

“If You Have to be a Fool, Be the Wisest Fool”

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1 Corinthians 1:17–30

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1 Corinthians 1:17–25

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. 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. ¹⁹ For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”

²⁰ Where *is* the wise? Where *is* the scribe? Where *is* the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. ²² For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who 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...²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Introduction

“Theology!?! There’s no money in *theology*.” I remember to this day. Those are the words a relative said to me when I told him I was going to seminary. “Theology!?! There’s no money in *theology*.” I was stunned. I didn’t know what to say. I muttered something like, “That doesn’t matter to me,” looking down at my shoelaces. Of course, I thought of a nice snappy response *the next day*! Isn’t that always how it is? You think of that great response only when the conversation is over. I should have said, “No, but there are great *riches*!” Oh well, the moment was lost and off I went to my theology.

But so it is in this world: a rhetorical sneer is regularly cast at the idea of *theology*—the contemplation of the things of God. Theology is hardly the queen of the sciences anymore. More like the most irrelevant worker bee in the hive. Why, therefore, would you devote yourself to *studying* it? That is the basic spirit of the age when it comes to the relevance of *theology*.

Paul, on the other hand, is under the inspiration of another spirit, the Holy Spirit. And in 1 Corinthians 1 we get a lot of help to navigate such (post)modern currents.

In 1 Corinthians 1:22 you can hear the *first century* sneer toward the gospel. I suppose times haven't changed much. Paul writes, "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom." But the *cross* that Paul preaches simply disappoints. It has been said, "Jews wanted a victor not a victim; Greeks wanted a sage not a sacrifice." Thus, the gospel of the cross of Christ appears to them both *foolish and weak*.

In light of this, I have 2 points and a charge for us for this academic year.

I. God *intentionally* saves through the cross specifically because it looks *foolish*

The first point is this. God has *intentionally* designed the gospel so that it looks *foolish* with *the cross* at the center. Look at verses 17–18.

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. ¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

God does *not want* the cross to "be emptied of its power." How might that happen? If it is dressed up in the sort of "words of eloquent wisdom" that the world prizes. That is if it looks like just a better brand than the world already thinks it wants. So if such "words of eloquent wisdom" will temper the gospel of its true saving power, God *does not want* any mixed in. To put it another way, *there is no* "eloquent wisdom" that can dress up

the cross to impress any who looks only through such worldly eyes. It's just not an option. Athens can only *dilute* Jerusalem.

Verse 19 pushes this further: God has intentionally established the cross as *his wise way of saving* in order to specifically look foolish in the eyes of unbelievers. Verse 19 says,

¹⁹ For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

This is a quote from Isaiah 29 concerning *a specific form of judgment* to make the seeing, blind, and to make the wise, foolish. Why would God do that? In order to silence those who *boast in themselves*. Now Paul says that the judgment of Isaiah 29 also underwrites the gospel. Hence verse 21:

²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

Do you see that? “It pleased God” to save in this specific way: with *a cross* that will never impress in the eyes of the world. God has *intentionally* designed the gospel so that it looks *foolish* with the cross at the center. That is the first point.

II. God *intentionally* saves through the cross specifically because it looks *weak*

Point number 2 is this: God has *intentionally* designed the gospel so that it looks *weak* with *the cross* at the center. Verses 24–25 form the to this section:

²⁴ ...but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

And notice that Paul nowhere tries to give an explanation, or what we should say to redress worldly misunderstandings, or how to make the gospel look powerful or look sophisticated in anyone's eyes. May that never be! The gospel doesn't need some kind of veneer to make it somehow palatable. *That* is what would drain the cross of its wisdom and neuter the cross of its power!

You know it's *good* I didn't have a retort that day when my family member mocked "theology." Because if I did, I would have looked *clever*, playing the same rhetorical game as him. I might have impressed him with my witty one-upmanship. I would have leveled the gospel to the same plane of judgment in the world's terms.

Rather, Paul says this is just the way it's going to be when we lock horns with the world. And God would have it no other way. So that when *conversion* does happen (and it will because the gospel is powerful to open eyes) it will be clear that it is done by God and not by man's "eloquence."

These are the two points we gather from Paul tonight: God has *intentionally* designed the gospel so that it looks both *foolish and weak* with the cross at the center.

III. The Charge

How do we put such teaching into practice at our seminary? It is simply this: if you must be viewed as foolish in the eyes of the world, be wise in the ways of God *specifically by emphasis on the cross*.

It is specifically *the cross* that is the folly, not Christianity—or 'religion'—in general. One atheist critic has even said that Christianity might have something useful for the world—its ethics, its hopefulness, its charity, etc.—but you Christians just keep talking about sin, sin, sin. Always with the cross, cross, cross. Give it a rest already, is his point. You see, *the cross* goes out of its way to make a stumbling block. Therefore, be bold and *be foolish and weak* before the eyes of the world by orienting your life

around *the cross*. *That* is the defining mark of all “theology” that sets it apart as the particular wisdom and power of *God*.

This academic year, let us be a community that is not tempted by the siren song of “eloquent wisdom” so as to dilute the wisdom of the gospel or obfuscate the beautiful simplistic clarity of the gospel. May we never succumb to the pressure to dress the gospel up in postmodernese, as though our own brand of sophisticated wisdom (just as worldly when *we* invent it) will somehow impress in the eyes of “the debater of this age.” Let us revel in, and always return to, that true unadorned wisdom of God: Christ crucified and Christ raised that silences the boastful and exalts the lowly.

If we do, then we will also bask all the more in the true power that the gospel avails. And what is that? Verse 21 tells us the power “to save those who believe.”

And finally, we must remain humble. Verse 26 compels us to “consider your call, brethren...” That is, Paul’s application is to *think*. To think about the gospel and to think about ourselves. We are “not wise by worldly standards” or “powerful.” But verse 29 concludes,

²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

That is the big takeaway. The cross glorifies God’s wisdom and power *and humbles us*. By our own wisdom we did not figure our way to God. By our own power we did not ascend our way to God. But God had chosen the foolish and the weak as his means *to come to us*.

You will learn a lot this year. I too am expecting to learn a lot this year! But a little bit of knowledge can puff up. So let us always remember God has *intentionally* made us foolish and weak in the eyes of the world and tells us to “consider” that, *think about that*. So if we boast we boast only in him and his grace—his wisdom and power towards us who believe.

³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Conclusion

I found myself in a similar conversation about halfway through my PhD program. By this time, I was far more confident in my theological pursuits, and a secular historian was asking me about my dissertation research. I have to admit I felt a little proud that I could discourse on his academic level. But after hearing me out, he just replied, “Religion, huh? Don’t we have all that figured out already?” Once again I was nonplussed, befuddled, and awkwardly exited the conversation.

I should have said (again, thought of this the next day), “Well, you may think you have everything figured out, but the rest of us are still asking questions.” Oh! That would have put him in his place! But once again, it’s good that I didn’t think of that. My witty retort would have been the take-away. But may the presentation of the gospel to the world, and the way it settles in our own hearts, never ride on human cleverness, wisdom, eloquence, or power—but may it always be so here at ITS that (v. 25) “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” And may we be able to sing with all sincerity,

“Riches I heed not, nor man’s empty praise,
Thou mine inheritance, now and always.”