

First Epistle to the Corinthians

3 – Essay One: The Cross and Unity – Wisdom of the Cross (1.2)

Discussion 1 of 2

1 Corinthians 1:17-2:2

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.¹

Is Paul telling his audience that intellect and reason are hindrances to gospel proclamation?

1. Bailey's Outline²
 - a. **A. The Problem: Divisions, Baptism, and the Cross (1:10-16)**
 - i. "I follow ___" is not a valid statement of identity for Christians – it divides
 - ii. "Our Lord Jesus Christ died for us" is the source of Christian community – it unites
 - iii. The cross is God's gift; baptism is the believer's receiving of God's gift
 - b. **B. The Wisdom and Power of God: The Cross (1:17-2:2)**
 - c. **B. The Wisdom of God: Revealed Through the Spirit (2:3-16)**
 - d. **A. Christian Unity: Paul, Apollos, and Cephas as One (3:1-4:16)**
2. Possible structures of 1:17-2:2
 - a. *ESVSB*
 - i. God's wisdom answers the problem (1:17b-4:21)
 1. The nature of God's wisdom (1:17b-2:16)
 - b. *Reading Corinthians*
 - i. Was Paul crucified for you? (1:17-3:4)
 1. Section 1 of 2
 - a. *Preface* (1:17)
 - b. **A. The wise vs. the foolish** (1:18-20)
 - c. **B. Preaching saves believers** (1:21)
 - d. **C. Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom** (1:22)
 - e. **D. We preach Christ crucified** (1:23a)
 - f. **C. To Jews a stumbling block, to Greeks folly** (1:23b)
 - g. **B. Christ is power/wisdom to those called** (1:24)
 - h. **A. The wise/weak vs. the foolish/strong** (1:25-31)
 - i. *Prologue* (2:1-2:5)
 - c. *Bailey*³
 - i. Simultaneous interweaving of three structures –
 1. Ring Composition
 2. Parallel to Isaiah 50:4-11 (Servant Song #3)
 3. Greek funeral oratory (Pericles)
 - ii. Ring Composition (1:17-2:2)
 1. Segment A (1:17-20) – Wise words and people are not enough (Cross needed)
 - a. **Aa. Paul Sent** – preach gospels – not wise words – the cross
 - b. **Bb. Destroy** – the power of God – scripture: destroy
 - c. **Cc. Jewish scholar** – Greek scholar
 2. Segment B (1:21-26a)⁴ – power and wisdom of God is in the Cross

¹ 1 Cor. 2:1-2, *ESV*

² Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*; Kindle ed., location 679

³ Bailey, loc. 742

⁴ Bailey refers to this set of texts as *hymn to the cross* (loc. 490)

- a. **A.** Wisdom of God – world ignorant
 - b. **B.** Gospel of Jesus and the cross – believers
 - c. **C.** Jews – Greeks
 - d. **D.** We preach – the cross (1:23a)
 - e. **C.** Jews – Greeks
 - f. **B.** Those called – Christ is power and wisdom
 - g. **A.** God is wise and strong – humans are weak and foolish
3. Segment A' (1:26b-2:2) – Wise words and people are not enough (Cross needed)
- a. **Cc.** Jewish scholars (few) – Greek scholars (few)
 - b. **Bb.** Boasting – wisdom of God – scripture: boasting
 - c. **Aa.** I, Paul, came – not wise words – proclaiming
- iii. We will examine Isaiah and funeral oratory parallels next time

	First Half ↓	Second Half ↑ ⁵
Aa	1:17 (ESV) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom ⁶ , lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power ⁷ .	2:1-2 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom ⁸ . For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified .
Bb	18-19 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are <u>perishing</u> ⁹ , but to us who are being saved it is the power of God . For it is written , “I will <u>destroy</u> the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning ¹⁰ I will thwart.”	29-31 So that no human being might <u>boast</u> ¹¹ in the presence of God. And because of him ¹² you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God ¹³ , righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written , “Let the one who boasts, <u>boast in the Lord</u> .”
		[<i>Aside</i>] ^{27b-28} God chose what is weak ¹⁴ in the world to shame the strong ¹⁵ . God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing ¹⁶ things that are...
Cc	²⁰ Where is the <u>one</u> who is wise ? Where is the <u>scribe</u> ? Where is the <u>debater</u> ¹⁷ of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?	^{26b-27a} Not many of you ¹⁸ were wise according to worldly standards ¹⁹ , not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose

⁵ When the text is laid out in this manner, Paul’s intentions become quite clear.

