

FAITHFULLY PROCLAIM THE CROSS OF CHRIST

1 ¹⁶I also baptized the household of Stephanas; besides them, I do not remember if I baptized anyone else—¹⁷for Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel; [and to do so] not with a discreet choice of words, so that the cross of Christ would not be deprived of its power. ¹⁸Although the doctrine of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing; to us who are being saved it is the power of God,¹⁹for it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will bring to nothing the intelligence of the intelligent. ²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God turned the wisdom of the world into foolishness? ²¹Since the world did not know God through its wisdom, in His wisdom God was pleased through the foolishness of the preaching to save those who believe. ²²Although the Jews ask for signs and the Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles; ²⁴but for those who are called, (both Jews and Greeks,) Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God—²⁵because the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men. ²⁶[Just] consider your calling, brothers, [consider the fact] that not many of you are wise by human standards, not many are influential, not many are of noble birth. ²⁷On the contrary, God chose the foolish things of the world in order that he might put the wise to shame, and God chose the weak things of the world in order that he might put the strong to shame. ²⁸Indeed, God chose the lowly things of this world and the things that are despised and the things that have no [standing], so that he might reduce to nothing the things that are [highly regarded by the world]. ²⁹[He did so] in order that no one may boast before God. ³⁰It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—righteousness and sanctification and redemption; ³¹in order that it may be just as it has been written, He who boasts, let him boast in the LORD.

2 When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or [human] wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony of God. ²I was determined to know nothing while I was with you, except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling. ⁴And my speech and my preaching were not [characterized] by persuasive wisdom, but by a demonstration of the Spirit and power; ⁵in order that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. (1 Cor. 1:16-2:5)

Introduction

When cable T.V. magnate, Ted Turner, addressed a group of media broadcasters, he told them, “Christianity is a religion for losers.” A few months later, in June of 1990, Turner addressed the American Humanist Association in Orlando, Florida. On that occasion he described Christianity as being “weird.” Turner went on to explain, “[Jesus] had to come down here and suffer and die on the cross, so with his blood our sins would be washed away. Weird, man.” (*WORLD*, 6/16/90, pp. 18-19.) Ted Turner has an accurate understanding of the gospel and of the cross of Christ—but to him the whole thing is “weird” and offensive.

On one occasion, when Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem for the last time, He openly spoke of the cross. Peter, with the best of intentions, took the Lord aside and began to rebuke Him, explaining that such talk was not good for public relations if the Lord Jesus expected to draw a following of disciples.

The doctrine of the cross was as offensive to men of the first century as it is to those in the twentieth or the twenty first century. There was then, as much as there is today, the temptation to tamper with the message of the cross of Christ in order to make it less offensive and more acceptable to the natural man.

The Lord Jesus rebuked Peter for his efforts to promote good public relations at the expense of the cross; and He likewise calls us to be faithful to proclaim the doctrine of the cross today. Let us be faithful to proclaim the cross of Christ, because any tampering with the message of the cross will detract from or even nullify its saving power.

I. Let Us Faithfully Proclaim the Cross of Christ, Even Though It Is an Offense to Human Pride (1:17-25)

Paul testifies that he was sent by Christ to preach the gospel, and to do so *“not with a discreet choice of words,”* so that the cross of Christ would not be deprived of power. The phrase translated, *“a discreet choice of words,”* literally, *“wisdom of words,”* means a careful, wise choice of words; a prudent, discreet selection of just the right words that would be most winsome and appealing to the audience; words that would gain the attention of the audience, words that would win their favor, words that would not cause them to be offended. But Paul was instructed by Christ to shun such words so that the cross of Christ would not be deprived of its power. As the nineteenth-century Christian scholar, Charles Hodge, commented, “Whatever obscures the cross deprives the gospel of its power.”

We, like Paul, must proclaim the message of the cross in a straightforward manner, despite the fact that it is *“foolishness”* to the natural man (vs. 18.) The fundamental reason men reject the cross is their own human pride, as Paul emphasizes in verse 23. The gospel of Christ crucified was to the Jews a stumbling block, or, an offense—was there was the refusal to identify with the shame of the cross. The doctrine of Christ crucified was to the Gentiles a matter of foolishness—on their part, there was the inability to comprehend, and hence to accept, the power of the cross. The question posed in their mind was, “How can this man save us when he could not save himself?” We may take note of the testimony of Hollywood movie producer Steven Spielberg, following the making of the movie, *Schindler’s List*—a story centering on the Nazi extermination of the Jews during World War II. In the face of the Holocaust, Spielberg still insisted that hatred was learned, rather than being innate to man’s nature; to admit that hatred is innate to man would force man to look outside of himself to God and to Christ for salvation, which is something sinful man refuses to even consider doing.

