

THE  
CROSS  
AND  
CHRISTIAN  
MINISTRY

*LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM  
1 CORINTHIANS*

**D. A. CARSON**



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This book is gratefully dedicated to

Perry and Sandy,

not because they need it  
but because they model it.

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## PREFACE

**F**OR TOO LONG, many evangelicals have viewed the cross exclusively as the means by which God in Christ Jesus achieved our redemption. Of course, no Christian would want to minimize the centrality of the cross in God's redemptive purposes. But if we view it as the means of our salvation and nothing more, we shall overlook many of its functions in the New Testament. In particular, so far as this study is concerned, we shall fail to see how the cross stands as the test and the standard of all vital Christian ministry. The cross not only establishes what we are to preach, but how we are to preach. It prescribes what Christian leaders must be and how Christians must view Christian leaders. It tells us how to serve and draws us onward in discipleship until we understand what it means to be world Christians.

The content of the five chapters of this book was first prepared as a series of four talks (chaps. 3 and 4 were developed from one) for the International Council of Accrediting Agencies (ICAA), an affiliate of the World Evangelical Fellowship. The ICAA coordinates several regional accrediting agencies whose purpose is the promotion of high-quality theological education in evangelical institutions around the world.

## Preface

The series of talks was then revised and presented afresh at the quadrennial world congress of the International Federation of Evangelical Students (IFES). Representatives attended from 108 or 109 countries. It was an enormous privilege to try to expound God's Word to them. In countless private conversations, I learned a great deal from these brothers and sisters in Christ, and I am grateful to God for their steadfastness, zeal, and unassuming leadership.

What you have before you has been revised once again, this time to accommodate the printed page. Although the form of these chapters is an exposition of parts of 1 Corinthians, my concern goes far beyond antiquarian interest. The message of these sections from 1 Corinthians must be learned afresh by every generation of Christians, or the gospel will be sidelined by assorted fads.

It is now commonplace to confess that evangelicalism is fragmenting. To the extent that this is true, it is utterly imperative that we self-consciously focus on what is central—on the gospel of Jesus Christ. That means we must resolve “to know nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2), in exactly the same way that Paul made that resolution. This will shape our vision of ministry as much as it will shape our grasp of the centrality of the gospel.

I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude to Baker Publishing Group for maintaining its interest in this series of basic biblical expositions. Is there anything more important than learning to think God's thoughts after him?

*Soli Deo gloria*

# 1

## The Cross and Preaching

*1 Corinthians 1:18–2:5*

*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. For it is written:*

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

*Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is*

*wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.*

*Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”*

*When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.*

**W**HAT WOULD YOU THINK if a woman came to work wearing earrings stamped with an image of the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb dropped over Hiroshima?

What would you think of a church building adorned with a fresco of the massed graves at Auschwitz?

Both visions are grotesque. They are not only intrinsically abhorrent, but they are shocking because of powerful cultural associations.

The same sort of shocked horror was associated with *cross* and *crucifixion* in the first century. Apart from the emperor's explicit sanction, no Roman citizen could be put to death by this means. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves, aliens, barbarians. Many



thought it was not something to be talked about in polite company. Quite apart from the wretched torture inflicted on those who were executed by hanging from a cross, the cultural associations conjured up images of evil, corruption, abysmal rejection.

Yet today, crosses adorn our buildings and letterheads, grace our bishops, shine from lapels, and dangle from our ears—and no one is scandalized. It is this cultural distance from the first century that makes it so hard for us to feel the compelling irony of 1 Corinthians 1:18: “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.”

Yet this cultural distance must be bridged. We must return again and again to the cross of Jesus Christ if we are to take the measure of our Christian living, our Christian service, our Christian ministry.

To begin at the beginning, I want to trace the place of the cross in Christian preaching and Christian proclamation. It will be helpful to follow the theme in three parts, corresponding to the three principal paragraphs in our biblical text.

### **The Message of the Cross (1:18–25)**

Paul has already criticized the Corinthians for their divisive spirit. One party says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; yet another, probably the most sanctimonious of the lot, “I follow Christ” (1:11–12). Both of Paul’s letters to the Corinthians demonstrate that believers in that city were constantly tempted to attach themselves to strong leaders and then look down on others. Fascinated by the rhetoric of learned scholars of their day, the Corinthians were sometimes more impressed by form and show than by content and truth. They loved “words of human wisdom” (1:17)—literally, “wisdom of word,” the wit and eloquence that neatly packaged more than one school of thought in first-century Greece.

