

Commentary

1 Cor 1:18-25 is the first of three paragraphs making a similar point. The message that Paul preaches (1:18-25), the church that results (1:26-31) and the methods he uses as a preacher (2:1-5) are all outwardly unimpressive. The world wants a message accompanied by miracles or couched in terms of worldly wisdom, it looks for a church that is full of wise, powerful or noble people, and it values rhetorical showmanship and persuasive speech ... in other words, it values the outwardly impressive-seeming. But God's methods are to bring all of this kind of thing to nothing, and to exalt himself and his way of doing things, as Paul explains.

Paul has just described how the Corinthians prized (literally) 'wisdom of word' (17), the wit and eloquence with which contemporary ideas and philosophies were packaged. Paul instead preached 'the word of the cross', and all his focus is on the content of his message. (NB Some older translations suggest that it is the act of preaching that Paul says is foolish ['the foolishness of preaching' KJV], but actually the correct translation is 'the foolishness of what was preached' [21] emphasising content.)

What is this message? Paul is absolutely clear that the message Christians preach is 'the word of the cross' (18), 'Christ crucified' (23) 'Jesus Christ and him crucified' (2:2). The power is in the message about that cross (17).

Paul's themes are:

- The message of the cross seems foolish to the world

Paul states the point in 18a (and cf 21b): people who are not Christians think that the gospel Christians preach, 'the word of the cross', sounds silly. Paul explains why this is: it is because the gospel message does not match up to human expectations of what a powerful message should sound like. This explains why we Christians so often feel embarrassed that our message sounds silly: it does!

Some people, like Jews (22), think that any message that is truly powerful will be accompanied by miraculous signs. Matt 12:38-39 is a good example of just that kind of demand made to Jesus. Of course, Jesus did do miracles that pointed clearly to who he was, and not least to his authority (eg Mark 2:10-12; cf John 10:38; 20:30-31). But there is another kind of demand for miracles that puts us into the driver's seat to evaluate, test, assess ... as if God must jump through our hoops if I am ever to believe in him.

Others, like the Gentiles (22), demand that God must fit into pre-determined systems of thought, 'meeting the high standards of their academic and philosophical prowess' (Carson). This is no less treating God as if we have the right to approve him, or not.

A gospel that will not play these games will inevitably be a 'stumbling block' that will for ever seem 'folly' (23) to those who think such things essential.

- The message of the cross shows up the wisdom of the world to be foolishness

Verse 20 is where Paul drives home the means by which God has debunked all the best of humankind's philosophies and various 'wisdoms'. When it comes to knowing God, when it comes to being saved rather than perishing, what can the wisdom of this world offer? The wise man (who proclaimed one of the many competing worldviews), the scribe (ie the expert in God's law, so perhaps 'the theologian or ecclesiast'), the debater (ie someone famed for public speaking) are all of no use. In fact, they will always be of no use unless the centre of their 'wisdom' is the cross. Furthermore, they are shown to be of no use.

The quotation from Isaiah 29:14 in 19 explains that this message of the cross is God's way of doing what he always said he would: by the cross, God sets aside and shatters all human pretensions. We cannot know God or find salvation except by the way he has laid down, and this therefore moves us (and our human wisdom) to one side and puts God himself centre stage.

This means that salvation is not only for those with IQs in excess of 130, not only for the young, beautiful, extrovert, educated, wealthy, healthy ... etc etc. It is also for the old, the ugly, the introverts, the illiterate, the poor, the sick, the perverse, etc etc.

- The message of the cross is powerful

The gospel is powerful because it saves people. Everyone who has ever lived and who ends up in heaven will be there because and only because of this gospel ... how powerful it is. No wonder all of heaven's multitudes will be singing gospel songs in praise of the one the gospel concerns.

It is only 'us who are being saved' (18), 'those who are called' (24), in other words, 'Christians' who recognise this. We look at the man who was left to die on the cross, and we recognise that despite his apparent weakness, there is God's power. We listen to words explaining that this is the way of salvation, which so many are quick to deride as childish and unsophisticated, and we recognise that there is God's wisdom.

