

GOD'S NONSENSE

by Ray C. Stedman

I think no American Christian can read First Corinthians without feeling right at home. I was told recently of a young pastor who was inquiring of an older pastor what he should do to prepare for his ministry. The older man told him, "Well, I would advise that above all else you must get a Ph.D. degree, for no church today will listen to a man who does not have a Ph.D." When I heard that, the centuries fell away and I felt I was right back in Corinth with its love of human wisdom, its exaltation of human philosophies, and its stress upon status symbols which were dividing the church and producing factions, schisms and quarrelings in their midst. These Christians at Corinth were quarreling over what Paul calls "the wisdom of words," and their quarrelings and divisions were sabotaging the impact of this church upon the city so that much of what had started out with tremendous power was beginning to fade away because of the divisions within the congregation.

Now, the cure to such divisiveness and dissension, Paul says, is the gospel. We usually think of the gospel as something that non-Christians need to hear, but the New Testament makes very clear to us that it is Christians who need to understand the gospel. Believing the gospel is not only the means by which you become a Christian, it is the means by which you are delivered in your Christian life from all the causes of disagreements, factions, dissensions and pressures of lust, etc.

Now, the heart of the gospel, Paul says, is the cross of Jesus Christ, and he brings us to that in the 17th verse of Chapter 1, where he says,

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom [i.e., wisdom of words], lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. {1 Cor 1:17 RSV}

The theme of this next section is the power of the cross, and Paul is going to show us clearly, in a very profound passage, what the cross does in human thinking and in human affairs.

The cross, of course, has become the symbol of Christianity today. Ladies wear it on chains around their necks; we use it as decorations in various places. We have become so familiar with the cross in those terms that we have forgotten much of the impact it had in the 1st century.

It was, for these early Christians, and for those among whom they lived, a horrible symbol. If you had used it then as a symbol it would have made people shudder. We would get much closer to it today if we substituted a symbol of an electric chair for the cross. Suppose we had an electric chair mounted on our wall here, with its straps and its atmosphere of death and of shame? Wouldn't it be strange driving across this country to see church steeples with electric chairs on top? We would get much closer to the meaning that the cross had in the minds of 1st century people if that were true.

Now, the cross is not the whole of the gospel. Some people have misunderstood that from this letter, because Paul said that when he came to Corinth he came determined not to preach anything among them "save Jesus Christ and him crucified." Before this letter is over, however, the apostle is going to write a great section on the resurrection of Christ. That is part of it too. But the cross was particularly needed in Corinth, as it is needed in our American churches, because the word of the cross is the cure for all human division.

Now, Paul goes on to introduce this astonishing power of the cross, Verse 18:

**For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,
"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart." {1 Cor 1:18-19 RSV}**

The cross is significant in Christianity because it exposes the fundamental conflict of life. That is what these verses declare to us. The cross gets down below all our surface attempts at compromise and cuts down to the basic difference behind all human disagreement. Once you confront the cross and its meaning, you find yourself unable to escape that final, basic judgment of life as to whether you are committed to error or committed to truth.

Now, we must understand very clearly, before we go on, what Paul means by "the word of the cross."

First of all, it means the basic announcement of the crucifixion of Jesus. The cross is a fact of history. Any of you who have been involved in some of the modern cults or the psychological groupies forming today that emphasize meditation, of transactional analysis or something of this sort, know that what you are introduced to in these groups is, basically, philosophy, and various ideas that men have about human behavior and how to control it. And there are conflicting philosophies in this area today. You have a whole spectrum of religious groups based upon various philosophical concepts. But when you come to Christianity you do not start with philosophy, you start with facts, inescapable facts of history that cannot be thrown out or avoided. One of them is the incarnation of Jesus, the fact that he was born as a man and came among us, yet under strange and marvelous circumstances. Another of the great facts of our faith is the crucifixion. Jesus died. He was nailed to a tree. It was done at a certain point of time in history and cannot be evaded. This is part of the word of the cross, part of the gospel that we declare to men everywhere that something very strange happened to Jesus of Nazareth. He died a strange death. He did not deserve it, but by the judgment of the Romans and Jews alike he was put to death for a crime that he did not commit. That is part of the word of the cross. But that, of course, is not all of it.

What is meant by this verse, primarily, is a reference to the judgment that the cross makes upon human life. That is where we run into what Paul calls later "the offense of the cross." When you say that Jesus was crucified you are saying that when the universally acknowledged finest man who ever lived takes the place of any one of us, or any person who has ever lived, he deserves nothing but the instant judgment of God, and death at God's hand. That is a judgment on all of us. That is what people do not like about the cross. It condemns our righteousnesses. It casts aspersion on all our good efforts, wipes them all out and says they are totally worthless. A single individual yielding to the God who made him, and filled with the power of God designed for him, is worth far more than all the created universe, but man without God is a totally worthless being whose only value lies in the possibility that that divine life can be reinstated in him. That is the word of the cross, and that is what Paul means when he speaks of the cross as the symbol of the Christian life.

