

PREACHING CHRIST CRUCIFIED (CONTINUED)

I Corinthians 1:18-25

The cross is set forth here as distinct from and as opposed to the wisdom of the world. What the Bible differentiates we should respect. The cross is set forth as God's way of salvation. The wisdom of man is set forth as man's way of salvation. The agency of the first is preaching, while the agency of the latter is philosophy. Here we have the eternal controversy between preaching and philosophy. Between the two is a chasm as wide as the one between truth and error, light and darkness. There is no place where they ever unite except at the cross, at which place human wisdom must capitulate to God.

This means that there is a perpetual difference between the message of the gospel and the wisdom of the world. The moment we compromise this difference we rob the gospel of its power. The great difference between the two is that the gospel is a revelation while philosophy is an invention.

Factions arose in the church at Corinth because the people failed to comprehend the significance of two things—the Christian message and the Christian messengers. There were people in the church who were exalting the messengers above the message. They were dividing over men instead of uniting around a message. The message was divine. The messengers were human. All factionalism that has existed in churches has been needless.

This scripture does not say the preaching of foolishness. There is a great deal of foolishness which is passed out under the label of preaching. That is not what is meant here. Here it means that the cross is unphilosophical. It does not fit the ideas of the wise. It does not follow their arguments. They want something which is more agreeable and acceptable. They want something that flatters their own philosophies. They want something that parallels their own minds. They want something which will not disturb their conscience nor require them to change their ways of life. For these reasons, the preaching of the cross is to them an absurdity.

The time will come in the life of every one of us when we must make a choice. That choice has personal consequences. Upon it hinges the whole pattern of our present life and the nature of our future life. That choice is between the wisdom of the Word and the wisdom of the world. The unsaved do not consider preaching entirely foolish, but rather the content of what is preached. They do not object to preaching Christ as the world's greatest man and as a wonderful example. They admire His life, but they want to pass over His death. They believe in His example, but they turn away from His redemption. They will accept His character, but they reject His crucifixion. They even state that if His gospel could be stripped of the shed blood as the basis for atonement, they would accept and follow Him. Such teaching is tampering with the very heart of Christianity, leaving it dead and useless.

There are many who do not object to the cradle, but they are vigorously opposed to the cross of Christ. And why? It lies in the very nature of the cross. The cross means death to human effort. It precludes any possibility of self-salvation. It requires faith and abolishes works. It sets forth a picture loathsome to the sensibilities of culture and philosophy. Those who are already lost and perishing are saying that the preaching of the cross is foolishness. The cross stands for a new creation, not spontaneous from within human nature but instantaneous from the divine nature, not from below but from above, not of flesh but of faith, not from man but from God.

Unto the saved the preaching of the cross is the power of God. The attitude of the saved is not simply one of philosophical argument and explanation, but of personal experience. Christianity is much more than an academic question to be settled by philosophers and scientists. To those who have experienced this power, and are now saved, the cross is not a proposition, but a demonstration. It is not a promise, but a power—"the power of God."

The inevitable consequence of the course of the human intellect which considers the preaching of the cross to be foolishness is to defy God and to deify man.

It is perfectly clear that God has rejected the wisdom of the world and has employed the foolishness of preaching. It is utterly impossible for man to know God through intellectual processes. It takes a life process, not a thought process. Salvation is not by thinking but by believing, for "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." Note that it does not say, "them that think," "them that are moral," "them that are good," nor "them that are religious," but "them that believe." All of these things will be true as an effect of salvation but never as the cause of it.

The substance of preaching is the cross. There cannot be any variations or substitutions. Mahatma Gandhi asked some missionaries who visited him during a fast to sing a hymn for him. "What hymn?" they inquired. "The hymn that expresses all that is deepest in your faith," he replied. They sang "When I survey the wondrous cross."

In this scripture we are brought face to face with the three great types of religious life in the world:

I. The Jew.

In the Jew you will find a splendid specimen of the human family. He has an ancestry of which man may well be proud. He can trace an unbroken line back to Abraham. His history, beginning just this side of the deluge, is filled with noblest deeds of heroism. His laws are the model for every civilized government, and his religion the purest and the best to be found in the ancient world.

