

2 – Dividing is dumb

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Dividing over leaders – Can you believe it happens?

The apostle Paul had just gotten news in Ephesus that there was a division in the church that he had spent three and a half years planting. And it just had to stop.

The ONLY church in Corinth was breaking into factions – “I follow Apollos, I follow Paul, I follow Cephas”. What was a single unified group is splintering over teacher preference.

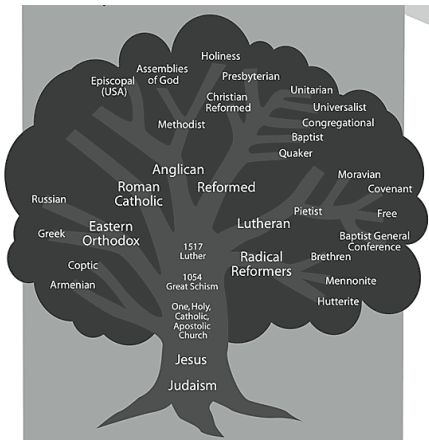
Now, this was pretty normal in a Greek context. Because speakers were superheroes. You aligned with speakers like we align with college sports “I follow Creighton, I follow UNO, I follow the Huskers.” So why not in Christianity?

It is a part of being messy. And in our messy church series we are talking about the dark underbelly of the church and the way that Paul addressed it. Quick question – does this happen today? Do people in churches divide over teachers?

OK, I am going to take a risk here for the loud extraverts – shout out one reason why churches divide. But let me say it back into the mic so our online audience can hear too

(Ideas, Examples)

Yeah. I know that I have seen it happen all over the Christian world. When I was on staff at Willow, we had three literally world class communicators – Bill Hybels, John Ortberg and Lee Strobel. It was a homerun every message – 20,000 people would flock to their teaching and still we had “I follow Bill. I follow John. I follow Lee.” And people would skip if their favorite was not preaching that week.



The internet has made this worse. “I follow Louis Giglio. I follow Matt Chandler. “I follow Stephen Furtyk” And no question, these are great preachers. But now somebody not only has the option of their local pastors... but national pastors. And you can choose who you ‘like’ – which is probably not who you need.

If you look over the years, the church has divided and divided over teachers. Until the Christian Family tree looks like this. And here is the Christian and Missionary Alliance, right about here...

Paul’s warning is clear. We don’t follow teachers, we follow Christ. We don’t follow AB Simpson or RR Brown or Mark Ashton, there is only one name that we follow!

In fact, Paul adds some sarcasm to his answer. **“Is Christ Divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?”** 1 Cor 1:13 Nonsense! There is only one Savior, one message, One Lord, One faith, One Baptism. It is first and ever and only Jesus.

In fact, can I give a warning about following human leaders to passionately? Leaders and teachers will disappoint you – 100% of the time. Including me. Here is what I mean. Some teachers will do something really dumb. Major sin – adultery, hypocrisy, secret lives, failed marriages, stealing kingdom resources. If you ever really get to know someone like me, you’ll be disappointed. When you know them, you’ll find out that they actually still have sin. They will say something judgmental, they will have a short fuse, they will not extend compassion or not be evangelistic when they should. When you get up close to real live leaders, the veneer comes off and you realize it is not as shiny as a well crafted Sunday message makes them look. Trust me, I know hundreds of leaders that are disappointing when you know them deeply.

Now, once in a while you will find a person who is just integrity to the core. Loves Jesus, full of prayer, wise in all things. Well, I have bad news. Even those people will leave you. They will hear the calling of the Lord to another location. They will retire. They will grow old and die. Every leader will be a disappointment.

There is only one who will never disappoint. Only one who is as beautiful close up as he is on stage. Only one who never fails. Only one who will never leave you and never forsake you. What is his name? Only trust in people in so much as they point you to Jesus.

Only trust them in as much as they point you to the cross.

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. ¹⁹ For it is written:

**“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”^[c]**

Lets sit in this idea for a while. Of course the cross is foolishness to people who have not trusted in it. This is one reason that people need time as they are exploring faith in Jesus

- Nobody in their right mind was looking for a crucified messiah. Nobody looks for salvation in the electric chair – just criminals. Nobody thinks that the way up is down and that God would condescend to below us in order to lift us up. Your standard person in an unreached tribe or in the ancient world or a bigtime modern university just would not think that is how it would happen. It is foolishness.
- Think about this. We get WAY too used to the message of the cross as normal because we were raised in a Christian subculture. But lets get logical. God shows up as a human being. He submits to false accusations, lies and torture. He is thrown up on a pain filled instrument of capital punishment for criminals. And in his defeat, he saves the world. What is up with that? Scores of so-called Messiahs came before Jesus and their movements ended with a Roman Cross. Today, people wear crosses as jewelry – but that is like wearing an electric chair or a lethal injection or a noose. This is not victory but defeat.

BUT if you are being saved it is the power of God. What does that mean?

