

Chapter 2: The Foolishness and Weakness of God

1 Corinthians 1:18–25

In the previous passage, Paul addressed the growing divisions within the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 1:10–17). Why, though, have those divisions arisen? More importantly, what is the antidote to those divisions? As Paul moves into his next section, he makes clear that much of what stands behind their quarreling is the desire to be wise according to the standards of this age and this world. This world admires those who build the tallest towers of human learning, as though human wisdom could assist humanity to climb their way up to God. Fundamentally, this was the same sin committed by the builders of the Tower of Babel, but this desire to be wise goes all the way back to the Fall itself: “So when the woman saw...that the tree was to be *desired to make one wise*, she took of its fruit and ate, and also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6). The desire to seek wisdom apart from God has been the fundamental characteristic of human sin from the beginning.

Against this human arrogance, Paul holds up the shameful, scornful, despised cross. Jesus prayed to avoid the cross (Mark 14:36), and Jesus knew that he could demand that his father send twelve legions of angels to his defense at any moment (Matt. 26:53). Nevertheless, he submitted to the cross in obedience all the way to death, even when his Father forsook him (Matt. 27:46). He did not seek his own human will, according to the wisdom of his human nature, but he submitted to the will of his divine Father. In doing so, the cross became the power of God unto salvation for all those who believe. In 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, Paul explains how *God calls fools to faith through the folly of the cross*.

The Folly of the Cross (1 Cor. 1:18–20)

As we mentioned in the last study, 1 Corinthians 1:17 is a transition from Paul’s discussions of the disunity at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10–16) to God’s power and wisdom in the weakness and foolishness of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18–25). Paul makes this connection explicit through the conjunction “for” at the beginning of v. 18, which offers an explanation and an expansion upon what Paul only hinted at in v. 17.¹ In the earlier passage, Paul insisted that there must be no divisions among the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10). Now, Paul explains why those divisions have arisen at all: the Corinthians have overestimated the value of human wisdom and reasoning, and, therefore, they have misunderstood the gospel that Paul preached to them.²

Wisdom of Word vs. the Word of the Cross (1 Cor. 1:18)

Paul’s emphasis becomes clearer when we recognize another connection between v. 17 and 18: the repetition of the word *logos* (“word/speech/logic/doctrine”). In v. 17, Paul spoke of “words of eloquent wisdom” (lit., “wisdom of word [*logou*]”), and then in v. 18, Paul speaks of the “word [*logos*] of the cross.” Concerning this observation, Gordon Fee writes, “There is a *logos* (speech) that belongs

to wisdom, and there is a *logos* (message) whose content is the cross—but they are mutually exclusive.”³ The *wisdom* that the Corinthians prized refers both “to the possession of exalted knowledge and to the ability to express that knowledge in a powerful and rhetorically polished way.”⁴ That is, they were not merely interested in wisdom as *knowledge*, but “wisdom of *word* [i.e., speech]” (1 Cor. 1:17). They applauded the most sophisticated human learning and the most eloquent human speech. Still, however, it is important to remember that Paul gave thanks to God that the Corinthians were enriched in “all speech [*logō*] and all knowledge” (1 Cor. 1:5). Apparently, the Corinthians have twisted the gifts that God gave to them for their good into instruments of division.

In contrast to this human “wisdom of word” is the “word of the cross”—or, perhaps we might translate this as the *preaching* or *doctrine* or *message* or the cross.⁵ This word of the cross is the opposite of human sophistication, brilliance, beauty, strength, and eloquence. To the contrary, the cross represents human shame, degradation, and humiliation. From a human perspective, it is no surprise that the word of the cross would be considered as “folly”; however, Paul insists that the word of the cross is folly *only* to those who are perishing. To those who “are being saved,” however, this same word of the cross is “the power of God.” We should note that Paul does not contrast “folly” with “wisdom,” as we might expect, but with “power.” On this point, Leon Morris observes that the gospel “is not simply good advice, telling us what we should do. Nor is it information about God’s power. It *is* God’s power.”⁶ That is, the word of the cross *alone* has the power to save in a way that all the wisdom of the world fails to accomplish.⁸ In this, we should observe that the gospel does not represent God’s threatening of his power *over* believers, but of his unleashing his power *for* believers.⁹

Destroying Human Wisdom (1 Cor. 1:19–20)

