

Lest the Cross Be Emptied

¹Cor 1:17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly 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,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ 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?

²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

^{2:1} And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1 Corinthians 1:17-2:2

“Shining”

Back in my Denver Seminary days (at the turn of the last millennium), I had many discussions with fellow students over the nature of music and its inherent meanings (or lack thereof). Not *lyrics*, mind you. Just the music itself. To my great surprise, I found myself completely outnumbered as each of them argued that music has no inherent meaning; but only the meaning you assign to it.

Enter *The Shining*. Even if you’ve never seen it, you’ve likely heard of it. The Stephen King novel turned into a classic horror movie and miniseries was inspired by his stay at the end of the season in room 217 up in Estes Park’s own Stanley Hotel.

In the original Stanley Kubrick film, [the theme music](#) begins at the very beginning, playing directly over the opening credits as the camera tracks Jack Torrance’s car driving through the isolated Rocky Mountains toward the Overlook Hotel. The theme is an electronic adaptation of the traditional “Dies Irae” (Dee-ess Ee-ray; Day of Wrath), a 13th-century Gregorian funeral chant. With unrelenting quarter notes set in the Dorian (minor) mode, the Moog machine mimics a tuba and trombone that end each line with horrifying atonality and dissonance. The melody relies on tight, interlocking half-step movements that slowly creep downward, then up, then down more, then up, and so on creating

a haunting piece that instantly transforms a scenic aerial shot into a deeply unsettling, ominous warning.

As it is [a horror movie](#), the original Warner Brothers trailer stitches together a series of clips that drag you into an abyss of delusion, insanity, and supernatural evil, all put to classic horror music as Jack completely loses it. But around October 2005, something happened to the Kubrick classic trailer that no one could have foreseen.

An editor by the name of Robert Ryang entered a contest held by the *Association of Independent Creative Editors (AICE)*, which challenged assistant editors to [fundamentally alter a film's genre through clever cutting](#). He took most of the same scenes from the original trailer and a couple new from the movie and turned “The Shining” horror movie [into a Rom-Com](#) teaser, simply by reediting the scenes, talking very happily, and vitally, inserting Peter’s Gabriel’s cheerful punchy 1977 “Solsbury Hill” in place of the horror music. Gabriel’s classic had already become the ultimate industry-standard musical shorthand for a “personal journey,” and Hollywood trailers repeatedly overused it in recent history (*Vanilla Sky*, 2001; *Big Fish*, 2003; *In Good Company*, 2004) to instantly manipulate people’s emotions. Thus was born [“Shining,”](#) one of the foundational milestones of the internet meme culture that

spread virally through peer-to-peer sharing sites and email threads right as *You Tube* was first launching.¹

In 1964, the Canadian philosopher [Marshall McLuhan](#) wrote a book called *Understanding Media – The Extensions of Man*. In this book, he titled his first chapter, “[The Medium is the Message](#),”² as he helped pioneer a new discipline called [Media Ecology](#)—the study of how media, communication technologies, and digital platforms act as complex environments that reshape human perception, behavior, culture, and social structures.

[The medium is the message?](#) Could it really be? While it certainly is an overstatement, its point is exactly what “Shining” the reedit is capitalizing on.³ Messages are not merely conveyed in words, but in the forms in which the words come.

¹ See “[Shining: A Romantic Comedy – Parody Trailer HD](#),” YouTube (Dec 1, 2020). Compare with Stanley Kubrick, “[The Shining – Official Trailer \[1980\] HD](#),” YouTube (Apr 6, 2012).

² [Marshall McLuhan](#), *Understanding Media – The Extensions of Man* (New York: 1964).

³ **Going Deeper.** Think about how no one marches off to war to a Brahms’s lullaby or puts the baby to sleep to Metallica’s “Master of Puppets.” One of our families long-standing examples in modern church music is the song “[As the Deep Pants](#).” The [gentle, reflective contemporary praise chorus](#) with a [calm and intimate tempo](#) repeats the first verse of Psalm 42, “[As the deep panteth for the waters so my soul longeth after thee](#),” and then moves into a sentimental refrain, “[You alone are my heart’s desire and I long to worship Thee](#),” with none of the rest of the lyrics coming from the Psalm.

