

Sermon follow-up
2/21/10

These follow-up notes really cover the last several weeks, as I preached on 1 Cor. 1:18-2:5.

On the foolishness of the gospel by worldly standards, see Michael Bird, *A Bird's Eye View of Paul*, 162f, for his hilarious Carlos Hernandez illustration. The entire book is a great summary and intro to Paul's life and letters. Here's another rendition of the same illustration from Bird's blog:

My name is Jose Samblanco and I live in a rural village of Peru and, most importantly, I am the apostle to the Internet. I'm here, on-line, proclaiming to you the good news about Carlos Hernandez. Carlos Hernandez was a Peruvian peasant. He was a prophet mighty in word and deed as attested by many miraculous signs. But his own people did not receive him. Carlos was accused of being an Al-Qaeda terrorist, he was handed over to the authorities, and was executed on the electric chair. But God did not let Carlos languish in death and decay, but Carlos has been raised by God and is now the exalted Lord of the Cosmos. I am here to tell you that Carlos was electrocuted for your sins. Furthermore, it is exclusively by faith in King Carlos that you receive the hope of redemption.

I've even written a hymn about Carlos:

*Carlos was there on that horrible chair
They tied him down with bolts and then zapped him with 40 000 volts
It was for you that our saviour fried and died
Despite the fact that his hair caught on fire, this one is God's true Messiah.
The wisdom of the world has been refuted because Carlos was electrocuted
He is my saviour and my lamp, because he absorbed every deadly amp
Now I know that God does care, 'cause he sent Carlos Hernandez to the electric chair.*

I've also written other hymns like, "In the chair of Carlos I Glory" and "When I cling to that old rugged electric chair". Now this new religion has spread rapidly here in Peru and some people even wear gold electric chairs on their necklaces, we put chairs on top of places of worship. In fact in Peru, the Red Cross has changed their name to the Red Chair. Athletes, prior to a big race, don't make the sign of the cross, instead they make the sign of the electric chair as a gesture of good luck. They pretend to sit down and then shake themselves uncontrollable for about 5-10 seconds. Knowing this I would like to call you to have faith and allegiance in Carlos Hernandez as your Lord and Saviour.

Back to Reality

This gospel of Carlos Hernandez is obviously quite absurd. However, I must wonder if the message of the cross, i.e. the message of a crucified saviour, sounded altogether different to audiences in the Greco-Roman world.

This leads me to question: what is the folly of the cross and what does it mean to be a fool for Christ?

Josef Stalin once scoffed, "The Pope! How many divisions has he got?" Stalin saw the church as weak because she had no standing army. But this is measuring power by worldly standards. The preaching of the cross is a different kind of power – the power to save from sin and death.

Lots of stuff on union with Christ to share:

John Calvin understood union with Christ better than perhaps any theologian since Paul. Calvin wrote:

How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son — not for Christ's own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men?

First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. For this reason, he is called 'our Head' [Eph. 4:15], and 'the first-born among many brethren' [Rom. 8:29]. We also, in turn, are said to be 'engrafted into him' [Rom. 11:17], and to 'put on Christ' [Gal 3:27]; for, . . . all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.

It is true that we obtain this by faith. Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits."

Calvin:

The Lord willingly and freely reveals himself in his Christ. For in Christ, he offers all happiness in place of our misery, all wealth in place of our neediness; in him he opens to us the heavenly treasures that our whole faith may contemplate his beloved Son, our whole expectation depend upon him, and our whole hope cleave to and rest in him. This, indeed, is that secret and hidden philosophy which cannot be wrested from

sylogisms. But they whose eyes God has opened surely learnt it by heart, that in his light they may see light (*Institutes*, 3.20.1, trans. Ford Lewis Battles).

“How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son — not for Christ’s own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men?”

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It is true that we obtain this by faith. Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits.

Calvin:

We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ. We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else. If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is “of him.” If we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing. If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion; if purity, in his conception; if gentleness, it appears in his birth. . . . If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross; if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood; if reconciliation, in his descent into hell; if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; if immortality, in the same; if inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his Kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given to him to judge. In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain and from no other.

Calvin:

We await salvation from him... because he makes us, ingrafted into his body, participants not only in all his benefits but also in himself... If you contemplate yourself, that is sure damnation. But since Christ has been so imparted to you with all his benefits that all that is his is made yours— that

you are made a member of him, indeed one with him— his righteousness overwhelms your sins; his salvation wipes out your condemnation; with his worthiness he intercedes that your unworthiness may not come before God's sight. Surely this is so: We ought not to separate Christ from ourselves or ourselves from him. Rather we ought to hold fast bravely with both hands to that fellowship by which he has bound himself to us.... Christ is not outside us but dwells within us. Not only does he cleave to us by an indivisible bond of fellowship, but with a wonderful communion, day by day, he grows more and more into one body with us, until he becomes completely one with us.

Calvin:

We must now examine this question. How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ's own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, *all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race* remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us . . . for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him. It is true that we obtain this by faith. Yet since we see that not all indiscriminately embrace that communion with Christ which is offered through the gospel, reason itself teaches us to climb higher and to examine into the secret energy of the Spirit, by which we come to enjoy Christ and all his benefits.

Calvin:

The phrase *in ipso* (in him) I have preferred to retain, rather than render it *per ipsum* (by him,) because it has in my opinion more expressiveness and force. For we are enriched in Christ, inasmuch as we are members of his body, and are engrafted into him: nay more, being made one with him, he makes us share with him in every thing that he has received from the Father.

Calvin:

As this secret power to bestow life, of which he has spoken, might be referred to his Divine essence, he now comes down to the second step, and shows that this life is placed in his flesh, that it may be drawn out of it. It is, undoubtedly, a wonderful purpose of God that he has exhibited life to us in that flesh, where formerly there was nothing but the cause of death. And thus he provides for our weakness, when he does not call us above the clouds to enjoy life, but displays it on earth, in the same manner as if he were exalting us to the secrets of his kingdom. And yet, while he corrects the pride of our mind, he tries the humility and obedience of our

faith, when he enjoins those who would seek life to place reliance on his flesh, which is contemptible in its appearance. But an objection is brought, that the flesh of Christ cannot give life, because it was liable to death, and because even now it is not immortal in itself; and next, that it does not at all belong to the nature of flesh to quicken souls. I reply, though this power comes from another source than from the flesh, still this is no reason why the designation may not accurately apply to it; for as the eternal Word of God is the fountain of life, ([John 1:4](#)), so his flesh, as a channel, conveys to us that life which dwells intrinsically, as we say, in his Divinity. And in this sense it is called life-giving, because it conveys to us that life which it borrows for us from another quarter. This will not be difficult to understand, if we consider what is the cause of life, namely, righteousness. And though righteousness flows from God alone, still we shall not attain the full manifestation of it any where else than in the flesh of Christ; for in it was accomplished the redemption of man, in it a sacrifice was offered to atone for sins, and an obedience yielded to God, to reconcile him to us; it was also filled with the sanctification of the Spirit, and at length, having vanquished death, it was received into the heavenly glory. It follows, therefore that all the parts of life have been placed in it, that no man may have reason to complain that he is deprived of life, as if it were placed in concealment, or at a distance.

Calvin:

That joining together of Head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short, that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance, so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed.

