

THE CROSS AND CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

LEADERSHIP LESSONS
FROM 1 CORINTHIANS

D. A. CARSON



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Preface

For too long, many evangelicals have viewed the cross exclusively as the means by which God in Christ Jesus achieved our redemption. Of course, no Christian would want to minimize the centrality of the cross in God's redemptive purposes. But if we view it as the means of our salvation and nothing more, we shall overlook many of its functions in the New Testament. In particular, so far as this study is concerned, we shall fail to see how the cross stands as the test and the standard of all vital Christian ministry. The cross not only establishes what we are to preach, but how we are to preach. It prescribes what Christian leaders must be and how Christians must view Christian leaders. It tells us how to serve and draws us onward in discipleship until we understand what it means to be world Christians.

The content of the five chapters of this book was first prepared as a series of four talks (chapters 3 and 4 were developed from one) for the International Council of Accrediting Agencies (ICAA), an affiliate of the World Evangelical Fellowship. The ICAA coordinates several regional accrediting agencies whose purpose is the promotion of high-quality theological education in evangelical institutions around the world.

The series of talks was then revised and presented afresh at the quadrennial world congress of the International Federation of Evangelical Students (IFES). Representatives attended from 108 or 109 countries. It was an enormous privilege to try to expound God's Word to them. In countless private conversations, I learned a great deal from these brothers and sisters in Christ, and I am grateful to God for their steadfastness, zeal, and unassuming leadership.

What you have before you has been revised once again, this time to accommodate the printed page. Although the form of these chapters is an exposition of parts of 1 Corinthians, my concern goes far beyond antiquarian interest. The message of these sections from 1 Corinthians must be learned afresh by every generation of Christians, or the gospel will be sidelined by assorted fads.

It is now commonplace to confess that evangelicalism is fragmenting. To the extent that this is true, it is utterly imperative that we self-consciously focus on what is central—on the gospel of Jesus Christ. That means we must resolve “to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2), in exactly the same way that Paul made that resolution. This will shape our vision of ministry as much as it will shape our grasp of the centrality of the gospel.

I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude to Baker Book House for maintaining its interest in this series of basic biblical expositions. Is there anything more important than learning to think God’s thoughts after him?

Soli Deo gloria.

1

The Cross and Preaching

1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5

¹⁸For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will
frustrate.”

²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For 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. ²²Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the

wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

²⁶Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

¹When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved 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. ⁴My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

What would you think if a woman came to work wearing earrings stamped with an image of the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb dropped over Hiroshima?

What would you think of a church building adorned with a fresco of the massed graves at Auschwitz?

Both visions are grotesque. They are not only intrinsically abhorrent, but they are shocking because of powerful cultural associations.

The same sort of shocked horror was associated with *cross* and *crucifixion* in the first century. Apart from the emperor's explicit sanction, no Roman citizen could be put to death by this means. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves, aliens, barbarians. Many thought it was not something to be talked about in polite

company. Quite apart from the wretched torture inflicted on those who were executed by hanging from a cross, the cultural associations conjured up images of evil, corruption, abysmal rejection.

Yet today, crosses adorn our buildings and letterheads, grace our bishops, shine from lapels, and dangle from our ears—and no one is scandalized. It is this cultural distance from the first century that makes it so hard for us to feel the compelling irony of 1 Corinthians 1:18: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Yet this cultural distance must be bridged. We must return again and again to the cross of Jesus Christ if we are to take the measure of our Christian living, our Christian service, our Christian ministry.

To begin at the beginning, I want to trace the place of the cross in Christian preaching and Christian proclamation. It will be helpful to follow the theme in three parts, corresponding to the three principal paragraphs in our biblical text.

The Message of the Cross (1:18–25)

Paul has already criticized the Corinthians for their divisive spirit. One party says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; yet another, probably the most sanctimonious of the lot, “I follow Christ” (1:11–12). Both of Paul’s letters to the Corinthians demonstrate that believers in that city were constantly tempted to attach themselves to strong leaders and then look down on others. Fascinated by the rhetoric of learned scholars of their day, the Corinthians were sometimes more impressed by form and show than by content and truth. They loved “words of human wisdom” (1:17)—literally, “wisdom of word,” the wit and eloquence that neatly packaged more than one school of thought in first-century Greece.

But while many siren voices told people what to believe and how to live, eloquently appealing all the while to the “wisdom of word,” Paul simply resolved to proclaim the gospel (1:17), “the message of the cross” (1:18). All his focus is on the content of his message. God was pleased to save those who believe “through the

foolishness of what was preached” (1:21). It is the content of what is preached that Paul here emphasizes, not the act of preaching (as some versions suggest: e.g., “the foolishness of preaching” [ΚΙΥ]).

Paul delineates two critical features in this message of the cross:

The Message of the Cross, by God’s Determination, Divides the Human Race Absolutely (1:18–21)

The ancient world deployed various polarities for describing humanity: Romans and barbarians, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free. But Paul here sets forth the only polarity that is of ultimate importance: he distinguishes between those who are perishing and those who are being saved. The dividing line between these two groups is the message of the cross: “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1:18).

Indeed, Paul emphasizes that this fundamental distinction arises from God’s stated purposes: “For it is written,” Paul writes in verse 19, and then cites Scripture. God has already declared himself on this question, so for Paul it is settled.

The Scripture passage he cites is Isaiah 29:14: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” In other words, the message of the cross is nothing other than God’s way of doing what he said he would do: by the cross, God sets aside and shatters all human pretensions to strength and wisdom.

This is a central theme of Scripture. God made us to gravitate toward him, to acknowledge with joy and obedience that he is the center of all, that he alone is God. The heart of our wretched rebellion is that each of us wants to be number one. We make ourselves the center of all our thoughts and hopes and imaginings. This vicious lust to be first works its way outward not only in hatred, war, rape, greed, covetousness, malice, bitterness, and much more, but also in self-righteousness, self-promotion, manufactured religions, and domesticated gods.

We ruefully acknowledge how self-centered we are after we have had an argument with someone. Typically, we mentally conjure up a rerun of the argument, thinking up all the things

we could have said, all the things we should have said. In such reruns, we always win. After an argument, have you ever conjured up a rerun in which you lost?

Our self-centeredness is deep. It is so brutally idolatrous that it tries to domesticate God himself. In our desperate folly we act as if we can outsmart God, as if he owes us explanations, as if we are wise and self-determining while he exists only to meet our needs.