⁶ Or, wise words (Bailey)

⁷ Or, lest it [preaching the gospel] be emptied of its power, the cross of Christ (Bailey)

⁸ Or, not in lofty words or wisdom, proclaiming to you the mystery of God (Bailey)

⁹ Or, to those being destroyed (Bailey)

¹⁰ Or, cleverness of the clever (Bailey)

¹¹ Or, So that all flesh might not boast (Bailey)

¹² Or, From him (Bailey)

¹³ Or, who became wisdom for us from God, that is... (Bailey)

¹⁴ Or, weak things (Bailey)

¹⁵ Or, strong things (Bailey)

¹⁶ Or, to make powerless (Bailey)

¹⁷ Or, scholar (Bailey)

¹⁸ “Of you” is an inference that is not present in the Greek text.

¹⁹ Or, the flesh (Bailey)

	First Half ↓	Second Half ↑ ⁵
		what is foolish ²⁰ in the world to shame the wise...;
A	^{21a} For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom...	^{25-26a} For the foolishness of God is wiser than men ²¹ , and the weakness of God is stronger than men ²² . For consider your calling, brothers... ²³
B	^{21b} ... It pleased God through the folly of what we preach ²⁴ to save those who believe .	²⁴ ... But to those who are called , both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God .
C	²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom ...	^{23b} ... A stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles ...
D	^{23a} ... But we preach Christ crucified...	

3. Details

a. Pair Aa

- i. Paul sent by Christ; Paul responds by coming – divine initiative, human response
- ii. Significant difference between “lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” vs. “lest it [preaching the gospel] be emptied of its power, the cross of Christ”
- iii. Paul is not attacking wisdom or eloquence or sound reasoning and intellect
 1. This letter is evidence of highly polished rhetoric
- iv. Paul is writing against minimizing or removing the cross of Christ as the core of the gospel preaching
- v. “Mystery” is better than “testimony” because “mystery of God” is a Pauline phrase used to describe the work of Christ through the cross; it fits better with the idea of foolishness incomprehensible to the world; it fits better with Paul’s motif of the mystery revealed to believers

b. Pair Bb

- i. Power of God: the cross of Christ
- ii. Wisdom of God: the power of God at work through the body of Christ
 1. Pair: God’s initiative (power); human response (joining Christ Christ)
- iii. Both parts of the pair cite scripture – first in support of “destroy” and the second in support of “boast”
- iv. Paul is not preaching general, broad-based anti-intellectualism or anti-reason, but is again speaking specifically about the message of Christ crucified
- v. God’s power works in unconventional ways that only make sense to those who choose to believe in God
 1. Objection: how can a person believe in something that doesn’t make sense until she believes in it?
 2. Paul’s concern here is not (yet) with how people come to believe, but with the consequences of believing or not
- vi. “Being saved” – what does this mean?

²⁰ Or, foolish things (Bailey)

²¹ Or, human wisdom (Bailey)

²² Or, human strength (Bailey)

²³ The colon (‘:’) or something similar at the end of the first part of 1:26 is common to most English translations with the implication that the “not many” refers to the Corinthian believers. Bailey sees the passage differently, placing the first part of v26 as the end of v25 as is shown in this table.

²⁴ Or, the gospel preaching [*kerygma*] (Bailey)

1. The power of God appropriated through wisdom by joining Christ into his body
 2. "Righteousness and sanctification and redemption"
- c. Pair Cc
- i. Who is considered "wise"?
 1. The scribe (Jewish) and the scholar (Greek)
 - ii. What is the "wisdom of the world"?
 1. That God would become a servant and allow himself to be crucified and die
 - a. Idea offensive to both Jews and Greeks
 2. NOT against general reasoning or knowledge
 - iii. Not many [of you]
 1. "Of you" is not present in the Greek text
 2. "Worldly standards" is lit., *sarx* [flesh]
 3. This text (1:26-27) is NOT: telling the Corinthian believers that most of them are not "wise according to worldly standards" or powerful or of noble birth, and that they are "foolish in the world to shame the wise"
 - a. Some Corinthian believers were educated, wealthy, and/or influential
 4. This text is saying there were very few who recognized Christ on the cross
 - a. This text is saying very few Jewish scribes could accept that the Messiah would be crucified
 - b. This text is saying very few Greeks could accept that divinity would allow himself to be crucified
 - iv. The reality and truth about the cross of Christ is foolish according to the human interpretations of Jewish scripture and pagan mythologies, but this is God's wisdom and accordingly, shames the wise of the world
- d. The Aside
- i. Paul elaborates on the cross of Christ
 1. It is "weak" and "low and despised" according to the world
 - a. To not defend or retaliate was (still is) considered "weak"
 2. It reveals the "strong" for the shame that they are
 3. It reveals that all the things considered worthwhile pursuits and possessions in the world are nothing next to the cross of Christ
 - ii. "Things that are not" – possibly referring to Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas²⁵
 - iii. Paul is NOT speaking about the Corinthians in these terms
 1. If he was, they would have ample reason to boast in themselves, contradicting what Paul writes in the next few sentences
 - iv. Paul couches his language in ambiguity, to protect himself and the church. He does not directly attack Rome and Greece.²⁶
- e. Pair A
- i. Wisdom of God and foolishness of God are the same thing – the cross of Christ
 - ii. Verse 21a – The world, relying on their norms, did not recognize God in Christ crucified
 - iii. "Foolishness" and "weakness" tie A-D to Aa-Cc
 - iv. Human wisdom and power are weak because they are ultimately unable to change hearts and minds. The former can manipulate and coerce and threaten, but only God's wisdom and power can cause people to change willingly.
 - v. "For consider your calling" (A') – closes the A-D-A periscope