Calvin:

The Lord willingly and freely reveals himself in his Christ. For in Christ, he offers all happiness in place of our misery, all wealth in place of our neediness; in him he opens to us the heavenly treasures that our whole faith may contemplate his beloved Son, our whole expectation depend upon him, and our whole hope cleave to and rest in him. This, indeed, is that secret and hidden philosophy which cannot be wrested from syllogisms. But they whose eyes God has opened surely learnt it by heart, that in his light they may see light.

Calvin:

For this is the purpose of the gospel, that Christ may become ours, and that we may be engrafted into his body. When the Father gives him to us to possess, he also communicates himself to us in him, and thence flows participation in all good things. Paul's argument is this: 'Because you have been admitted by the gospel, which you received by faith, into communion with Christ, there is no reason for your to be frightened by

the danger of death, since you have been made partakers of him who arose as victor over death.'

Polhill:

God died in the flesh, that man might live in the Spirit....

Let us distinguish ourselves according to the two Adams. Whatever is vicious or defective in us, relates to the first Adam: whatever is gracious or prefective of our nature, relates to the second. Never can we be too humble under the sense of original corruption which adheres to our nature. Never can we be too thankful for that supernatural grace which gave us a new nature. Because we have a Divine nature in us, we should live suitably to it. Had we but one single creation, we had been eternally bound to serve and glorify God; but when he sets to his hand the second time to create us again in Christ Jesus unto good works, how should our lives answer thereunto! When in the horrible earthquake at Antioch the emperor Trajanus was drawn out of the ruins, it was a very great obligation upon him to serve and honour God who so signally delivered him; how much greater obligation lies upon us, who are drawn by an act of grace out of the ruins of the fall! How should we live in a just decorum to that Divine nature which we are made partakers of! We should still be bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit, and shewing forth the praises of him who hath called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. Again; because the relics of corruption are still remaining even in the regenerate, we should ever be upon our spiritual watch; we should set guards within and without, that sin may not creep in by the ports of sense, nor rise up out of the deep of the heart. When a temptation approaches to us, we should say as a holy man did, *Auferte ignem, adhuc enim paleas habeo*; take away the fire, yet I have chaff within. If a Jonah fall into a pet against God; if a David wallow in adultery and blood; if a Peter deny his Lord with a curse, what may not we do! The remnants of original sin in us should make us keep a watch over our hearts, and ponder the path of our feet. Our flesh is an Eve, a tempter within us; nay, a kind of devil, as an ancient speaks, *Nemo sibi de suo palpet, quisque sibi Satan est....*

econdly, we receive a human nature from Adam, and have we not a divine nature from Christ? are we not called his seed? are we not begotten by his Spirit and word? were we not in a spiritual sense seminally in his blood and merits? how else should any such thing as the new creature be produced in a lapsed nature? These things are as proper to make us parts and members of Christ, as a human nature is to make us parts and members of Adam; therefore, the communication of righteousness from Christ must be as full and great as the communication of sin is from Adam. Bishop Usher tells us, that we have a more strict conjunction in the Spirit with Christ, than ever we had in nature with Adam; one and the same spirit is in Christ and believers, but there is not one soul in Adam and his posterity: the communication from Christ, therefore, if answerable to the union, must be as great, nay, greater than that from Adam...

The other is that special conjunction, which is between Christ and Believers; Christ is the Head, they are the Members: the Ligatures of this Mystical Union are the Holy Spirit and Faith, the quickening Spirit (saith the reverend Usher) descends downwards from the head to be in us a fountain of supernatural life; a lively Faith, wrought by the same Spirit, ascends from us upward to lay fast hold upon him. The Scripture notably sets forth this Union, We dwell in Christ and he in us, John 6.56, We abide in him and he in us, John 15.4. We are Members of his Body, of his Flesh, and of his Bones, Ephes. 5.30, 32. And he is in us the hope of Glory, Col. 1.27. This the Apostle calls a great Mystery, and the Riches of the Glory of the Mystery; we are ingrafted into him as Branches into a Root; cemented to him as the building is to the foundation; incorporated with him as the food is with our Bodies; united to him as Members are to the Head. We eat his Flesh, and drink his Blood, and become one Spirit with him; nothing can be more emphatical, the Holy Spirit which resides in him the Head, falls down upon us Members, and so makes a kind of continuity between him and us, too Spiritual and Divine to be interrupted by any local distance: Hence St. Chrysostom saith, that there is no medium or middle between Christ and us; hence St. Austin saith that, Believers are made one Christ with the Man Christ, the Head and the Body make up one Christ: Hence that of Aquinas, that Christ and his Members are but one mystical person; the consequence of this admirable Union is the communication of Divine Blessings from him to us... said the learned Zanchy, All our good things depends on this most necessary Union.

Turretin:

The gospel teaches that what could not be found in us and was to be sought in another, could be found nowhere else than in Christ, the God-man... who taking upon Himself the office of surety most fully satisfied the justice of God by His perfect obedience and thus brought to us an everlasting righteousness by which alone we can be justified before God.

By this union with Christ his people enjoy all spiritual blessings. In particular, they have pardon by his blood, acceptance by his righteousness, renewal by his Spirit, increase of grace, divine sympathy in their sorrows, victory in temptation, support in death, a glorious resurrection, a public acquittal in the day of judgment, and everlasting life.

Herman Witsius:

By a true and real union, (but which is only passive on their part,) they are united to Christ when his Spirit first takes possession of them, and infuses into them a principle of new life: the beginning of which life can be from nothing else but from union with the Spirit of Christ...Further, since faith is an act flowing from the principle of spiritual life, it is plain, that in a sound sense, it may be said, an elect person is truly and really united to

Christ before actual faith. But the mutual union, (which, on the part of an elect person, is likewise active and operative), whereby the soul draws near to Christ, joins itself to him, applies, and in a becoming and proper manner closes with him without any distraction, is made by faith only. And this is followed in order by the other benefits of the covenant of grace, justification, peace, adoption, sealing, perseverance, etc.

John Ball:

This is the order of spiritual blessings conferred upon us in Christ, faith is the band whereby we are united unto Christ; after union follows communion with him; justification, adoption, sanctification be the benefits and fruits of communion...

By faith we are engrafted into Christ, and made one with him, flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone, lively members of that body, whereof he is the head: and by Christ we are united unto God. In Scripture to be in Christ and to be in Faith are put indifferently. By faith we are married unto Christ and have communion with him in his death and resurrection, he and all his benefits are truly and verily made ours; his name is put upon us, we are justified from the guilt and punishment of sin, we are clothed with his righteousness, we are sanctified against the power of sin, having our nature healed and our hearts purified: we draw virtue from him to die to sin, and live to righteousness

Herman Ridderbos:

the foundation for the doctrine of justification, too, lies in the corporate unity of Christ and his own.

The Epistle to Diognetus, from the early church:

He himself took on Him the burden of our iniquities, He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for them that are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! that the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors! (Epistle to Diognetus, ch9)

Union with Christ means righteous status and life transformation are inseparable. You cannot ask Jesus to pay your debts, you overdue bills, but then

say, "I'll keep spending just as recklessly as before." If Christ becomes your righteous status, he also becomes the Lord and Transformer of your life.

