

Take-Aways for Small Group Leaders to Consider

Last week we discussed Paul's initial argument: unity in the church. Paul now seeks to show that "prideful confidence in human wisdom is antithetical to the deepest logic of the gospel."¹ Though this passage doesn't explicitly refer back to the Corinthian issues of unity, Paul seeks to prove that the root of these issues is grounded in man's desire to glory in the superficially impressive human wisdom of this time period.

Paul reminds believers that God chose a very different picture of "wisdom" to show his character. Instead of sending a war hero, he sent a suffering servant who would be shamed and die a "powerless" death on the cross. The cross now becomes the starting point for an epistemological revolution. In fact, the cross becomes the key to us understanding this new eschatological age where we now live in the "already not yet." We are already saved but still being sanctified. We are already redeemed, but not fully perfected.

- Interestingly, philosophers, powerful orators, scribes, and Torah scholars were all esteemed "celebrities" of this age, like our movie stars and athletes. Paul explains in v. 20-25 that though esteemed, they actually don't understand the ways of God; thus, their rhetoric will pass away and appear ridiculous in light of the cross.
- Why would crucifixion be such a hard thing to accept for Jews and Christians alike? Crucifixion was meant to make an example out of criminals and rebels. It was meant to show people that they could not defy the Roman empire, and if they tried, their end would be the cross. Astoundingly, instead of showing triumph to Rome, the cross shows triumph to Christ. He was crucified, but the cross could not hold him down and kill him. Instead, he overcame his death and, symbolically, he overcame the Roman Empire and all worldly powers.
- In 1 Cor. 2:2 the word crucified in the Greek is a perfect passive participle. This perfect tense describes actions completed in the past whose effects continue into the present. Thus, when Paul sees the entire gospel as Christ Crucified, he is saying that Jesus' identity remains stamped by the cross. Thus, any other accounts that don't include Jesus as the crucified one are not the true gospel.

¹ Hays, Richard B. *First Corinthians*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997. 26.

REVIEW:

1. Take 5-10 minutes to discuss Sunday's sermon "God's Challenge to Human Self-Sufficiency."
2. What new perspectives did you gain on the meaning of the word "wisdom" and of the term "self-sufficiency?"

INTRO TO THE TEXT:

Corinth was an important port city in ancient Greece, situated about 50 miles west of Athens on a peninsula that provided access to both the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. It was very cosmopolitan, bursting with activity, interesting people, and new ideas – much like Houston! Paul established the church at Corinth sometime between 51 and 53 AD, during his second missionary journey. The early church in Corinth consisted of several "house" churches and included both Jewish converts and Greeks. After Paul's departure, tensions arose between Jews and Gentiles, between social classes, and between certain factions over issues such as leadership. Paul heard reports of these tensions while in Ephesus and wrote this letter of both encouragement and reproof in 54 or 55 AD.

READ 1 Cor. 1:18 – 2:5

ANALYZE THE TEXT

1. Verse 1:19 quotes Isa. 29:14. Verse 1:31 refers back to Jer. 9:23-24. Look back at these passages. Who is the "speaker" in these passages? Why does Paul quote from them? What do they say about God's view of human wisdom and self-sufficiency?
2. Read verses 1:27-28 again. Why do you think God chooses the foolish, weak, lowly, and despised to achieve His purposes? How did Jesus do this during His earthly ministry?
3. The key contrast in this text is between **human wisdom** and **God's power** (vv. 1:24-25, 2:5.) What is Paul referring to here – i.e., God's power to do what? Is this about salvation alone, or is there more?

SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

It has often been said about Paul's letters to the church at Corinth that they speak of believers' problems that are still very much evident in today's

modern world. Indeed, Pastor Birchfield's first sermon in this series was entitled "An Ancient Word to the Contemporary Church." Overreliance on human wisdom and strength, the tendency to feel that we can attain knowledge of God or solve all of our problems based on our own efforts, is every bit as much an issue today as it was in Paul's day. And as the passages from Jeremiah and Isaiah remind us, it wasn't new in Paul's day either. There is nothing new under the sun (Eccl. 1:9.)

APPLY:

1. Princeton President, Dr. Christopher Eisgruber, upon assuming the helm of this great institution of human learning and wisdom (actually founded by Presbyterian ministers), was asked about his own religious views. While affirming his support for religious freedom and "pluralism", he said he did not personally see the need for such "mythology" in his own life. To him (using Paul's word), the Gospel is "foolishness." Who is someone in your sphere of influence whom most in the world would consider wise, but who sees no place for faith in his/her life? How should you pray for that person?
2. If the opportunity arises, what should you say to him/her about the Gospel? (Think of it like this: apologetics is not merely a defense of the gospel but a thoughtful, winsome, engagement of our faith with another.)
3. Read 1 Cor. 1:22-23 and Matt. 12:38-40. Have there been times when you have looked for signs or relied on human wisdom to better understand God? How were you turned back to "Christ crucified" as the only source of God's wisdom and strength?
4. Currently, are any of you wrestling with doing something "foolish" for the sake of the gospel? If so, share and pray over this decision (giving up social media for a period; changing career; cutting out one of your kid's many activities so that you can take a Sabbath as a family once a week; etc.).

MEMORIZE: 1 Cor. 1:18-19

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."