But this God says, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Indeed, the point has already been made implicitly in verse 18. One might have expected Paul to say, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the *wisdom* of God." Instead, he insists it is "the *power* of God." Of course, he will later say that the gospel is also God's wisdom (1:24), but he starts off on a different note. This is not a slip on Paul's part; the point is crucial. Paul does not want the Corinthians to think that the gospel is nothing more than a philosophical system, a supremely wise system that stands over against the folly of others. It is far more: where human wisdom utterly fails to deal with human need, God himself has taken action. We are impotent when it comes to dealing with our sin and being reconciled to God, but where we are impotent God is powerful. Human folly and human wisdom are equally unable to achieve what God has accomplished in the cross. The gospel is not simply good advice, nor is it good news about God's power. The gospel is God's power to those who believe. The place where God has supremely destroyed all human arrogance and pretension is the cross.

Paul drives the point home with three stinging rhetorical questions:

"Where is the wise man?" (1:20). In first-century Corinth, "wisdom" was not understood to be practical skill in living under the fear of the Lord (as it frequently is in Proverbs), nor was it perceived to be some combination of intuition, insight, and people smarts (as it frequently is today in the West). Rather, wisdom was a public philosophy, a well-articulated world-view that made sense of life and ordered the choices, values, and priorities of those who adopted it. The "wise man," then, was someone who

adopted and defended one of the many competing public world-views. Those who were “wise” in this sense might have been Epicureans or Stoics or Sophists or Platonists, but they had this in common: they claimed to be able to “make sense” out of life and death and the universe.

An organizing system, a coherent world-view, conveys a sense of power. If you can explain life, you remain in control of it. The Greeks were renowned for their pursuit of coherent systems of thought that ordered their world. In short, they pursued “wisdom.”

But Paul’s rhetorical question asks, in effect, which of these public systems of thought disclosed the gospel? Which “wise man” discerned God’s marvelous plan of redemption?

In the light of the cross, how well do the raucous appeals of competing public philosophies stand up? What place does the cross have in communism? What place does the cross have in capitalism? Does systematic hedonism lead anyone to the cross? How about dogmatic pluralism? Will secular humanism lead anyone to the most astonishing act of divine self-disclosure that has ever occurred—the cross of Christ?

Does the elevation of the virtues of democracy lead men and women to the cross? In America, the founding fathers conceived of democracy as a way of establishing accountability by restricting power. If the populace as a whole did not like the executive, legislative, or judicial branches of government, the ballot box provided a means of turfing them out. Strangely, modern politicians speak of “the wisdom of the American people,” as if special insight resides in the masses. That was not the perception of the founding fathers; it is certainly not a Christian evaluation. Doubtless, democracy is the best form of government where the populace is reasonably literate and shares many common values, but even under these conditions the majority vote does not always display great wisdom. It is the best way to limit power and make government more or less responsive; it is not the best way of determining right and wrong, truth and falsehood, good and bad. Does democracy itself lead anyone to the cross? Is it not always wrong to equate “the American way,” or, more broadly, any democratic system, with the gospel?

Paul's point is that no public philosophy, no commonly accepted "wisdom," can have enduring significance if its center is not the cross. Whatever the merits or the demerits of these various systems, they exhaust their resources on merely superficial levels. They do not reconcile men and women to the living God, and nothing is more important than that. They cannot uncover God's wisdom in the cross, and if that is hidden all other "wisdom" is foolish. Where is the wise man?

"Where is the scholar?" (1:20). The rendering *scholar* is misleading. *Scholar* suggests an academic, perhaps a very gifted one. The Greek word *grammateus* used here was not used in Greek culture to denote any kind of advanced scholar. What Paul has in mind is the use of the term among Greek-speaking Jews: the *grammateus* was the "scribe," the expert in the law of God, the person knowledgeable in biblical heritage and in all the tradition that flowed from it. Thus, in his first two rhetorical questions Paul anticipates both the Greeks who look for wisdom and the Jews who seek miraculous signs (1:22).

Paul's point here, then, is that theologians, biblical experts, ethicists, and the ancient equivalent of ecclesiastics fared no better than the "wise man." None of them had developed a system where the cross stands at the very center; none of them had anticipated "good news" from God that would make much of the odious death of the long-awaited Messiah. With even less excuse, our generation multiplies religious sentiment long on "self-fulfillment" and "personal need" and painfully short of thoughtful examination of what it cost Almighty God to pursue rebellious human beings and win them to himself.

"Where is the philosopher of this age?" (1:20). The word rendered "philosopher" might more literally be translated "debater" or "orator." But in Greek culture rhetoric was so highly regarded that the best public philosophers were almost inevitably gifted and trained rhetoricians. To them, form was as important as content.

But where were these philosophers and debaters when Jesus was dying on the cross? How well did their infatuation with form prepare them to follow one who never danced to faddish tunes? No matter how celebrated they were as they mastered the media of their day and earned sheaves of laurels for their brilliant per-

formances, they were blind and lost when it came to what is of transcendental importance.

The plain fact of the matter is that in the cross God has “made foolish the wisdom of the world” (1:20). Paul does not merely mean that God made the world’s wisdom appear to be foolish. What he says is far stronger: God has made foolish the wisdom of the world. He has reduced the vaunted wisdom of the world to folly. He has pricked its pretensions and established its foolishness. How has God done this?

In the first place, Paul says, the utter bankruptcy of all the world’s efforts to know God was part of God’s wise design. It was “in the wisdom of God” that “the world through its wisdom did not know him” (1:21). Not only did the wise and the scholars and the philosophers fail to understand, God in his all-wise providence actually worked it out that way. Their failures are thoroughly blameworthy; their ignorance of God and their endless, self-centered preoccupation are culpable. Nevertheless, no evil, certainly not theirs, can escape the bounds of God’s sovereign providence—and it is God himself who ensures that the world in its wisdom does not know him. It is not hard to see why: in this fallen order, human “wisdom” (in the sense already described) is deeply idolatrous. How can idolatrous attempts to domesticate God be rewarded with deepening knowledge of the Almighty? It could never be! God himself has ensured that it cannot be. And thus God himself has established the utter folly of this world’s wisdom.

There is a second way in which God has “made foolish the wisdom of the world.” Granted that through God’s wise providence the world has not known him, God determined that some men and women would come to know him—but through a means utterly unexpected and unforeseen by the “wise” people of the world. “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1:21).