Union with Christ means his story is our story. As pointed out in the sermon on 2/14, Christ's mission was to recapitulate the history of Adam and Israel. While some Reformed theologians have focused on the imputation of Christ's active obedience to the law, it would be closer to the Bible's own theology to speak of the imputation of Israel's recapitulated history. The gospels do not focus very much on Jesus keeping the commands of Torah (though he was obviously sinless); instead they focus on Jesus as the new Adam and Israel, reliving (and thus rewriting) their histories. Through his death and resurrection as the new Adam and new Israel, he brings us into a new relationship with God. We share in his history and thus in his righteous, glorified status.

A lot of recent Lutheran scholarship has focused on Luther's understanding of union with Christ. Many scholars have pointed out that Luther understood imputation in terms of union, even using marriage as an illustration. While the so-called Finnish school is not an entirely reliable guide of Luther's thought, they have brought Luther's view of union with Christ back to the place of prominence it deserves. There are too many quotations to give that prove the point, but here's one that is particularly helpful:

In the twelfth place, faith does not merely mean that the soul realizes that the divine word is full of grace...it also unites the soul with Christ, as a bride is united with her bridegroom...so that they hold all things in common, whether for better or for worse. This means that what Christ possesses belongs to the believing soul; and what the soul possesses belongs to Christ. Thus Christ possesses all good things and holiness: these now belong to the soul. The soul possesses lots of vices and sin, and these now belong to Christ. Here we have a happy exchange...Christ makes the sin of the believing soul his own through a wedding ring, which is faith, and acts as if he had done it himself, so that sin could be swallowed up in him...Christ, the rich, noble, and holy bridegroom, takes in marriage this poor, contemptible, and sinful little prostitute, takes away all her evil, and bestows all his goodness upon her...she is now found in Christ and is swallowed up by him, so that she possesses a rich righteousness in her bridegroom.

Nothing reveals God's hatred of human pride more than the gospel itself. The OT Scriptures continually show that God despises pride:

- Proverbs 6:16–17 says, "There are six things which the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination to him . . ." and the first one mentioned is "haughty

eyes."

- In Psalm 101:5 David speaks for God and says, "The man of haughty looks and arrogant heart I will not endure."
- Proverbs 16:5, "Every one who is arrogant is an abomination to the Lord."
- Isaiah 2:11, "The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the pride of men shall be humbled; and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day."
- Jeremiah 50:31, "Behold, I am against you, O proud one, says the Lord God of hosts; for your day has come, the time when I will punish you."

Jesus condemned pride when he said "What is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

Pride was the main problem in the Corinthian church, as seen in how often Paul brings it up in the Corinthian correspondence:

- 1 Corinthians 1:29—"so that no human being might boast in the presence of God . . ."
- 1 Corinthians 1:31—"Therefore, as it is written, 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.'"
- 1 Corinthians 3:7—"So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."
- 1 Corinthians 3:21—"So let no one boast of men."
- 1 Corinthians 4:6-7 ---" . . . that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another...If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?"
- 1 Corinthians 4:18—"Some are arrogant as though I were not coming to you."
- 1 Corinthians 5:2—"And you are arrogant!"
- 1 Corinthians 8:1—"Knowledge puffs up, love builds up."
- 1 Corinthians 13:4—"Love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude."
- 2 Corinthians 1:9—Hardship comes even up to the brink of death, "but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."
- 2 Corinthians 3:5—"Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God."
- 2 Corinthians 4:7—"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us."
- 2 Corinthians 12:9—"I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ might rest upon me."

The gospel blocks all roads to human pride and shuts us up to total dependence on God. In other words, the gospel is designed to get the result of 1 Cor. 1:31.

The Christian life is about Jesus from a to z. He is the beginning and end of our Christian experience. Every Christian's goal should be to get a PhD in Jesus. But, of course, the riches we have in him are inexhaustible, so we never get to the end of our learning and growing.

In union with Christ, we have new power over sin (Rom. 6). Sin is not our master – thus, worry is not your master, stress is not your master, anger is not your master, lust is not your master. We are free to give ourselves wholly to God's service.

What you boast in is what gives your life its weight. It's your anchor. It's what you cannot imagine living without because if it was taken from you, you'd come undone. Paul says God should be our boast. To boast in anything else is to live a weightless life.

Union with Christ means we have to "Jesusize" our soteriology. Sometimes theologians have led us to focus more on the benefits than the Benefactor, more on the discrete blessings than the One in whom we are blessed. But biblically, everything we have is found in Jesus as an aspect of his person. These blessings are intrinsic to his identity; we participate in them via our faith-union with him. Thus we can say Jesus IS our regeneration. Jesus IS our justification. Jesus IS our sanctification. Jesus IS our resurrection. Jesus IS our life. Etc.

On union with Christ, I highly recommend the helpful treatment by Anthony Hoekema in *Saved By Grace*. Helpful accounts are also found in James Stewart, John Murray, Dick Gaffin, Sinc Ferguson, etc. Of course, N. T. Wright has many helpful things to say about union with Christ as well, though he does not use standard Reformed terminology.

The sanctification in view in 1 Cor. 1:30 might be best understood as what John Murray, Anthony Hoekema, and Dick Gaffin have called "definitive sanctification." See, e.g., http://www.the-highway.com/definitive-sanctification_Murray.html.

J. C. Ryle:

Jesus is a complete Saviour. He does not merely take away the guilt of a believer's sin, He does more-He breaks the power (1 Pe. 1:2; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 12:10).

E. Y. Mullins:

In Jesus is made known to us the ultimate reality of God as a moral and spiritual being.
In Jesus, God appears as righteous love.
In Jesus, God comes near for our salvation.
In Jesus, the grace and power of God are manifested for our redemption.
In Jesus, God takes the initiative in seeking us.
We are found and awakened by the gospel. But our sin binds us. We know ourselves alienated in heart and life from God. We are unable to redeem ourselves. We belong to a kingdom of evil and are held captive. We need forgiveness and reconciliation. Through his atoning work Christ brings God near in forgiving grace.
We need moral and spiritual transformation. Christ supplies the motives which lead to repentance and the new life.
“In Christ” is the phrase which expresses the total meaning of the new life. He is its source, its structural law, and its goal.
We are, in other words, regenerated and spiritually constituted in Jesus Christ.

Charles Spurgeon:

Let this be to you the mark of true gospel preaching - where Christ is everything, and the creature is nothing; where it is salvation all of grace, through the work of the Holy Spirit applying to the soul the precious blood of Jesus...

On Christ, and what he has done, my soul hangs for time and eternity. And if your soul also hangs there, it will be saved as surely as mine shall be. And if you are lost trusting in Christ, I will be lost with you and will go to hell with you. I must do so, for I have nothing else to rely upon but the fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, lived, died, was buried, rose again, went to heaven, and still lives and pleads for sinners at the right hand of God.

Peter Leithart, following Karl Barth, on union with Christ:

Barth insists that the center of the New Testament is Jesus, and that without Him there is nothing to be said. The list found in 1 Corinthians 1:30 – wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption – “become a meaningless statement in spite of the high content of its predicates” without Jesus. For the writers of the New Testament, “wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption are not relevant concepts in themselves, but only as predicates of the subject Jesus.” He concedes that “more recent historical research might permit itself the assertion that apart from the name Jesus Christ almost everything in the New Testament, everything that could at a pitch be worked up into a principle, has its more or less exact parallel outside the Bible, and so certainly cannot be the very essence of the matter.” But the name of Jesus

makes all the difference, not only setting the New Testament off from everything else but raising everything to a “central and fundamental and eternal” level “the moment it is interpreted as the predicate an utterance about Jesus Christ.” Jesus is not a single element among others, but “the mathematical point toward which all the elements of the New Testament witness are directed.”