The Foolishness of the cross is the central lens through which everything is now seen.

- An epistemological revolution – nice big words eh? What I mean is...
- A brand new starting place of “how do we know anything”

- This will TOTALLY change how you see Wisdom, Power and Wealth
- If you grasp this passage, you will never see the world the same again, so listen carefully

God is going to frustrate the wisdom of the wise. Now, a greek person, wisdom can mean both the application of knowledge, and the ability to rhetorically present that information. In a world before TV and internet, people were captured by scintillating speakers – and there has been no culture in history that developed rhetoric higher than the Greeks.

- Ethos, Pathos, and Logos? Aristotle pic

Aristotle, in fact, was the one who defined what makes great speeches in three categories. Ethos is the character and credibility of the messenger. Pathos is the experience or “passion” of the communication – how it generates emotion in you. And Logos is similar to logic. It is the content of the message and the flow of reasoning.

So in our passage, Paul is contending, don’t look to teachers and their rhetoric for your loyalty, look to Jesus. In fact, that very word LOGOS is used in his argument – for the LOGOS of the cross is foolishness.

Central idea: **The LOGOS of the cross is MORIA to those who are perishing.** The LOGOS (word/reasoning) of the cross seems foolish to the world, but is in fact the very power of salvation – rescue of humanity. That word for foolishness in the Greek is moria – and it is the same root we get the word “Moron”. You gotta be a moron to think that crosses save! But God’s LOGOS of the cross is only moria to those who are perishing. In fact, how many people today scoff at Christians and our beliefs? They think it absurd, write books against us, critique us publicly, make tik toks and reels about our stupidity.

- But to those of us who are being saved, it is the very power of God. Stop again. How is that? We will get to it... but I want to note a strange saying in this verse. Paul says we are being saved – active, present tense. Usually we talk about how we have been saved. But this is a theme of our book... the powerful and present reality of God’s saving work now. God is presently afoot in the world acting in deliverance and judgement. In other words, the book of life is not closed yet. God is still actively engaged in saving people. The game is still on – for us and those around us, so we have to reach one more.

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

Paul is about to redefine their values. In Corinth, they valued their public speakers like we value sports heroes, internet influencers and Hollywood Celebs. Paul is turning popular categories on their head and saying “Don’t look at celebrity.” God’s foolishness is better. And remember our context – he is talking to those dividing over favorite teachers – don’t look at Paul, Peter and Apollos – not Bill, Lee and John - as competition with each other, or the other rhetoricians of the day. We are not fighting for attention or presenting OUR truth... God has something deeper...

²¹ 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.

Whoa. Let's go slow on that. God was so wise that he created a world in which the common human wisdom would never figure him out. At least not his plan of salvation. Because there are certain things that can be known about God without divine revelation. You can know that there is an intelligent designer behind the world. You can know that God is highly intelligent and creative. You can know there is morality because he put a conscience in you. But you will never figure out the wise plans of God becoming human to die on a cross based on our own wisdom. It has to be revealed, or taught or preached in order to get it.

The role of teaching, Paul insists, is promoting God's foolishness. It is not impressing audiences. It is not developing a following or creating factions. It is pointing people to God. This is why it is always a red flag for me when a church pastor is highly critical of other churches. Some make their identity all about their style – "We do ONLY expository preaching... unlike the pagan churches down the road. We have REFORMED theology... unlike the unreformed ignoramuses. We go verse by verse and take four years to do ROMANS...unlike the foolish ones who go through a book in eight weeks." You been to that church? Paul is saying – preaching is foolishness – but the foolishness of God. If you don't walk away with Jesus on the brain, I have failed you. Any preacher has failed you.

²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

- Jews look for signs and get a stumbling block.
- Greeks look for wisdom and get foolishness
- Christians choose foolishness and get the very power and wisdom of God.

Did Jews look for signs? You bet! And by sign, we mean miracles that point to the idea that this must be the Messiah. Cuz anybody can claim to be a messiah. A supernatural wonder like Moses or Elijah did gives you credibility. Zechariah in the temple – Angel telling him of miracle birth and he asks "What Sign shall be given. And the Angel says "I am Gabriel! I stand in the presence of God!" Jesus said to the people around him – "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe." John 4:48. Jesus said to the Pharisees – the only sign that will be give you is the sign of Jonah. Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him John 12:37. They had lots of fake messiah's and so they wanted evidence – preferably supernatural and preferably on their terms.

Greeks were obsessed with wisdom. They had their own classes, teachers and study groups. Platonists, epicureans, Stoics and so much more. Their obsession was with the human process of discovery of wisdom.

And Paul is putting together a scale. Just to make it crystal clear. God's dumbest idea is better than our best idea. His foolishness is wiser than our wisest wisdom. And as a bonus, his weakest weakness is stronger than our strongest strength. So, what do we do? We point to Jesus. Not to me, or Craig Groeschel, or Matt Chandler or any other preacher... we just point to Jesus.

