

CGYG & LIFE Bible Study: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

For Discussion: In your experience, how do the media typically portray Christianity? Why do you think they portray it as they do?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

For Review

- What issue did the apostle Paul start to address in 1:10-17?
 - divisions & factions within the church, claiming to be following different leaders (Paul, Apollos, Cephas, Christ)
 - chapters 1-4 address this issue in depth

Read 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5

- What does Paul contrast in this passage of Scripture? How does this relate to the issue that Paul starts to address in 1:10-17?
 - the wisdom of God vs. the wisdom of the world/human wisdom (more specifically, human philosophies/worldviews, especially pertaining to how to know God
 - worldly wisdom in speech – ‘words of eloquent wisdom’ vs. preaching the Gospel / word of the Cross (1:17-18)
 - not with lofty speech or wisdom/plausible words of wisdom; but nothing except Jesus Christ & Him crucified (2:1-4)
 - worldly wisdom in thought/ worldview vs. God’s plan of salvation in Christ
 - Jews seeking signs & Gentiles seeking wisdom vs. Christ & Him crucified (1:20-25)
 - “wisdom of the wise; discernment of the discerning” (1:19) that does not know God (1:21)
 - God’s choice of the foolish/weak to shame the wise/strong of the world (1:26-31)
 - divisions in the church reflect the wisdom of the world at work, not the wisdom of God as shown in Christ
 - the Gospel undercuts any grounds for boasting– only boast in God (1:31) → no grounds for boasting in human leaders (3:21)

-What is “the word of the Cross” (v.18), and how does it divide humanity? Why does it seem like folly to so many? (consider also Romans 1:16-23)

- the message about Christ’s death on the Cross on our behalf (1:23, 2:2)
 - i.e. the Gospel message (1:17; cf. Rom. 1:16 – the Gospel is the power of God for salvation, as the Word of the Cross is in 1 Cor. 1:18), that we are sinners deserving of death, but that Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised, etc. (cf. 1 Cor 15:3-8)
- only 2 categories of response – rejection (perishing) & acceptance (those being saved)
- folly to those who are perishing
 - reject the message for various reasons (e.g. Jews & Greeks – as seen in 1:22ff; discussed below)
 - per Rom. 1:18-23 – manifestation of rejection of God / rebellion against Him – claiming to be wise, over & against Him
- but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God
 - have personally experienced God’s power at work in their lives, through the word of the Cross

-In 1:18-31, what different responses does the word of the Cross elicit, and why do people respond as they do? Have you encountered similar responses in your own experience?

- folly to those who are perishing – reject the message for various reasons (e.g. Jews & Greeks – as seen in 1:22ff)
 - the words, “Christ crucified” would seem like a contradiction in terms, from the perspective of human understanding – “Messiah meant power, splendor, triumph; crucifixion meant weakness, humiliation, defeat.” (Fee, p.75)
- Jews – expecting a different kind of Messiah – one that was powerful and would lead Israel to victory over her enemies
 - Demand signs (e.g. John 6:29-31) – displays of supernatural power to ‘prove’ that Jesus is who He said He was
 - a Messiah coming in weakness/humility was a stumbling block many couldn’t get over (1:23)
 - in particular, crucifixion = hanging on a tree – understood as an indication of God’s curse (Deut. 21:22)
 - demanding “proof” that Jesus is the Messiah - even though He performed many miracles among them
- in the same way, many today demand “proof” that God exists
 - e.g. “If God exists, why doesn’t He just show Himself to me, then I’ll believe?”
 - e.g. “power evangelism” movement of 1990s – need for signs & wonders to accompany evangelism
- Gentiles - looking for “wisdom” - were impressed with knowledge & learning; eloquence of speech & sophistication of thought/ideas
 - had their own ideas about what the gods were like and how they behaved

- the message of the Cross ran counter to all this – about someone from an obscure backwater of the Roman Empire, who claimed to be a king but seemed too weak save himself (much less others) and was crucified as a common criminal
 - How could this be God, much less a savior, if he couldn't even save himself?
 - seemed too simple; seems to lack sophistication as a philosophical system; and preachers like Paul weren't particularly eloquent
 - those who were following Christ were mostly from the lower social strata (1:26)
- very similar in many respects to how the world views Christianity today – a crutch for the weak or the unintelligent
 - concept of God's holiness & judgment and need for atonement is also repugnant to modern sensibilities

