**The Church at Corinth**

**A Church Facing Inner Problems – #4**

**The Folly of the Proclamation of the Gospel**

**1 Corinthians 1:18-31 – Part Two**

**1 Corinthians 1:19-29**

***19*** *For it stands written,*

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,*

*and the learning of the learned I will confound.”*

***20*** *Where is the sage? Where is the scribe? Where is the inquirer of this age? Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish?* ***21*** *For since, in God’s wisdom, the world did not come to know God through its own wisdom, God was pleased to save those who have faith through (despite) the folly of the proclamation (what was preached).*

***22*** *Whereas Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,* ***23*** *we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,* ***24*** *but for those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

***25*** *For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.* ***26*** *Look now at your own calling, brothers. For not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were powerful; not many were of noble birth.*

***27*** *But God chose what is foolish in the world in order to shame the wise, and what is weak in the world to shame the strong.* ***28*** *God chose what is lowly and despised in the world, things that do not exist, to nullify the things that do,* ***29*** *so that no human being might boast in God’s sight.*

**Paul Appeals to the OT**

Verse 19 – *For it stands written* ….

Literally, “*for it has been written*” i.e., in Scripture. Paul often explicitly introduces an OT quotation (sometimes with “as”: 1:31; 2:9; 3:19; 2 Cor 8:15; 9:9; Rom 1:17; 2:24; 3:4, 10; 4:17; 8:36; 9:13, 33; 10:15; 11:8, 26; 12:19; 14:11; 15:3, 9, 21).

Similar to this passage, in 1 Corinthians 14:21 Paul has an OT scriptural citation (LXX, Isaiah 29:14), “*I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the learning of the learned I will confound.*” Paul is convinced that the warning that God expressed of old is still valid even for Christians (see 9:10; Rom 4:23): God will confound the wisdom of the world. This introductory quotation in Ch 1 finds its counterpart in 1 Corinthians 3:19–20, where Paul says, “*the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight*,” and he there quotes Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11 to strengthen his argument further.

**Human Wisdom**

God will sit in judgment and bring to naught both Sophia “wisdom” and “intelligence, learning”, so highly esteemed among those who now consider the message of the cross to be foolishness. Why will this take place? Because of what’s wrong with human wisdom.

1. Very often, human wisdom ignores the weak and not only does not offer them any help but very often crushes them. So the wisdom of the world works for the able and the strong.
2. Human wisdom’s foundation is the use of power, but this power is for the able ones.
3. Throughout human history, human wisdom has operated by dividing the human society into masters and slaves in the old Roman Style and now into various forms of masters and others who are given fewer shares according to their intelligence and performance.

**God’s Wisdom**

1. God is the Creator of all. He created us different but treats us with the same love. In the NT, sinners and righteous are loved with the same love. There are no classes but there are different gifts. Hence no one has a base for power.
2. Because God is love, his wisdom operates with love, he lifts up the fallen, heal the broken, free the captive, and open the eyes of the blind, (see, the message of the Incarnate Wisdom in (Luke 4:16-19).
3. The Wisdom of God is his redeeming actions, but human history hardly knows how or even why anyone should be redeemed.

**Sage, Scribe, Inquirer**

Who are the sage, the Scribe, and the Inquirer of this age? Let’s look at the historical background of the uselessness of the wisdom of the world.

1. In verse 20 Paul asks, “*Where is the sage? Where is the scribe? Where is the inquirer of this age?*” It seems that Isaiah 19:12 was in the mind of Paul, *“Where now are your wise men?”* In Isaiah, these words were said about the uselessness of the Egyptian princes of Zoan, who were the wise counselors of the Pharaoh. The last phrase, “*of this age*,” is to be understood with all three individuals, not just the “inquirer.” It will turn up again in 1 Corinthians 2:6.
2. The Wise are those in the schools of Philosophy, but the Scribes are those teachers of the Law, the learned man among Jews. The “expert interpreter” of the Mosaic Law (see, Matt 2:4; Mark 12:38; Acts 23:9]), and the “Inquirer” have often been taken to be a pejorative term, “disputant, debater.” But this name also can mean a seeker after truth. It was so used in the Greek philosophical and patristic tradition and often meant a Greek philosopher. In the Greek philosophical tradition, the verb “to debate” or “to inquire” commonly meant “join in examining” (Plato, Cratylus 384c; Meno 80d, 90b). Hence came the noun denoting the “searcher, student,” who appeared in Acts 28:29 and according to the Latin Text of the Vulgate, those who were “seriously arguing among themselves.” Latin Christian writers Tertullian and Ambrose translated the noun as the “inquirer.”

