

1 Corinthians When Faith & Life Collide

Study 2

The Gospel and the Divided Church

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

“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,
And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”

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? 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. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption— that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.”

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor

of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

But as it is written:

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard,
Nor have entered into the heart of man
The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”

But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.

These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For “who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?” But we have the mind of Christ.”

A. The power lies in the Cross, not wisdom

1 Corinthians 1:17

“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.”

- 1. Discussion question. If our salvation was based on words of eloquent wisdom instead of understanding the meaning of the cross, what are the implications? Is our salvation secure? Why or why not?**

B. The Cross is irrational only to those who are spiritually dead

1 Corinthians 1:18

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

- 2. Reflection question. How do your non-Christian friends view the Lord Jesus Christ? Why do they see Him that way?**

C. God’s wisdom is designed to defy human logic

1 Corinthians 1:19-21

“For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”

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? 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.”

- 3. Discussion question. In the Bible, God consistently gives instructions that are seemingly foolish to man. We have been given 3 examples in the video lecture. Find another such “foolish” instance of God’s instruction in the Bible. (There is more than 1 correct answer.)**

- e.g. Naaman’s healing from leprosy - go down into the Jordan 7 times
- 2 Kings 5
- “Are not the Abanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?”
- From Naaman’s point of view, it was stupid to wash himself in a dirty river like Jordan

4. Comprehension question. Why does God give such “foolish” commands?

- God purposely designs His commands to look foolish or stupid so that man has no merit
- It would be impossible for man to take credit for his/her success
 - e.g. Because I am smart / intelligent / have a good character
- For example, walking around the walls of Jericho would be an unsound and unwise thing to do from a military standpoint
 - But it worked - and we can only attribute it to God

D. Human logic traps him

1 Corinthians 1:22-24

“For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

5. Reflection question. Why do you think human logic is insufficient to understand God’s wisdom? Do we ever unconsciously try to do that?

E. The Corinthians themselves are evidence of the power of the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:25-28

“ Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the

things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are,”

6. Discussion question. There are instances in which the weak overcome the strong in the Bible. Give an example and discuss where their strength came from? (There is more than 1 correct answer.)

- e.g David and Goliath
- 1 Samuel 17
- God purposely used the weak to confound the strong

7. Discussion question. What does this teach us?

- We should rely on God for strength
- We should treat our strength as weakness before God
- We should treat our wisdom as foolishness before God
- We should be humble

F. The Cross proves that salvation is unmistakably God's

1 Corinthians 1:29-31

“that no flesh should glory in His presence. 30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption— 31 that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.””

8. Discussion question. If the Cross was so outrageously foolish in man's sight and yet is able to save us, what does this say about the origin of salvation from sin, death, and hell?

- It has to be from God
- No man could have conceived such an idea

G. Paul's preaching is based on the Cross

2 Corinthians 2:1-5

“And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

9. When preaching the Gospel, should we focus on making it sound good to the audience or making it clear to the audience? Which is more important? Why?

- Clarity is more important than eloquence
- So that our faith rests in the power of God, and not the wisdom of man

2 Corinthians 2:6

“However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.”

10. Comprehension question. What is the nature of the wisdom of this world?

- Our thinking is governed by the limits of our immediate horizons, the physical world which is temporal and will pass away

11. Fill in the blanks. Consider the following verses. Based on the video lecture, what lessons do they teach us about the Spirit of God?

Verse Number	Verse	Lesson about the Spirit of God
v. 10	“But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.”	God’s wisdom is divine revelation through the Spirit
v. 11-12	<p>“For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.</p> <p>Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.”</p>	The wisdom revealed to us is the most intimate truth because it comes from the Spirit of God
v. 13	“These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”	The wisdom we share with you comes from His Spirit and can only be accepted by believers who have His Spirit too

12. Discussion question. What is the danger of tampering/watering down the Gospel?

Takeaway
<p>A. The power lies in the Cross, not wisdom</p> <p>B. The Cross is irrational only to those who are spiritually dead</p> <p>C. God’s wisdom is designed to defy human logic</p> <p>D. Human logic traps him</p> <p>E. The Corinthians themselves are evidence of the power of the Cross</p> <p>F. The Cross proves that salvation is unmistakably God’s</p> <p>G. Paul’s preaching is based on the Cross</p>

Case Study

Case 1 – The Old Cross vs The New Cross

“The old cross slew men, the new cross entertains them. The old cross condemns men, the new cross amuses. The old cross destroyed confidence in the flesh; the new cross encourages it” - A. W. Tozer

1. What do you think he is trying to warn us about?

The temptation in our society is to water down the offence of the cross.

When we preach the cross it causes much derision and ridicule hence the temptation is to smoothen out the less popular concepts. We reduce emphasis on sin and the penalty of sin. We do not talk about hell nor much about eternal life.