But while many siren voices told people what to believe and how to live, eloquently appealing all the while to the “wisdom of word,” Paul simply resolved to proclaim the gospel (1:17), “the message of the cross” (1:18). All his focus is on the content of his message. God was pleased to save those who believe “through the foolishness of what was preached” (1:21). It is the content of what is preached that Paul here emphasizes, not the act of preaching (as some versions suggest: e.g., “the foolishness of preaching” [KJV]).

Paul delineates two critical features in this message of the cross:

*The Message of the Cross, by God's Determination,  
Divides the Human Race Absolutely (1:18–21)*

The ancient world deployed various polarities for describing humanity: Romans and barbarians, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free. But Paul here sets forth the only polarity that is of ultimate importance: he distinguishes between those who are perishing and those who are being saved. The dividing line between these two groups is the message of the cross: “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” (1:18).

Indeed, Paul emphasizes that this fundamental distinction arises from God's stated purposes: “For it is written,” Paul writes in verse 19, and then cites Scripture. God has already declared himself on this question, so for Paul it is settled.

The Scripture passage he cites is Isaiah 29:14: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” In other words, the message of the cross is nothing other than God's way of doing what he said he would do: by the cross, God sets aside and shatters all human pretensions to strength and wisdom.

This is a central theme of Scripture. God made us to gravitate toward him, to acknowledge with joy and obedience that he is the

center of all, that he alone is God. The heart of our wretched rebellion is that each of us wants to be number one. We make ourselves the center of all our thoughts and hopes and imaginings. This vicious lust to be first works its way outward not only in hatred, war, rape, greed, covetousness, malice, bitterness, and much more, but also in self-righteousness, self-promotion, manufactured religions, and domesticated gods.

We ruefully acknowledge how self-centered we are after we have had an argument with someone. Typically, we mentally conjure up a rerun of the argument, thinking up all the things we could have said, all the things we should have said. In such reruns, we always win. After an argument, have you ever conjured up a rerun in which you lost?

Our self-centeredness is deep. It is so brutally idolatrous that it tries to domesticate God himself. In our desperate folly we act as if we can outsmart God, as if he owes us explanations, as if we are wise and self-determining while he exists only to meet our needs.

But this God says, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” Indeed, the point has already been made implicitly in verse 18. One might have expected Paul to say, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the *wisdom* of God.” Instead, he insists it is “the *power* of God.” Of course, he will later say that the gospel is also God’s wisdom (1:24), but he starts off on a different note. This is not a slip on Paul’s part; the point is crucial. Paul does not want the Corinthians to think that the gospel is nothing more than a philosophical system, a supremely wise system that stands over against the folly of others. It is far more: where human wisdom utterly fails to deal with human need, God himself has taken action. We are impotent when it comes to dealing with our sin and being reconciled to God, but where we are impotent God is powerful. Human folly and human wisdom are equally unable to achieve what God has accomplished

in the cross. The gospel is not simply good advice, nor is it good news about God's power. The gospel is God's power to those who believe. The place where God has supremely destroyed all human arrogance and pretension is the cross.

Paul drives the point home with three stinging rhetorical questions:

*"Where is the wise man?" (1:20).* In first-century Corinth, "wisdom" was not understood to be practical skill in living under the fear of the Lord (as it frequently is in Proverbs), nor was it perceived to be some combination of intuition, insight, and people smarts (as it frequently is today in the West). Rather, wisdom was a public philosophy, a well-articulated worldview that made sense of life and ordered the choices, values, and priorities of those who adopted it. The "wise man," then, was someone who adopted and defended one of the many competing public worldviews. Those who were "wise" in this sense might have been Epicureans or Stoics or Sophists or Platonists, but they had this in common: they claimed to be able to "make sense" out of life and death and the universe.

An organizing system, a coherent worldview, conveys a sense of power. If you can explain life, you remain in control of it. The Greeks were renowned for their pursuit of coherent systems of thought that ordered their world. In short, they pursued "wisdom."

But Paul's rhetorical question asks, in effect, which of these public systems of thought disclosed the gospel? Which "wise man" discerned God's marvelous plan of redemption?

In the light of the cross, how well do the raucous appeals of competing public philosophies stand up? What place does the cross have in communism? What place does the cross have in capitalism? Does systematic hedonism lead anyone to the cross? How about dogmatic pluralism? Will secular humanism lead anyone to the most astonishing act of divine self-disclosure that has ever occurred—the cross of Christ?