For the Greek, God must function as the all-wise God on their terms.

Both approaches demand God to fit into human perceptions of how God should be and act. Both determine to make God fit man's ideas and desires. Both start with what we humans think. Gordon Fee says:

For both the ultimate idolatry is that of insisting that God conform to our prior views as to how "the God who makes sense" ought to do things.¹ God can't be boxed in like that. He remains who He is no matter how we decide He should be.

The cross divides humanity into two groups. Previously, there were Jews and Gentiles; now, there are *those who are perishing* and *those who are being saved*.

- For those perishing, the message of the cross is still absolute foolishness. It cuts across all human categories of what's important. Humans look for power and prestige. In the cross they see weakness and humiliation. Humans look for wisdom. In the cross they see foolishness. By clinging to human categories of what's important – by hanging on to their idolatry – they miss God's message.
- For those being saved, however, the message of the cross is the power of God. It's this message that releases humans from their slavery to sin. It is this message that provides eternal life.

The two groups are mutually exclusive. You can't belong to both groups at once; and you must belong to either one or the other.

Jews and Gentiles still exist, of course. However, that's no longer the important division. Now, the important division centres upon people's attitude to and relationship with Jesus. Apart from Jesus, both Jew and Greek belong

¹ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1988) 74.

in the category of those who are perishing.

Those who Responded at Corinth

In verse 26, to make the same point again but from a different angle, Paul reminds them of their experience of hearing the gospel and responding to it.

Brothers, 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. 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. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him. It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us the wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

Have a look at yourselves, says Paul. Check yourselves out by those worldly standards you're so keen on.

- How many of you were in the Who's Who of famous philosophers and wise oracles?
- How many of you were in the Who's Who of business executives, government officials and movie directors?
- How many of you were in the Who's Who of important aristocratic bloodlines?

Yes, a couple had claims to fame in the world's system – but most of you didn't? Most of you were basic nobodies. You were the riff-raff of society; the boring, everyday people; the unimportant ones who merely make up the numbers. When God chose you, he completely ignored

those values considered important by the world. He chose you as a living contradiction to those values.

One basic problem with worldly standards is they divide people into different groups on the basis of their abilities or status or wealth or influence or whatever. Some have made it; some have not. For example, if the standard's wisdom, there will be those who determine whether you reach the minimum standard to qualify. They do that in all sorts of ways:

- Evaluate people in debates.
- Check out the logic of their conversation.
- See whether they can argue an issue rationally.
- Check out if they know the accepted philosophers.
- Find out whether they can operate on the Socratic method.
- Check out their UAI.

You set the standard, and see whether people meet that standard – either they do or they don't.

Now, it's quite true the gospel also divides people into two groups – those perishing and those being saved. The big difference is this: people aren't excluded on the basis of those who've made it and those who haven't. It's quite open for all to join the being saved group. God makes the offer to all. There are no entrance requirements:

- You don't have to reach a certain level of wisdom.
- You don't have to attain a certain sum of money.
- You don't have to be born into aristocracy.
- You don't have to be successful in business.

You don't have to achieve anything or to contribute anything or be qualified in any other way.

And so Paul asks them: if you understand the gospel – it's

free nature that undermines all these worldly standards – why do you want to start boasting about the supposed worldly wisdom of some of your leaders? In bringing you into His kingdom, God's done away with all those worldly standards that plagued your non-Christians lives. So, now you've received this gift quite apart from those worldly standards, why do you want to reintroduce them again? What's the point?

- God's wisdom isn't found in all those things that make up worldly standards – human wisdom, influence, noble birth, power. You didn't get into God's kingdom that way. You couldn't get into God's kingdom that way.
- God's wisdom is found in Jesus and His death on the cross. In the cross we're given righteousness, holiness and redemption. These things don't come from human effort – they're God's gifts.

You can't progress beyond the cross – for the cross itself is the demonstration of God's power and God's wisdom. It doesn't get any better than that. It can't get any better than that.

Therefore, there's no room for boasting – either for the Corinthians then or for us today. The way God operates – primarily choosing the insignificant and rejected people of the world rather than the wise and powerful – means there's no way we can exalt ourselves or think ourselves better than others. The cross – God's foolishness which is not understood by the wise and powerful of this world – nullifies the worldly values boasted about by others. In the world, people may boast about their achievements. In God's kingdom, that isn't an option. There's simply no room for boasting about ourselves or our leaders.

Paul who Preached at Corinth

Paul then reminds them how he preached the gospel in Corinth – and uses that to reinforce his point. 2:1

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

The way Paul preached was to emphasise the message – Jesus and the cross.

- Paul didn't use the fancy speaking methods of the current Greek orators. He didn't try to confuse people with big sounding words or wise sounding ideas. He didn't present his message as something to be attained only by the intellectual elite.
- Nor did Paul come as a figure of personal power. He didn't try to compel people with the force of his personality. He didn't try to influence them with his own importance as a person.