Next, Paul cites a prophecy from the Old Testament (Isa. 29:14) to demonstrate that destroying human wisdom and thwarting human discernment has always been God’s intention—an intention that God has now accomplished through the cross of Christ.¹⁰ When we consider the wider context beyond the verse Paul has quoted, it does not seem that Paul has chosen this passage at random. Just as Paul has been confronting eloquent speech (“wisdom of word”), the Lord similarly addresses false speech in the preceding verse of the prophecy: “Because this people *draw near with their mouth* and *honor me with their lips*, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment *taught by men...*” (Isa. 29:13).¹¹ This is an important point, since in Isaiah 29, the Lord is addressing the people of Israel, not the wider Gentile world. As Paul will go on to make clear in vv. 22–24, the temptation toward idolizing human wisdom is not something that plagues only the Greeks, with their great tradition of philosophy and rhetoric, but even the Israelites. No human being can “match wits with God,” and God’s unexpected, paradoxical, counter-intuitive, and *foolish* choice of the cross proves the feeble limitations of human wisdom once and for all.¹²

Indeed, as mentioned earlier, this human drive to seek wisdom apart from God goes all the way back to the original Fall. In the garden of Eden, the woman rebelled against God’s commandment when she “saw that the tree was to be desired to make one wise” (Gen. 3:6). The word for *desired* in that context is the same word used in the Ten Commandments to refer to *coveting* (Ex. 20:17). The insatiable desire for human wisdom is bound up in the covetousness of our hearts, where we give ourselves to anything other than God in order to satisfy the desires that God created to lead us to him. Indeed, Paul elsewhere remarks that covetousness is the same thing

as idolatry (Col. 3:5). From the Fall, God has been combatting the covetousness of human wisdom-seeking. Remarkably, God has won the decisive victory in that battle in the least desirable way, humanly speaking: at the cross.

So, in v. 20, Paul asks where the wise, the scribe, and the debater are after God's grand display of his own wisdom and power. Some have suggested various identities for these three classes of wise people; however, it is better and simpler to see this as a general challenge to every kind of wise person, summarized in these three general terms.¹³ More important are the terms "of this age" and "of the world" in the last two questions of v. 20. No matter how brilliant these wise people may be, their intellects are limited to *this* age and to *this* world.¹⁴ Because of this, they are no more capable of reasoning their way up to God's wisdom than the eye of a blind man is capable of discerning color.¹⁵ There is nothing left to dispute, philosophize, argue, or debate, for God has already revealed the bankruptcy of their wisdom by the cross that they continue to despise and reject.

The False Wisdom of Confusion (1 Cor. 1:21–23)

Although the general sense of v. 21 is clear, the specific force of Paul's argument in the first half of the verse is debated. Literally, Paul writes, "For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through its wisdom..." (my translation). What is clear is that Paul is continuing to contrast human, worldly wisdom against God's wisdom. What is unclear surrounds the meaning of the phrase "in the wisdom of God." Does this mean that the current state of confusion among the worldly wise is taking place according to the wise, sovereign, foreordination of God, or that the worldly wise reject God's in spite of being surrounded by endless manifestations of God's wisdom in creation and providence (cf. Rom. 1:18–23)?¹⁶ Certainly, the latter interpretation is true; however, in this context, the former interpretation probably makes the most sense. As David Garland summarizes this idea, "God was wise enough not to let human wisdom be the key to knowing God" (cf. Acts 14:16; 17:30; Rom. 1:24; 11:32).¹⁷

Because worldly wisdom entirely misses the mark of God's wisdom anyway, God delighted ("it pleased God") to make an ultimate display of his power and wisdom in the weakness and foolishness of the cross. By the folly of the cross, God saves those who believe in the message of the cross that Paul preaches. By implication, Paul intimates that the only way for anyone to be saved is by recognizing *first* that, in our own wisdom, we are fools.¹⁸ *Second*, God's salvation requires sinners to embrace what seems like folly to them: Jesus Christ crucified. This message, Paul insists, comes through "the folly of preaching" (lit., ESV: "the folly of what we preach"). By the ambiguity of this phrase, Paul reveals that this "folly" includes *both* the foolishness of the message itself *and* the foolish means by which the message is delivered.¹⁹ Importantly, Paul means something beyond formal sermons delivered from pulpits on Sunday mornings: "It is to be remembered, however, that *preaching*, in the Scriptural sense of the term, includes the inculcation of the truth, whether to an individual or to a multitude—whether by the road side, or in the school, or lecture-room, or the pulpit. Philip, as he rode in the chariot with the eunuch, 'preached to him Jesus,' Acts 8, 35."²⁰ It is not only that God has displayed his power through the crucifixion of Jesus, but that he continues to display his power when Christians share this message with others. Specifically, God displays his power by saving those who *believe* this preached message of the cross of Christ.