²⁵ Bailey, loc. 894

²⁶ Bailey, loc. 900

1. Calling is God's initiative
 2. "Called" appears in immediately preceding text (B')
 3. It is best to see this as a rhetorical question for the readers summarizing the A-D-A, rather than introducing the closing section of this hymn
 4. Implied questions: Why did you believe? What attracted you to Christ? Was it worldly power and influence? Christ absorbed evil into himself when he chose to not defend himself, to not retaliate, and instead allow himself to be crucified and die. This is weakness and foolishness on God's part, according to the world's wisdom. So consider your call. Why did you accept Christ into your life and choose to join his body?
- f. Pair B
- i. "Who believe" do so because they are first "called" by God
 1. The motif of "calling" important in this letter
 2. All are called; e.g., Jews and Greeks (but women and men, poor and rich, etc.)
 - ii. What is gospel preaching?
 1. "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God"
 - iii. Now we see how people can understand the cross – it is in God's calling (prevenient grace) that ALL have the opportunity to understand and make a choice to believe²⁷
- g. Pair C
- i. Signs and wisdom – it is the cross of Christ – it is a stumbling block and folly to those who see it only in terms of "how to get ahead" in this world
- h. Fulcrum D
- i. The core of the gospel, and the focus of Christian community: "Christ crucified"

The Roman could boast of the power of empire. The Greek could boast of the greatness of Greek civilization. The Jew could boast in the covenant, the patriarchs, the law and much more... But for Paul the power and the wisdom *of the cross* made all such boasting meaningless...

[Paul affirms] that earthly power is not a mirror image of the power of God. Granted, righteously executed earthly power was not for Paul inherently evil... The problem emerges when individuals, communities and nations begin subtly to see their power as an extension of the power of God. Then "boasting" emerges, and as that happens, disaster ensues.²⁸

4. Additional rhetorical structure notes²⁹
 - a. The center of the hymn (1:23) is two sets of paired lines, each line seven syllables (Greek), lines 1-4 and 2-3 rhyme – well known Semitic poetic meter – masterfully combining Greek words with Semitic pattern
 - b. The hymn itself is a set of seven pairs in perfect ring composition
 - c. No one can say that Paul did not use highly eloquent, polished, and wise words in his composition
5. Summary thoughts
 - a. The cross of Christ is the central tenet and foundation for the believing community

²⁷ Corresponds to Paul writing, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." (Rm 8:29-30 ESV)

²⁸ Bailey, loc. 824

²⁹ Bailey, loc. 944

- b. Calling is always God's initiative; believing and responding is the human response; i.e., believers are not called because they believe, rather believers are believers *because* they responded positively to the call
- c. God calls everyone
- d. Paul is not anti-intellectual – he is anti-gnostic, however
- e. Wisdom and foolishness is not about the general use of intellect or knowledge – it is about the message of Christ crucified
- f. Paul crafts and presents his appeal with the most eloquent and artistic use of words and rhetoric
- g. Power and wisdom of God is found in the cross of Christ
- h. Paul never praises the Corinthians for their foolishness or weakness – this is a misinterpretation of the text
- i. Paul speaks out against the power structures of the world (in veiled language)

Even most defenders of rhetoric, or skilled speech, admitted that it was sometimes abused. But they argued that it was necessary, because having truth but being unable to persuade others of it was not helpful. Philosophers commonly criticized rhetoric, claiming that truth, not skillful speech, should be the emphasis; but these same philosophers used forms of argument developed by rhetoricians. Paul here disapproves of mere rhetoric, but his own writing, including 1 Corinthians, displays extensive knowledge and use of rhetorical forms. Although Paul may not have matched the rhetorical prowess of Apollos or the standards of Corinthian leaders, he was a skillful writer in his own right.

Even the most renowned speakers (e.g., Dio Chrysostom) regularly disavowed their own speaking abilities in order to lower audience expectations; then they spoke brilliantly. Rhetoricians recommended this technique.³⁰

Paul is not providing an excuse for sloppy preaching; rather he is affirming that the preacher does not *create the meaning* in his/her mind, but reports God's *acts in history*, and the report of those acts should be *well composed*... Paul proclaims saving events in history; he does not offer a beautifully formulated series of better ideas than his philosophical competitors.³¹

Next time: two additional views into today's passage, 1 Cor. 1:17-2:2.

Archives at <http://corinthianessays.blogspot.com/>

³⁰ *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*; 1 Cor. 2:1-5

³¹ Bailey, loc. 798, 804