We need to think about this statement very carefully. The New International Version’s translation here is basically right: God determined to save those who believe “through the foolishness of what was preached,” not “by the foolishness of preaching” (KJV)—as if there were something inherently transforming in the act of preaching. The focus, as we have seen, is

on the content of the preaching, not the form.¹ The content of “what was preached” Paul goes on to stipulate in verse 23, still to be explored. Quite simply, it is “Christ crucified.” That notion is not something that the world, despite its vaunted wisdom, would ever have thought up. But God abases the world’s pretensions still more; he determines that the message of the cross, the content of what is preached, should save “those who believe.”

This is breathtaking. God has not arranged things so that the foolishness of the gospel saves those who have IQs in excess of 130. Where would that leave the rest of us? Nor does the foolishness of what is preached transform the young, the beautiful, the extroverts, the educated, the wealthy, the healthy, the upright. Where would that leave the old, the ugly, the introverts, the illiterate, the poor, the sick, the perverse?

The gods of the rich are not gentle with those the rich dismiss as poor; the gods of the wise are not kind to those the wise reject as stupid; the gods of the social elite are not patient with outcasts.

Granted that this is a fallen, rebellious world, the gods that are “discovered” (should we not rather say invented?) by human wisdom are mere projections of our hubris. But the true God, the God who is there (as Francis Schaeffer used to say), dismisses them all. He has “made foolish the wisdom of the world” (1:20); he has been pleased to save “those who believe.” These people are saved by him, not because he chooses those who boast some superior trait or insight, not because he loves people who judge themselves to be wise, but because he has determined to rescue those who believe him. By his grace, they trust him, they rely on him, they abandon themselves to him. He is their center, their rock, their hope, their anchor, their confidence. And thus God quietly and effectively banishes the wisdom of our culture as utter folly.

Thus the message of the cross divides the human race absolutely: it is “foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who

1. Of course, even the NIV talks about “the foolishness of what was *preached*,” not “the foolishness of what was *discussed* or *shared*” or the like. The significance of Paul’s choice of language will be explored later in this chapter, when 2:1–5 is expounded.

are being saved it is the power of God" (1:18). On the one side are those whose religion, or lack of it, seeks a domesticated God accessible to the informed, the initiated, the wise; on the other side are those who have received the foolishness of the gospel by faith and are saved.

Paul stresses a second element in the message of the cross:

The Message of the Cross Proves That God's Folly Has Outsmarted Human Wisdom; His Weakness Has Overpowered Human Strength (1:22–25)

Paul now divides those who are perishing into two groups. These two groups represent the fundamental idolatries of his age, and of every age:

"Jews demand miraculous signs" (1:22). Historically, of course, this is what happened to Jesus on more than one occasion. When "some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, 'Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you,'" he replied, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign!" (Matt. 12:38–39). They were openly testing him by demanding a sign (Matt. 16:1). Even those who out of sheer desperation asked Jesus for miraculous help could at first be gently rebuffed, with words such as these, "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders . . . you will never believe" (John 4:48). In some cases, such as the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus' miraculous power was attractive to the crowd simply because of what it gave them (John 6:26).

But one might well ask why Jesus should object. After all, he performed many miracles. Why should he object when someone asked him for one? Did not such requests simply give him an opportunity to display yet one more powerful work?

These questions miss the point. There is a kind of longing for a display of Jesus' power that is entirely godly, submissive, perhaps even desperate. There is another kind that puts the person making the request into the driver's seat. Some want to see Jesus perform a sign so that they can evaluate him, assess his claims, test his credentials. At one level, of course, he accommodates himself to our unbelief by performing miracles that ought to elicit faith (John 10:38). But at another level, he cannot possibly reduce himself to nothing more than a powerful genie who per-

forms spectacular tricks on command. As long as people are assessing him, they are in the superior position, the position of judge. As long as they are checking out his credentials, they are forgetting that God is the one who will weigh them. As long as they are demanding signs, Jesus, if he constantly acquiesces, is nothing more than a clever performer.

Thus the demand for signs becomes the prototype of every condition human beings raise as a barrier to being open to God. I will devote myself to this God *if* he heals my child. I will follow this Jesus *if* I can maintain my independence. I will happily become a Christian *if* God proves himself to me. I will turn from my sin and read the Bible *if* my marriage gets sorted out to my satisfaction. I will acknowledge Jesus as Lord *if* he performs the kind of miracle, on demand, that removes all doubt. In every case, I am assessing him; he is not assessing me. I am not coming to him on his terms; rather, I am stipulating terms that he must accept if he wants the privilege of my company. “Jews demand miraculous signs.”

“*Greeks [i.e., Gentiles] look for wisdom*”(1:22). We have already discovered what this means. These people may not erect conditions that God has to meet, but they do something just as bad. They create entire structures of thought so as to maintain the delusion that they can explain everything. They think they are scientific, in control, powerful. God, if he exists, must meet the high standards of their academic and philosophical prowess and somehow fit into their system, if he is to be given any sort of respectful hearing.

In both “Jews” and “Greeks,” there is profound self-centeredness. God is not taken on trust. Both the demand for signs and the pursuit of “wisdom,” and all the countless progeny they have spawned, treat God as if we have the right to approve him, to examine his credentials. This is the most reprehensible wickedness, the most appalling insolence, the most horrific mark of our deep rebellion and lostness.

By contrast, Paul says, “we preach Christ crucified” (1:23). That is our content, and to those who do not know Christ it is an astonishingly odd message. In the first century, it must have sounded like a contradiction in terms, like frozen steam or hateful love or upward decline or godly rapist—only far more shock-

ing. For many Jews, the long-expected Messiah² had to come in splendor and glory; he had to begin his reign with uncontested power. “Crucified Messiah”: this juxtaposition of words is only a whisker away from blasphemy, since every Jew knows that God himself has declared that everyone who hangs in shame on a tree stands under God’s curse (Deut. 21:23). How could God’s Messiah be under God’s curse? How could God’s Messiah be crucified? To the Jew, the very idea is a “stumbling block” (1:23), the ultimate scandal. That is what Paul himself thought before he was converted. He was outraged that fellow Jews should honor as Messiah, indeed as God himself, a man whom God had obviously cursed (see Gal. 1:13–14; 3:13).

