

The Weak and Worldly Cross

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19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." 20 Where *is* the wise? Where *is* the scribe? Where *is* the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

26 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.

30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God-- and righteousness and sanctification and redemption-- 31 that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD."

1 Corinthians 2:1 And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

About 14 years ago, two researchers named Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton interviewed about 3000 American teenagers about their Christian beliefs. When they were finished, they compiled the findings in a book called *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. The authors then came up with a phrase to describe the kind of religion that these teenagers, who are now in their twenties and thirties, believed in. They called it Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not Christianity, though most of those teenagers thought they were Christians.

If you're a believer in MTD, this is what you believe. There is a god. But this god is more a god you discover inside yourself, in your own personal search for truth. He looks over the world, but more like a landlord who has tenants. He doesn't really interfere with the lives of its inhabitants, and he never judges you. He is more like someone who listens and understands. He is more of a therapist than a judge.

What this god really wants is for people to be good, nice, and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. If you are a good person, you will go to heaven. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

In this version of religion, life is moralistic: it is mostly about being good; life is therapeutic, life is mostly about feeling self-affirmed and not judged, and life is deistic: god exists, but he does not involve himself in any real way.

I wonder how many professing Christians hold to some form of this idea. If you hold to this kind of religion, your Facebook friends will like all your posts, your unbelieving colleagues will tell you that they like your non-judgemental form of religion, and you will probably encounter very little conflict with unbelievers. Moralistic therapeutic deism is exactly the kind of religion that unbelievers come up with, and the kind they applaud.

But MTD is absolutely incompatible with the true meaning of the Cross. As we come again to the *****Gospel, the true preaching of the Cross, separates us from false teaching like MTD. In

fact, the Cross, not only separates us from MTD, but separates from every humanly-constructed form of religion.

This is nothing new. Paul was confronting a very similar situation in around A.D. 55, when he wrote this letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthians were also in danger of embracing a kind of weak and worldly religion. The Corinthians were also interested in a Christianity that was fashionable, respectable.

But Paul saw the same danger then that looms today: when you try to appeal to human pride, when you try to flatter human nature and mix it with Christianity, the result is sub-Christianity. The result is a cross which is really no longer the cross. And a sub-Christian cross cannot save anyone.

What Paul gives us in this passage is three marks of the real message of the Cross.

I. The Real Cross Cannot Be Tamed

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. 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. 19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." 20 Where *is* the wise? Where *is* the scribe? Where *is* the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

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During Paul's time, professional speakers, trained in classical rhetoric, would make their living by giving speeches, orations that were filled with the wisdom of Greece, and high culture of Rome. We still have the writings of Aristotle which detail the techniques of the ideal public speaker. And there was something of a celebrity culture around these speakers in the Roman world. People queued up to hear them, paid money to listen to them. Their use of language, their ability to illustrate, the power of their memories was entertaining.

Not only so, but it was an appeal to the pride of the Graeco-Roman culture. They prided themselves on being civilised. Their culture of law, philosophy, government, architecture was seen as far superior to the people they conquered. Everyone outside of Roman culture was called a barbarian. The best speeches of the day quoted from, and alluded to, all the wealth of Greek and Roman intellectual culture: their philosophers, their great thinkers, their historians, their mythologies.

Now Paul was not ignorant of this culture. He had grown up with Roman citizenship. When Paul was in Athens, he was able to quote from the Greek poet Epimenides, reference a poem about Zeus, and answer their religions. Some have thought that Paul may have been among the most learned men in the world at the time.

But verse 17 tells us the choice Paul made:

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

He preached the Gospel, which is the message of the Cross, not with wisdom of words. He avoided the entertaining, flamboyant, and self-congratulating techniques of the orators of his day. He says the same thing in 2:2:

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

I didn't pour the Gospel into the mould of intellectual brilliance. I didn't spray-paint the Gospel with the gold of sounding cultured, or personally intelligent, or being all too clever.

Why not? Paul tells you in verse 17: lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

Paul consciously avoided those things, in order that the Cross would not be made of no effect. Made of no effect is one word in the Greek, and it means to destroy something's power, to render it harmless, useless, powerless. You declaw and defang the the animal. You disconnect the machine from its power source. What the cross will do, and is supposed to do, is neutralised, when you try to dress it up, and put make-up on it, and spray it with the cheap perfume of human wisdom.

When you do that, it is no longer the Cross, and it can no longer have its powerful effect. What is that effect? 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.

The message of the Cross is so counter-human wisdom, so counter man's glory, so counter everything that humans make when they construct their systems, that it quickly divides its audience in two. For some, the message is foolishness. For others, the message does not simply make sense, it powerfully changes them.

The word *foolishness* is the Greek *μωρία*. Our English words moron, and moronic actually derive from this word. It means intellectual nonsense, foolishness, silliness. It is what is so idiotic that you dismiss it. For the Greeks and Romans of Paul's day, the true preaching of the Cross was idiotic, lunacy.