Chesterton on humble boldness:

What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition. Modesty has settled upon the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth. . . .

We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table.

N. T. Wright:

Victory over the powers comes, not from human wisdom, from success in human terms, but from the forswearing of all kinds of human power and authority, privilege and status. When Christians in Corinth and elsewhere give up their rights, they are not merely retreating from human possibility out of generous concern for one another. They are striking a blow against the paganism which offers humans a spurious self-worth, an inflated self-identity.²⁰ They are offering a direct challenge to paganism, based not on their own new-found religious self-assurance but on the revelation of the one god, one lord which they have discovered in the cross. They are doing what (I suggest) all Christian confrontation of paganism must do. Instead of either assimilating or retreating into a dualistic ghetto, the church must seek to build shrines for the true god on ground at present occupied by paganism. Only so can the dehumanizing and distorting power of paganism be broken, and replaced with the healing and restoring love of the creator and redeemer god.

1 Cor. 1:18ff has a lot to say about the offensiveness of the cross.

Mark Driscoll:

The curious paradox of the atoning death of a bloody Jesus rising above the plane of human history with a mocking crown of thorns is that *he is offensive in an attractive way*. It is the utter horror of the cross that cuts through the chatter, noise, and nonsense of our day to rivet our attention,

shut our mouths, and compel us to listen to an impassioned dying man who is crying out for the forgiveness of our sins and to ask why he suffered. Tragically, *if we lose the offense of the cross, we also lose the attraction of the cross so that no one is compelled to look at Jesus.* Therefore, Jesus does not need a marketing firm or a makeover as much as a prophet to preach the horror of the cross unashamedly.

1 Cor. 1:18ff also points us to the paradoxes of the cross.

Mike Bird:

The proclamation of the cross sounds like folly to many, when in fact it is God's wisdom.
What looks like powerlessness is God's power.
What sounds like a tragedy is stunning victory.
The death that looks so shameful has established God's honor.
What appears as a cause to mourn is a cause for inexpressible joy.
God has triumphed in the cross of Jesus, and we share the triumph with him.

William Willimon on the foolishness of proclaiming the cross:

Imagine being asked to stand before a grand gathering of the good and the wise and being asked to make a speech about goodness, beauty, the meaning of life, the point of history, the nature of Almighty God or some such high subject and having no material at your disposal but an account of a humiliating, bloody, execution at a garbage dump outside a rebellious city in the Middle East. It is your task to argue that this story is the key to everything in life and to all that we know about God. This was precisely the position of Paul in Corinth. Before the populace of this cosmopolitan, sophisticated city of the Empire, Paul had to proclaim that this whipped, bloody, scorned and derided Jew from Nazareth who was God with Us. As Paul said, he had his work cut out for him because preaching about the cross "is folly to those who are perishing," foolishness and stupidity. A cross is no way for a messianic reign to end. Yet what else can this preacher say because, whether it makes sense to us or not, "it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." (1 Cor. 18, 21) Tailoring his manner of speech to his strange subject matter, Paul says that he chose a foolish sort of preaching that was congruent with his theological message:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my

speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that our faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Corin. 2:1-5)

This is probably our earliest, most explicit statement on the peculiarity of Christian preaching, and one of the few places in the New Testament where a preacher turns aside from the task of proclamation to discuss the nature of proclamation now that God has come as a crucified Messiah. A crucified Messiah? It is an oxymoron, a violation of Israel's high expectations for a messianic liberator. In order to bring such a scandal to speech, Paul eschewed "lofty words or wisdom," the stock-in-trade of the classical orator. Rather than avoiding the scandal of the cross or attempting to sugar coat its absurdity in order to make it more palatable, he limited his subject matter so that he knew, "nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." His manner of presentation, his delivery was "weakness," "fear and trembling," a rather peculiar demeanor for a public speaker. Why? So that nothing might move his hearers, nothing might convince them but "the power of God."

For God the Father to allow God the Son to be crucified, dead and buried is for God to be pushed out beyond the limits of human expectation or human help. The cross is the ultimate dead end of any attempt at human self-fulfillment, human betterment or progress. Hanging from the cross, in humiliation and utter defeat, there is nothing to be done to vindicate the work of Jesus or to make the story come out right except "the power of God."

Paul says that he attempted to preach the gospel to the Corinthians in just that way. Rather than base his proclamation on human reason, common sense, or artful arguments, he spoke in halting, hesitant "fear and trembling" so that if they were to hear and to understand, to assent and to respond, it would have to be solely through "the power of God."

Paul says to the Corinthians that the cross is moria, moronic foolishness: For the message about 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, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom. God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (I Corin. 1:18-25)

When Christians are asked to say something profound about ourselves, to say something about the nature of God, this is what we say – "cross."

God has chosen predominantly the foolish, the weak, the poor, the despised to be his people. Frankly, the church is not much to look at, most of the time. When I look at the evangelical world, I see so much kitsch, so much shallowness, so much immaturity....and yet, these are the people God will use to change the world! That does not excuse those things that should embarrass us (and no doubt embarrass God), but we should remember that God can work through even a weak and broken people to accomplish his purposes.

1 Cor. 1:18ff suggests that God has chosen a few who are wise, strong, powerful, etc., by worldly standards. In other words, as I preached in the 2/7 sermon, the church is a socioeconomically mixed body, quite reflective of the surrounding culture.

Due to egalitarianism and rising class warfare, many Christians who are successful by worldly standards feel a deep sense of guilt. But is this a false guilt? It's certainly not wrong to be successful; indeed, on the whole, we should expect God's people to have success in the world as we work hard, practice self-discipline and service towards others, etc. The fruit of the Spirit will certainly not always lead to prosperity, but Proverbs shows us that God blesses obedience in the long run. In a healthy, honest economy, with a level playing field, many Christians will do well and some will even rise to elite positions.

Wealthy, successful Christians should not beat themselves for having been successful, any more than they should take pride in their success. It is certainly true that God us, especially if we are wealthy, to a life of self-denying generosity, but he does not call us to a life asceticism. The rich and poor need each other. There is a kind of mutuality. The rich need to see that poverty is more complex than blaming the poor for their laziness. The poor need to see that not all the rich are wicked oppressors; indeed, some are very humble, kind, and servant oriented, even if their standard of living remains relatively high.

The socioeconomic diversity of those God has called means that we must avoid stigmatizing either wealth or poverty. God's true people, after all, find themselves falling into both categories (as well as "middle class"). It also means that church life should make room for people at all points on the socioeconomic spectrum. For example, this is why churches should avoid "dress codes." It's why churches should be sensitive about scheduling events and programs that cater to the upper crust, e.g., Bible studies that would require folks to shell out a lot of money for baby-sitting that most people don't have. It's impossible to accomodate everyone at every point along the way, but the effort to do so should be there.

What about those passages that seem to favor the rich over the poor (e.g., Proverbs)? Wealth is a blessing in itself, but riches bring responsibilities. Riches also bring dangers. The Christian elite must beware of a worldly pride that would look down on others. They must guard against snobbery. They must never be paternalistic when they help the marginalized.

