

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: Calvin Miller wrote years ago about attending “one of those ‘biblical’ movies” popular a few decades ago. “Just before the intermission,” he wrote, “the crucifixion was presented in breath-taking color and drama.” As Jesus died, a terrible storm formed. The camera caught rivulets of blood flowing from Jesus’ hands, down the cross and into a depression at the foot of the cross. “Then the rain began to fall,” wrote Miller. “The rain accumulated in that small basin and mingled with the red. Soon the pool filled to overflowing and began trickling down the mountainside. The small red rill combined with other torrents of rushing water. Finally it became a great crimson tide for this world’s salvation—but, more than that, for *my* salvation.”

Then, suddenly, it was the intermission and Miller jostled his way to the theater lobby. “In the lobby,” he continued, “men laughed and chattered as though nothing had happened. Jewelry-bedecked women tossed their heads with lighthearted caprice. Children clamored for a drink from the water fountain. A noisy line formed at the concession booth... It was not that I had gone to that lobby expecting everyone to be collected into little prayer groups... [or] singing ‘When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.’ Most people who see the cross are not impressed with it. They can see it and walk away and forget it. Yet, the Christian who sees the cross and esteems it is a person who understands his or her debt. He or she alone owns the cross.” [*Once Upon a Tree*, pp.114—115]

- B. That is what binds us together as a church. **A church, by the Bible’s definition, is simply a gathering of people whose lives are being changed by God’s powerful, wise message of the cross of Christ.** And as much as we’d really like to be regarded as intelligent and wise people by those

around us, our commitment to the message of the cross is inevitably foolish to this world's wise, religious and philosophical people.

- C. Turn to 1 Corinthians 1:17-25. Paul wrote to this very contentious church hoping to restore their Christian unity. **V.10...** The Corinthians lived in a Greek culture that thrived on philosophical debate. Our friend Stamati, who is from Athens, told me that to this day Greeks love to debate. He was just back in Greece and said the tables in coffee shops are often noisy with arguments and discussions. Well, the Christians in Corinth brought that argumentativeness to church. They were breaking into sharp factions each claiming to have the corner on wisdom and knowledge. But they were forgetting the message of the cross.
- D. We don't have to come from that culture to run that danger. God wants us to learn from their mistakes.

In **v.17-18** Paul is explaining that when he came to Corinth he had just one thing on his mind...

I. "THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS IS FOOLISHNESS TO THOSE WHO ARE PERISHING" – AND ALL ARE PERISHING WHO DO NOT BELIEVE IT

- When Paul talks about "the message of the cross" he means, first, the facts. In **1 Cor 15:3-5** he spells out the details... And those facts carried profound meaning. Jesus Christ died on the cross because we are all alienated from God by our sin. Jesus is God's Messiah—his Deliverer and Champion, sent to save his people from their sins. He rose from the dead because God accepted his sacrifice. Consequently, when we trust Christ Jesus to save us our sins are forgiven and we are granted eternal life with God in heaven.
- But "the message of the cross is foolishness" to most people. It makes no sense to people who never think about their guilt. It makes no sense to people who think they have the power within them to change their lives. It

makes no sense to people, like the Jews of that day, who could only see salvation in political terms. It makes no sense to people, who like the Greeks, think gods are apathetic and unfeeling. At every turn, *“the message of the cross is foolishness.”*

- What these people in their religious and intellectual arrogance could never guess is that God is actually using their proud ideas to stymie them – v.19... This is a quote from **Is 29:14**. It is helpful to hear the verse before that one [**29:13...**]. Did you hear the problem? Their religion was counterfeit because *“their hearts are far from me.”* That is *the* fundamental issue that a religion or philosophy must confront—because of our pride and sin, all people *at heart* are far from God. If a wise man, or a religious scholar, or a philosopher doesn’t reckon with that problem, then God will show them to be fools. God doesn’t just ignore these people. He purposely confounds their efforts to create religions and philosophies that give no thought to humanity’s core problem: *“their hearts are far from [God].”*
- In **v.20-23** Paul calls the world’s intellectuals to account... Once you know Christ and experience his forgiveness and life what do these people have to offer you? As *The Message* puts it, *“Hasn’t God exposed it all as pretentious nonsense?”* What in God’s name is their appeal!? God says to these gurus, religious scholars and philosophers, *“Go ahead. Write your books. Deliver your lectures. Have your talk shows and seminars. Meanwhile, I will see that the message of Christ’s cross is proclaimed. It will actually save people who are perishing while you yammer about how foolish it is and how wise you are.”* God says to the Jews looking for signs, *“I will not give supernatural signs to people who refuse to see.”* God says to the Greeks, *“I will not debate the wisdom of my plan with those who refuse to face the fact of their own hard hearts.”*

I wrote to Bob Fischer about this. Bob is a thoughtful Christian who just got his Ph.D. in philosophy at UIC and has begun teaching in Texas. He referred me to one of his favorite quotes from **Blaise Pascal**. Here is a paraphrase:

When Christ “*appeared in his advent of mercy*” he came in such a way that those who do not want God’s mercy would not see him. After all, if people do not want mercy, it would not have been right for Christ to appear in an overwhelming way that they could not refuse. Yet he would not appear “*in so hidden a manner that He could not be known by those who should sincerely seek Him.*” He wanted to be recognizable as the Savior “*to those who seek Him with all their heart, and to be hidden from those who flee from Him with all their heart.*” Those who seek a Savior have enough light to see him. Those who have no interest see and understand nothing.

