

Editorial: The Foolishness of the Cross

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Paul proclaims that the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Cor 1:18). When unbelievers hear the message of the gospel, it does not strike them as intellectually compelling. The word of the cross, to their way of thinking, is utter foolishness. We had a vivid example of such an assessment of Jesus a few years ago. Geoffrey Fieger, a former democratic candidate for governor in Michigan, said that just as Jesus Christ was deified in the past so also Elvis might be deified in the centuries to come. He proceeded to suggest that Jesus was a “goofball.”

Perhaps Fieger was simply more honest than many in his assessment of Jesus. Apparently many in Paul's day found the gospel of Christ to be strange. We see this in 1 Corinthians 1:22-23, “For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness” (NASB).

Christians proclaimed that the world would only be transformed through a man who was crucified. Such words must have sounded bizarre to people 2000 years ago. We are accustomed to the message of Christ crucified because of Christian tradition. Imagine if someone said today for the first time, “A man who was executed by the political authorities in a small Middle Eastern country is the Savior of the world.” How strange it must have sounded to people in Corinth when Paul began to proclaim the crucified Jesus as Lord of all.

The Jews expected God to bring in the kingdom forcefully and dramatically. Paul

preached that God chose to bring salvation through a Galilean peasant who was crucified during the Passover feast, and God quietly raised him from the dead (not in the sight of the whole world) three days later. In the second century a Jew by the name of Trypho had a debate with Justin Martyr, a Christian apologist. Trypho said to Justin during the debate, “Prove to us that he [the Messiah] had to be crucified and had to die such a shameful and dishonorable death, cursed by the law. We could not even consider such a thing” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 90.1).

The Greeks believed that truth was accessible only to the clearest and most profound thinkers. Those blessed with intellectual acumen would point the way forward. Paul proclaimed to them, “God has chosen to save through a man whom he has crucified and raised from the dead.”

The fundamental issue for Paul is not wisdom but power. The gospel is the power of God resulting in salvation to every one who believes, both to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16). God reveals his power in the gospel by changing people's lives. Hence, the wisdom of God is revealed in the gospel because the gospel gives all glory to God.

We need to be careful of going to extremes in considering the role of the intellect. Paul does not summon us to quit using our minds. We are to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, and *mind*. Sometimes Bible believing Christians have defended intellectual laziness and sloppiness from these verses. Nor does the

foolishness of the gospel mean that the message we preach is irrational and contradictory. We don't say, "Jesus was resurrected from the dead, but we also believe his bones are in the grave." Both statements cannot be true. We don't believe in that which is contradictory. The gospel is foolish in the eyes of the world, but it is the truth. It fits the facts as they are. Thus, it is a serious mistake to use this passage to deny the importance of study and thinking carefully.

On the other hand, we must be on guard against thinking that we can explain every problem to those who have doubts about the Christian faith. We must beware of a rationalistic spirit that thinks that it can answer every problem for both unbelievers and believers. We don't believe in anything that is actually contradictory, but there are some elements in our faith that are above reason, that exceed our rational capacities. I think the great thinker Pascal got it right when he said, "If we submit everything to reason our religion will be left with nothing mysterious or supernatural. If we offend the principles of reason our religion will be absurd and ridiculous."¹

One example may be useful. The doctrine of original sin does not seem fair to many. The scriptures teach that all human beings are born into the world with a nature that makes sin inevitable. We are not born into the world neutral, poised between good and evil. We are born into the world destined to sin, spring-loaded to sin. Now to many people that doesn't seem fair. When explaining our faith to unbelievers, we may be tempted to explain away the biblical teaching because it seems offensive to human reason. Once again Pascal's advice is on target,

Without doubt nothing is more shocking to our reason than to say that the sin of the first man has implicated in its guilt men so far from the original sin that they seem incapable of sharing it. This flow of guilt does not seem merely impossible to us, but indeed most unjust. . . . Certainly nothing jolts us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet, but for this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we remain incomprehensible to ourselves. . . . Consequently it is not through the proud activity of our reason, but through its simple submission that we can really know ourselves.²

In this issue of the journal we investigate the message of 1 Corinthians. As we read we are reminded that the gospel centers on the crucified and risen Lord. The gospel we preach is the wisdom of God because it doesn't praise our intellects or advertise our strengths. It causes us to fall on our knees and acknowledge our weakness, our dependence, our terrible need. It causes us to look up to God as the great Savior. "It is by his doing that we are in Christ Jesus" as verse 30 says. The gospel teaches us that our righteousness, our sanctification, our redemption, and our wisdom are all gifts of God. The message of the gospel scuttles human pride because it reminds us that our life did not start with our choosing God but his choosing us. Therefore, all the glory is God's.

ENDNOTES

¹*Pascal: Pensées*, translated with an introduction by A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1966) 83.

²*Ibid.*, 65-66.