What about those passages that seem to favor the poor over the rich (e.g., the Magnificat, James)? The issue in the Bible is not so much socioeconomics as it is ethics. Poverty in itself does not indicate faithfulness. If the Bible promised the poor would simply take the place of their wealthy oppressors, without nuance, rich and poor would be in an endless cycle of trading places – and surely that’s not the point! The biblical vision of shalom ultimately means all of God’s people must live lives of abundance in the end.

Again, the rich and poor really need one another in the church. Socioeconomically homogenous churches are missing out. A great illustration of rich and poor edifying one another is found in the best-selling book, *Same Kind of Different As Me* by Denver Moore and Ron Hall.

How is Christ, specifically Christ crucified, our wisdom? In the OT, wisdom has to do with kingly rule. Jesus rules through service. He is our king precisely because he gave himself for his people. He has become our tree of life and our tree of knowledge. In him, we rise to maturity and share in his cosmic rule over all things.

When we come to share in his wisdom, we learn that true rule/power comes through service. Wisdom is reflected in humility and self-giving love. This is the wisdom that should characterize the church as a political community, an alternative “polis” to the cities of man. (Note how many issues in the letter of 1 Cor. have to do with ecclesial politics: building the church in the right way, discipline/excommunication, lawsuits, unity, religion/idolatry in the marketplace and at the table, gender relationships, use of gifts, individualism, victory over death, etc.).

The Corinthians have traded in the wisdom of the cross for the wisdom of the world. Paul wants them to get their true wisdom back.

In 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Paul distinguishes preaching that gives people what they want vs. what they need. Paul is making the same kind of distinction in 1 Cor. 2:1-5. It is important for preachers to stand above the cultural fray. They must not cater to any particular cultural group, but use the gospel to call all to Christ.

What does 1:26ff mean for the church’s self-image? The average Christian is average, maybe even below average. Many of us are not that impressive in the eyes of the world, but God has chosen those the world rejects. What a comfort!

As we see in the ministry of Jesus, God delights to associate with the lowly and despised. He fellowships with the cast-offs and losers. Yes, it looks like God is

out of his mind. But this is simply his mercy, grace, compassion, and love on display. A “sane” god would not be so merciful!

True wisdom exults in the cross, and gives God the glory. Mere worldly wisdom is offended by the meaning of the cross and exalts man.

William Cwirla on Christ as our wisdom:

Wisdom is the Truth of God from the mouth of God. By wisdom the simple gain prudence, and the foolish gain understanding. Wisdom is more precious than jewels. Wisdom’s gifts are worth more than gold. Wisdom is a gift from God. For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. Wisdom is knowledge and understanding shaped by the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Wisdom is the craftsman at the Father's side. Wisdom’s fingerprints are all over the created order. Through Wisdom all things were created. Wisdom was with God before all things, and through Wisdom all things were made. The beauty of the stars, the splendor of the seas, the marvelous variety of birds and fishes, the intricacies of a DNA double-helix, the mystery of distant galaxies, you. Science can dust for the fingerprints, but only faith can perceive the Designer’s hand.

Man turned away from God seeks knowledge without wisdom. Information and facts. “You can be like God,” said the original Lie. “You can have knowledge without Wisdom. Just reach in for yourself and grab it.” That is the way of Folly, foolishness, unbelief. “The fool says in his heart there is no God.” The end of Folly is death.

Jesus Christ is Wisdom incarnate, holy Wisdom in human flesh. He is the “power of God and the wisdom of God.” “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He reflects the very glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.” He is the “glue” that holds the universe together. Your cells, your DNA, a table, a chair - they hold together in and through Him. He's what the scientists search for and sages long to find. The ordering Wisdom of the universe. The intelligent Designer. He is Jesus the Christ - the One born in Bethlehem, who hung on a cross and rose from the dead, to save the cosmos He created.

He teaches us the way of prudence, the way of Wisdom that leads to life. That way is the way of the cross, of dying and rising, repentance and faith. This way is foolishness to the worldly-wise, yet to those made wise through His Word and Spirit, it is God’s creative wisdom to save. He will come to raise us on His advent Day. And then you baptized believers, wise in Him, will shine as the brightness of the heavens.

1 Cor. 2:1-5 is heavily freighted with implications for the way the church conducts her ministries and mission work. It speaks directly to our desire to grow large and successful looking churches. It deconstructs our desire to engage in ecclesiastical empire building.

Church growth strategies often include marketing the church to a particular niche group, a particular demographic. How does one decide which group to target? Bill Hybels, leader of Willow Creek outside of Chicago, said, "Generally a pastor can define his appropriate target audience by determining with whom he would like to spend a vacation or an afternoon of recreation." Now, I'd be happy to vacation or recreate with anybody in my congregation. But I think this is a horribly unbiblical approach to the church's mission. Jesus certainly didn't target people he wanted to vacation with (what a upper middle class way of putting things anyway!!). Jesus surrounded himself with social misfits! Nor did Paul surround himself with vacation candidates. Indeed, Paul had to defy every prejudice he had grown up with in order to become an apostle to the filthy, unclean Gentiles.

To be fair, I should note that Hybels offers a response in this interview, though I think he still misses the biblical point:

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1994/july18/4t820b.html>

The young Augustine is a good example of the kind of thing Paul is opposing in 2:1-5. Augustine was trained in classical rhetoric. Before his conversion, he was an oratorical specialist and had a nice job promoting propaganda for the emperor. He was an expert in the "excellent speech" Paul rejects. After Augustine's conversion, he became a plainspoken, humble preacher of the gospel. He was still eloquent, but his eloquence served Christ rather than himself. He realized that "Thus saith the Lord" trumps the art of rhetoric. He began to imitate the rhetoric of the biblical authors, as opposed to the rhetoric of the Greco-Romans. Augustine came to understand that biblical leadership is not a matter of showmanship, but humble service. See *Selling Jesus* by Doug Webster, 109f.

Paul refused to relate to his hearers as consumers, through their felt needs. Instead, he told them a story that redefined them and created a new set of felt needs. Frankly, the cross could not answer the kinds of questions people in Paul's culture were asking. He had to get them to reframe their questions so they could see the cross as the answer. We cannot make the gospel fit us; we have to be made to fit the gospel. Preaching aims at this kind of conversion/transformation.

To package the gospel in the forms of American pop culture is like a doctor delivering news of cancer to a patient while doubled over in laughter.

There are a number of books that critique the modern day “marketing the church” movement. Various works by Willimon, Hauerwas, Peterson, MacArthur, Wells, Piper, and others are very helpful. Works by secular scholars like Postman can also be helpful. Works such as Stephen Nichols *American Jesus* and Paul Grant’s *Blessed Are the Uncool* are informative. But my favorite book on these issues is by Beeson’s Doug Webster, *Selling Jesus*.

Webster raises some compelling questions. See p. 20-21, 37. He also shows the contradictions of our culture’s “wish list,” which force churches to make important decisions in their philosophy of ministry. See p. 95f. Webster uses Richard Baxter as a positive model. See p. 147f. Webster also rightly points out how consumerism has a tendency to dehumanize us, as we are treated as nothing more than a bundle of desires from whom something can be leveraged. See p. 61.

