

Paul Barnett, The Word of the Cross (1 Corinthians 1:18–25)

Often in Paul's letters he takes his readers in the churches back to the fundamentals of his initial message to them. Perhaps new members had been added to the church in the three years since he had left and didn't understand his teachings, not having heard them from his own lips. Among them, we may also suppose, were those who had in recent times risen to prominence, but whose grasp of the gospel was defective and who appeared to be taking over the intellectual and spiritual leadership from the founding apostle of the church. Paul will later hint at the influence of these teachers within the church in Corinth (3:10, 17; 4:18–19).

So what was their message? In a word, 'wisdom.' At the time Corinth was the greatest of the cities of Greece, so it comes as no surprise that the members of the church there might be interested in Greece's most characteristic intellectual pursuit, 'wisdom.'

'Wisdom' as used by Paul may mean more than an intellectual pursuit. More broadly, that one word may capture what we may call a 'world view'. In that world view 'man' is at the centre and God is at the margin. Such 'wisdom' from the Greeks is a celebration of the subtlety of Socrates, the elegance of Aphrodite in marble, and the athleticism of Olympic competitors portrayed in red on an amphora. In a few words it is about 'cleverness', 'power' and 'style', things so important to the Greeks, but expressed in every society where those values become dominant.

How might this 'wisdom' have found expression among the Corinthians in the several years since Paul left them? I say 'might' because we do not certainly know the precise form this 'wisdom' took within the church in Corinth. Perhaps it included the glib mottoes like 'all things are lawful' and 'food for the stomach and the stomach for food' which Paul echoes only in order to rebut (see on 6:12, 13). Most probably, too, it was found in their inflated estimate of their 'speech' and 'knowledge', which were so in evidence that Paul acknowledges these 'gifts' in both surviving letters to this church (see on 1:5; 12:8; 13:2a; cf. 2 Cor. 8:7). 'Speech' and 'knowledge' exercised haughtily for self-aggrandizement and not for the good of others is probably what Paul more briefly calls 'the wisdom of this age and of the rulers of this age' (see on 2:6).

How does Paul respond to this worrying pastoral situation? First, he states that the word of the *cross* is 'foolishness' to those who are perishing, but 'wisdom and power' to those who are being saved (1:18, 21). Only through the message of the crucified One are people able to be saved. Second, through the preaching of 'Christ crucified', God is overturning currently held human values of 'wisdom' and 'foolishness' (1:20, 25). In the coming age all present values will be reversed (see on 7:29–31). Third, this is confirmed by looking around at the undistinguished members sitting in the assembly of believers (1:26–31). Fourth, consistent with that, as he reminds them in 2:1–5, his initial preaching concentrated on 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' proclaimed in plain words, not 'in lofty words of wisdom'.

1. The Word of the Cross (1:18–25)

Paul now explains the divisive impact of 'the word (*logos*) of the cross'. No doubt this reflects his experience of twenty years in ministry to Jews and Greeks in the eastern Mediterranean. He points out that God's scale of values is opposite to man's scale of values. Thus the 'wisdom' of man is 'foolishness' with God and the 'foolishness' of God, as man judges it, is true 'wisdom' and true 'power'.

Two words that keep appearing in this passage are ‘weakness’ and ‘foolishness’ and their opposites ‘power’ and ‘wisdom’. The opposites—‘the wise’ and ‘the fool’—abound throughout the ‘Wisdom’ literature of the Old Testament, especially in the book of Proverbs. Sometimes ‘the wise’ and ‘the fool’ are contrasted within the same sentence:

A fool’s talk brings a rod to his back,
but the lips of the wise protect them.

Jesus, too, stood in the tradition of the ‘wise’ teacher of godly proverbs. Remember his parable of the wise man who built his house on the rock and the fool who built his on the sand (Matt. 7:24–27)? Paul’s contrasts between ‘wisdom’ and ‘foolishness’ in this passage place him in the same tradition.