To understand why, consider a piece of graffiti found engraved into a wall in ancient Rome. It has come to be called the Alexamenos Graffiti. It mocks a Christian named Alexamenos. It has a picture, with the inscription, "Alexamenos worships his god". Alexamenos is drawn on the left, lifting his arm in a sign of reverence and worship. Who is Alexamenos worshipping? He is worshipping a god being crucified. But the god on the cross is a donkey. For the ancient Romans, this was so ridiculous, that they called Christians – assenarii – donkey worshippers.

Now where did that come from? Why would a Roman guard or servant or soldier, look over at a man he knew to be a Christian, and take the time to mock him with this drawing? The answer is that the cross was a repulsive and shameful symbol. Any religion that made a crucified leader its god was foolishness to the Greeks and Romans.

Crucifixion was not simply a form of execution in Roman times. When someone was executed, most often he was beheaded, or even given poison to drink. Beheading is quick and without much pain or humiliation. Crucifixion, on the other hand, was a form of death by torture and humiliation. Crucifixion would result in agonising pain, that could last for hours or even days. Crucified persons were usually stripped naked, and often placed along highways for people to see. Very often, crucified men were not buried, but left on the cross to decompose and be destroyed by birds, animals and insects. Sometimes, the body would be thrown on the city's garbage heap.

Thieves were not crucified, unless some kind of rape or murder had accompanied their theft. Roman citizens could not be crucified. Middle and upper class people could not be crucified.

Crucifixion was so humiliating, so distasteful, so obnoxious, that only the poor, the slaves, the rebellious from other nations could be crucified. The Roman statesman Cicero called it "the most

cruel and disgusting penalty" (Verrem 2:5.165),

To see a crucified man was to see someone who had offended the world in the deepest way, and had been condemned to the lowest, most obscene and painful death man could invent.

It means that which is so offensive, that it arouses anger, disapproval, or stumbling. So you would be witnessing to someone about sin and the need for atonement, and they would be fine with it and agreeing, and then you get to the cross, and it would be the place where the person stumbles. How can the means to forgiveness be by someone who was crucified? That's hard to take. That's distasteful. That's gruesome, and it smacks of death and blood and torture, and it doesn't sound like a tasteful, civilised religion.

So when your message is so shameful, and so unacceptable, and so, filled with stigma, what are you going to do? How did the church deal with the fact that the gospel itself was scandalous and ridiculous to the average man? Did they decide to play down the fact that Jesus had been crucified lest it alienate their listeners? Did they try to focus on the nicer parts of the message so as to connect with the middle and upper classes of society? Did they rework the message so that the gruesome cross was not the main focus, but rather the happy, life-giving message? Did they repackage the message to avoid being ridiculed, mocked, misunderstood or slandered?

I think Alexamenos' Graffiti tells you how central the cross was. Christians did not merely accept the message that their Lord and Saviour had been crucified, they boasted in it. For someone to draw that picture, mocking Jesus, it tells you what they told others about their faith. They didn't hide the cross; they didn't try to escape the shame, they preached it.

They knew the power of the cross is only experienced when it is unleashed as it is.

But the message of the cross hasn't lost its scandal.

The message is still scandalous: that a sinner deserves death and punishment before a holy God. That one man, who lived in Jerusalem 2000 years ago was actually God in flesh, and is the exclusive means of reconciliation with God.

That is highly offensive to people today. It is highly offensive to modern man that he is on death-row as far as God is concerned; that he is not naturally good and worthy of heaven, that he has offended God in ways he cannot possibly conceive of.

That God became a man, is offensive to the world. After all, God is our cosmic consciousness, God is the life-force in us all, God is the energy of the universe, God is all of our creative acts. How can you make God into a person, much less three persons, one of whom became a man. That's preposterous! That's fairy tales! That's barbaric!

That Jesus was the substitute for the sinner, is offensive to the world. How could Jesus be punished for guilty sinners? One unbeliever called this truth 'cosmic child abuse'. It is crazy – that Jesus could pay for Adam's sin.

That He alone is the way is highly offensive to people today. How could one man's death at one time in one place be the key for all men everywhere? How could Jesus Christ be the only way when there are so many religions and so many people, and so many religious ideas in the world? It is so narrow-minded and bigoted and backward to imagine that Jesus is the only way! And to say that those who do not believe in Jesus will experience the wrath of God is like uttering the vilest curse words to some people. It is almost savage to say such things.

That it is faith in Him plus nothing that saves is offensive to people today. The idea that I do not contribute to my salvation, that I do not have enough merit to earn my own salvation is very offensive.

That is still scandalous, and still ridiculous to people. That is a message which the world thinks you should be embarrassed to believe and embarrassed to share. But that is the word of the cross. That is the gospel.

The real cross only unleashes its power when you preach it in its God-centred, man-convicting way. It becomes power to those believing when it is not dressed up as self-esteem, or therapy, or self-enhancement, or moral example.

What does this power look like when unleashed?