²⁶ Brothers and sisters, 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.

This actually feels pretty good to me. Paul is speaking to the ordinary people at Corinth. He knows their pedigree. And it is not super impressive. I feel the same way. I came from a really ordinary lower middle class family. Middle of three boys. Nobody would call our family impressive, smart, noble, wealthy or well educated. We had very little influence.

I am wondering if anyone here feels the same. Not a horrible past, but just not anything noteworthy. Maybe you even feel a deficit – like you have some disadvantage, some weakness. You guys know my insecurity, right? I never got trained to be a pastor. No undergrad. I started grad school four times and never got a degree. Just an ordinary guy. And you can tell I'm insecure cuz I joke about it a lot, mostly because I don't want people to find out through the grapevine – I'd rather have people laugh with me than criticize me behind my back.

How about you? Maybe you feel marginalized because you didn't do too well in school. Maybe you are international and your English is not fluent. Maybe you are just too short, too fat, too poor, too inexperienced and the world says you can't do it! What might God say to you?

27 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. 28 God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him.

Oh, that is such good news! Remember how I said that we were going to have an epistemological revolution today? Here it is in diagram form.

Diagram – 1 – lens of the world

You know how it is in this world. The people who get attention are rich and famous and strong and wise. University of Michigan is lauded this week for it's national championship. Political candidates are getting all the news as they criss cross Iowa for tomorrow's caucuses. The Emmy's will be given out tomorrow – awards for people who are already paid a mint and on TV – like acclaim on top of money on top of fame.

We are pounded with this stuff – news, internet you gotta succeed, get famous, make waves and live large! New Years internet posts have all the same stuff – workout plans, diet plans and money making schemes so we can be strong, wise and in charge. But everything changes via the foolishness of the cross.

Diagram 2 – lens of the cross

But through the lens of the cross, everything is inside out and backward. Your view is transformed. Jesus became human and it resulted in exaltation. Death was actually the key to eternal life. God showed up in disguise like a baby and lived incognito for 30 ish years to go public and get crucified.

And, he now chooses to use the ordinary, the misfit, the last kid picked for the team, the leftovers and despised ones... to do what is eternal and glorious and brilliant.

Do you know that God is like that? He picks people who would not get picked. That way, he gets the glory for everything.

- You know Abraham lied and Sarah laughed at God. You know Moses stuttered. Noah got drunk. Tamar posed as a prostitute in order to bag her Father in Law. Timothy had ulcers. Peter had a temper. David was so small, he couldn't fit into the armor. You think God can't use you?
- Jeremiah was suicidal. Jacob was a cheater. Elijah was burned out. Paul was a murderer. Gideon was anxious. Zacchaeus was short. Lazarus was... dead. You think God can't use you?
- Sampson told his secrets to a girl that wanted to kill him. Thomas doubted. and John the Baptist was just plain weird. You think God can't use you?

Friends, God does not call the qualified, he qualifies the called. He has you in his sights to be a world changer. Short, anxious, burned out, cheater.... These are not disqualifiers, they are opportunities for a God who chooses the weak to shame the strong and the foolish to shame the wise.

Now, I have to say... that I have considered a mystery to contemplate for years – the idea that God chooses the 'things that are not' in order to upend the 'things that are.' And I had to just live a little to get it better. You know what I mean by live a little? Like, stuff that didn't seem to make sense at 25 or 35 start gelling around 45. Because one thing you see is 'things that are not' becoming 'things that are'.

Consider these thoughts in our lifetime – Uber. Sharing cars with people 20 years ago was gross and dangerous. Now it has put the "Taxi" industry underwater. Things that are not, are despised or lowly nullifying things that are. In 2005, you would have bet on Blockbuster and not Netflix.

Photo albums used to be made up of carefully curated paper photos on just the right paper in just the right album. In the church, residencies are replacing traditional educational models. Citycare 'was not' eight years ago. Thriving churches were once only a dream. You see, God loves this stuff – talk about someone who has 'lived a little'! He looks for the lowly and despised. The outliers, the longshots – with dreams of things that are not and turns them into real things.

Even your very salvation, the basis of everything we think and do and say... is someone who was DEAD who is now ALIVE. Someone who was LOST who is found. A NOBODY who has become a child of the king!

³⁰ 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. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."^[d]

So, what is our application? Is it to just be weak, foolish and non-existent? **Nay! It is to boast in the LORD. Not in teachers. Not in factions. Not in denominations. Not in degrees. We boast in the LORD. Because all the stuff the world boasts about – is nothing. And it will one day burn. And all that remains will be God's inside out, upside down priorities. You will never regret time you spend with Jesus. You will never regret giving your life to Jesus. You will never regret investing in young people for Jesus. You will never regret doing missions for Jesus. Giving resources for Jesus. Spending every Sunday and the other six days worshipping Jesus. It is foolishness to the world, but the power of God to us!**