Jewish Signs and Greek Wisdom (1 Cor. 1:22–23)

In v. 22, Paul repeats the same word “since” (ESV: “for”) that appeared in v. 21 in order to restate his point more pointedly.²¹ So, Paul takes the general statement about the whole world’s (flawed) wisdom and applies it to the specific cases of the failures of the Jews and the Greeks to embrace Christ by faith.²² The way in which the Jews fail intellectually is by their insisting upon a sign (e.g. Num. 14:11, 22; Mark 8:11; John 6:30): “It implies a refusal to take God on trust; he must present his credentials in the form of visible and identifiable acts in which his claim upon men, and his ability to meet their need are validated. The attitude in question, though often very religious in form, is fundamentally sceptical, and essentially egotistical.”²³ The Jewish failure becomes even more apparent when the Jews continued in their unbelief in spite of the signs that Jesus *did* perform (e.g., John 7:31; 9:16; 11:47).

Next, Paul contends that the failure of the Greeks from seeking “wisdom.” Of course, this does not mean that wisdom in itself is wrong.²⁴ Instead, Paul is echoing themes from the wisdom literature of the Old Testament by insisting that true wisdom begins not with the folly of human speculation, learning, philosophy, and rhetoric, but with the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7). For the Greeks specifically, *wisdom* was an entire worldview where man is the central figure, with God only playing a marginal, supporting role: “Such ‘wisdom’ from the Greeks is a celebration of the subtlety of Socrates, the elegance of Aphrodite in marble, and the athleticism of Olympic competitors portrayed in red on an amphora. In a few words it is about ‘cleverness’, ‘power’ and ‘style’, things so important to the Greeks, but expressed in every society where those values become dominant.”²⁵

Thus, while Jews and Greeks have built their intellectual structures in different directions, both have built new versions of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). That is, both Jews and Greeks believe that their human wisdom will eventually allow them to reach up to God in heaven, so they reject the message that the Son of God has come down to them to be crucified for their salvation. To the Jews, the proclamation of a crucified Christ is a stumbling block that trips them up from faith. To the Jews, “‘Christ crucified’ is a contradiction in terms, of the same category as ‘fried ice.’ One may have a Messiah, or one may have crucifixion; but one may not have both—at least, not from the prospective of merely human understanding. *Messiah* meant power, splendor, triumph; *crucifixion* meant weakness, humiliation, defeat.”²⁶ To the Gentiles, “Christ crucified” seems as foolishness in comparison with their great traditions of human learning: “Nothing in the apprehension of rationalists can be more absurd than that the blood of the cross can remove sin, promote virtue, and secure salvation; or that the preaching of that doctrine is to convert the world.”²⁷ While Jews and Gentiles reject Christ crucified for *different* towers reasons, they have both engaged in the same foolishly ambitious project that the Babylonians failed to finish so many years earlier. In fact, we might even say that those who reject Christ now are more foolish than the Babylonians, since the Babylonians abandoned their construction after God confused their speech (Gen. 11:7–9), while Jews and Greeks alike are now reveling in their confused speech, considering their confusion to be “wisdom of word” (1 Cor. 1:17).

The Faith of the Effectual Call (1 Cor. 1:24–25)

In contrast to all human wisdom, God continues to hold forth Christ crucified as the salvation of

those who believe. The word “crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23) is a perfect tense participle, indicating “that he remains the crucified one.”²⁸ It continues to please God to hold out salvation to the world through his crucified Son. And, although many Jews and Greeks continue to reject Christ crucified in the folly of their wisdom, Paul points out that other Jews and Greeks do believe. Rather than consider Christ crucified to be a stumbling block or folly, these believers consider Christ crucified to be the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24).

Effectual Calling (1 Cor. 1:24)

What accounts for the difference between the unbelief of some and the belief of others? Paul attributes the difference to the question of *calling*: “to those who are called...” (1 Cor. 1:24). Paul has used this word three times already in this letter: (1) Paul is *called* by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 1:1); (2) the Corinthian church are those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus and *called* to be saints (1 Cor. 1:2); (3) these believers are *called* into the fellowship of God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor. 1:9). In the latter two uses, along with this use here in v. 24, the word *called* refers to “the effectually called, as distinguished from those who are merely externally invited. There is a twofold call of the gospel; the one external by the word; the other internal by the Spirit.”²⁹ Indeed, Paul has already stated that Christ crucified has been preached to all (external calling), but rejected by many (1 Cor. 1:23), while yet believed upon by these *called* who have received an *internal* calling (1 Cor. 1:24).³⁰