1. The futility of such learning in view of “the message of the cross” is due to the fact that the systems of Philosophy and the use of power can’t accommodate the “cross as the power of God.”
2. We might assume Paul was actually putting forward the role of a “fool” from the popular theater and mime, which was a form of ancient Greek and Roman theatrical entertainment in which familiar characters and situations were farcically portrayed on stage, often with coarse dialogue and ludicrous actions, so that “folly” would be best understood as a designation of an attitude and behavior of a particular social type, the lower class buffoon, who would then stand in contrast with the eloquent and sophisticated. This may be so, and the next words of Paul himself may support this: “*Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish?* (Some old Greek manuscripts and others read “the wisdom of this world”). Paul says “*make foolish*,” taken from the LXX Isa 19:11, where the “counsel” of Egyptian sages “*will be made foolish*.” The same idea is formulated a bit differently in Romans 1:22, “*Pretending to be wise, they became fools*,” or “*they were made foolish*.” Or also, “*Every human being has become a fool without knowledge*” (Jer 10:14). God’s power in the OT in saving Israel was not that of an army. In the struggle with Pharaoh, God defeated the Egyptian army by using the power of creation, the water of the Red Sea, and the other natural powers in the Ten Plagues against Egypt. So “*the wisdom of the world is folly*” because even physically it cannot stand up and fight the Creator of the Universe.

1. The Cosmos appears as a synonym for “this age” (verse 20) and has to be understood as the “world” that has been subjected to man (Ps 8), and man has turned the Cosmos and made it his kingdom.

**The Wisdom of the World**

In the Bible man was created to be the little god of the universe according to the story of creation (Gen 1:26-27). The same is retold in thanksgiving in Psalm 8:5; God made man lower than elohim (אֱלֹהִ֔ים), lower than god. Man acquired wisdom, and this “human wisdom” in 1 Corinthians 2:5 is what man has learned within his fellowship or without his fellowship with God. This human wisdom can be in harmony with the goal of God’s creation or against the goal of his creation. Please notice that “the utterance of wisdom” is among the spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:8). The gifts of the Spirit are given to us because of the mixed nature of our wisdom.

**The Plight of the World – Failing to Know God**

This word “cosmos” does not mean the material world, but the inhabited world. In verse 21 Paul says, “*For since, in God’s wisdom, the world did not come to know God, through wisdom, through its own wisdom, or by way of wisdom.”* This clause is not easily rendered because of the prepositions “through” and “by”. Paul, in Romans 1:19-23, discusses the failure of the pagan world to come to a proper knowledge of God in spite of the revelation of the power of God in the Universe having been made evident, thanks to what can be known about God, ever since the creation of the world. From Romans we can tell why humans failed to know God:

1. The darkness of the human mind was and is due to evil. Evil has been and continues to be the greatest cause of confusion of knowledge. We like to do what we desire regardless. Our minds and lusts were and still are in constant war or disharmony.
2. How does evil darken our minds? The old Christian answer is that:
3. Evil turns us towards our being,
4. Evil creates its own code of behavior,
5. As evil turns us towards our own being and creates its own code, “evil can no longer consider what is good and smile on the good, for the good is totally unknown and even hostile to human lusts.”