Evidently Paul is engaged in a dispute with a section of the church in Corinth who were preoccupied with ‘the wisdom of words’ (verse 17) which was not ‘wise’ at all. As he will show true ‘wisdom’, that is, God’s ‘wisdom’, is found in ‘the word of the cross’ (verse 18). As best as we can recapture the situation, these persons were now saying that Paul’s ‘word of the cross,’ his message of ‘Christ crucified,’ was ‘weak’ and ‘foolish’. It must be improved, made more acceptable, by dressing it up differently, using ‘words of wisdom’.

1. The Great Reversal: Wisdom is Foolishness (verses 18–21)

In verse 18 Paul none too subtly contrasts ‘the word of the cross’ with ‘the wisdom of words’ (verse 17). The latter are just ‘words’ which only appear to be ‘wise’, whereas ‘the word of the cross’ is a content-laden ‘word’, a message about ‘the cross’ on which the Messiah met his awful death. Paul’s message was solid in content, though not ‘flowery’ in its presentation (see on 2:1–5), whereas the message of those he criticizes was empty of content though impressively eloquent in delivery.

Paul’s ‘word’ had devastatingly opposite effects on its hearers, as Paul knew well from his many years of preaching it. To people in general who are ‘perishing’ because they belong to the ‘present age’ which is ‘passing away’ (7:31; cf. 2:6), ‘the word of the cross’ is ‘foolishness’ (*mōria*—‘moronic’). But ‘to us’ who receive that ‘word,’ who are ‘being saved’ by it, it is ‘the power of God.’

We ask, ‘being saved’ for *what*? Paul has in mind the coming age of God, for which this present age is a temporary and transient anticipation. Thus those who are ‘perishing’ in this age will ‘perish’ absolutely and eternally in the coming age, and those who are ‘being saved’ in this age will be ‘saved’ absolutely and eternally in that age. And the ‘word of the cross’ is the instrument of salvation for the coming age.

At the onset of the coming age God will ‘destroy the wisdom of the wise’, as Paul observes, quoting Isaiah 29:14. The ‘wisdom’ of the present age regards the ‘word of the cross’ as ‘moronic’. But that ‘wisdom’ will be seen for what it is, ‘moronic’, and what is currently dismissed as ‘moronic’ will be seen to be profoundly ‘wise’.

Reflecting on twenty years of debating unbelievers Paul asks, ‘Where is the wise man’ (of the Greek academy)?, and ‘Where is the scribe’ (of the Jewish synagogue)? These unbelievers, whether Greek or Jewish, are ‘disputers of this age’ with minds closed to ‘the word of the cross’. In the coming age their ‘wisdom’ will be recognised as ‘foolishness’. So he asks, ‘Surely God has made foolish the wisdom of the world?’ By ‘world’ Paul means ‘human history and culture’ which is dominated by sin and death, from the time of Adam’s rebellion.

Paul offers a 'proverb-like' observation. 'Wisdom' has failed. God in his kindness has provided another way to know him.

For since in the wisdom of God
the world through its wisdom did not know
him,
God was pleased
through the foolishness of what was
preached
to save those who believe.

In the depths of God's wisdom, he did not allow the 'wise' of Greece or the 'scribes' of Israel to know him through *their* 'wisdom'. God knew that human arrogance would be intolerable if people from this corrupt 'age' could reach up with their intellects and say, 'There is God, we have found him.' Truly, God eternally eludes such people. They never find him for he hides himself from them (Matt. 11:25–27; Ps. 89:46). Because God was unreachable through human 'wisdom' he was 'pleased' to make himself known. How did he do this? It is 'through the foolishness'—the *mōria*—of the preached message, that is, 'the word of the cross.' As this 'word' is proclaimed God 'saves' those who believe it, saves them for his coming age.

Thus this 'word of the cross' divides those who are 'being saved' from those who are 'perishing'. Those who are 'saved' have 'life' in this age through the Spirit, whereas those who are 'perishing' in this age face eternal 'death' in the next (2 Cor. 2:15–16).