But Greeks could not regard “Christ crucified” any more highly. They exalted reason and public philosophy, not faith and public criminals. Not many years would elapse before Emperor Trajan would dismiss Christianity as a “pernicious superstition”—and he was simply articulating widely held opinion. More broadly, Romans more interested in power than in philosophy would dismiss an expression like “crucified hero” as utter foolishness (1:23). Perhaps that is why Paul subtly moves from describing “Greeks” (v. 22) to mentioning “Gentiles” (v. 23). He wants to make it clear that the cross is foolishness not only to Greeks but to all Gentiles, that no one is left out, that the cross is scandal or folly to everyone. Even the word Paul uses for “foolishness” is not accidental; it can be understood to mean “mania” or “madness.” Gentiles wrote off the message of the cross not as eccentric, harmless folly, but as dangerous, almost deranged, stupidity.

The cross, then, is dismissed and derided by everyone. But still, Paul insists, “we preach Christ crucified” (1:23). The message of the cross may be nonsense to those who are perishing, “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1:23), “but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24).

This is an astonishing claim!

We will better feel its power if we note two things. First, those who stand apart from the perishing world are “those whom God

2. Messiah and Christ are equivalent, the former springing from a Hebrew background and the latter from Greek.

has called.” The fundamental reason they are different is that God has called them—which in Paul’s use means that God has reached out and saved them. God’s “call,” as Paul refers to it, is effective: those whom God calls are inevitably converted (see Rom. 8:30). True, these same people can be referred to as “those who believe” (1:21). From the human perspective, faith appropriates the peerless benefits of Christ’s cross. But the question of ultimate cause must be asked: If it was God’s wisdom that ensured that the world through its wisdom would not know him (1:21), how did these people come to believe? If everyone finds the cross foolish and repulsive, how did these people come to delight in it? Paul’s answer: They were called by God himself (1:24)—a point he reiterates a couple of verses later.

Second, these God-called people, “both Jews and Greeks” (i.e., people called by God without racial distinction), have come to discover that Christ, Christ crucified, is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24). The language is chosen carefully. The Jews demanded powerful signs and expected a powerful Messiah. They were offended at the ridiculous implausibility and inherent weakness of any notion of “Messiah crucified.” Yet in deep irony, it is that moment of sublime weakness, the cross of Jesus Christ, that most greatly displays the power of God—and Christians recognize it. For their part, the Gentiles loved what they called wisdom. They dismissed as crass foolishness any notion of a hero who was crucified. Yet in deep irony, it is this moment of transparent folly, the cross of Jesus Christ, that most greatly displays God’s breathtaking wisdom. That is what Paul says: “to those whom God has called,” regardless of background, Christ crucified is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24).

This is both deliciously ironic and entirely appropriate. It is ironic because what the world dismisses with a shudder is nothing less than God’s means of bringing blessing the world cannot otherwise obtain. It is appropriate because all of the world’s rebellious self-centeredness is precisely what ensures that it cannot understand the cross, while God’s wise plan of redemption hinges on God himself taking self-denying action to bring about the consummation of his authority.

Paul did not come by this insight easily. For him, it began on the Damascus road. When he came face to face with the resurrected and glorified Jesus whom he had dismissed as a shameful usurper who deserved the curse of God that fell on him, he had to revise many of the structures of his thought. If Jesus was alive, then the Christians who kept insisting they were witnesses of the resurrection had to be listened to with new respect. If Jesus was alive, and glorified, then God could not have placed an irrevocable curse on him. But if the meaning of the cross was not that Jesus was doomed under God's curse, what was its meaning? If Jesus' resurrection proved that Jesus was vindicated by God himself, even though he had died in shame on the odious cross, what was the significance of that death?

Only the Christian claim made sense. Jesus was the promised Messiah, all right, but he was also the suffering Servant. Certainly he was the reigning King who claimed that all authority was his, but he was also the fulfillment of multiplied centuries of bloody sacrifices, all pointing forward to the supreme sacrifice which alone could effectively deal with sin. Jesus died under God's curse, all right, not on account of his own sin, but on account of mine. And the value of his sacrifice is most spectacularly vindicated in the most remarkable fact of history: God raised him from the dead.

Called of God, Christians have always fastened their confidence to the cross of Jesus Christ. That is why we still sing, for instance, this hymn from the Middle Ages:

O sacred head! sore wounded,
 With grief and shame bowed down,
 Now scornfully surrounded
 With thorns, Thy only crown!
 How pale art Thou with anguish,
 With sore abuse and scorn!
 How does that visage languish,
 Which once was bright as morn!

What Thou, my Lord, hast suffered,
 Was all for sinners' gain:
 Mine, mine was the transgression,
 But Thine the deadly pain:
 Lo! here I fall, my Saviour;

'Tis I deserve Thy place;
Look on me with Thy favour,
Vouchsafe to me Thy grace.

What language shall I borrow
To thank Thee, dearest friend,
For this, Thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end?
O make me Thine for ever;
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never
Outlive my love to Thee!

Be near me when I'm dying,
O show Thy cross to me,
And, for my succour flying,
Come, Lord, and set me free!
These eyes, new faith receiving,
From Jesus shall not move;
For he who dies believing,
Dies safely through Thy love.

Bernard de Clairvaux (1090–1153)

What the world dismisses as sheer foolishness, the foolishness of God, proves “wiser than man’s wisdom” (1:25). What the world writes off as hopeless weakness, the weakness of God, proves “stronger than man’s strength” (1:25). This is much more radical than saying that God has more wisdom than human beings, or that he is stronger than human beings—as if we are dealing with mere degrees of wisdom and power. No, we are dealing with polar opposites. Human “wisdom” and “strength” are, from God’s perspective, rebellious folly and moral weakness. And the moment when God most dramatically discloses his own wisdom and strength, the moment when his own dear Son is crucified—although it is laughed out of court by the tawdry “wisdom” of this rebellious world, by the pathetic “strength” of the self-deceived—is nevertheless the moment of divine wisdom and divine power. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (1:25).