**What is the Wisdom of God?**

In the book of Psalms, such as Psalm 104, wisdom is God’s wise plan in caring for creation. The Hebrew OT never used the Greek word for “Universe.” The world, even in later rabbinic writings, was known as creation. The OT does not lead any reader, as it never led any Jew, to any form of Deism. The wisdom of God in the OT has three qualities:

1. It reflects God’s faithfulness to keep the promises.
2. It has his mercy, or ***chesed***, so much that God demands a dialogue with sinful Israel (Isa 1:18) and there is a whole book called the prophecy of Hosea that is a call for the return of the unfaithful Israel.
3. More important is the fact that the wisdom of God is that of the wisdom Redeemer who acts not according to the Law but very often according to the Covenant.

Paul appeals to this wisdom and says that the wise God saw fit that the world of men should not come to know him through its own wisdom because the wisdom of the world is totally different

**The Folly of the Preaching (the *Kerygma*)**

God was pleased to save those who have faith through the folly of the proclamation. Literally “those believing,” i.e., those who respond with faith to the preaching of the Christian gospel about God’s work in Christ crucified, as in Romans 10:8–10. “The folly of the proclamation” corresponds to “God’s wisdom” in the preceding verse. It is called “folly” because of its content: the proclamation makes known “the message of the cross” (1:18). For the first time, Paul mentions kerygma, “proclamation,” the technical term for what apostles and early Christian announced to their contemporaries, as they preached: “Jesus is Lord” (12:3; Rom 10:9). It will appear again in 1 Corinthians 2:4; 15:14). Paul, however, now calls that kerygma “folly” as in verse 18.

**Three Parts of the Preaching**

1. God’s good pleasure to make use of such folly to confound “the wisdom of the world” and to save those who are believers.
2. It is “God’s pleasure,” and this word “pleasure” must be remembered as God’s free “resolution” to use what is indeed folly to prove the futility of the wisdom of the world, for this wisdom can’t save sinners or communicate divine grace.
3. “The folly of the proclamation” is nothing less than “the wisdom of God,” the way God deals wisely with the world of humanity, not only revealing to it something about Himself, but also communicating the means of salvation.

**Have We Kept the Folly of the Cross?**

Throughout our history, our great theologians, since St Anselm of Canterbury, (1033 – 1109), tried to create a good rational presentation of the death of our Lord on the cross. His book, known by its Latin name Cur Deus Homo, literally means “Why the God-Man?” Anselm faced the rise of rational attempts to give Christian Theology a solid philosophical foundation to answer such questions as “Why did the Son of God die on the cross?” Anselm put forth what is now known in theology as the Satisfaction Theory of the Atonement. He introduced the idea of *satisfaction* as a rational organizing value to explain the divine love (John 3:16). It went like this.

1. Sin is an injury to the honor of God.
2. This injury can’t be cured expect by *punishment*.
3. God has offered an alternative of satisfaction and equally fulfilling the requirements of justice thus opening the way to the assertion of punishment as the true satisfaction of the law.
4. In his view, God’s offended honor and dignity could only be satisfied by the sacrifice of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Anselm undertook to explain the rational necessity of the Christian mystery of the atonement. Anselm’s approach rests on three positions—first, that satisfaction is necessary on account of God's honor and justice; second, that such satisfaction can be given only by the peculiar person of the God-man Jesus; and, third, that such satisfaction is really given by this God-man's voluntary death.

**Our Futile Attempts to Avoid the Folly of the Cross**

1. Our rational attempts come from our systems and from our definitions and values. God’s wisdom and the cross don’t belong to the ordinary human way of life or even the extra-ordinary human way. This does not make the preaching of the cross impossible. The cross strips us from all our rational reasons for the death of the Son of God for sinners.
2. Death to bring life is folly to the human mind. Although we greet with honor our dead heroes, because we die to secure our freedom. Nevertheless none of them died to reconcile us with God or to secure eternal life or healing and freedom from the burden of sins. This Paradigm is close to Christian thinking but is still not able to preach the extreme love of God.

**The Scandal of the Cross**

Verse 22 – *Whereas Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom*.

Paul looks at the inhabited world at that time and it was made of this pair, Jew(s) and Greek(s). Both rejected the Revelation of God in Christ (Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 1:23–24; 10:32; 12:13; Rom 1:16; 2:9, 10; 3:9; 10:12). Although Paul distinguishes Jews and Greeks, he finds that they are alike in their reaction to the Revelation of God in Christ, in that both are demanding proof.

