

“The Message of the Cross”

Introduction: Corporations often spend huge sums of money designing their logos. They hire advertising agencies to develop a symbol unique to the organization, one which expresses at a glance the qualities the organization wants to be associated with, be it stability, or reliability, or progressiveness, or cleverness. The logo, when conceived, then appears on business cards, letterhead, and the company’s product line, and is prominently displayed at national and local headquarters.

An organization which chose as its logo a hangman’s noose, a firing squad, a gas chamber, or an electric chair would seem to have lost its mind! It would be sheer madness, according to the wisdom of the world, to choose an instrument of torture and death as the symbol of your organization. And yet, such a symbol—the cross—is the universally recognized logo of Christianity. We’re baptized with the sign of the cross, our tombstones are typically marked with a cross, our places of worship all contain a cross right in the line of vision of the worshippers, the worship space is often built in the shape of a cross, and in many of our traditions those who worship often cross themselves at some point in the liturgy.

Well might we ask: Is this good business practice?! Is continuing to remember and celebrate a horrible death really the best way to attract newcomers, or the wisest way to talk about how we are to live? Well, according to the writers of the NT, it is not only the best way, it is the only way. The cross is the lens through which we are to understand God and to live life. The cross reveals a God who defies expectation, loves us beyond measure, and asks us to reevaluate all our ideals and values in light of it. Let’s think for a bit about how Paul makes this point to the church in Corinth.

I. The Dilemma of the Cross

A. Paul recognizes our dilemma. He knows that there are many who struggle with the message of the cross, that there are those for whom Christ crucified is a stumbling block, and those for whom it is pure foolishness. Now, the Greek word for stumbling block is “skandalon,” so for some, those who Paul identifies as Jews, the cross was literally a scandal. And, foolishness in the Greek language is “moria,” the root of which the English word, moron, retains. It’s a word that was used in the field of psychiatry to designate a person of incredibly low intelligence, but it is no longer in technical use because it is considered offensive. Which makes Paul’s point perfectly: the cross, to many Gentiles, is flat out moronic because it is, to their minds, offensive.

B. So, how is the cross a scandal to Jews and moronic to Gentiles?

1. For many Jews, it was impossible to believe that the one God had sent to rescue them from their Romans occupiers would allow himself be killed on a Roman instrument of death. What kind of Messiah would that be? Furthermore, to be hanged on a tree, according to the law in Deuteronomy (21:23), meant that one had been cursed—subject to divine judgment—by God. The good Jew was looking, Paul writes, for signs. As a people who had suffered long and hard under the burden of foreign oppression, they understandably wanted to see demonstrations of God’s miraculous power which, in their minds, would serve as irrefutable proof of the Messiah and his ability to rescue them. A Jesus who was humble and meek and lowly, who deliberately avoided the spectacular, could not the Chosen One of God be.

2. For many Gentiles, their understanding of divinity included a god who was not, and could not be, affected by feelings. Neither could they understand a god who would descend to earth and dwell among men and women, for that would necessarily involve him in human affairs, from which they believed god needed to remain detached. They sought, with their love for learning, reasonable accounts of the order of things presented to them in a logically compelling way. That the Chosen One of God should be a crucified criminal made absolutely no sense.

C. Now, not just to pick on ancient Jews and Gentiles; the cross is also a dilemma, a scandal and an offense, to us. It means that we're really not as good as we thought: our sin is bad enough that we needed a savior to die to pay its penalty. It means that we're really not as clever as we thought: there is nothing we can do to earn God's love, but Jesus brings it to us as a gift, through the cross. It means that our ideals and values are really not as ironclad as we might have supposed: wealth, status, power, honor, and comfort all fall in light of the humility, suffering, and self-giving love we see lived out on the cross. In the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes this change of ideals and values quite clear. Those who are blessed in the realm of God are not the self-confident, hedonistic, self-righteous, competitive, aggressive, beautiful people, but the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, etc. Living through the lens of the cross, in other words, turns everything upside down and calls us to reevaluate all that we do and think.

II. The Wisdom of God

A. What should start to become clear to us as we reflect is that we cannot get to this place through our own wisdom, nor through the wisdom of the so-called experts, whoever they might be. In the first century, it was the wise, the teachers of the law, and the philosophers of the age (v. 20) who were the "experts." But none of them truly knew who God was and who God wanted them to be. In our day, neither the "experts" like doctors, lawyers, and investment bankers, or movie stars, sports heroes, politicians, and even pastors, can take us to the truly good and godly life with their worldly wisdom. Rather, the ideals and values of the cross, especially as declared in the Beatitudes, are revealed wisdom; they are shown to us and produced in us by the Holy Spirit. Without the revealed wisdom of God, without the Holy Spirit, being poor in spirit, being one who mourns and is meek and is merciful, probably just seems like a pathetic, loser way to live!