2. *The Great Reversal: Foolishness is Wisdom (verses 22–25)*

Why are the efforts of the Greek 'wise' and the Jewish 'scribe' doomed to futility? It is 'because Jews seek signs' and 'Greeks seek wisdom.' The Gospels amply demonstrate Jewish blindness. The Pharisees were preoccupied with 'miracle signs' (Mark 8:11–13), often of a grotesque and freakish kind (e.g., a cow giving birth to a lamb in the Temple) which they saw as pointers to the coming Messianic age. Yet the 'signs' of Jesus, which were truly miraculous, were not understood, because they were not self-servin, done quietly for the relief of human misery (cf. John 6:26). The 'signs' of Jesus were evidence that the kingdom of God stood in their midst in the person of Jesus, but they had no eyes for it (Luke 17:21).

The blindness of the Greeks to God was, in Paul's experience, due to their preoccupation with 'wisdom'. The Greek city states were the home of philosophy as is evident in the respective contributions of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Zeno (founder of Stoicism) and Epicurus (founder of the Epicureanism).

Following Alexander's conquests of Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Mesopotamia in the fourth century BC, schools of philosophy were transplanted from Athens to the conquered regions, including the Greek cities that ringed Israel itself in Paul's day (e.g., Gadara in the Decapolis). It cannot be denied, however, that many of the intellectual achievements of modern times flow from the Greeks, as the writings of their philosophers were re-examined during and after the Middle Ages.

Is Paul, then, attacking 'wisdom' or the 'mind' *per se*? By no means! Paul frequently urges his readers to think (see, e.g., on 14:20) and his own letters are argued with a lawyer's logic. Paul is not against 'wisdom', since this is God's gift to understand his world and its workings. A whole body of literature in the Bible is 'wisdom' literature, much of it quite down-to-earth. Rather, Paul is opposed to 'the wisdom of the world', that is, of this fallen and corrupt age, as it applies to just one subject, man's attempt to find God by that 'wisdom'. The early Christian writer Tertullian (c. 160–220) said there was no common ground 'between a philosopher and a Christian, between a disciple of Hellas and a disciple of heaven,' or historically speaking, between 'Athens and Jerusalem, Academy and church.'

In contrast to those who fruitlessly seek God by 'wisdom' Paul declares that he and other Christians 'preach Christ crucified', which is another way of referring to 'the word of the cross' (verse 18). For us crucifixion is quite remote. It has not been practised since its prohibition by the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. Furthermore, 'Christ crucified' has become for us either a preacher's slogan, a theological topic or a religious ornament. But in Paul's world it was the most horrific method of execution known, reserved as a deterrent to keep slaves and provincials in their place. According to Cicero it was so unspeakably ugly as to be 'off limits' in polite conversation. 'The very word cross,' he wrote, 'should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears' (*Pro Rabiro* v. 16).

When, therefore, Paul 'preached Christ crucified' in Corinth in c. AD 50 he was speaking of Jesus' gruesome death twenty years earlier. There was an immediacy of time, a horror of detail and a depth of humiliation for the crucified that today we cannot imagine. Reading Paul's words we capture something of the shock and distaste experienced by the original hearers.

To preach that God's uniquely anointed king, the Messiah, had been crucified was to invite scorn from every quarter (verse 23). For Jews their Messiah was to be *powerful*, a victor, spattered with blood, perhaps, but with the blood of enemies he had vanquished. To contemplate a Messiah who was *powerless*, bloodied with his own blood, humiliated as he hung naked impaled on a stake by the hated Romans, was 'a stumbling block' (*skandalon*) to Jews, something utterly unthinkable, a massive barrier to belief.

For their part, Greeks cherished the tradition of Socrates of the philosopher king, a ruler who was *wise*, one who was loftily above human passions and pain. Paul's announcement that God's king, who made claims on their loyalties, had been *crucified* was *morla*, 'foolishness.' The reaction of Greeks to the message of the cross is captured in a rough drawing on the wall on the Palatine Hill in Rome in the third century. A foolish looking youth is worshipping a crucified man with an ass's head. The crudely written graffiti reads, 'Alexamenos worships his god.' Here is a fool worshipping a crucified ass-man!