Instead we shift our emphasis toward what Christ can do for us here and now. We talk about how Christ will heal our hurts , our diseases, lift up our shattered self esteem and bring joy into our lives. Our programs entertain and do not convict. Our teaching encourages us to depend on our own efforts rather than shattering our pride and forcing us to depend on the cross alone. We focus on meeting the felt needs of society, hunger, disease and never talk about eternal death and the true gravity of sin in our lives. We focus on activities but not on holiness and character transformation by the Holy Spirit.

Case 2 – Spiritually Discerned?

Casey had a friend at his work place with whom he had been trying to reach out to. She was highly intellectual and asked many questions like how do we know that there is a God? Or how do we know that Jesus really rose from the dead? Or how do we know the Bible is the Word of God? She also asked " How does Jesus' death save her from her sin?" Her friend did not really understand at all.

Casey had no answers but told her that all she needed to know was that Christ died for her and she needed to accept Him as Lord and Saviour. It was all a matter of faith only. She made this conclusion based on 1 Cor 2:14 - "The natural person does not accept the things

of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

1. Is Casey's conclusions correct? Is there a difference between not understanding the message of the gospel and rejecting the message as foolishness?

The issue with her friend is not that she has concluded that the gospel is foolishness. What her problem is that she has legitimate questions which remained unanswered. We cannot expect people to come to faith without really giving an explanation about why we believe there is a God or how does Jesus dying actually save us from our sins. We need to provide explanation on how salvation works. If we look at the book of Romans it is a carefully structured argument Paul puts forward as to the need for the world for salvation and how people are to be saved. He uses examples in nature and logic and OT prophecy. What Paul refers to in regard of the natural man not being able to understand or that he regards the cross as folly is simply that after all the explanation the non Christian will initially reject the way of salvation offered on the cross as it will not sound plausible to him. It will sound ridiculous as it relies on a "common criminal's death" whilst it is more plausible to do good works to earn salvation.

2. What should Casey do with her friend?

Give her a good Christian book to read or bring her to Alpha or a more matured Christian for discussions. She should pray for the person.

Case 3 – Preaching: Eloquence, Power, or Neither

Thomas was part of the leadership team in a Baptist church where a new pastor had been hired. His preaching was extremely boring and long winded rambling round and round without much structure nor points. He had however preached on the cross as well.

He had only a form 5 education and went to bible college straight after dropping out of secondary school. Most of the congregation were graduates or post graduates. He was very defensive when members commented on his sermons.

He said that it was they who were unspiritual as they failed to recognise his spirituality and were too used to the worldly wisdom which depended on eloquence. However, he had great pastoral skills in ministering to people personally.

When some of the leaders suggested he enrol himself for more preaching classes or allow some of the more gifted lay preachers to take the pulpit with him he objected and quoted Paul in 1 Cor 2:1-5 and said that since Paul was not eloquent neither should he be. It was the leaders who were ungodly and using worldly wisdom. The pastor said that eloquent preachers were not godly preachers.

1. Is it right for the new pastor to quote 1 Cor 2 :1-5 as a defense for his poor sermons?

The pastor is using this part of scripture as a defence of his poor sermons. Paul wrote to counter the prevailing problem of disunity in the church as people formed themselves behind their favourite speakers much like the difference schools of Greek philosophers. They relied on sophistication, eloquence and wisdom to gain support and superiority. Paul's admonition was not to depend on these in ministry but to focus the message on the crucified Christ. Hence Paul's ministry showed spiritual success notwithstanding or in spite of his lack of eloquence or poor physical state simply because he preached about the crucified Christ, the power of God for salvation. Thus thrust of the passage is not about rejecting eloquence nor organising the sermon along a series of logical steps so people can understand better, it is about focus.

The pastor is culturally dissimilar to his audience and needs to adapt to connect with them. If he has a secondary education and his audience has a tertiary one then even his illustrations of the truth may fail to move his audience as they do not find resonance. We are not only asked to make the truth clear but to make it real too in people's lives.

The letter of Paul to the Romans shows much deliberate rhetorical structure and logic , it is a masterful presentation of the gospel which is clear as well as compelling. We are nowhere told in scripture to be long winded and rambly.

2. Is he right in blocking the lay preachers from preaching?

He is wrong, he should have recruited more gifted people to the pulpit as long as the Word is accurately and powerfully preached. That is the goal, not his stature and standing in the congregation which will be threatened if he allowed this. The church does not belong to him, it belongs to Jesus.

3. Do you agree with his statement that eloquent preachers are not godly preachers? What will happen to this church in the long run?

It is patently not true. The Bible always favours content over form as God's using of less endowed people always highlights His power and glory. Godliness and eloquence have nothing to do with each other. We choose godly and gifted people to preach and that order. Not the other way around and certainly his statement is an over generalisation based on his feelings of inadequacy in this church. In the long run if nothing is done the church will dwindle down in numbers and ultimately die out or he attracts like minded people whilst the more educated ones move on to other churches. Hence it is always best to have a strong team of leaders both lay and full time to lead the church so no one acts with vested interest.