What happens when you appeal to our materialistic, self-centered, sex-obsessed, consumerist culture? What happens to the gospel and church life when the surrounding culture calls the shots? When we try to compete with Hollywood on its own terms? This is analogous to parents allowing their children to make decisions about diet, school, schedule, etc. See Webster, p. 78. Webster also offers a helpful assessment of the church growth/seeker sensitive movement. He points out that if the unchurched feel perfectly at home on our churches we have reduced the gospel to another folk religion. See p. 17.

Webster also deals with the absurdity of preaching. See p. 90.

Some people say preaching is no longer a useful medium because people have a hard time remembering what was preached in our technologically driven age. But preaching is like eating. You do not have to remember what you ate for dinner last night to know that it nourished you. Remembering sermon specifics is great, but not even preachers remember everything they say! The Puritans like Jonathan Edwards used to talk about the “impression” made by a sermon: while the technical details might not linger with the listener, the effects would.

Duane Garner’s 3 part blog series from ‘The Avenue’ is very relevant to 2:1-5:

No matter how good a preacher or Bible teacher you may be, no matter how seriously you take the task of preparation and presentation—in the back of your mind, it is difficult not to have this haunting, nagging thought that you are competing for the minds of your hearers; competing against the polished news anchor person, the hip music video producer, and the New York ad agency. Compared to what Hollywood is producing, the simple preached gospel can start to seem very archaic, very out-of-touch, very boring.

What makes it even worse is the proliferation of Christian television programming, where Johnny (or Janie) Hair-Do does something similar to preaching on much nicer platform than yours and with lots of slick video production. It is tempting to think that we are up against that, and therefore must do something on par with what they are doing, or at least something that competes with them in order to grab people's attention, and to keep people's attention long enough to teach them something. So in reaction, lots of Christian pastors and churches make efforts to sweeten the impact of their message with all sorts of technological whizbangery, movie clips, drama, interviews, light shows, professionally performed music and so on (you know what I'm talking about). I believe that many of these churches are sincerely hoping that they can package the gospel in such a way that it will be heard and accepted by a generation that is saturated with special-effects-laden movies and over-produced pop music and frenetic television advertising. When we respond negatively to those sorts of things we sound really funny, really out of touch and horribly anti-evangelical.

Therefore our response has to go deeper than the fact that we don't particularly care for synchronized interpretive hula hoop dance teams, or whatever the entertainment of the day happens to be. And when people in our congregations wonder why we don't do those sorts of things, and when we have the tingling temptation that maybe people would respond better if we showed movie clips during our sermons, we need to have a better response than "we just don't do that."

You see, the reason that this kind of pandering to whims of the culture is not helpful and is in many cases downright dangerous is that beneath all of this there is the underlying suspicion that the preaching of the gospel is insufficient on its own. We think it needs lots of propping up. It needs lots of decoration. It needs lots of pageantry, because all by itself it is just dry and dull. That's the underlying assumption.

We have a fundamental lack of confidence in the spoken word of God.

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Last time I asserted that the modern evangelical trend of trying to make the worship experience similar to what one would find in the movie theater or on the cable network is evidence that we have a fundamental lack of confidence in the preaching of the word of God.

But let's just suppose for a moment that in fact, sincere Christians who are serious about the preaching of the Word are engaged in these sort of things only out of a concern to make the gospel relevant to a pop-culture-saturated generation. We would still ask – Are any of these innovations

really necessary in the first place? Do they really accomplish what they intend to accomplish?

Why assume that what people in our communities want from a church is what they are getting everywhere else? They have lots of opportunities to be entertained or wowed or emotionally manipulated (if they are into that sort of thing)—but why should we assume that they are expecting the very same thing when they come to church?

People normally expect church to be very different from the rest of life. Just as they don't want their doctor's office to be run like WalMart, and they don't expect their experience at the library to be the same as their experience at the deer camp, no one automatically expects their church experience to be the same as their movie or rock concert experience.

In my experience it is only Christians who are bored of church, or bored with a certain kind of music, or bored with a certain preacher who are concerned that they be entertained in their Sunday morning gathering. I don't get that same sense from unbelievers coming to the church for the first time or from the unfaithful who are returning to church after a long absence. They expect worship to be bigger and older than they are—to have more substance than anything else in their lives.

Other forms of information and education and entertainment may be more slickly-produced and flawlessly-executed than anything the church has going on, but where is the authority in those things? Where is the life and the light? Where is the truth?

Someone somewhere once gave this example—when you go to a baseball game for the first time, you expect there to be things you have to learn about the game and about the experience of watching. You need to learn when to stand up, when to sit down, how to keep score, what to watch for, what the rules are, fan etiquette – things that increase your enjoyment – things that you aren't born knowing. If people expect that much of a learning curve in order to truly enjoy a baseball game, why should they be surprised when they come to church and people are using words they don't understand and singing songs they don't know?

We are likely selling ourselves and our communities very short, and taking some things for granted when we just assume that people want their church experience to be a lot like the Oprah show or a jazz festival or the high school pep rally.

No doubt, we want to do what we do well. When it comes to leading worship, there is no excuse for mumbling, or being morose, or being ill-prepared. Almost nothing is more unbearable and more uncomfortable than a worship service where the pastor and the musicians fumble through everything. But the point is that we must do what we do well, and not try to do what some other venue is doing, and then to do it poorly.

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I've suggested that the various efforts of pastors and churches to ride the currents and model their worship in the image of pop culture are evidence that these Christians are essentially uneasy about the sufficiency of the Word of God and the sacraments. I've also pondered the question of

whether unbelievers and the unchurched are even really demanding this sort of thing of the Church.

I have just a couple more thoughts on this.

In so many discussions about this type of thing, you will hear someone suggest that it is our evangelical duty to make the gospel relevant to the culture. And there is a seed of true concern there. We don't want to conduct worship in Latin. We don't want to be cold toward outsiders. We don't want to put unnecessary barriers between them and worship. But at the same time, it isn't the Church or her message that is to be made relevant to the world, the mission of the Church is to make the world relevant to Christ.

If we are caught up in the thinking that everything that we do must be packaged in user-friendly forms in order to facilitate individual understanding or to meet individual expectations of spiritual experiences, we effectively give unbelievers dominion over the Church and her faith. The nations then become the judges before which the Church must plead its case—with her hat in her hand. Cultures, not Christ, are then the authorities which will decide whether the faith and life of the church are meaningful and worthy.

But what does Paul say about the wisdom and the authority of the world in all of its judgments? "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? The world through wisdom did not know God." So then "The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (1 Cor. 1:20ff)

Let us not subject our faith and our worship and our preaching to the world in order for it to tell us whether or not there is any substance, or any worth to these things. Let the world come to Christ to find its relevance and meaning in Him.

Charles Finney is a good example of how the church goes wrong when she does not heed Paul's warnings in 2:1-5. Finney developed revivalistic techniques, aimed at producing conversion. Finney believed that sinners were bound to change their own hearts, but believed preachers could make this happen through the right use of means. Finney would certainly not admit that this often amounted to emotional manipulation, but he certainly believed preachers could engineer conversions. Finney said

There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means. . . . A revival is as naturally a result of the use of means as a crop is of the use of its appropriate means

When you go this route, the next thing you know church has become a veritable circus (or variety talk show). Any means that produce desired results become acceptable.

But Paul makes it clear that not all means consistent with the gospel and can, in fact, empty the gospel of its power.