At the same time, the Jew is the religious formalist. "The Jew requires a sign." That is an outward display of the spectacular and the miraculous. Let us see wherein this spectacular and miraculous religion fails.

1. While it attracts the attention it fails to enlighten the understanding. Frequently a new sect springs up and demands attention, not on the ground of deeper spirituality, but because its leader claims to speak with tongues, or heal the sick, or perform some other wonder.
2. While it excites wonder it utterly fails to transform character.
3. While it proclaims power it does not reveal love. Sin is a disease of the heart rather than of the head, and unless our gospel reaches the affections it will never produce a revolution in conduct. To Nicodemus Christ declared that the supreme trouble was not that men were in darkness, but that they loved it. We are all better in our heads than we are in our hearts.

II. The Greek.

He claims for himself not only a unique origin, but also intellectual supremacy. He is the embodiment of culture in literature, art, science and philosophy. Having done so much for humanity intellectually, he claims leadership in the spiritual domain also. He acknowledges the authority of reason only.

There are some valid objections to the claim made by the Greek:

1. While it can abolish ignorance it cannot eradicate sin. Sin has gone deeper than the intellect--it has fortified itself in the heart, and there it must be dealt with. One thing which is written large on the pages of history is that a brilliant intellect and a vile heart may dwell in the same personality. Greece led the world in culture and in vice at the same time. When she was producing the works of art and the intellectual activities that make her

still the wonder of the world, her religious observances were unspeakably vile. Today vice is as abundant in the palace as it is in the hovel.

2. While improving the human, it has no power to impart the divine. To Nicodemus Christ declared that except a man be born from above he cannot see the kingdom of God. At the point where we grapple with evil in a struggle for victory and freedom, we begin to realize the need of divine help. Years ago a German scientist succeeded in grafting the egg of a spider onto the egg of a fly. The result was a creature half fly and half spider. Imagine the fly nature wanting to use its wings, yet ever held down by the spider, while the spider nature would seek to destroy the fly. Something like this has taken place in the life of humanity. Onto human nature there has been grafted a demon nature, so that we find ourselves recoiling from the very things we do, and doing the things from which we recoil. This is what Paul referred to when he exclaimed, "The good that I would I do not, but the evil that I would not, that I do." The new birth is the coming of the Spirit of God into the human soul, casting out the evil within. Regeneration is more than a new ideal or a new motive--it is the incarnation of a new and divine force in the life.
3. While solving many problems of this life, it does not throw any light on the life which is to come. It can lighten up the path that leads down to the grave, but it has neither guide nor torch for those who are about to go into its gloomy caverns. It will walk with us to the margin of the river, and is a delightful companion by the way, but it has no rod with which it can smite the waters and divide them. It sweetens many of the cups of life, but that only adds to the bitterness of that cup which death puts to our lips. A religion that has nothing better than a guess to offer to those about to embark on the sea of eternity does not meet the deepest needs of the human soul.

III. The Christian.

Paul says, "The Jew requires a sign and the Greek seeks after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified." He does not denounce Judaism or Grecianism as evil, but he declares them to be inadequate.

1. There is in the gospel all the miracle that the Jew can ask for. The supreme miracle is not the curing of a diseased body, but the resurrection of a dead soul.
2. There is greater wisdom in Christianity than that of which the Greek boasts. If the human intellect wants a problem large enough to tax all its powers, let it unravel all the mysteries that inhere in the cross of Christ. God has hid in Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and less than eternity will be too short for their discovery.
3. Christianity offers us a Saviour. This Saviour comes to the poor outcast, so defiled by sin that he is not only loathed by those who know him, but in his heart he loathes himself, and He leads him to a fountain in which he can wash and be clean. For the soul about to enter the hereafter, He brings a light that transforms death's gloomy prison into the inn of a traveler on his way to glory. When all things earthly are slipping away, on mighty wings He bears us up through the everlasting gates and assigns us our place in the city of God.

As for us we will take the Christ of the cross, Who may indeed be a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Greek, but to those who are called, whether Jews or Greeks, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

"I take, O Christ, thy shadow
For my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than
The sunshine of thy face.
Content to let the world go by,
To know no gain nor loss;
My sinful self my only shame,
My glory all the cross."