But rather than cater to the demands of the proud, we learn from Scripture, “*God resists the proud*” (Jas. 4:6.) Consequently, His chosen instrument of redemption, the cross of Christ—by which those who humble themselves and believe are saved—is an object of contempt to the proud and is rejected by them. The words of the Psalmist well apply to the proud in their rejection of the cross of Christ: “*let what should have been for their peace become a snare for them*” (Psl. 69:22b, in the Hebrew Bible.) Consider the example of the proud Syrian general Naaman, who, seeking deliverance from his leprosy, had to humble himself in order to receive the blessing of being cured:

Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed. ¹¹But Naaman went away angry and said, I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of Jehovah his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. ¹²Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be cleansed? So he turned and went off in a rage. ¹³Naaman’s servants went to him and said, My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, Wash and be cleansed! ¹⁴So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy. (2 Kgs. 5:10-14)

We, like Paul, must proclaim the message of the cross in a straightforward manner, “*because the foolishness of God is wiser than men*” (vs. 25.) In verse 20 the Apostle Paul challenges the great intellectuals of the world to come forward and provide a “working solution to man’s great problem.” Paul’s rhetorical questions, “*Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher?*” serve to demonstrate that the wise men of the world do not have the answers to the great dilemma that confronts fallen man, namely, his sin. The British preacher, Martin Lloyd-Jones, commented,

I was reading recently a review of a book by a certain Lewis Mumford, called, *The Condition of Man*—a very able and remarkable book ... for its description of our age and our period. And yet I must agree with the criticism passed upon that book by the reviewer: It is a wonderful diagnosis, but you go and ask Mr. Mumford for a solution and he just hasn’t a solution to give ... Again, if you read the new book on philosophy by Bertrand Russell, you will find he says the same thing. He confesses quite frankly that philosophy cannot deal with the problems of mankind. He does not know the answer; he can describe the situation, but he cannot solve the problem. There is no hope and no light in the world today apart from that which is found in the Scriptures. (Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Second Peter*, p. 119)

Then Paul asks, *“Has not God turned the wisdom of the world into foolishness?”* In other words, God has demonstrated that the wisdom of the world is foolishness, and He has done so by allowing the world to pursue its own chosen course only to arrive at a place of failure and despair. Writing to the British philosopher, Bertrand Russell in 1922, upon reviewing Russell’s book, *The Problem of China*, the novelist Joseph Conrad commented, “I have never been able to find in any man’s book or any man’s talk anything convincing enough to stand up for a moment against my deep-seated sense of fatality governing this man-inhabited world ... The only remedy for Chinamen and for the rest of us is the change of hearts” (Paul Johnson, *Modern Times*, Harper & Row, New York, 1983, pp. 12-13.)

But the Apostle Paul goes on to assure us, *“the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men”* (vs. 25.) Man in his wisdom could not provide a way in which God’s justice could be satisfied and at the same time God could extend mercy and forgiveness to sinners and reconcile them to Himself—but God in His wisdom has provided the solution: *“God presented [Christ Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement ... ²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice ... so that he might be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus”* (Rom. 3:25-26.) Man by his own human strength cannot begin to provide release from the clutches of sin and the devil, let alone attain the heights of heaven’s holiness—but God by His strength has provided the victory: referring to the cross of Christ, the Apostle Paul writes, *“having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by it”* (Col. 2:15.) The Lord Jesus declares, *“I tell you the truth, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed”* (Jn. 8:34-36.)

Let us be faithful to proclaim the cross of Christ, even though it is a great offense to human pride.

II. Let Us Faithfully Proclaim the Cross of Christ, Because God Uses It to Save His People (1:24-31)

The gospel of Christ crucified is a stumbling block (or, an offense) to the Jews, and is foolishness to the Gentiles, but it is the power of God and the wisdom of God to *“those who are called”* (vs. 23-24.)

Through the preaching of the gospel Christ Jesus the Savior is freely and sincerely offered to all, but men by nature spurn the shame and the weakness of the crucified Savior. It is only when God sovereignly issues His divine call that a man responds to Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to recognize in Christ the power and the wisdom of God; it is the Holy Spirit who compels us to come to Christ and believe in Him, committing our heart and life into His hands. Consider the following illustration of the divine calling: Your son has run away from home. Out of love for him, you go searching the streets of the city. You finally find him in the company of his friends standing on the street corner in a

dangerous part of the city. You tell him to come home, and you invite all his friends to come along. But every one of them, including your son, rejects your offer and turns away. At this point, motivated by love for your son, you grab him by the shoulder and inform him, “Your friends may do as they please, but you are my son and you are coming home with me.” The gospel is freely and sincerely offered to all; at the same time, God sovereignly calls His children and compels them to respond.