**Proofs Come from Our Old Life**

1. Proof, for the Jews, has to be a sign. They made this demand to Jesus himself (Mark 8:11; Matt 12:38; Luke 11:16; cf. Matt 16:1–4; John 6:30).
2. For the Greeks, proof is something wise in the sense of the philosophical. Herodotus (Hist. 4.77.1) knows the proverb, “All Greeks are busily engaged in the pursuit of all wisdom”; Aristotle (Nic. Ethics 6.7.2): “It is clear that wisdom is the most precise of the modes of understanding”; Aelius Aristides (1.330): “The Athenians are the leaders in all education and wisdom.”

1. Our old life normally rejects the new form of life. But Paul does not yield, “*we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block (a scandal) to Jews and folly to Gentiles. This “we” for Paul is the “we” of those “who are being saved*” (verse 18). The saved do not succumb, because their trust is neither:
   1. In a sign that speaks of God’s power, or
   2. In a philosophical system.

Christians maintain their faith in “Christ crucified,”

**The Cross: Why Not Signs or Systems?**

1. The cross is about an inner change of our life. In the words of Paul, that change is crucifixion with Christ and giving up the old life. So, what can signs do in bringing a change and in giving up the old life?
2. The same has to be said about any system, whatever this system may be. Systems can’t bring life or change humanity. No system was able up till now to penetrate the human heart and change it to the opposite.
3. The message of the cross, the action of the cross, was the “death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). Paul says he can’t but boast “*save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*” (Gal 6:14). The consequence is that the believing Christian knows that he or she is “*co-crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*” (Gal 2:20). For the Christian “*always carries in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies*” (2 Cor 4:10).
4. To be crucified literally is to be “fastened to a cross” and this is how Greek historians and others who mention crucifixion (Polybius, Hist. 1.86.4; Diodorus Siculus, Bibl. Hist. 16.61.2; Epictetus, Diss. 2.2.20; Josephus, Ant. 2.5.4 §77; 17.10.10 §295). Paul is “fastened to the scandal” which is the word used in Greek ***skandalon*** and it is more than just “a stumbling block,” i.e., “the stumbling block” of the cross or rather its “scandal” (Gal 5:11). As Paul puts it in Galatians 3:13, Christ became a “curse” of the law, an allusion to Deuteronomy 21:23, which says that a “*hanged man is accursed by God.*” In the Roman period of Palestine, that saying of Deuteronomy was understood to refer to crucifixion (Josephus, Ant. 13.14.2 §380; J.W. 1.4.5 §§93–98). Hence the crucified Christ could be seen as accursed, and thus a stumbling block.

**The Folly for the Greeks is the Opposite of Wisdom**

Lucian of Samosata (a [Cynic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynicism_(philosophy)) [philosopher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosopher), 120–180?), mocked Christians: “they worship that crucified sophist himself and live according to his laws” (*De morte Peregrini* 13; the title of this book means the death of Peregrini which is a fictional person called also by Lucian Proteus, 13). Jesus died a death well known in the Roman world as the slave’s punishment (M. Hengel, Crucifixion, 51–63).

**The Scandal and the Folly**

1. The cross always remains a scandal and foolishness not only for Jew and Gentile but also for all humanity because the cross exposes man’s illusion that humans can save themselves from death and from inner decay.
2. Here the cross is the challenge to individualism and personal disputes. It is the “Castle and the Rock of True Saving Love”. At the cross there are no arguments, to love and to forgive is not an option but is a necessity.

**A Note from Philemon**

In our churches, the cross will be always a challenge to everything we say, or do. The cross is like a sharp knife that goes deep into what we call love to show us all the rotten hidden parts of this love. If anything goes wrong (*i.e., we have an inclination toward evil*) in our life or in the church, this says one thing: that the cross is not deep enough or absent from our life in spite of the fact that it may be seen in the building (*refers to the crosses that appear on church buildings*). Lord have mercy if we deviate from your love and your wisdom.

No date

***Pope’s Notes***

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