Now, he goes on in this verse to tell us that word always produces two reactions. It did so in the first century and still does today -- exactly the same two:

First, the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing. The word "folly" here literally means "silly." It is silliness, absurdity, nonsense, to those who are perishing. If you have ever tried to witness to somebody who has a sense of sufficiency about himself, who feels that he is a self-made man -- and he worships his creator -- you have discovered the folly of the cross. To come and tell such a man that all his efforts and all his impressive record of achievement is worth nothing in God's sight, that it does not make him one degree more acceptable, that it is nothing but wasted effort, you will immediately run into the offense of the cross. He will call that doctrine silly, absurd: "You mean to tell me that all this impressive array of human knowledge and wisdom that has been accumulated for centuries, with all the great achievements of mankind in the realm of relief of human misery and the technological advances of our day, that all that is absolutely worthless? Nonsense!" That is what they said in the 1st century and that is what they say today.

I am sure there are some here this morning who are thinking that -- "If that's what the Bible teaches, then I think it's ridiculous."

The other reaction is that the cross is the power of God to those of us who are being saved. (The perishing have not perished yet; they are on the way to perishing. Nor have the saved been fully saved yet; we are on the way to that final salvation yet to be realized.) But to us who are being saved, the cross is the key to the release of all God's blessing in human life. It is the way to experience the healing of God in the heart, the deliverance

from the reign of sin, and the entry into wholeness, peace, and joy. The cross is an inescapable part of that process.

Now, those are the two reactions. And to prove that this is universally the case, and not something merely for a moment in time but always God's way with man, Paul quotes the words of God from the book of Isaiah, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart," {cf, Isa 29:14}. If you look that up in the book of Isaiah you will find that it came at a time when Judah was being confronted with an invasion. The northern borders of the land were being attacked by the Assyrian army, and all the statesmen and politicians of the day, including King Hezekiah, were trying to find a way out of this dilemma. (It reads very much like the present day crisis in the Middle East.) They were trying to find a way by human ingenuity and political scheming to either make a mutual defense treaty with Egypt, or somehow turn off the wrath of the Assyrian army and escape imminent invasion. But God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and announced that he would deliver his people without any help from the politicians. This is the way he put it, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart," {cf, Isa 29:14}.

The book of Isaiah goes on to record how God did that very thing, {cf, Isa 37}. The Assyrian army came right up to the gates of Jerusalem and surrounded the city. King Hezekiah could see the hordes of Assyrians, their tents surrounding the city, mocking and taunting the Israelites. Their leader, Sennacherib, sent a letter to the king ordering him to surrender, but the king spread it out before the Lord and prayed over it. And God answered. He sent an angel who in one night slew 185,000 of the Assyrian soldiers. (History says that a plague broke out in the Assyrian camp and overnight 185,000 died. The Authorized Version puts it in a rather remarkable way: "When they woke up in the morning, behold, they were all dead," {cf, Isa 37:36 KJV}.) God did exactly what he said he would do. He did not ask for any human help. He did it, and the land was delivered.

Now, Paul picks that up and says that is the way God works, and especially, he works that way in the matter of human redemption.

That brings us then to Paul's analysis and examination of the wisdom of the world, of this age, versus the wisdom of God. Now we are going to look at a very profound passage. I want to take time with it, so we will cover only a very few verses of it this morning. It is one of the most amazing examinations of a problem that every generation, without fail, has to face: How much should we trust the wisdom of men? How much reliance should we put upon the ability of men to solve their own problems in whatever realm or dimension of life we care to investigate? (This is a particularly helpful passage to students at school.)

Paul says in Verse 20:

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. {1 Cor 1:20-21 RSV}

He begins with three questions, but essentially he is asking this one question: "What true standing does human wisdom give to you?"

Here we come up against the matter of how much value are degrees. I am not setting aside degrees, they do represent something of value, but how much of a human life and the value of a life can be detected by the degrees that a man has? The implication of these questions is: None.

Now, Paul is referring to the two universal approaches to understanding and gathering knowledge and wisdom.

The first is the scribal, or Jewish approach -- the study of all the wisdom and writings of the past. The Jewish scribes gave their whole attention to reading the ancient Scriptures and ancient writings of wise men, trying to gather it all and reduce it to practical applications for their day. But Paul says, "Where does that get you?" The answer is: Nowhere.