Thus, this *internal calling* is itself *effectual* to bring about faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Westminster Larger Catechism puts it this way: “Effectual calling is the work of God’s almighty power and grace, whereby (out of his free and special love to his elect, and from nothing in them moving him thereunto) he doth, in his accepted time, invite and draw them to Jesus Christ, by his word and Spirit; savingly enlightening their minds, renewing and powerfully determining their wills, so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein.”³¹ Therefore, the *called* are the same people as “those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21) and “us who are being saved” (1 Cor. 1:18).³² By faith, the *effectually called* believe that Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God. Those who only receive the outward call of preaching cannot discern God’s power and wisdom in Christ crucified.

The Foolishness and Weakness of God (1 Cor. 1:25)

Paul summarizes this section with this ironic, yet profound, statement: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor. 1:25). Importantly, Paul here uses a different form of the word “foolishness” than he has used up to now: “Paul does not use the word ‘foolishness’ (*mōria*) as in vv. 18, 21, 23, but says ‘the foolish thing’ (*mōron*), i.e., the cross. So with *the weakness*; the cross is ‘the weak thing’ of God that is stronger than anything man can produce.”³³ In part, this language reflects the idea that God has concealed his wisdom and strength through the cross.³⁴ Even more, this also means that God has accomplished more through this foolishness and weakness than all human wisdom and strength ever could.³⁵ Thomas Schreiner summarizes Paul’s logic helpfully: “Weakness becomes the circuit through which strength is conveyed, and what seems to be foolish—the message of the cross—becomes the vehicle by which wisdom is transmitted.”³⁶

Discussion Questions

- 1) Which human wisdom(s) are you tempted to trust? The political wisdom that promises a better world? The psychological wisdom of soothing your conscience without dealing with your sin? The American Dream wisdom that hard work will lead to success, ease, and comfort? The pluralistic wisdom that everyone may define their own truth? How does the cross overturn these wisdoms?
- 2) If you profess faith in Christ, to what degree does Isaiah 29:13 apply to you? Do you draw near to God with your mouth? Do you honor God with your lips? Do you merely obey human commandments taught by men? In all of this, is your heart nevertheless far from God? Why are we tempted to this kind of hypocrisy? How does the cross confront the hypocrisy of professing believers?
- 3) Why has the pursuit of wisdom apart from God always characterized sin (Gen. 3:6)? Why have human beings always attempted to build towers to reach up to God (Gen. 11)? What kind of tower are you trying to build? What actions do you take each day to make your tower a little taller? Why do you think those actions will enable you to reach God? How does the cross thwart your progress?
- 4) Why do human beings reject the proclamation of Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23)? Why do we need the effectual calling of God's Holy Spirit in order to believe that the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24)? How does this doctrine affect our evangelism? Does this doctrine tempt us to passivity or drive us to prayer? For whose effectual calling are you praying right now?

Notes

1. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 71.
2. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 51.
3. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 71.
4. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 27.
5. For “preaching” and “doctrine,” see Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 18. For “message,” see Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 71.
6. “To those who think of Christian believers as “the saved” Paul’s choice of the continuous present to denote the *process* of *being* saved may seem less than robust and confident. But Paul expounds salvation in terms of three tenses. A well-known analogy depicts those rescued from a sinking ship by a lifeboat as: (1) those who have been *saved*: they have been rescued from peril; but (2) as the lifeboat moves to the shore, they are *in process of being* saved. Finally, (3) they look ahead with longing to the lifeboat’s reaching the solid shore. Then they *will be* saved.” (Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 43.)
7. Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 49.
8. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 19.
9. Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 43.
10. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 70–72.
11. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 29.
12. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 73.

13. Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 50.
14. “Paul slips in the words of *this age*. The contrast between ‘this age’ and ‘the age to come’ is common in the teaching of Jesus and in Paul’s writings as well. The brilliance of *the philosopher* is limited to this age and is relativized when we consider the age to come.” (Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 68.)
15. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 82. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.viii.iv.html>>
16. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 21.
17. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 67.
18. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 84. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.viii.iv.html>>
19. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 69.
20. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 21–22.
21. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 54.
22. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 22.
23. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 54.
24. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 69–70.
25. Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 29–30.
26. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., 78–79.
27. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 22–23.
28. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 69–70.
29. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 23.
30. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 70–71.
31. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #67.
32. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 70.
33. Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 52.
34. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 88. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39.viii.iv.html>>
35. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 24.
36. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 71.