For those of us in any form of Christian ministry, this lesson must constantly be reappropriated. Western evangelicalism

tends to run through cycles of fads. At the moment, books are pouring off the presses telling us how to plan for success, how “vision” consists in clearly articulated “ministry goals,” how the knowledge of detailed profiles of our communities constitutes the key to successful outreach. I am not for a moment suggesting that there is nothing to be learned from such studies. But after a while one may perhaps be excused for marveling how many churches were planted by Paul and Whitefield and Wesley and Stanway and Judson without enjoying these advantages. Of course all of us need to understand the people to whom we minister, and all of us can benefit from small doses of such literature. But massive doses sooner or later dilute the gospel. Ever so subtly, we start to think that success more critically depends on thoughtful sociological analysis than on the gospel; Barna becomes more important than the Bible. We depend on plans, programs, vision statements—but somewhere along the way we have succumbed to the temptation to displace the foolishness of the cross with the wisdom of strategic planning. Again, I insist, my position is not a thinly veiled plea for obscurantism, for seat-of-the-pants ministry that plans nothing. Rather, I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight. Whenever the periphery is in danger of displacing the center, we are not far removed from idolatry.

The Outreach of the Cross (1:26–31)

Although Paul has been sketching in how the message of the cross divides the human race, in large part he has focused on those who reject that message. Now he turns exclusively to those who accept it—and he finds that who they are supports his vision of what the message of the cross is about. By and large, he insists, the people who have accepted this message are not the wise, the glamorous, the gifted, the saintly. No—they are the nobodies.

Paul makes his point, offers a theological justification for it, and then ends with a Christian vision of boasting.

Paul's Point (1:26)

“Brothers,” Paul addresses his fellow Christians, “think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.” At this point, Paul is dealing at the empirical level: these are the observable facts, and he wants the Corinthians to recognize them. When he tells them to consider what they were when they were “called,” he means that he wants them to remember their station in life when they were converted.

And what were they? Not many were “wise,” “influential,” or “of noble birth” (1:26). Almost certainly Paul is adapting the language of Jeremiah 9:23–24, which he actually cites a few verses later (in 1 Cor. 1:31). In Jeremiah 9 the prophet quotes God as saying:

“Let not the *wise man* boast of his wisdom
 or the *strong man* boast of his strength
 or the *rich man* boast of his riches,
 but let him who boasts boast about this:
 that he understands and knows me,
 that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,
 justice and righteousness on earth,
 for in these I delight,”
 declares the LORD. [emphasis added]

Like Jeremiah, Paul speaks of the “wise.” Jeremiah’s “strong man” becomes, for Paul, the “influential”—that is, the strength in view is not the strength of the weight-lifter but the strength of the opinion-maker, the person with clout. The “rich man” becomes the person “of noble birth,” since in preindustrial days the overwhelming majority of the wealthy sprang from the upper classes.

Paul recognizes, of course, that these categories have no eternal significance. He is talking about those who are wise “by human standards”—and implicitly about those who are influential or well born “by human standards.” The particular expression he uses³ suggests that he is strongly putting down those “human standards”; they are the standards of this world, this fallen world, over against those of God. Nevertheless, they are

3. Greek, *kata sarka*, lit., “according to the flesh.”

the standards that most of society highly esteems. Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that “not many” of them met those standards.

Before we pursue Paul’s argument any further, it is worth pausing to remember that some opponents of Christianity have sometimes tried to turn Paul’s words against the gospel. They say that only the ignorant and the foolish become Christians. For example, in the second century the critic Celsus sneered at Christians in these terms:

Their injunctions are like this. “Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly.” By the fact that they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their God, they show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and children. [Contra Celsum 3.44]

Along analogous lines, not a few contemporary intellectuals work very hard at conveying the impression that all Christians are fools or knaves or both. And on first reading, Paul might almost be taken to support this criticism.

More careful reading shows that Paul’s point is rather different. In the first place, Paul repeatedly says “not many,” not “not any.” In the days of the great evangelist George Whitefield, the Countess of Huntingdon used to say that she was saved by an *m*: God’s word declares “not *many* noble,” not “not any noble.” Besides, it has been repeatedly shown that first-century Christianity was astonishingly heterogeneous. It was the only society in the empire that brought together slave and free, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, male and female. If there were many poor, ill-educated people, many slaves and illiterates, there were also people like Crispus, Gaius, Philemon, Erastus—not to mention minds like Paul’s.

So what then is Paul saying in this verse? His point, surely, is that being wise or influential or well born cannot possibly be a criterion of being a Christian or of being spiritual. If many in the Corinthian congregation were drawn from segments of society that were not highly regarded “by human standards,” then no

one could argue that the church was basically a high-class operation with a few exceptions to prove how open-minded it was. Rather, it was a low-class operation with a few sophisticated exceptions to prove that the “wise” and the “influential” and those “of noble birth” are not necessarily excluded.

God’s grace can reach anyone. But being well regarded in the surrounding pagan society is in no sense an advantage. If anyone approaches God on the basis of some putative wisdom or “pull” or wealth, he or she is necessarily excluded. If God accepted people on such grounds, he would compromise himself. He would be the worst kind of snob, the kind that is impressed by entirely superficial advantages—like a panting, third-rate social climber in a pinstripe suit, desperate to be approved and eager to fawn all over anyone who speaks with a posh accent. Paul insists that such a vision of God is utter nonsense. God is not impressed by the public philosophies, political clout, and extravagant wealth that the world so greatly admires. And the Corinthian believers should have recognized the point and disavowed such pagan allegiances themselves. After all, the commonness of their own predominant backgrounds should have alerted them to the kind of people God frequently pursues.

This is a point that our generation cannot afford to ignore. Why is it that we constantly parade Christian athletes, media personalities, and pop singers? Why should we think that their opinions or their experiences of grace are of any more significance than those of any other believer? When we tell outsiders about people in our church, do we instantly think of the despised and the lowly who have become Christians, or do we love to impress people with the importance of the men and women who have become Christians? Modern Western evangelicalism is deeply infected with the virus of triumphalism, and the resulting illness destroys humility, minimizes grace, and offers far too much homage to the money and influence and “wisdom” of our day.

Paul’s Theological Justification (1:27–30)

The empirical evidence, then, is that the Corinthian congregation was made up of people from a wide range of backgrounds, but that most of them could not boast of any great cultural superiority. Is there a fundamental reason for this?

Paul insists there is. God himself “chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not [today we would probably refer to ‘the nobodies’]—to nullify the things that are” (1:27–28). Paul presupposes that people will not come to Christ unless he chooses them. So if there are many “nobodies” who come to Christ, it can only mean that Christ has chosen them. The fundamental reason why there are not more big shots in the Christian church (“big shots” as measured “by human standards,” 1:26) is that God has preferentially chosen the nobodies.