So ... what the world dismisses as foolishness proves to be wiser than all the wisest wisdom this world possesses. What the world dismisses as weakness proves to be stronger than all the strongest ideologies and bedrock ideas on which civilisation is built.

Romans 1:16-17 is a helpful cross-reference. Paul is making the very similar point that the gospel is 'the power of God' because it is able to save everyone who believes ... how incredibly strong is that! Paul writes this to explain why he is 'not ashamed' of the gospel; this not only means that he's not bashful about it, but also that he is confident that he will not be shamed by it (ie he is confident that, in the end, it will turn out that it was certainly worthwhile giving his life to preaching it).

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Study Outline

Launching question

Why do you think we often feel silly when it comes to explaining that 'Jesus died on the cross for my sins'?

The story so far ...

Why does Paul say 1:17? What contrasts are there in this verse?

Looking closer

Paul is now going to explain why he preaches the gospel ...

READ 1:18-25

What does the world think about the gospel, according to these verses?
Why?

In what ways are people today like the Jews and Greeks of verse 22?

What does it mean to say the gospel is a stumbling block? why is it?

How does the gospel 'destroy the wisdom of the wise' (19)?

What does the gospel do to 'the wise man', 'the scribe', 'the debater' (20)?

Does this mean to say that no other realm of study is worthwhile?

In what ways are all the best ideas and worldviews 'foolish'?

Why does Paul preach the gospel if everyone thinks it's so silly?

Who thinks the gospel isn't foolish?

Why do we think it isn't foolish?

Thinking it through

Given where Paul began this letter in 1:1-17, why is he saying all this?

How do 1:18-25 defend Paul's ministry against those looking down on him?

How does this help us avoid personality cultism in church life?

In what ways do Christians today value the impressive-seeming?

How should Christian 'success' be measured?

Obviously one application of this passage would be that we should be all the more committed to preach the gospel, as Paul was (17).

What can we expect to happen as we preach the gospel? *think about v18*

How does this passage encourage us as we try to preach the gospel?

How specifically does it help us when we feel 'silly' (cf Launching Question)?!

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Study 2

Summary

Corinth was New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas all rolled into one. It was the Roman Empire's second city, and a centre for commerce, popular culture, mishmash-religion and pleasure. Paul's trip there in Acts 18:1-17 grew a church in the midst of hostility and inter-community tension. Within 2-3 years, Paul writes this letter responding to news brought by Chloe (1:11) and to issues raised in a letter they'd written to him (7:1).

In ch 1-4, as Paul confronts divisions in the church, look out for themes of ...

- worldly ways of thinking (eg exalting individual leaders, or their polished public speaking, stressing form over content);
 - over-realised eschatology (ie bringing into the present some of the blessings God promises us for heaven), producing a triumphalism where individuals have an inflated view of their own maturity;
 - what is authentic Christian ministry (and defending Paul's own ministry).
- Ch 1-4 is really a pastoral sermon on the theme of **true wisdom and false**.

The story so far ...

The Corinthian church has everything/lacks nothing, and yet is quarrelling and dividing behind personalities: the theological implications of this are serious. Paul emphasises that this is God's church and everything it has is a gift from him: so where do these individual leaders and different groupings fit in? Paul's role is not to count scalps (or baptismal records!) but to preach the gospel. Again, this gospel is God's and to be preached in God's way, relying on God's power ... it would be easy again here to chase after technique and outward-attractiveness instead.

Theme Sentence

The unimpressive-seeming gospel is God's powerful way to save.

Ideas for application

- we sometimes despair that the gospel seems so slow to produce conversions, but the point here is that it always produces an effect, dividing people. In that sense, it always 'works'.
- people will always think they can ignore Christianity, and deride us because of the 'foolish' / 'weak' things we believe. We shouldn't be surprised when it happens!
- the world will always need the gospel because the world will always need saving, and there is no other way to be saved than this.