Illustration: Michael Wilkins, professor at Biola University in CA, thought exactly that when the Beatitudes were held up as ideals for him and his youth group buddies to emulate. The four of them were three-sport athletes in high school and wanted nothing to do with their youth leader's attempts to turn them from being cocky and macho superstars to meek and mild servants. He renounced both his Christian identity and the church. A few years later, Wilkins was sitting under the night sky in a jungle in Vietnam, a member of a cocky airborne infantry combat battalion. "We were a well-trained exceedingly efficient war machine," he recalls. But one night, after an especially ravaging battle, he remembers experiencing the reality of what Jesus had been talking about in the Beatitudes. He writes [Matthew NIVAC, 221f]:

I had killed gleefully that day. I had ripped the life from other young men without a twinge of conscience. I saw the bodies of my nineteen- and twenty-year-old squad members ravaged by other young men who were our hated enemies, yet probably none of us on either side could really offer any adequate explanation for our animosity. That night I experienced brokenness. I became poor in spirit as I recognized the depth of my depravity . . . I mourned the evil in me and

the evil that I saw emerge so quickly in all of us. . . From that very night I began to realize that there was indeed a very different way to live. I did not articulate it that night in these words, but meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity, and peacemaking all became so much more clearly preferable than the way that I had been pursuing significance and success.”

What was revealed to Wilkins, in a way that only the convicting ministry of the Spirit of the living God could, was that the way of the cross provides the lens for life. It defies human wisdom, reveals the source of real power, turns everything upside down, and is the source of the life that is truly life.

B. “You should know about this wisdom of God if you think about it,” Paul writes to the Corinthians. To illustrate, he takes them to their history as recorded by the prophet Isaiah. For it is written, he reminds them: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate” (v. 19, cf. Isa. 29:14). The context here is fascinating. The external threat of the day (8th c. B.C.) was the militant Assyrian Empire which was rising to power in the east. The question forced upon God’s people, Judah, the southern kingdom, and its king, Hezekiah, was whether to trust God’s promise to be with them and protect them, or to strike up an alliance with Egypt, the place, ironically, of their former oppression. The leaders of the day trusted in their own wisdom, and not God’s; they relied on the false refuge of human calculating and deal making. And they paid the price, for their alliance with Egypt so alarmed Assyria that it sparked the invasion Israel sought so hard to avoid. God scolds them in this way (Isa. 30:1-2):

“Woe to the obstinate children,” declares the LORD, “to those who carry out plans that are not mine, forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit, heaping sin upon sin; who go down to Egypt without consulting me; who look to Pharaoh’s protection, to Egypt’s shade for refuge. But Pharaoh’s protection will be to your shame, Egypt’s shade will bring you disgrace.

God’s rescue strategy went on to allow Jerusalem to be besieged and crushed before rescuing it. The defeat ended up becoming a new beginning. It was an event in which a foreshadowing of God’s wisdom, in the cross and resurrection, could be seen. Worth noting is that Hezekiah’s father, Ahaz, had a similar issue (cf. Isa. 7). And the point is that both kings, both father and son, were so impressed with the power of the world that they failed to notice, or to trust, the unexpected and seemingly weak and foolish ways the wisdom of God was leading.

As we think about this in our own day, we the church, Paul writes, have the wisdom of God to proclaim and the way of the cross to live out. One application perhaps is that we as Christians need to ask about the alliances we’ve been entering. Are we trusting God to act, seeking as best as we can to live in the way of the cross? Or, are we looking to the worldly wisdom of various politicians, or business executives, or famous people to somehow fight whatever culture war we may perceive we’re in and hopefully bring God’s kingdom to our land? Paul would warn us that it won’t work that way, that linking our arms and our cause with arrogant, prideful, unethical folk is not the way of God’s kingdom. The best way to fight, the best way to reveal the kingdom, and the best way to woo others to the spring of living water, is the way of the cross. It is the way of kindness and mercy, the way of humility and sacrifice, the way of justice and righteousness. It is the way of offering grace and being instruments of healing and faithful living, in a world that has become filled with fear.

Let us be reminded of, and consider how we might walk in, that way, as we make our way to the table of the Lord together.