God has chosen the foolish things, Paul insists, “to shame the wise.” This does not mean that he makes them feel ashamed, but that he shames them, he disgraces them. In exactly the same way, God has chosen the nobodies “to nullify the things that are” (1:28). In other words, God delights to prick all the pretensions of this rebellious world. Where proud men and women parade their mighty intellects, God chooses the simple; where wealthy people assess each other on the basis of their respective holdings, God chooses the poor; where self-centered leaders lust for power, God chooses the nobodies. All “the things that are”—that is, the things that appear to have substance and are highly promoted in this fallen world—are “nullified.” They are written off as having no eternal significance, since God does not attach his salvation to any of them. In fact, he goes out of his way to overturn their presumption: God chooses the nobodies.

God’s ultimate reason for this choice is of utmost importance: it is “so that no one may boast before him” (1:29). Not only has he shamed and nullified the world by choosing so many people whom the world does not highly esteem, God has taken this step to shatter human boasting. God acts to redeem fallen men and women because he is gracious, and for no other reason. He does not owe anyone in the world forgiveness and eternal life. If he gave out these wonderful gifts on the basis of a formula worked out by the immigration departments of many countries—the more education, skills, sophistication, and wealth you have, the easier it is to get in—then many of those who come to know God by faith in Jesus Christ would have a legitimate ground for boasting. But God takes the action he does “so that no one may boast

before him.” “I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols” (Isa. 42:8). “For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this. How can I let myself be defamed? I will not yield my glory to another” (Isa. 48:11). Again and again Paul has to warn the Corinthians against the dangers in their boasting (e.g., 1 Cor. 3:21; 2 Cor. 10–13). If one has any deep understanding of the gospel, one must say, with Paul, “Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded” (Rom. 3:27).

In short, the Corinthians themselves constitute unassailable proof that God’s categories of wisdom and power are radically different from those of the world. The outreach of the cross as measured by the profile of the Corinthian congregation confirms the message of the cross: salvation is God’s free gift, secured by the ignominious death of his own Son. This odious death is God’s triumphant act, his most dazzling and powerful deed, the action by which he disgraces and trashes all human pretensions. God’s salvation springs from God’s grace, and it is received by those who trust him—not by the “beautiful people” or by the rich and powerful. The Corinthian believers should have understood these things simply by looking at who they were when God saved them.

But there is one kind of boasting permitted to Christians. Indeed, it is mandated of them.

A Christian Vision of Boasting (1:30–31)

Paul is not saying that Christians have nothing to boast about. Rather, he is saying that if they boast about the things the world boasts about, they are boasting about the wrong things.

That is true even in the passage from Jeremiah to which Paul has already alluded. There God not only prohibits the wise, the strong, and the rich from boasting of their assets, but he adds, “let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight” (Jer. 9:24). Of course, this does not give sanction to self-centered religious fanatics to run around and claim that all their opinions about everything are right because they know the Lord. The point of this solemn utterance is that human boasting is vile precisely because it elevates self to the pinnacle of importance—and sad to

tell, it is as possible to do that in the religious field as in any other. This sort of boasting is done in order to puff ourselves up. It indicates that we are focusing on what is transient, of no eternal importance.

The only thing of transcendent importance to human beings is the knowledge of God. This knowledge does not belong to those who endlessly focus on themselves. Those who truly come to know God delight just to know him. He becomes their center. They think of him, delight in him, boast of him. They want to know more and more what kind of God he is. As they learn that he is the God “who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth,” naturally they want those same values to prevail—not because their egos are bound up with certain arbitrary notions of, say, “justice,” but because their center is God and they take their cues from him and his character. They boast in him.

And now God’s most dramatic act of “kindness, justice and righteousness” has occurred—in the death of his Son. By this act God has ensured that countless men and women will truly know him, and know the kind of God he is. “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus” (1:30), Paul tells the Corinthians. That is, it is because God chose them, as the previous verses make clear, that they have become Christians, that they are now “in Christ Jesus.” They have been reconciled to God; they know him who is eternal; they have tasted the blessed relief of sins forgiven. Thus, Christ Jesus, the crucified and risen Christ Jesus, is himself God’s plan, God’s wisdom; he “has become for us wisdom from God” (1:30). This is not the wisdom of the world, which cannot make room for the cross. This wisdom from God is the cross; it is “Christ crucified” (1:23). Far from being vain and pompous and of no eternal importance, this “wisdom” effects eternal changes and brings men and women into a deep relationship with the living God.

In short, this “wisdom,” this plan, means nothing less than “our righteousness, holiness and redemption.”⁴ Lest anyone be

4. Some versions follow the *KJV*: “. . . Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption”—suggesting that there are *four* things that Christ here becomes for us. But both the Greek and the logic make more sense in the *NIV*: Christ “has become for us wisdom from God”—and then that wisdom is “fleshed out” in biblical categories to distinguish it from the wisdom of the world. *This* wisdom means our righteousness, our holiness, and our redemption.

tempted to think that God's wisdom is nothing more than a souped-up version of the world's wisdom, Paul immediately unpacks it in traditional biblical terms. This "wisdom" secures our "righteousness" (a term that reflects our legal standing before God), our "holiness" (a properly religious term that reflects the exclusive sphere to which we now belong), and our "redemption" (a term drawn from the slave trade to reflect our newfound freedom from sin, corruption, and death).

Small wonder, then, that Paul ends by directly quoting Jeremiah. "Therefore, as it is written: 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor. 1:31). We are as foolish as the Corinthians when we make much of what cannot endure, when we promote the values and plans and programs of a world that is passing away as if they bear any deep significance. So misguided a course eloquently betrays how little we know God. For the better we know God, the more we will want all of our existence to revolve around him, and we will see that the only goals and plans that really matter are those that are somehow tied to God himself, and to our eternity with him. Did not Jesus tell his followers to store up for themselves treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:19–21)?

So the message of the cross must shape our ministry (1:18–25); the outreach of the cross confirms that message and drives us back to what is fundamental (1:26–31). But there is one more element to bear in mind.

The Preacher of the Cross (2:1–5)

Paul's own example should have told the Corinthian Christians that they were pursuing a dangerous path, for in his preaching he had self-consciously distanced himself from the rhetorical pomp of his day. He writes, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom [both 'eloquence' and 'superior wisdom' probably here refer to form rather than content] as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God" (2:1).