Well, what about the debater of this age? That was the Greek approach. The Greeks loved to get together to debate the philosophies of their day. We would call it the dialectic approach, arguing as to which is better, which is right, and debating all the conflicting philosophies and opinions of the day. Paul is raising the question, "Where does that get you?" Again the implied answer is clearly: Nowhere. What is it worth? Nothing. That is a very harsh judgment, isn't it?

I think at this point we must make a very important distinction. There is a difference between human knowledge and human wisdom. Unfortunately, in reading a passage like this, many confuse the two:

Knowledge is the discovery of truth, and God always encourages it. He gave us minds to use. There is nothing anti-intellectual in the Scriptures. I want to make that very clear. God has set man on a search to unravel and discover the millions of secrets he has hidden in the universe, many of the greatest, I am sure, yet undiscovered. Man is given the gift of reason to search these out. To investigate into any realm of knowledge is perfectly right and proper. To give yourself to a discovery of the laws of physics and what is behind matter is perfectly right. To give yourself to investigation of the wonders of the human body, of medicine and pathology, is perfectly right. To set yourself to discover the secrets of the stars, or the secrets of the workings of the human mind and the psyche in psychology -- these are all perfectly right. But that is knowledge, the discovery of truth. Wisdom is the use of truth. This is where Scripture always throws down the gauntlet.

Scripture says there is something faulted about human wisdom -- it does not know how to use truth. All truth discovered through human knowledge is misused, abused, twisted, distorted, and, therefore, we end up worse off than we were before. Now, I think this needs to be said today in a university community such as we have right here. It needs to be especially emphasized because so many Christians begin to worship human wisdom and to feel that secular writers know more about some of these matters applying to the use of knowledge than Christians do. And there is no question that many secular writers do know a great deal more about the discovery of truth than do many Christians. But what we must clearly understand, and what this great passage will help us understand, is that when it comes to the application of truth, secular minds are juvenile, for the most part. They are twisted; they do not know what to do with their knowledge, and so are a lot of Christians who follow along these same paths and who have not approached the use of truth from the revelation and the wisdom of the Word of God.

It is amazing that even thoughtful secular writers will distinguish these differences. I was reading recently an excerpt from Vance Packard's new book, *The People Shapers*, in which he explores the possibility of molding the minds of men and altering human behavior by scientific process. He concludes with these words:

A person can be high in learning ability and memory, and still remain a fool. The two do not add up to either brilliance or wisdom in thinking. Until someone comes along with a pill for wisdom, we might better aspire to become a more humane society, rather than a more brainy one.

Now, in Verse 20, the apostle also asks another question, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" When he asks that he is asking, in essence, "What is the true nature of human wisdom?" And his answer is, "Foolishness." It is ridiculous; it always sounds impressive, it radiates optimism, and it even seems to work for a while in a limited area of application. This is always what confuses us so. But when it is all over, it has succeeded in changing nothing.

Now, that we need to face. That is a fact. That is why every generation wrestles with the same problems, and that remains true as far back as you go into the farthest reaches of human history. That is why we are confronted with the puzzle of why one generation never seems to learn from another. The great German philosopher, Hegel, was quite right when he said, "History teaches us that history teaches us nothing." That is why old age always points to youth and says, "Won't you listen? Won't you pay attention?" And youth invariably points back and says, "Look what it made us! Look where you got us! We're not going to pay any attention to you." That is the story of history.

Winston Churchill once said these remarkable words:

Certain it is that while men are gathering knowledge and power with ever-increasing speed, their virtues and their wisdom have not shown any notable improvement as the centuries have rolled. Under sufficient stress, starvation, terror, warlike passion, or even cold, intellectual frenzy, the modern man we know so well will do the most terrible deeds, and his modern woman will back him up.

Now, why is this true? In Verse 21, the apostle puts his finger right on the problem:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, {1 Cor 1:21a RSV}

That is the problem. What is the major fault of the wisdom of man? Well, despite his pretentious claims to have penetrated the secrets of life, he has failed to discover and acknowledge the greatest fact of all -- God himself. The great being behind all that exists is God, and for man to ignore and leave out of his thinking the most important fact of all is nothing but stupidity. That is why in our public school systems there is a conspiracy of silence to keep God out. You run into it everywhere. No one hardly dares to mention his name. Teachers are very careful not to allow the investigation of natural phenomena to lead to the conclusion that behind these phenomena is a being of great wisdom, power, and might. They use euphemisms instead: "Nature, karma, destiny, fate." Or, if they are driven into a corner, "Providence" -- but not God.