MacArthur's *Ashamed of the Gospel* includes a helpful critique of Finney.

More random thoughts on 2:1-5.

Where the preacher is weak, the gospel is strong.

It is possible to preach in such a way that preacher preempts the cross.

We need to continually ask: How does the cross shape our church growth strategies? Our philosophy of ministry? The cross turns the economy and value system of the world on its head; this should be reflected in the life and culture of the church.

James Denney once wrote, "No man can give at once the impression that he himself is clever and that Jesus Christ is mighty to save." Paul rejected self-exalting wisdom and rhetoric; preachers today must do the same.

On biblical eloquence, see John Piper's conference message:

[http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByConference/41/3265 Is There Christian Eloquence Clear Words and the Wonder of the Cross/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByConference/41/3265%20Is%20There%20Christian%20Eloquence%20Clear%20Words%20and%20the%20Wonder%20of%20the%20Cross/)

1 Cor. 4:19 and 2 Cor. 10:10 give helpful background on 2:1-5.

Luther's theology of glory vs. the theology of the cross is very relevant to 1 Cor. 2. The Corinthians wanted a theology of glory, whereas Paul was offering them a theology of the cross. For Paul, the cross became his worldview, the lens through which he viewed all of life.

Goals:

First of all, Paul said he was not trusting in sophisticated rhetorical devices. Paul's teaching and preaching while he was in Corinth were not patterned after the styles of communication that the Corinthians loved so much, "superiority of speech" and "wisdom." The New International Version translates the phrase "eloquence and superior wisdom." C. K. Barrett writes: "The two nouns are close together in meaning, for 'eloquence' literally means 'rational talk.' And 'superior wisdom' literally means 'worldly cleverness.' They represent the outward and inward means by which men may commend a case, effectiveness of language, and skill of argumentation." Paul refused to give the people what they wanted in terms of communication style.

Second, in the first clause of verse 2, he refused to show off his theological knowledge, philosophize, or psychologize. He didn't encumber the message with Paul Tillich vocabulary. He himself was a gifted rabbi, one of the greatest minds of his age. He probably knew four or five languages. And yet he refused to compete with the articulate philosophers of Corinth or show off his credentials. . .

Third, in the beginning clause of verse 4, Paul didn't try to persuade with a powerful, compelling delivery. Paul's plain way of speaking was not compelling. In 2 Corinthians 10 Paul admits that he wasn't a very impressive public speaker. I thought of the way modern-day athletes say, "Show me what you've got!" If the itinerant philosophers and teachers of Corinth had said to Paul, "Show us what you've got!" he would have said, "I don't have much, actually. I choose not to compete with you." They depended on their powers of persuasion to gain followers. But Paul says, "I am not a salesman. I will not use emotional manipulation or theatrics. I am an ambassador. I proclaim truth.

MacArthur:

Human words of wisdom, no matter how impressive and persuasive, would have robbed the gospel of its power. He saw no place for calculated theatrics and techniques to manipulate response. Many have responded to an emotional appeal, without a true knowledge and conviction of God. Paul did not do that kind of preaching. He surely would have gotten a wider and more receptive hearing, but his hearers would have been left in their sins and without a Savior. . .

Paul had great natural abilities, but he did not rely on them. Even the human words and wisdom of an apostle could not save a person. He did not want his hearers to identify with his own wisdom, which could give them only another philosophy, but with God's wisdom in Jesus Christ, which could give them eternal life. . .

Hodge:

Here the whole context shows he refers to his state of mind. It was not in the consciousness of strength, self-confident and self-relying, that he appeared among them, but as oppressed with a sense of his weakness and insufficiency. He had a work to do which he felt to be entirely above his powers...

In these verses, therefore, we are taught:

1. That, the proper method to convert men in any community, Christian or Pagan, is to preach or set forth the truth concerning the person and work of Christ. Whatever other means are used must be subordinate and auxiliary, designed to remove obstacles, and to gain access for the truth to the mind, just as the ground is cleared of weeds and brambles in order to prepare it for the precious seed.

2. The proper state of mind in which to preach the gospel is the opposite of self-confidence or carelessness. The gospel should be preached with a sense of weakness and with great anxiety and solicitude.
3. The success of the gospel does not depend on the skill of the preacher, but on the demonstration of the Spirit.
4. The foundation of saving faith is not reason, i.e. not arguments addressed to the understanding, but the power of God as exerted with and by the truth upon the heart.

Stedman:

In the book of Acts we are told that after he had been in Corinth for a few months the Lord Jesus appeared to him in a vision and strengthened him and said to him, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent, ... and no man shall attack you to harm you," {cf. Acts 18:9-10}. That is a revelation of why Paul was afraid. He was afraid he was going to be beaten up as he had been in other cities. He was afraid because of personal pride. He was afraid of being branded as a religious fanatic. He did not like those feelings, nevertheless he faithfully began to talk about what God had said in Jesus Christ.

Soon there was a second visible result. Paul calls it the "demonstration of the Spirit and [of] power." As Paul in this great sense of weakness told the facts and the story out of the simple earnestness of his heart, God's spirit began to work and people started coming to Christ. You read the account in Acts. First, the rulers of the synagogue turned to Christ, and then hundreds of the common, ordinary, plain, vanilla people of Corinth began to become Christians. Soon there was a great spiritual awakening, and before the city of Corinth knew what had happened, a church had been planted in its midst and a ferment was running throughout the city.

Piper:

We know from Paul's letters that he was a profound thinker and that he could use language powerfully. But the point he is making here is that he did not preach the gospel with the hope of appealing to the worldly, unspiritual admiration of those things. He did not want people to respond because of his oratory or his intellect. . .

Now what does all this have to do with the cross of Christ? That Paul is trembling and fearful, that he is weak and unimpressive, that he avoids flourishes of oratory and intellectual ostentation — what's all that got to do with the cross? . . .

I think what it means is that whatever else he knew, whatever else he spoke about, and whatever else he did, he would know it and say it and do it in relation to Christ crucified. This brings us back to where we started. He will not let the cross become a historical relic. He puts it at the center of his everyday work and relationships.

Spurgeon:

The power that is in the Gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher, otherwise men would be the converters of souls, nor does it lie in the preacher's learning, otherwise it would consist in the wisdom of men. We might preach until our tongues rotted, till we would exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless the Holy Spirit be with the Word of God to give it the power to convert the soul.

John Piper:

But don't make a mistake here. Just as the wisdom of God is foolishness with man, so the power of God is viewed by men as weakness. God wills it that way: chapter one, verse 27: "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." The divine power in which our faith rests is not the power of a May Day in Red Square; it is not the power of big business or bloc voting; it is not the power of personal savvy and cool self-assertion. The power in which saving faith rests is the power of divine grace sustaining the humble, loving heart and radiating out through weakness. That is the inimitable power that we see in Christ - meekly, humbly, lovingly mounting the cross for our sin. The power of God's grace sustaining the humble, loving heart of Christ and radiating out through his weakness: this is the resting place of saving faith and this is the demonstration of the Spirit and power (2:4).