-pride underlies these reactions – humanity seeking to set itself up against God and to save itself (1:29; cf. Rom. 1:18-23)

- But some believe and are saved → these are called by God (1:24) and personally experience the wisdom and power of God in Christ at work in their own lives (1:18, 24) – saved/redeemed from sin & death, and raised to new life with Christ
 - Jews seeking power; Gentiles seeking wisdom → those who are called find both in Christ (1:24)
 - find wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption in Him (1:31)

- How has God “destroyed the wisdom of the wise” and “made foolish the wisdom of the world” (1:19-20)? Why has He done this?

- In the word of the Cross, God has turned all the world's wisdom upside down → things thought to be of worth shown to be worthless
 - 1:19 cites Isa. 29:14 – brings the wisdom & discernment of the worldly wise to nothing, whether of the scribes (probably Jewish experts of the law – often referred to in the Gospels) or the 'debater'/philosopher (perhaps a reference to those seen as wise to the Greeks of the time)
 - the world in its wisdom did not know God (in fact, rejected God, as per Romans 1:18-23)
 - so God uses what seems weak & foolish to the world to show His wisdom and His power – and to save those who believe (1:21)
 - not attainable through worldly wisdom, but simply by believe – taking God at His word!
 - demonstrates that the foolishness of God is wiser than Man's wisdom; His weakness stronger than Man's strength (1:25)
 - also, God chose to call & reveal His wisdom & power not the wise & powerful of the world, but to the 'foolish', the 'weak'; to the despised and the 'nobodies' of this world
 - these are the ones to whom He has given life, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption in Christ
 - He has done to undercut human pride & boasting
 - glory goes to God alone; no grounds for boasting, except in Him alone

- In light of 1:17-31, why did Paul choose to preach the Gospel “not with words of eloquent wisdom” (1:17), resolving instead “to know nothing... except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (2:1-2)? Why does doing otherwise potentially empty the Cross of its power (1:17)? How should this impact the way we evangelize today?

- power in evangelism comes not from our ability, eloquence or wisdom, but from “the foolishness of what was preached” (v.21) i.e. the word of the Cross; from Christ Himself
 - the wisdom of the world is at odds with the wisdom of God (1:18ff)
 - seeking to mix in worldly wisdom runs counter to God's purposes in “destroying the wisdom of the wise”
 - God is pleased “through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe”
 - requires us to humble ourselves before Him; whereas worldly wisdom seeks rather to elevate ourselves → boasting in self / human accomplishment rather than in the Lord
- using words of eloquent wisdom seeks to persuade based on the wisdom/skill of the speaker, rather than relying on the wisdom and power of God displayed in the Cross of Christ (1:18ff)
 - may fall into the temptation of drawing attention to the speaker, rather than to Christ
- evangelism today – the centrality of the preaching of the word of the Cross / Christ crucified; not to lose focus on the central message, or to water it down to try to be less offensive

Reflection and application

Just as the word of the Cross – the message about Jesus Christ and His death on the Cross – was a stumbling block and foolishness to many in the apostle Paul's day, so it remains to many in ours. The word of the Cross remains offensive because in it, God condemns our sin and rebellion against Him and shows that there is nothing we can do in our own wisdom or strength to save ourselves from His judgment. He destroys our human wisdom and confronts our pride, choosing the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world to shame the strong, so that no one may boast before Him (1:18-31). And yet, in that same word, God extends His mercy and grace, so that those who respond to that simple message of the Cross in faith experience in Jesus Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1:24; cf. Romans 1:16). He becomes for us wisdom from God - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption (1:30).

When sharing your faith with others, are you sometimes tempted to leave out or gloss over parts of the Gospel that you think might seem foolish or unpalatable to others? If so, remember that the word of the Cross is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe, and take care, lest you empty the Cross of Christ of its power.