It has been persuasively argued that Paul is alluding to the sophists of his day. Many intellectual movements greatly prized rhetoric. Philosophers were as widely praised for their oratory as for their content. But the sophists brought these ideals to new heights. Following fairly rigid and somewhat artificial conven-

tions, these public speakers were praised and followed (and gained paying students!) in proportion to their ability to declaim in public assembly, to choose a theme and expatiate on it with telling power, and to speak convincingly and movingly in legal, religious, business, and political contexts. They enjoyed such widespread influence in the Mediterranean world, not least in Corinth, that public speakers who either could not meet their standards, or who for any reason chose not to, were viewed as seriously inferior.

It is difficult for us at the end of the twentieth century to appreciate how influential this allegiance to rhetoric was. There is at least a little hint in the fact that Paul finds it necessary to deal with the matter again in 2 Corinthians (see 10:9–10; 11:5–6). It is worth remembering that rhetoric was a central subject in most Western universities until the beginning of this century. The rise of print, radio, and especially television has so elevated “cool” communication that fiery oratory now seems rather strange—either quaint or dangerous. Television newsreaders maintain perfect poise and calm voices whether they are describing famine in the Sahel, reporting an earthquake that wiped out two hundred thousand people in central China, or announcing who won a basketball game.

But rhetoric brings with it many dangers. Those who pursue eloquence and high-sounding insight with precious little content are often doing little more than preening their own feathers. Such oratory made Paul nervous. It affords far too many temptations to pride to be safe for anyone interested in preaching the gospel of the crucified Messiah.

So Paul made a choice. He “resolved” (2:2) to adopt a more restrictive course, even though he was cutting across the stream of cultural expectations. When the pressure to “contextualize” the gospel jeopardizes the message of the cross by inflating human egos, the cultural pressures must be ignored.

Two misinterpretations of Paul’s commitment must be strenuously avoided. First, it would be entirely improper to infer that Paul was an incompetent speaker, a bad communicator. When Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra, where the sophists’ standards of rhetoric held little sway, the pagans identified Paul with Hermes, the Greek god of communication (whose Roman name was

Mercury) because Paul was the chief speaker (Acts 14:12). Doubtless Paul displayed many communicative skills and worked to improve the clarity and potency of his presentation. In Thessalonica he earnestly “reasoned,” “explained,” and “proved” that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead (Acts 17:2–3). What Paul avoided was artificial communication that won plaudits for the speaker but distracted from the message. Lazy preachers have no right to appeal to 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 to justify indolence in the study and careless delivery in the pulpit. These verses do not prohibit diligent preparation, passion, clear articulation, and persuasive presentation. Rather, they warn against any method that leads people to say, “What a marvelous preacher!” rather than, “What a marvelous Savior!”

Second, we would be entirely mistaken if we concluded on the basis of this passage that Paul was insensitive to cultural peculiarities among the diverse groups he evangelized, and therefore we need not bother with such niceties ourselves. In fact, Paul was astonishingly flexible. This point can be demonstrated by appealing to the Book of Acts and comparing, say, Paul’s sermon in Pisidian Antioch in a Jewish synagogue (Acts 13:13–41) with his sermon in the Areopagus in Athens, in a decidedly pagan context (Acts 17:16–31). But the point can be made even more forcefully by appealing to Paul’s own writings, not least 1 Corinthians. We shall return to this remarkable flexibility in the last chapter of this book, where we look more closely at some parts of 1 Corinthians 9. For the moment it is enough to insist that, however great Paul’s flexibility and cultural sensitivity, they are not open-ended; he draws the line where he thinks the gospel might be jeopardized. And clearly he thinks the gospel is jeopardized by any kind of eloquence or rhetoric that does not reinforce the message of a crucified Messiah. Clever, witty, amusing, glittering discourse may be warmly applauded by the literati, but it does not easily square with the odium of the cross. So Paul will have none of it.

Neither would the early English Puritans. In an age when scholars often used the pulpit to display their great learning, the Puritans resolved to speak with simplicity and forcefulness calculated to do their hearers the most good. Their sermons were designed to benefit their hearers with the eternal gospel, not to

win applause from other learned preachers. When Thomas Goodwin went up to Cambridge University in 1613, he desired to emulate the best “witty” preachers, such as Dr. Senhouse of St. John’s College. But after his conversion, Goodwin adopted the Puritan principle:

I came to this resolved principle, that I would preach wholly and altogether sound and wholesome words, without affectation of wit and vanity of eloquence. . . . I . . . have continued in that purpose and practice these threescore years. I have preached what I thought was truly edifying, either for conversion, or bringing them up to eternal life.⁵

But I understood this point most clearly, I think, when I heard of an Egyptian believer with extraordinary communication skills. Arabic is a language that operates on two levels. There is a sort of street Arabic—or, more precisely, there are several quite different street Arabics, depending on the region—and a “high” or “literary” Arabic. The latter may be found not only in good Arabic literature, but, in the hands of the skillful, it may be found in oral address. This particular Egyptian Christian was a journalist, widely read as much for the music of his prose as for the quality of his content. He felt called of God to Christian ministry, abandoned journalism, and soon built up a very large congregation. Many of those who attended his church did so simply because they greatly enjoyed listening to his orations.

But this preacher was troubled. He discovered that many people were far more interested in his Arabic than his Savior. After much soul-searching, he switched to the more colloquial Arabic. His reasoning was quite simple: his purpose was to convey the message of the cross, and he had come to the conclusion that his rhetoric was getting in the way. That man, surely, understood Paul.

What gets in our way?

It would probably be invidious of me to try to make a list of things that might get in the way in our culture, not least because

5. Thomas Goodwin, *Works*, ed. J. Miller (London: James Nichol, 1861), 2.1xivf. Cited in J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 74.

they vary from region to region, but also because culture keeps changing. Instead, it will be a wiser and more enduring course to summarize the values Paul the preacher sets forth:

Proclaim the testimony about God. That is what Paul did: “I proclaimed to you the testimony⁶ about God” (2:1). Earlier we saw that God was pleased to save those who believe “through the foolishness of what was preached” (1:21), the focus being on the content. Nevertheless, Paul writes of “the foolishness of what was preached,” not “the foolishness of what was discussed or commented on or shared.” So also here: the content of Paul’s message is “the testimony about God” (that is, what God has done in Christ Jesus). But what Paul does with this message is proclaim it. He preaches it.