Now, that is another incredible fact. In all the reasoning of the mind of man he fails to discover the great force behind all matter, the great being behind all psychology, the great reality behind all the appearances that we investigate. Man with all his brilliance, ends up like little children who fail to see a great giant towering in their midst because they are so happily engaged in swinging on his shoestrings. No wonder T. S. Elliot says,

All our knowledge only brings us closer to our ignorance, and all our ignorance closer to death, but closer to death, no nearer to God.

Then he asks the question that hangs over this whole generation:

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Now what is God's answer to this? Well, Paul gives it to us in Verse 21:

... it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. {1 Cor 1:21b-25 RSV}

What a strange answer that is! God has chosen to set aside both the searchings of men and the demands of proud, stubborn men who demand miracles or else they will not believe, to confront them with what is basically a simple story of a crucified Messiah.

We had a clear example of that recently in newspaper reports of the discovery of a shroud, marked with the image of a man, that is supposedly the burial shroud of Jesus. It immediately evoked tremendous popular attention. Why? Because something about us wants to demand that God perform a miracle or else we will not believe. We are right back to where the citizens of Nazareth were when Jesus came among them. They asked him to do a sign, but he would not do it because of their unbelief. To the proud men who demand miracles and to the foolish intellectuals who insist on an explanation or else they will not believe, God gives the same answer -- the story of a crucified Messiah is held out to them as their only hope for deliverance. It is preached by the same kind of men and women as they themselves are, not brilliant people, not great, trained minds, not deep-thinking philosophers, but common, ordinary citizens, housewives, slaves, artisans, craftsmen, whoever, anybody can preach the story of a crucified Messiah. And yet that story, believed in, effectively accomplishes what the wisdom of man and the power of man cannot do -- salvation; people are actually delivered from themselves.

We remember the close of the '60s, when this whole nation was in the grip of a terrible wave of violence that

swept across our campuses and in our city streets; we remember the great racial unrest of that time and the violence that broke out between black and white.

We remember reading about an eloquent young black radical named Eldridge Cleaver who made white people tremble and sleep uneasily at night. Nobody knew what to do with him. The law could not handle him. No philosophy seemed to reach him. Nothing could change him; all the education he had in the American public schools had not altered him. But somehow, in God's wisdom and God's grace, at the right moment in his life the word of the cross reached him and he saw himself for what he was, without hope or help before God, except in Jesus Christ. How that delivered him and changed him. Now he is living among us, absolutely transformed, a positive force for good where once he had been a powerful force to destroy. That is a demonstration in our own day of the power of the cross to effect what the wisdom of man cannot do.

We remember the mess of Watergate and the sickening discovery of a basic illness so deeply involved in our whole national life that it touched the highest office in the land. Associated with it was an arrogant, ruthless young lawyer named Charles Colson. Now we have the story of how the word of the cross reached the "hatchet man" of the Nixon administration, and he is now devoting his life to the rescue of men in prison. He has been changed by the power of God.

More recently we have the story of the "king of porn," Larry Flynt, editor of "Hustler" magazine, the raunchiest, dirtiest, most obscene of all the obscene magazines on the market today. Now he is changed, according to the reports, born again, and his magazine is beginning to change because of the change in his life. What God has wrought by the power of the word of the cross!

I love to dwell on this because I think Christians have forgotten what God has put in their hands. What a marvelous God this is! Paul seems to bow before the wonder and majesty of this astonishing God in Verse 25:

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God [the nonsense of God] is stronger than men. {1 Cor 1:25 RSV}

What man cannot do, God accomplishes by this simple word about the crucifixion of Jesus and the judgment on the wisdom of man.

I hope one effect in our own lives will be that we not only understand the greatness of the God with whom we deal, but we will understand the foolishness of the wisdom of the world that cannot hold a candle to the greatness of the revelation of the truth of God. When we open this book, and study it, and learn what God says about what life is, we are dealing with a reality that breaks away and strips off the illusions and delusions of a secular age, and introduces us to bedrock reality. That is where we ought to live.

I want to close by reading a quotation by C. S. Lewis:

It is hardly complimentary to God that we should choose him as an alternative to hell. Yet even this he accepts. The creature's illusion of self-sufficiency must, for the creature's sake, be shattered. And by trouble, or fear of trouble on earth, by crude fear of the eternal flames, God shatters it, unmindful of his glory's diminution. I call this "divine humility," because it's a poor thing to strike our colors to God when the ship is going down under us, a poor thing to come to him as a last resort, to offer up our own when it is no longer worth keeping. If God were proud, he would hardly have us on such terms. But he is not proud. He stoops to conquer. He would have us even though we have shown that we prefer everything else to him, and come to him because there is nothing better now to be had.

Title: God's Nonsense
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: Studies in First Corinthians
Scripture: 1 Cor 1:18-25

Message No: 3
Catalog No: 3573
Date: April 2, 1978

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