

# The power of the cross.

1 Corinthians (CGS#3) – 1:18-31

**INTRODUCTION:** 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. So, 1 Corinthians is a response from Paul to those questions and concerns. And we've seen the big challenge unfold in chapter one, the church had divisions, rivalries, and quarrels. Paul tells them that this should not be, 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 cross in Paul's mind is the central image of Christianity. It is an image of humiliation and impotence in the Roman world. You only ended up on a cross because of a crime against Rome, and you were there to make a point, no one is stronger than Rome. That is exactly the power of the image for Paul, except it doesn't validate the kingdom of Rome; it validates the kingdom of heaven. Here is how one theologian explains it: "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 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." <sup>1</sup>

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." <sup>2</sup> **The power of the cross is demonstrated in the unity of the church.** May we look more like Christ than Corinth or Ames.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God's Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 21–22.

<sup>2</sup> EFCA. *Evangelical Convictions*, 2nd Edition (pp. 219-221). – Emphasis added.

**GETTING STARTED** – As you begin your group time, take time to answer this question together: In your experience, what has been the most important example of church unity? And, what did you learn from it?

**IN THE WORD** – Let's dig back into the passage. It is important to strengthen our muscles in reading God's Word. On Sunday, we walked through the passage in the sermon. Hopefully, that helped you to see the landmarks of the passage with fresh eyes. Now, with your group, go back through it and see what God is saying to you specifically.

First, before you read the passage, take a moment to ask God's Spirit to quiet your mind and heart and to illuminate the text to you. Second, read the passage aloud to the group. Then, follow the simple method below. (O.P.A)

**Observe:** Make 8-10 observations from the passage. Pay close attention to observe and note repeated words and phrases, names, places, and themes.

**Principles:** From your list of observations, what patterns or big ideas do you see emerging? Can you distill it down into 2-4 big idea truths?

**Apply:** Moving from your list of principles, it is time to apply God's Word. Remember, we believe that God's Word is living and active and that it can change the way we live Monday-Friday. What is one tangible way to apply a truth from your list above?

**Note:** Another way to approach your time together is to talk through the following questions about the article of faith we are studying that week.

1. What did you hear God's Spirit say to you through the passage this week? How does it encourage you? How does it sharpen you?
2. How have you seen God at work in your life this week? Have you enjoyed him? Have you heard his voice and the leading of his Spirit? Big ways or small ways.
3. What similar patterns, attitudes, or behaviors do you see in yourself that Paul has addressed in 1 Corinthians so far?
4. How would you answer this question to someone in 30 seconds, what is the power of the cross?
5. Is there anything that you subconsciously attach to "being a Christian" that Paul would say that it resembles "signs and wisdom?" (vv. 22-25) Think politically, economically, academically, or even overemphasize moral behaviors. I.e., How are we tempted to look more like Ames than Christ?