

The Imperfect Church – 3  
 The Wise Church  
 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Introduction

A paradox is a statement that seems absurd, going against contemporary wisdom or common sense, yet is proven to be true. Often compared to an oxymoron, it uses contradictory words or ideas to prove larger truths. Some paradoxical statements we are familiar with are:

- Less is more.
- The beginning of the end.
- You make money by spending money.

Paradoxes are powerful literary devices that are found across all forms of literature.

- George Orwell in 1984 – War is peace.
- Shakespeare in Hamlet – I must be cruel to be kind.

TS – In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul will utilize a paradox to communicate the truth of the Gospel. Listen as he brings to light the extreme contradiction between God the Creator and his creation.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 - <sup>18</sup> The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. <sup>19</sup> As the Scriptures say,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise  
 and discard the intelligence of the intelligent.”

<sup>20</sup> So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world’s brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish. <sup>21</sup> Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. <sup>23</sup> So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it’s all nonsense.

<sup>24</sup> But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God’s weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.

<sup>26</sup> Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. <sup>27</sup> Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who

are powerful. <sup>28</sup> God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. <sup>29</sup> As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. <sup>31</sup> Therefore, as the Scriptures say, "If you want to boast, boast only about the Lord."

As we have already seen, and will continue to see, this Corinthian Church is a prideful church. They have been dividing up into factions for the purpose of gaining influence and power. After calling them out for such a grievous sin, Paul will now begin the process of dismantling the pride that is driving, not only this sin of division, but the rest of the sins he will confront over the rest of the letter.

Corinth was the capital city of the largest region of Greece. It was a hub for global trade and a center of global culture. It influenced not only Greece, but the entire Roman Empire. On top of its wealth, trade/commercial importance, and cultural influence, Corinth was known for its intellect and sophistication. I describe it as sophisticated because the Greek word for 'wisdom' that we saw so much in 1 Corinthians 1 is "Sophia."

So sophisticated is Corinth that they were known for hosting a group of philosophers known as the Sophists. Experts in rhetorical persuasion, the Sophists were powerful orators who would command audiences in the thousands. Historians say that when a Sophist would arrive in town, the Roman Senate would suspend its sessions, and those watching the Olympic/Isthmian Games would empty the grand arenas, all flocking to hear the fount of wisdom, spouting all the new ideas from around the world.

These Sophists became the popular stars of their day (think Hollywood elite). This pride of new ideas and influential worldly philosophy was the context that these Corinthian Christians were saved out of. Sadly, this pride of elite worldly wisdom had come to define this church. They looked like, and sounded like, the world around them. This same problem has plagued every church in every age since Corinth. If the church is the "called-out ones" how can we remain distinct from the world we've been called out of? How can we be light in the darkness?

Charles Spurgeon – "I believe that one reason why the church of God at this present moment has so little influence over the world is because the world has so much influence over the church."

Adopting worldly wisdom only makes the church worldly. Paul powerfully confronts this wretchedness with what should really mark the church. It is the cross of Jesus that establishes the identity of the church. This text gives us two reasons why the Cross of Jesus marks the Church:

### 1. THROUGH THE CROSS, GOD CONTRADICTS THE WORLD

v. 18 - <sup>18</sup> The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.

We are introduced to the reality that there are only two groups of people on planet Earth. Those who are headed for destruction (word implies it is spiritual in nature, an eternity apart from God), and those who are being saved. Notice the lack of finality to their descriptions... "headed for destruction" and "being saved." The world is made up of people who are heading in two vastly different directions. One headed for Heaven, the other headed for Hell. The best way to describe these two groups are The World and The Church (those whom God has called out of the world). And these two groups view the Cross in vastly different ways. Those headed for Hell see the cross of Jesus as foolish (Gk. Word *moron*). Utter nonsense. But those headed for Heaven know the cross has saving power. The work Jesus did there has power over death and determines eternal destinations.

Paul will frame up the rest of the chapter between two OT quotations. The first one here is from Isaiah 29. In that chapter, the Kingdom of Judah is under attack and needs help. God has spoken through the Prophet Isaiah for them to trust in, rely upon God's intervention for them. They ignore God's Word and instead make a treaty with the most powerful nation on Earth, the pagan Egypt (the nation where they were once slaves). Uniting with a powerful ally makes sense. It is wise in the world's eyes, an intelligent strategy. Here is God's response:

Isaiah 29:13-14 - <sup>13</sup> And so the Lord says,  
 "These people say they are mine.  
 They honor me with their lips,  
 but their hearts are far from me.  
 And their worship of me  
 is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.  
<sup>14</sup> Because of this, I will once again astound these hypocrites  
 with amazing wonders.  
 The wisdom of the wise will pass away,  
 and the intelligence of the intelligent will disappear."