But not all Jews and Greeks have rejected 'the word of the cross'. To 'those who have been called' whether Jews or Greeks, 'Christ [crucified]' is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God'. Those who are 'called' (cf. 1:2) are 'us who are being saved' and 'those who believe' (verses 18, 21). How does God 'call'

his people? There are two steps in Paul's sequence of thought. First, there is the preaching of 'the word of the cross'. In consequence, second, the hearers, when they 'believe' this 'word', are 'saved' for the coming age. Thus 'the called ones' are those summoned by God to his kingdom, by the preaching of Christ crucified.

We must note Paul's interchangeable way of speaking of 'Christ crucified' (verse 23) or simply of 'Christ' (verse 24). The former represents his 'work' of salvation achieved for us on the cross, the latter simply to his 'person' or identity as the Messiah of God, his Son (cf. 1:9). Theologically 'Christ' and 'Christ crucified' must not be separated. On the one hand, we must declare that Jesus *is* the Christ, but that he is the Christ who was *crucified*. But on the other hand, in declaring his crucifixion for our justification, we must not separate this blessing from the *person* who was crucified. There must be neither a cross-less Christ nor a Christ-less cross.

Contradicting the 'wisdom of the world' and 'of this age', Paul declares 'Christ crucified' to be 'the power of God' and 'the wisdom of God'. Christ is the 'power' because only he makes possible forgiveness of sins (see on 15:3; cf. Rom. 1:16) and 'righteousness' from God (see on 1:30). Christ is that 'wisdom' given by God, by which those who previously did not know God at last know him (see on verse 21). Joined inseparably are God-given reconciliation with God and God-given knowledge of God.

Greeks attempted to find God and know him by climbing a ladder called 'philosophy'. They found no one there but themselves, no matter how high they climbed. It is only as God reaches *down* in 'the word of the cross' and offers us forgiveness of sins that his hidden identity is at last revealed. Our only action is to receive God's mercy with open hands at the foot of the cross of Christ. Here God proves to be deeply personal, a Father, merciful beyond imagination, who draws those who did not know him into a living relationship as his own dear children. But the proud intellectual will live and die not knowing him.

Paul concludes with a proverb-like statement of God's great reversal of this age's values as expressed in the 'word of the cross'. Paul remains astonished at God's ways. He speaks of the crucifixion of Christ as 'the foolishness of God' and 'the weakness of God'. It is as if Paul, the former persecutor, with tear stained face was pondering Christ on Pilate's cross, and asking, 'God, what were *you* doing there?' 'Was there no other way?' Yet Paul knew well there was no other way of dealing with human sin and human arrogance. 'Far be it from me to glory,' he told the Galatians, 'except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world' (Gal. 6:14, RSV).

But these words, 'foolishness' and 'weakness,' though ironic, are a window into the mind of God which we now know from 'the word of the cross'. The crucifixion of Christ reveals just who the Master of the universe is, humble, self-giving, tender-hearted, suffering for and therefore with creatures made in his image. Proud Jews and high-minded Greeks scoffed at the very idea that God could be like that. Muslims express outrage that God could be humble-hearted, as revealed in the crucifixion of his Son. The cross continues to be regarded by many as 'offensive' and 'stupid'. Yet in reaching down to save and reveal himself in the crucified One, God has identified with sufferers and suffering in the world. The Creator of the universe is no stranger to suffering, weakness and humiliation.

Paul concludes that the 'foolishness' and 'weakness' of God is 'wiser' and 'stronger' than men, for in that 'foolishness' and 'weakness' human salvation was won for those who will receive it.

Inscribed upon the cross we see

In shining letters God is love:

He bears our sins upon the tree;

He brings us mercy from above.