

The power of the cross.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Three weeks ago, we began our study of the book of 1 Corinthians. This book is actually a letter from the Apostle Paul to the believers (church) in Corinth. Paul planted this church (Acts 18) and had received some concerns from church members and a letter with questions. Paul tells them that they were looking more like Corinth than Christ. In 1:22-31, he tells them that their “calling” as the church is to preach Christ crucified and the power of the gospel not by wise words or signs, but by the substance of their everyday lives. He reorients their understanding of the purpose of the church in this section, just as he has done for their identities in the previous sections.

The wisdom of the cross was foolishness for both Jews and Gentiles, but for different reasons. For Jews, in Paul’s words, they demanded signs, and the Gentiles demanded wisdom. The cross seemed empty to both. But for the church, the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God that brings abundant life. So it makes complete and total sense that Paul would tell them that he didn’t win them with eloquent words, that they might mistake Jesus as an interchangeable element in the pantheon of Greek wisdom. Instead, it is Christ who stands above all earthly wisdom, which makes their boasting about earthly teachers all the more foolish. Paul’s words continue to be a corrective and a catalyst for them. They are now to be compelled to boast only in the Lord. “In this way, the church is the “first fruits” of what is to come. As one writer put it, “The church does communicate to the world what God plans to do, because it shows that God is beginning to do it.” In Christ, a new age has dawned, and the church is to be an anticipatory presence of that new age and an initial signpost of its coming. **The church is not just the bearer of the message of reconciliation, the church is a part of the message itself. The church’s existence as a community reconciled to God and to one another is what gives the message its credibility, for such a community is itself the manifestation of the gospel it proclaims.** Jesus said as much. In speaking to the Father of his disciples in John 17, Jesus prayed, “I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:22-23). One way the gospel is to be declared to the world is through the loving unity of Christians.”¹ **The power of the cross is demonstrated in the unity of the church.** May we look more like Christ than Corinth or Ames. Another way of saying it is, **my life is to be a billboard for God’s goodness and glory.**

¹ EFCA. Evangelical Convictions, 2nd Edition (pp. 219-221). – Emphasis added.

1. What we've heard. (1:1-18)

a. You are who you are, because of whose you are.

- i. Church of God & Saints Together

b. What is the nature of the Church?²

- i. More than one hundred different terms, metaphors and images are used in the NT to describe God's people with whom he has entered into a saving relationship in Christ. In addition to these descriptions several activities are said to characterize Christian believers. Integral to Paul's teaching about the people of God is his use of the important word *ekklēsia*, a term meaning "congregation," "church," "gathering" or "assembly."³
- ii. **The Greek term *ekklēsia*, translated as "church," simply means "an assembly," but in the New Testament it is used with a particular theological meaning in two senses. It is important to distinguish between the two, but, as we shall see, they must not be separated.**⁴

- 1. **The word *ekklēsia* is used around 110 times in the NT.** It is always used to describe in one way or another the redeemed people of God through their faith in Christ.

- a. 19 times in the book of Acts.

c. The Church exists because of Christ, and for Christ. – A doxological view.

- i. **The church exists to worship God. I.e., Give him glory. But it can only do this because of what God has done to establish the church.**

- 1. **"The main and most glorious purpose of any person's life is the whole-hearted worship of God."**

- ii. As with Paul's apostleship, the emphasis lies on their becoming God's people as the result of divine activity. What God has done "in Christ Jesus" makes them his new people. The verb "sanctified"²¹ probably should be understood as a metaphor for Christian conversion (cf. 6:11 and 1:30). However, the choice of this particular metaphor is hardly accidental. **Believers are set apart for God, just as were the utensils in the Temple. But precisely because they are "set apart" for God, they must also bear the character of the God who has thus set them apart.** Thus holiness forms part of God's intention in saving his people (cf. 1 Thess. 4:3; 5:23). Paul's concept of holiness regularly entails observable behavior. **That will be particularly the case in this letter, which is addressed to a community whose "spirituality" and "higher wisdom" have been largely divorced from ethical consequences. Thus at the outset his readers are singularly identified as the "church of God, sanctified in Christ Jesus."**⁵

d. You're becoming more like Corinth and less like Christ.

- i. Divisions over teachers. / The pursuit of wisdom – "Jesus was a good place to start..."

- ii. **What causes division - An overdeveloped sense of self. – I.e., Pride**

- 1. They all had a preferred pastor. ... "I am of..."

² The English word "church" derives from the Greek word *kuriakon*, which means "pertaining to or belonging to the Lord." This word was used of church buildings and developed into the English term which also referred to the community of people which met in those buildings. – via, EFCA. Evangelical Convictions, 2nd Edition (p. 224). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

³ Peter T. O'Brien, "Church," ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 123.

⁴ EFCA. Evangelical Convictions, 2nd Edition (pp. 197-198). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 32.