This is the message that the Corinthian church needed to hear. They were surrounded by worldly wisdom, the intellectual elite of the world. And they were buying into it. They were patterning their lives around it. Their lives made sense to the world around them. But here is the problem...the world cannot understand the Gospel, the message of the cross. It doesn't make sense to them. This very thing that is to define the Church contradicts the world.

1 Corinthians 1:20-23 - <sup>20</sup> So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish. <sup>21</sup> Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. <sup>23</sup> So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.

There is a worldly wisdom that sounds good, sounds right. But God declares it to be moronic, foolish. Think of our world's views on sexuality, gender, abortion...and they are applauded and defended by the world. God stands in direct contradiction to them.

No one can ever know God through human wisdom. No one is wise enough, intelligent enough, good enough to come to a saving knowledge of God on their own. The wisdom of this world is not wise enough. God can only be known (Gk. Word speaks of experiential, relational knowledge) through self-revelation. God is so beyond us that the only way we have any hope of knowing him is if he chooses to reveal himself to us. Through Scripture we can know God. Through Jesus we see who God really is. The cross of Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God's character. And that is not always the most popular message.

v. 23 - <sup>23</sup> So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.

When the Gospel is proclaimed, the religious are offended (Gk. Word is *scandalized*). Why? Because those who think they can earn their way to God hate the Gospel. Because the message of the cross is that you are never good enough. When the Gospel is proclaimed, the Gentiles (Gk. Word *ethnos* – nations) think it is nonsense. For example, when TV host Bill Maher saw the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, his response was, "The thought of someone else cleansing me of my sins is ridiculous. I don't need someone else to cleanse me, I can cleanse myself." The Gospel is nonsense to an

unbelieving world. It's a joke. It is something to be mocked and removed from our culture. Only a moron would believe that.

v. 24-25 - <sup>24</sup> But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.

Ernst Kasemann – "The cross always remains scandal and foolishness for Jew and Gentile, inasmuch as it exposes man's illusion that he can transcend himself and effect his own salvation, that he can all by himself maintain his own strength, his own wisdom, his own piety and his own self-praise even towards God. In the light of the cross God shows all this, and ourselves as well, to be foolish, vain and godless. For everyone is foolish, vain and godless who wants to do, without God and contrary to God, what only God ... can do.... Only the creator can be the creature's salvation, not his own works."<sup>1</sup>

## 2. THROUGH THE CROSS, GOD CHOOSES HIS PEOPLE

After making this life-changing point about the Gospel, he goes on to apply it to the church. This cross that is to define the church does so because it is the very means by which they became the Church.

1 Corinthians 1:26-28 - <sup>26</sup> Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. <sup>27</sup> Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. <sup>28</sup> God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important.

The Church is not some cosmic game of schoolyard kickball and God is one of the team captains who picks all the popular and gifted kids. We were not chosen because of our greatness, but because of God's greatness. L.L. Welborn - "In the cross of Christ God has affirmed nothings and nobodies."<sup>2</sup>

Notice the consequence of that truth:

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Witherington III, [\*Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 118.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, [\*First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 44.

v. 29-31 - <sup>29</sup> As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.  
<sup>30</sup> God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. <sup>31</sup> Therefore, as the Scriptures say, "If you want to boast, boast only about the Lord."

No one gets to brag in God's presence. No one gets to brag about being in God's presence. "God has united you with Christ Jesus." God did that for you. And for those who crave wisdom...we already know him. Jesus is Wisdom personified. We don't need to look to the world around us. We only need to look to Jesus and his revelation of himself in Scripture. We never need to move beyond the glory of the Gospel. Because of the message of the cross, we have a new Standing (Christ made us right with God), a new Status (he made us pure and holy), and a new Security (he freed us from sin – redeemed).

### Conclusion

This is the Gospel. This is the message of the Cross. This marks us as the Church because this makes us the Church. Though the world does not understand, though the world may mock it all as moronic, we know true Wisdom. We know the Gospel's power. We join with Paul's declaration in Romans 1:16 – "For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes."

The best place to end this is where Paul does. Here is the full text from Jeremiah.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 - <sup>23</sup> This is what the Lord says:  
 "Don't let the wise boast in their wisdom,  
     or the powerful boast in their power,  
     or the rich boast in their riches.  
<sup>24</sup> But those who wish to boast  
     should boast in this alone:  
 that they truly know me and understand that I am the Lord  
     who demonstrates unfailing love  
     and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth,  
 and that I delight in these things.  
 I, the Lord, have spoken!