So I commit myself as your pastor and call upon you to commit yourself as ministers in the church to act and speak in a way that will lead people to trust not in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Now let's shift the focus from the aim of Paul's work to the way he achieved it. I mentioned earlier that in our day, just as in Paul's day, there are peddlers of the gospel who seem to have forgotten that at the heart of our faith is "an old rugged cross, an emblem of suffering and shame," and that to trust Christ crucified is to be identified with him in the humiliation of his death, and that only in the age to come will we be glorified with him, and that while this age lasts we walk the Calvary road. Oh, to be sure, not without joy - indescribable joy and full of the hope of glory - but always joy in weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities. Watch out for the slick preachers who never mention these things, for whom the cross is a mere token symbol, for whom the exceeding sinfulness of all our hearts is scarcely mentioned, who use power, wisdom, fame, and luxury to beckon the self-centered middle class American to consider himself Christian at no cost to his pride and self-sufficiency.

Contrast the apostle Paul: 1 Corinthians 2:3 "I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling." Paul would have never made it on the major networks. You remember what his enemies said of him in 2 Corinthians 10:10 "They say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account.'" There is a brand of Christianity today that would have asked of Paul, "What good can he do for Christ? Why, he'll just turn everybody off. What Christ needs is shiny

people, people with education, power, status, flair. Otherwise, how are we going to be able to sell Jesus to the public and get America christianized?" Paul's question was not so much "What good can I do for Christ?" but rather, "What good can Christ do for the world through unworthy me?" It was not, "How much power can I muster for Jesus?" but, "How much power can Jesus show through my weakness?" Remember 2 Corinthians 12:8 and following? Paul said about some special infirmity that he had: "Three times I besought the Lord about this that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. I will all the more gladly boast in my weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

Paul knew that, if he was to be an agent of the crucified Christ to win people to faith in him, then he had to follow the way of Calvary. That is, he had to draw people's attention not to his own power, wisdom, status or flair, but to the power of God made perfect in weakness. He knew that if human power or beauty or intelligence or class got center stage, whatever conversions happened would not be conversions to the crucified Christ. If it is the power of God manifest in the weakness and death of Christ that kindles and sustains saving faith (as 2:5 says), then the way to reflect that power in our lives for the sake of others is to carry the death of Jesus in our own bodies. This is how Paul described the power of his own ministry. He said in 2 Corinthians 4:7-11: "We have this treasure (of the gospel) in earthen vessels (our weak bodies) to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

Willimon:

Imagine being asked to stand before a grand gathering of the good and the wise and being asked to make a speech about goodness, beauty, the meaning of life, the point of history, the nature of Almighty God or some such high subject and having no material at your disposal but an account of a humiliating, bloody, execution at a garbage dump outside a rebellious city in the Middle East. It is your task to argue that this story is the key to everything in life and to all that we know about God. This was precisely the position of Paul in Corinth. Before the populace of this cosmopolitan, sophisticated city of the Empire, Paul had to proclaim that this whipped, bloody, scorned and derided Jew from Nazareth who was God with Us. As Paul said, he had his work cut out for him because preaching about the cross "is folly to those who are perishing," foolishness and stupidity. A cross is no way for a messianic reign to end. Yet what else can this preacher say because, whether it makes sense to us or not, "it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." (1 Cor. 18, 21) Tailoring his manner of speech to his strange subject matter, Paul says

that he chose a foolish sort of preaching that was congruent with his theological message:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that our faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Corin. 2:1-5)

This is probably our earliest, most explicit statement on the peculiarity of Christian preaching, and one of the few places in the New Testament where a preacher turns aside from the task of proclamation to discuss the nature of proclamation now that God has come as a crucified Messiah. A crucified Messiah? It is an oxymoron, a violation of Israel's high expectations for a messianic liberator. In order to bring such a scandal to speech, Paul eschewed "lofty words or wisdom," the stock-in-trade of the classical orator. Rather than avoiding the scandal of the cross or attempting to sugar coat its absurdity in order to make it more palatable, he limited his subject matter so that he knew, "nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." His manner of presentation, his delivery was "weakness," "fear and trembling," a rather peculiar demeanor for a public speaker. Why? So that nothing might move his hearers, nothing might convince them but "the power of God."

For God the Father to allow God the Son to be crucified, dead and buried is for God to be pushed out beyond the limits of human expectation or human help. The cross is the ultimate dead end of any attempt at human self-fulfillment, human betterment or progress. Hanging from the cross, in humiliation and utter defeat, there is nothing to be done to vindicate the work of Jesus or to make the story come out right except "the power of God."

Paul says that he attempted to preach the gospel to the Corinthians in just that way. Rather than base his proclamation on human reason, common sense, or artful arguments, he spoke in halting, hesitant "fear and trembling" so that if they were to hear and to understand, to assent and to respond, it would have to be solely through "the power of God."

Paul says to the Corinthians that the cross is moria, moronic foolishness: For the message about 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, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom. God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (I Corin. 1:18-25)

When Christians are asked to say something profound about ourselves, to say something about the nature of God, this is what we say – “cross.”

J. I. Packer:

If we forget that it is God's prerogative to give results when the gospel is preached, we shall start to think that it is our responsibility to secure them. And if we forget that only God can give faith, we shall start to think that the making of converts depends, in the last analysis, not on God, but on us, and that the decisive factor is the way in which we evangelize. And this line of thought, consistently followed through, will lead us far astray. Let us work this out. If we regarded it as our job, not simply to present Christ, but actually to produce converts - to evangelize, not only faithfully, but also successfully - our approach to evangelism would become pragmatic and calculating. We should conclude that our basic equipment, both for personal dealing and for public preaching, must be twofold. We must have, not merely a clear grasp of the meaning and application of the gospel, but also an irresistible technique for inducing a response. We should, therefore, make it our business to try and develop such a technique. And we should evaluate all evangelism, our own and other people's, by the criterion, not only of the message preached, but also of visible results. If our own efforts were not bearing fruit, we should conclude that our technique still needed improving. If they were bearing fruit, we should conclude that this justified the technique we had been using. We should regard evangelism as an activity involving a battle of wills between ourselves and those to whom we go, a battle in which victory depends on our firing off a heavy enough barrage of calculated effects.

Nouwen:

In recent years I have become increasingly aware of the dangerous possibility of making the Word of God sensational. Just as people can watch spellbound a circus artist tumbling through the air in a phosphorized costume, so they can listen to a preacher who uses the Word of God to draw attention to himself. But a sensational preacher stimulates the senses and leaves the spirit untouched. Instead of being the way to God, his 'being different' gets in the way.

C. H. Spurgeon:

I have written for ploughmen and common people. Hence refined taste and dainty words have been discarded for strong proverbial expressions and homely phrases. I have aimed my blows at the vices of the many, and tried to inculcate those moral virtues without which men are degraded. Much that needs to be said to the toiling masses would not well suit the pulpit and the Sabbath; these lowly pages may teach thrift and industry all the days of the week in the cottage and the workshop; and if some learn these lessons I shall not repent the adoption of a rustic style. That I

have written in a semi-humorous vein needs no apology, since thereby sound moral teaching has gained a hearing from at least 300,000 persons. There is no particular virtue in being seriously unreadable.

David Wells:

What kind of Christian faith will you present or be left with if you are obsequiously prostrating yourself before baby boomers—a generally self-centered, relativistic, unloyal generation? You're giving them a Christ-culture theme that they cannot possibly understand, given their inherent nature. Willow creek and its clones view all of culture as harmless and neutral; therefore, why not adapt the Christian faith to it? The problem is that culture is laden with values that inevitably go against the thrust of the gospel message.