- a. This is a really important phrase and it is the implication of Paul is saying to them. We might read it and think of the passive nature of our “following.” We can follow all sorts of people on social media, and that doesn’t mean we are actively trying to be like them or see our identities wrapped up in their persona. However, that is what it meant in the Corinthian context.
2. **Paul will call out their boasting throughout the first four chapters. Consider his words in 4:6-7 - ⁶I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. ⁷For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?**
3. Related to these first two items are the repeated references to the Corinthians’ “boasting” (1:29–31; 3:21; 4:7 and being “puffed up” (4:6, 18–19). Their quarrels took the form of boasting in mere men, apparently in the name of wisdom (3:18–21; cf. 4:6). The problem, however, probably goes much deeper than that. As Munck observes: “Their view of Christian leaders as teachers of wisdom really ministers to their own exaltation. It is true that they boast about these great names, but only to boast about themselves.”
- iii. Humility – Is humility a core virtue in my life and something that I am dependent on God to grow in me?
 1. Humility first - **“When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.”** – Prov. 11:2
 - a. This word for *pride* is from a root that suggests boiling up, and is used of the arrogance of those who must have everything their own way, and will not be ‘kicked around’: e.g. Pharaoh (Neh. 9:10), Israel (Neh. 9:16, 29), the social rebel (Deut. 17:12, 13), the bogus prophet (Deut. 18:20), the murderer (Exod. 21:14). *Lowly* (AV, RV) is a rare word, found only here and (as a verb) in Micah 6:8 (‘walk humbly with thy God’), where it suggests the biddable spirit that is the opposite of the insubordination just considered.⁶
 - i. Pride and disgrace are linked together in the Proverbs. Likewise, humility and wisdom are linked together.
 2. If pride fosters division, then humility helps to foster unity.
 - a. Humility doesn’t think too highly of oneself. (Rom. 12:3)

2. Preach Christ Crucified (1:18-31)

- a. The weakness of the cross.
 - i. **The cross doesn’t make sense in our age because it tells us that we are not inherently good, nor are we inherently capable.**
 1. **Instead, it tells us that we are needy and must be rescued. This doesn’t resonate in the modern west, especially the Midwest.**
 - ii. **“The cross presents us with the most extraordinary inversion in history. It pits the epitome of weakness against the epitome of strength, and weakness wins. It takes a**

⁶ Derek Kidner, *Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 17, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 86.

bleeding, naked, brutalized and dying victim and puts him next to the military and legal might of the most powerful, wealthy and unstoppable empire the world had yet known. The contrast continues in the next generations: the power of Emperors Caligula, Claudius, Nero and Domitian against this tiny sect of Messianic Jewish oddballs proclaiming that Jesus rather than Caesar was Lord (as Paul does in this letter), and often being imprisoned or executed for it. Yet 2,000 years later, it is very obvious that the weak things of the world have shamed the strong and that divine foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. Our moral imagination is that of the Pieta, not the arena. The cross—a stark symbol that was supposed to mean *Roma Victor*—has come to mean *Christus Victor*. Those the ancient world regarded as heroes have become villains, and the crucified criminal has become the most admired and worshipped figure in history. As the classicist T.R. Glover once mischievously put it, we now call our dogs Nero and our sons Paul.”⁷

- iii. V. 19 - Paul now moves on to argue that this folly of God, with its message of the cross, is in fact God’s way of doing what he said he would do: set aside and destroy human wisdom. For him to say “For it is written” is sufficient argument. God has already spoken on this issue; he is now merely bringing it to pass. - The citation itself is of Isa. 29:14, chosen because, containing the word “wisdom” as it does, it makes precisely the point Paul wants to press here. In its original context this passage belongs to that grand series of texts that regularly warn Israel, or someone in Israel, not to try to match wits with God (cf. Isa. 40:12–14, 25; Job 38–42). Yet it is the folly of our human machinations that we think we can outwit God, or that lets us think that God ought to be at least as smart as we are. Paul sees this Isaiah passage as now having eschatological fulfillment. In the cross, the promised “great reversal” has been played out before human eyes in its ultimate way.⁸

b. The power of the cross is uncommon news to them and to us.

- i. V. 21 - Paul says, “God was pleased” to bring people into a proper relationship with himself “through the foolishness of what was preached.” **The word *kērygma* (“preaching”) here means not the act of preaching itself, but the content of that proclamation, namely the message of a crucified Messiah. This is confirmed by vv. 22–25, which go on to explicate “the foolishness of what was preached.”** God’s purpose in all of this is “to save those who believe.” This is the first clear expression in the Pauline letters of what was certainly central to his theology, namely that God himself has initiated salvation for those whom he calls (cf. vv. 24, 27), and their response to that call of grace is to “believe.” But believing does not mean simply giving assent to; it means putting one’s whole trust in as well. Thus, in contrast to the present Corinthian emphasis on wisdom, Paul insists—as they should well remember from their own experience—that salvation does not come “through wisdom” but “through the foolishness of the event of the cross.” And precisely because it stands in contradiction to ordinary human wisdom, it is only for “those who believe,” for those who will take the risk and put their whole trust in God to save in this way.⁹

- ii. **We don’t demand signs, but we fall victim to moral therapeutic deism.**

⁷ Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 21–22.

⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 69–70.

⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 73–74.

1. **On signs** - Thus “Jews demand miraculous signs.” This reflects Jewish messianic expectations. God had acted powerfully in their behalf in history; the promised Messiah would restore the former glory by acting powerfully on their behalf once again. “Show us a sign,” they repeatedly demand of Jesus (Matt. 11:38–39; Mark 8:11; Luke 11:16; John 6:30), “authenticate yourself; validate your messianic credentials with powerful displays.” And who can blame them? They had been down a long time and were looking for a mighty deliverer. They knew how God had acted in the past—with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Their idolatry was that they now had God completely figured out; he would simply repeat the Exodus, in still greater splendor.¹⁰
2. **Moral therapeutic deism is best understood by these principles.**
 - a. **God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.**
(Morality is emphasized, but it's reduced to kindness and fairness.)
 - b. **The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.**
(Therapeutic focus—faith serves personal well-being more than truth or obedience.)
 - c. **God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.**
(A deistic view—God is distant, only called upon in emergencies.)
 - d. **Good people go to heaven when they die.**
(Salvation is based on moral behavior rather than grace, repentance, or faith in Christ.)¹¹
3. **Ultimately, we don't need the cross for behavioral modification or to be “kind.” We need the power of the cross for the complete transformation of our hearts.**
 - a. **This is what Paul means when he talks about having the mind of Christ. It is the total renovation of our hearts.**
 - i. **1 Corinthians 2:16 (ESV)**
“For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.
 - ii. **Philippians 2:5 (ESV)**
Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,
 - iii. **Romans 12:2 (ESV)**
Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.
 - iv. **Romans 8:6 (ESV)**
For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 74–75.

¹¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). – Also see: Albert Mohler and Tim Keller have both commented on the dangers of MTD in contemporary church life.

- v. **Colossians 3:2 (ESV)**
Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.
- vi. **Philippians 4:7 (ESV)**
And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
- vii. **Philippians 4:8 (ESV)**
Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.
- viii. **1 Peter 4:1 (ESV)**
Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,
- ix. **Ephesians 4:23–24 (ESV)**
...and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.
- x. **2 Corinthians 10:5 (ESV)**
We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,
- iii. **We don't long for philosophical wisdom, but we get trapped by the "truth" of our hearts.**
- iv. "Greeks look for wisdom." This, too, was a national characteristic. As early as Herodotus it is said of them: "All Greeks were zealous for every kind of learning." Again, who can fault them? Theirs were the advances of civilization as none before. Indeed it was their very advances in learning that caused many to abandon the traditional gods and turn to *sophia*, or *philosophia*. Their idolatry was to conceive of God as ultimate Reason, meaning of course what we deem to be reasonable.
 - 1. These, then, are the two basic idolatries; and they are ever with us. The demand for power and the insistence on wisdom, always for us or from our point of view, are still the basic idolatries of our fallen world.¹²
- c. **Where do we preach Christ crucified?**
 - i. **At home. – 1 Cor. 6**
 - 1. My spouse, my kids, my parents, or my roommates.
 - 2. These relationships often have the most concentrated time with you. That means that they see the good and bad. This also means that they are prime to see the power of the cross in your development and growth.
 - ii. **At work / school. – 1 Cor. 8**
 - 1. In 1 Cor. 8 Paul will talk about food sacrificed to idols. He talks about the importance of representing Christ well to those who are outside of the faith. It is also a passage that speaks against the pursuit of behavioral modification alone.
 - iii. **In my neighborhood. – 1 Cor. 10**

¹² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 74–75.

1. Again in another passage Paul stresses the importance of the image we give outsiders. Too often we put forward the wrong message out of good intentions. Paul stresses that our love for our neighbor is to speak volumes of Christ's love for them too.

iv. In the church. - 1 Cor. 12 & 14

1. We preach (declare) the goodness of Jesus in the church when we operate according to the values of Christ with each other. This would have been particularly noticeable in Corinth where segregation was a common practice.

d. How do we preach Christ crucified?

- i. **"Not through signs or wisdom." – Paul is not saying that these things are important, but that they are secondary. The same truth applies to you and me today, as it did them. The proof is in the pudding. The way we live matters.**
- ii. Fruit of the Spirit – If we are becoming more like Christ these things will be increasingly evident in our lives.
 1. **¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.** ¹³
- iii. The Spirit and the Son are one. The fruit that the Spirit develops in us, is the same fruit that Jesus embodied in his earthly life. To put on the mind of Christ is to embody the fruit of the Spirit. And we cannot embody the fruit of the Spirit without the indwelling of the Spirit. And we will not have the indwelling of the Spirit without salvation through the Son. This is the power of the cross.

¹³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ga 5:19–26.