II. The Real Cross Changes People, People Cannot Change It

19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." 20 Where *is* the wise? Where *is* the scribe? Where *is* the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

V19-21, 25 Here Paul tells you the genius behind God's use of the message of the Cross. God deliberately attacks man's pride. Man is wise in his own eyes. In Romans 1, Paul tells us that mankind abandoned the worship of the true God and professing to be wise, they became fools. And through the millennia of history, man's philosophy, man's intelligence did not bring him to repentance.

So God chose then not to appeal to man's intellectual pride, but to instead use a message that would be deemed foolish to deliberately confront and attack the pride of man. Nothing except a humility of spirit would bring about knowledge of God.

Side-bar: it is important to reason with people about the Christian faith, to show them why you believe, why Christianity is intellectually coherent. But past a certain point, you will render the cross of no effect when you appeal to their self-important sense of intelligence.

The Gospel calls for intellectual humility, not pride.

V22-24 Once this message is preached, the Cross has the effect of dividing humanity in two. Now up to this point, the world was thought of in two categories: Jew and Gentile, or Greek. Paul says unbelieving Jews want miracles. Unbelieving Greeks want philosophy. So if you wanted to supposedly persuade unbelieving Jews, what should you do? You should ideally do signs, miracles, wonders. And if you wanted to persuade unbelieving Greeks, what should you do? You should use all the wisdom and eloquence of Greek philosophy.

But instead, Paul says, we keep preaching Christ crucified. Christ crucified is to the Jews who want miracles a stumbling block, and to the Greeks who want philosophy foolishness. But here is the powerful turning point:

24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God

To those called, those whom God has drawn, and who are being saved, the very same message completely changes in their eyes. But to those who are called, everything changes. To believing Jews – Christ becomes the ultimate miracle, the ultimate sign, the ultimate power. To believing Greeks – Christ becomes the ultimate philosophy, the ultimate wisdom, the very best reason.

But notice the difference is not that the message changed. The difference is “called” “Being saved”

The real cross, the real Gospel changes the very same people who scoffed at it, who stumbled over it.

You either change the message hoping to change the people, or you trust the message to change the people. Paul is saying, when you change the message, it will not change the people. When you let the Cross do its work, it will save people, it will convert people.

Stop diluting it, watering it down, dressing it up. Unleash it. Some will stumble and be offended. Some will scoff and mock. It's doing its work. But of those, suddenly, some will come to see it as powerful, and reasonable, and be saved.

Paul now proves this with a third point about the true cross.

III. The Real Cross Creates a People Like Its Message

26 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.

30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God-- and righteousness and sanctification and redemption-- 31 that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD."

The powerful message that cannot be domesticated, that must not be changed, when it works on people, it saves. But Paul asks the Corinthians, and by extension us, to take a step back and look at the composition of the church. Is the church largely composed of the fashionable, powerful and elites of the day?

Paul says, the church is not composed of the brilliant, the powerful, the aristocracy. Instead, God has delighted largely to save the forgotten, the average, the unremarkable, the simple, the weak, the poor.

Why? Because the church will then be another rebuke to man's pride. Man, in all his self-glory will not find God, but God will choose to save those the proud would despise.

The sovereignty of God in this passage is unmistakable, the word *chosen* occurs three times here, the word called and calling, the words *it pleased God to save*.

Expect the church to be a strange mix. Expect the church to include the down and outers, the poor, the slow-witted, the plain. Do not expect the church to be the trend-setters, the royals, the geniuses, the celebrities. Enjoy the plainness and diversity and humility of the church.

Stop following celebrity culture. While you may know who those people are, I can't see how Christians can fawn over such people, long to be like them, keep up with their every move, and still embrace the foolishness of the Cross. Can we simultaneously admire what the world admires and admire what God admires? Can we simultaneously love what human pride loves, and love what humility loves?

Why? Because Christians have something far, far greater. 30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God-- and righteousness and sanctification and redemption-- 31 that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD."

Here's your boast. Here's the glory of the humble man: he is clothed in Jesus Christ, the greatest one of all. He is wiser than the wise, he is stronger than the mighty, she is more beautiful than the

models of our age in Christ.

There are many people and so-called churches out there domesticating the cross, preaching MTD. But in taming the Cross, they just turned the Sword of the Spirit into a plastic stage-prop. The true message cannot be tamed.

By appealing to self-esteem, and self-affirmation, and niceness, and morality, there is no stumbling-block, and no foolishness. Everyone will like your message. But sadly, you will not see Christ the power of God, and Christ the wisdom of God, people gloriously and soundly converted. And so you will also never see the wonder of the church, a wonderful mix of high and low, rich and poor, small and great, called and saved.

“Cling to the cross, then. Put both arms around it! Hold to the Crucified, and never let Him go. Come afresh to the cross at this moment, and rest there now and forever! Then, with the power of God resting upon you, go forth and preach the cross! Tell out the story of the bleeding Lamb. Repeat the wondrous tale, and nothing else. Only proclaim that Jesus died for sinners. The cross held up by a babe’s hand is just as powerful as if a giant held it up. The power lies in the Word itself, or rather in the Holy Spirit who works by it and with it...Believe in Christ crucified and preach boldly in His name, and you shall see great and gladsome things.”