Rather, Paul presented the gospel as simply and plainly as he could. His confidence was in that message alone. It is the gospel. It is the power of God for saving people. He tried not to get in the way of the message.

What's it mean then in verse 4 that Paul preached the gospel *with a demonstration of the Spirit's power*? Some claim this is a reference to miracles –when Paul preached the gospel among them, it was accompanied by several

apostolic miracles to confirm the truth of the message. I think two things in the context make this unlikely.

- First, in verse 3 he says he came *in weakness and fear, and with much trembling*. That doesn't sound much like a miracle worker. It's a sharp contrast to the worldly values he's talking about.
- Secondly, back in 1:22 he refers negatively to the Jews' demand for miraculous signs. That's the idolatry of a worldly approach to God. That's the way God's foolishness is nullified and destroyed. It'd be very strange if Paul then turned round and affirmed that as the way he preached the gospel in Corinth. It'd seem to undermine the whole thrust of his argument in this passage.

I think what Paul means here is that the preaching of the gospel was confirmed amongst the Corinthians by the fact they became Christians.

- Why did the Corinthians accept a message that was foolishness? Because the Spirit's power worked in them, convincing them Jesus is God's wisdom.
- Why did the Corinthians turn from their wicked, pagan lifestyle and embrace God's righteousness? Because the Spirit's power worked in them, showing the cross as the way to holiness and redemption.

The gospel has the power to save people – to bring them out of darkness into light; to move them from slavery to evil to become servants of God; to transform their lives. That's what happened at Corinth when the gospel was first preached there and the church was formed.

The Answer to their Quarrels

Why's Paul spend so much time speaking of the foolishness of the gospel? How's this provide an answer to their

quarrels? What's it got to do with the Corinthians saying: I follow Paul and I follow Apollos and I follow Cephas?

Have a look at the second half of 1:17

not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Then look at 2:5

so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Can you see how Paul comes to the same conclusion at the end of both paragraphs?

The different "parties" at Corinth undermine the power of the gospel. Their "parties" focus on different elements of human wisdom. They're worldly values – and that's how they evaluate leaders. It's unchristian. The very act of comparison's worldly. They're in danger of abandoning God's foolishness – the gospel. They hadn't done that yet. They still had the message right – but they have dangerous attitudes to wisdom.

It's a subtle danger. On the surface, it looks so innocent and even healthy. What's wrong with a bit of healthy competition between leaders of the church? But look where such thinking quickly leads. Let's use Paul and Apollos as the example:

- Apollos is a better speaker/leader than Paul.
- I will pay more attention to Apollos than Paul.
- I will be a follower of Apollos rather than Paul.
- We will form a group around Apollos.
- Our group is better than the group following Paul.
- We are superior Christians to Paul's group.
- If you want to become a better Christian, you need to leave Paul's group and join our group.

And so different groups form within the church, each thinking themselves better than the others. They boast of their groups. They compare their groups. They leave behind the essential equality created by the gospel. The foolishness of the cross is exchanged for the world's wisdom. The power of the cross is undermined. The cross can't be improved by adding human wisdom

Conclusion

Have we learnt this lesson? You may be wondering why I told that story about the converted hippies not being welcome at church. It's another form this issue can take. Instead of boasting about different leaders, they *boasted* about different dress-codes. They had an unwritten dress-code for Christians attending their church and those who didn't measure up were made to feel they didn't really belong to the fellowship of sinners forgiven by God. It's imported from their culture rather than the gospel.

These days, some church leaders actually encourage the formation of their own bands of disciples – not disciples of Jesus, but disciples of themselves. Such leaders often encourage dependency so people rely on the decisions the leader makes for them. Sometimes it happens with whole churches; sometimes these groups form cults. It undermines the gospel. It sets up little groups that think they are special – they're spiritually superior to others not in their group. It encourages people to move beyond the cross – not in word, but in attitude. It robs the cross of its power.

It's always a danger for pastors, for it appeals to the lust for power that's part of our sinful nature. Something in us enjoys having a measure of control over others – even

desires it. It's worldly – it isn't the gospel. Never are you to be my disciples. Yes, you may be thankful for whatever spiritual gifts you may think God gave me – and hopefully you'll benefit from those – but always you are to be Jesus' disciple, as I also am to be.

Many examples can be piled up at this point.

- Why do we fuss when someone famous becomes a Christian – a sports star, a movie star, a politician?
- Why do those with some special spiritual experience sometimes give the impression they're now spiritually superior?
- Why did some Christians in the past (and perhaps still) put missionaries on some pedestal?

The cross undermines the world's values of wisdom and power. For those being saved, the cross is the power of God. We must continue to focus on the cross and guard against trying to improve it after the fashion of worldly values.