In verse 30 we are confronted with the ultimate source and reason for our salvation—the power and the will of God: *“It is because of him [God the Father] that you are in Christ.”* If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior it is because God has graciously granted to you saving faith in His Son and has brought you into a living relationship with Him, note Ephesians 2:8, *“by grace you have been saved through faith; this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.”* Consequently, as verse 31 indicates, all the glory and praise and thanksgiving is due to God. We cannot congratulate ourselves on our good choice; we must humbly thank God for His mercy; as the Apostle James informs us, *“By his own volition he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we may be a kind of first fruits of what he created”* (Jas. 1:18.)

Let us be faithful to proclaim the cross of Christ, because that is what God uses to save His people.

III. Let Us Faithfully Proclaim the Cross of Christ, Relying Solely upon the Working of the Holy Spirit (2:1-5)

When he came to the great city of Corinth—with all of its intellectual centers, paganism and decadence—the Apostle Paul resolutely determined to do nothing other than preach the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified (2 Cor. 2:2.) The fact that Paul **resolutely determined** to preach in this way reveals the strong temptation to do otherwise. Paul sensed the temptation to tone down the message and eliminate the reference to the cross of Christ in order to make the gospel palatable and attractive, engaging and convincing, to his hearers.

In verse 3 the great apostle describes his emotional state as he ventured to preach the gospel to the Corinthians. He was with them in *“weakness”*—there was a great sense of his own inadequacy, there was no sense of self-confidence and self-sufficiency. He was with them in *“fear”*—there was great apprehension that both he and his message would be rejected, ridiculed and spurned. He was among them *“with much trembling”*—the Apostle Paul’s preaching of the gospel in the great cosmopolitan city of Corinth was quite literally a traumatic experience, the Greek word, τρόμος, rendered “trembling,” is the Greek term from which we derive the word “trauma.”

Despite his emotional condition, when he spoke, his preaching was with *“a demonstration of the [Holy] Spirit and power”* (vs. 4.) His own human inadequacy

and frailty were overwhelmingly counterbalanced and offset by the presence and the operation in power of the Holy Spirit. As he preached, people were aware that they were encountering the presence and the power of God, that this was the very Word of God: the Word about God, the Word from God, and the Word by God. Note: This supernatural and divine phenomenon was especially apparent and gripping to God's elect who were in the audience; and they were compelled by the Holy Spirit to respond in faith to the preaching of the gospel. In some way we may compare it to the phenomenon of which Daniel speaks with regard to the revelation that was granted to him: *"I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; the men who were with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves"* (Dan. 10:7.) All were aware of the divine presence of God, but only Daniel was able to receive and comprehend the vision being imparted by God. In the same way, it was only those God had ordained to be saved who were directly confronted with the life-giving word of the gospel and were moved to believe. The rest of the audience may, or may not, have been so acutely aware of divine truth of the gospel, although a majority of them no doubt were convicted by the preaching of the word, but resisted it, rather than come to the light.

Verse 5 explains the reason for all these things—namely, the firm resolve to preach nothing except Christ and Him crucified, the apostle's acute sense of his own human frailty, and the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit: *"in order that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God."* As Paul would inform the Romans, *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, for the Jew first, but also for the Greek"* (Rom. 1:16.)

Let us be faithful to proclaim the cross of Christ, relying solely upon the working of the Holy Spirit to do so. Let us pray that the proclamation of the gospel would be as it was with the Apostle Paul when he preached in the city of Thessalonica; he testifies, *"our gospel did not come to you only with words, but also with power, and by the Holy Spirit and deep conviction"* (1 Thess. 1:5.) The Greek term, πληροφορία, rendered, "deep conviction," also bears the meaning, "certainty," or, "assurance." In other words, there was the undeniable conviction that they were being confronted with the Word of God.

Conclusion

The doctrine of Christ's cross was an offense to the men of the first century and it continues to be an offense to the men of the twenty-first century. This creates as great a temptation for us as it did for Peter to tamper with the message of the cross in order to make it less offensive and more acceptable to the natural man. But let us remember that our Lord rebuked Peter for his efforts to promote good public relations at the expense of the cross. Likewise, our Lord calls us to be faithful to proclaim to perishing sinners the doctrine of His cross in all of its unadulterated saving power.