Granted that “preaching” or “proclaiming” in the Scriptures is not restricted to something done behind a wooden pulpit between 11:00 and 12:00 on Sunday mornings, it is nevertheless hard to avoid the strength of this emphasis on proclamation in the New Testament. The reason for the emphasis lies in the message itself. God has taken action, and the good news is announced, it is proclaimed. God is not negotiating; he is both announcing and confronting. Done properly, preaching is simply the re-presentation of God’s gospel, God’s good news, by which men and women come to know him. Thus preaching mediates God himself. Many preachers, afraid of being thought arrogant, avoid talking about preaching. They prefer to think of what they do as “sharing.” In some limited contexts, doubtless there is nothing wrong with “sharing.” But something important is lost if we never speak or think of preaching and proclamation. That is our job, our calling. It is not arrogant to re-present as forcefully as we can God’s gospel; it is simply faithful stewardship. Further, if we focus on the powerful proclamation of the gospel, we shall be less likely to be seduced by siren calls to soften the sheer non-negotiability inherent in preaching.

Focus on Christ crucified. That is what Paul did: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2). This does not mean that this was a new

6. Some manuscripts read “the mystery of God” rather than [lit.] “the testimony about God.” The difference is very slight in Greek and makes little difference to my argument here.

departure for Paul, still less that Paul was devoted to blissful ignorance of anything and everything other than the cross. No, what he means is that all he does and teaches is tied to the cross. He cannot long talk about Christian joy, or Christian ethics, or Christian fellowship, or the Christian doctrine of God, or anything else, without finally tying it to the cross. Paul is gospel-centered; he is cross-centered.

That is more than a creedal commitment; it sets out Paul's priorities, his lifestyle, and, in this context, his style of ministry. If he really holds that God has supremely disclosed himself in the cross and that to follow the crucified and risen Savior means dying daily, then it is preposterous to adopt a style of ministry that is triumphalistic, designed to impress, calculated to win applause. It is precisely because Paul resolves "to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified" that he can formulate his policy on rhetoric.

What then does it mean today to resolve "to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified"? More narrowly, what elements in our ministries need overhauling when judged by this standard? For this commitment must not only shape our message but our style.

We have become so performance-oriented that it is hard to see how compromised we are. Consider one small example. In many of our churches, prayers in morning services now function, in large measure, as the time to change the set in the sanctuary. The people of the congregation bow their heads and close their eyes, and when they look up a minute later, why, the singers are in place, or the drama group is ready to perform. It is all so smooth. It is also profane. Nominally we are in prayer together addressing the King of heaven, the sovereign Lord. In reality, some of us are doing that while others are rushing on tiptoes around the "stage" and others, with their eyes closed, are busy wondering what new and happy configuration will confront them when it is time to take a peek.

Has the smoothness of the performance become more important to us than the fear of the Lord? Has polish, one of the modern equivalents of ancient rhetoric, displaced substance? Have professional competence and smooth showmanship become

more valuable than sober reckoning over what it means to focus on Christ crucified?

Do not fear weakness, illness, or a sense of being overwhelmed. The truth of the matter is that such experiences are often the occasions when God most greatly displays his power. As long as people are impressed by your powerful personality and impressive gifts, there is very little room for you to impress them with a crucified Savior. “I came to you,” Paul confesses, “in weakness and fear, and with much trembling” (2:3)—so much so that he needed special encouragement from God himself (Acts 18:9–10). But Paul knew that God’s strength is most greatly displayed in connection with our weakness (2 Cor. 12:1–10). Although he suffered fears, illness, weakness, and a tremendous sense of being overwhelmed by the enormity of the task, he did not fear the fear; his weakness was not compounded by focusing on his weakness. Far from it! He could write, “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). That is the testimony of a man who has learned to minister under the cross.

Strenuously avoid manipulating people. “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words” (2:4), Paul writes. He does not mean that there is no sense in which he sets out to be persuasive. Elsewhere he testifies, “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men” (2 Cor. 5:11). But he avoids persuasion that is manipulative; he eschews preaching that cajoles or moves people by its eloquence but does not faithfully present the gospel. It is the truth and power of the gospel that must change people’s lives, not the glamour of our oratory or the emotional power of our stories.

Some years ago I was speaking at a large youth convention in Australia. Never was I more impressed with the leader and organizer of these meetings than when he addressed the three or four hundred site and group leaders and quietly told them to avoid manipulation. Ensure that the young people get enough sleep, he said. We do not want decisions just because they are so tired their stamina is worn down. Do not put these people into emotional corners that compel decisions; such decisions are seldom worth

anything. Do not shame them or embarrass them in front of peers. Deal straightforwardly with the gospel.

This leader was simply following the advice of Paul. He was more interested in the integrity of his presentation, which he could not divorce from the integrity of the gospel itself, than with the pressure for impressive statistics.

Recognize that a cross-centered ministry is characterized by the Spirit's power and is vindicated in transformed lives. Paul's message was attended "with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that [the] faith [of his converts] might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (2:4–5).

That is what we need: unction, the anointing of the Spirit, the demonstration of the Spirit's power. Where that power is present, people cannot help but know it, and the faith of those who turn to Christ is safely anchored in God himself. Where that power is absent, nothing can repair the loss, and the faith of new converts is likely to be attached, in part, to the wrong things.

But Paul will say more about the Spirit in the following verses.

Concluding Reflections

The message of the cross smashes the great idolatries of the ecclesiastical world: our endless self-promotion, our love of mere professionalism, our addiction to well-defined methods. Doubtless in some circumstances it might be wrong to criticize any one of these tendencies. Yet taken together they weave a pattern of ministry that is so far removed from the message of the cross, the demonstrable outreach of the cross, and this New Testament description of the preacher of the cross, that we must confess in shame that we have turned to idols and must repent of our sin.

Biblical preaching emphasizes the gospel and constantly elevates Christ crucified. But it also recognizes that the cross is not only our creed, it is the standard of our ministry.

Questions for Review and Reflection

1. Why do human beings find the cross of Jesus Christ so unpalatable?
2. Explain what Paul means when he speaks of “the foolishness of God.”
3. Why does God so often save “nobodies”? What significance does your answer have for you personally?
4. What does it mean to “boast in the Lord”? Do you boast that way?
5. Summarize Paul’s view of what preaching should be, according to this passage.