- This is not all merely an intellectual battleground. **V.18** says, “*the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.*” This intellectual tomfoolery is a deadly business. People who will bend all their intellectual muscle to shaping and believing religions and philosophies that do not address the deadly problem that our hearts are far from God—those people ultimately die and go to hell for not bowing to the wisdom of God. **T. S. Eliot** wrote their obituary:

*All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death, no nearer to God.
Where is the life we have lost in living?^j*

II. NO MATTER WHAT THE WISE OF THE WORLD THINK, WE BELIEVE IN THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS

- A. Those of us being saved through the message of the cross know that it is the power of God (**v.18**)The good news of

Jesus Christ is not merely a worldview or a religious philosophy; a way of explaining how the world and life work. When the wise of the world claim their system is powerful, they claim to tap the power within you, or the vague power of the universe, or even the aid of angels. The power of the cross is not like those in the least.

Remember, our problem is that our hearts are far from God. Romans 3:23 puts it succinctly: *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* That is a death sentence. People cut off from God have as much life as cut flowers. They get sicker and sicker at heart. Their souls wilt. They are dying day by day. And in the end they will die forever.

When a person hears the good news that Jesus died and rose again to reconcile them to God—to draw their hearts *near* the life-giving Lord; when a person hears the good news that Christ rose again from the dead to regenerate them—to give them again the breath of life; when a person hears that good news and believes it—when they lay hold of it as the God’s wise solution for their perishing, they are born again. God accepts Christ’s blood as payment for their sin, draws them to himself with the love of a father, implants his own Holy Spirit in their hearts, and makes his presence their eternal home.

The effect is powerful. People change from the inside out. For some it is emotional, for others it isn’t. But if the message of the cross takes hold of us, it is most certainly *not* merely intellectual. Illus.: A week ago we went with some friends to see the movie, *The Help*, a pretty disturbing picture of the blind racism of the south in the ‘60s. Afterward, with tears in his eyes, my friend said, *“That is what Jesus saved me from.”* There is no one who has believed the message of the cross who is not powerfully changed.

- B. **V.23-25...** No matter where we started, Jew or Gentile, we are gathered as the church because we believe what was

proclaimed to us; and we have learned first-hand that
“Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Christ is the power of God because...

- We were rebels to God, and Christ made us friends
- We were prisoners with a death sentence and Christ set us free
- We were born in sin, and through Christ we were born again
- We were dead in sin, and Christ made us alive
- We were homeless orphans, and Christ brought us into the arms of our heavenly Father forever
- We were poor, and Christ made us rich
- We were nobodies, and Christ has made us a royal priesthood, the people of God.

Christ is the wisdom of God because...

- Through Christ, God worked salvation for men and women while they were still in their sins. He figured out how people born once, could be born again, how there could be a second Adam, and a new race of people born to him whose sinful DNA was countered by his own indwelling Spirit. **Christ the wisdom of God.**
- Through Christ, God found a way for the infinite God and the perfect man to die as a suitable sacrifice for sinners, and for those sinners to be drawn to salvation without violating their free will. **Christ the wisdom of God.**
- Through Christ, God found a way to keep all his promises and prophecies—to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, to David and the prophets; and to fulfill every pictured promise—Passover and Promised Land, manna and wine, Lamb and Lion. All in one man! **Christ the wisdom of God.**
- Through Christ, God found a way to trap the devil in his own schemes. He became the devil’s victim so that he

might be the devil's conqueror. God found a way to tie the mighty Satan in knots! **Christ the wisdom of God.**

- And through Christ, God found a way to make his enemies his beloved saints, spiritual orphans his own dear children, to make prisoners free, to make lame hearts leap, and he found a way to open death's *front* door, for Jesus Christ holds the keys to death and Hades! **Christ the wisdom of God.**

- C. We who are saved did not trust Christ because some sign convinced us, nor because we reasoned out the wisdom of God. Someone preached the message of the cross to us. Someone told us, straight and true, that Jesus died for our sins, rose again to give us life, and that we needed to believe him if we wanted to live.

Did you notice the phrase in **v.24**, "*but to those whom God has **called**.*" We would not be here except that God *called* us out of darkness into his marvelous light. That tears down that last proud claim we could make. I would have never seen the power and wisdom of the cross if God had not called so clearly and convincingly that even a spiritual fencepost like me could hear. Why did I hear and others don't? I do not know, but I know this. It surely was not because I was wiser! It was all the grace of God!

Conclusion

Where does this Scripture take us?

- **Never try to synchronize the wisdom, religion or philosophy of this world with the cross.** Beware of self-help gurus, preachers and scholars who empty the cross of its wisdom, and philosophies that never reckon on hearts far from God.
- **Rally together around the message of the cross.** Don't get used to it or take it for granted. Let nothing pull us apart, for none of us found salvation in any other way, and it is the will of our Savior that we should love one another, and serve him together as his Body.

- **Tell people, straight up, the message of the cross.** Yes, it is indeed likely that they will reject it as foolish or naïve. That is certain. But not all! God calls. We do not know whom or when, but when we speak the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection, some are waiting and ready to believe and to be saved from perishing. Just as we were.

ⁱ Lines 11-14 from 'Choruses from "The Rock"'