There’s nothing wrong with any of that, of course. But there is something that few think of. Psalms have context. And there’s probably a reason why Martin Nystrom who wrote this in 1984 didn’t go on to put any more of the Psalm to his tune. Can you imagine singing to this tune vs. 3, “[My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God?’](#)” or vs. 7, “[Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me](#),” or vs. 9, “[I say to God ... ‘Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?’](#)” Or put more poetically, Vs. 3, “[My tears alone have been my bread, By night and day I weep; They jeer at me till hope is dead: ‘Where is your God? He sleeps!’](#)” Vs. 7, “[Deep answers deep with thund’rous crash, Your billows crush my soul; The breakers of Your wrath now smash—I sink beneath their roll.](#)”

As I was debating my fellow students, I took a class called Pastoral Theology. For my final paper, I had stumbled across a comment by John Calvin in his 1 Corinthians commentary. It is near the beginning of his introduction to the letter. He starts mentioning the “false apostles” that had crept in, “not, in my opinion, to disturb the Church openly with wicked doctrines ... but priding themselves in the splendor and magnificence of their address [and] being puffed up with an empty loftiness of speech, they looked upon *Paul’s simplicity*, and even the Gospel itself, with contempt.” The key section that hit me and upon which I built my paper was this quote,

I conclude that they were persons who did not openly take away any thing from the substance of the gospel, but, as they burned with a misdirected eagerness for distinction, I am of opinion that, with the view of making themselves admired, *they contrived a new method of teaching, at variance with the simplicity of Christ.*⁴

Not a new message. *A new method.* This absolutely fascinating comment is directed especially at the beginning of the letter and the passage we will look at today.

Vs. 9, “I plead to God in bitter pain, ‘Why have You cast me down? Why must I walk in grief and shame, While foes still mock and frown?’” The medium is the message.

⁴ John Calvin and John Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 39.

1 Cor 1:17-2:2 and Its Thesis

The thesis of our passage is *the crucified Christ* as the true power and wisdom of God. The *message* of the cross deliberately overturns and shames every *method* of human wisdom, power, status, and boasting. In order to fit the message, a method had to be ordained which supplements rather than actively undermines it like “Solsbury Hill” so obviously does to a horror movie. The gospel must be proclaimed *plainly*—through a form not founded in rhetorical skill or human strength—lest the cross itself be emptied of its power.

Some of the key phrases we will come across are, “*not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power*” (1Cor 1:17), “*Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world*” (20-21), “*Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified*” (22-23), “*I did not come proclaiming ... with lofty speech or wisdom*” (2:1), and “*I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*” (2:2). Meanwhile, he *will describe God’s chosen form with four words*:

- 1:17 – *euangelizesthai* (“to *preach* the gospel / evangelize”)
- 1:21 – *kērygma* (“the *preaching* / the proclamation” — “the folly of the *kērygma*”)

- 1:23 – *kēryssomen* (“we preach / we proclaim” Christ crucified)
- 2:1 – *katangellōn* (“proclaiming / announcing” the testimony of God)

These are the opposite of the Corinthian’ rhetorical eloquence, stylish speech, and polished oratory that defined the traveling sophists and professional speakers of the day. God’s form *does not necessitate* a status-conferring presentation: high education, noble birth, social connections, celebrity, or ability to perform impressively (though, of course, it does not militate against those either). What it necessitates is that ornamental rhetoric and intellectual packaging do not make it respectable. The content does. The content simply announces an event. That’s the definition of preaching and proclaiming. The content here is inherently shameful because it proclaims a crucified man as Lord and Savior, the most humiliating image imaginable. It locates the effectiveness outside the skill of the preacher or elegance of the presentation—in God’s power working through the very things that look weak and foolish to the world.

1 Cor 1:17-2:2—An Unexpected Literary Genius

Looking at your Bible headings and chapter breaks, you will see that the literary unit has long been misunderstood. The ESV ends the last section in vs. 17, but technically, this

verse actually **begins** our unit. Likewise, you'd think it ends at the end of ch. 1, but the reality is, **2:1-2** actually **end** this unit of thought.

Unexpectedly, the passage we are looking at is far more **carefully crafted** than a casual reading suggests. Kenneth Bailey, who has given it one of the most detailed literary studies available,⁵ argues that the structure is so intricate that Paul likely did not compose it on the spot while rapidly working through the Corinthians' list of problems. He suggests Paul may have developed this—what he calls the “**hymn to the cross**”—some time earlier and then inserted and lightly adapted it here because it so perfectly addressed the deeper issue beneath their divisions and boasting. In other words, this is not off-the-cuff prose. It is deliberate, polished, and theologically loaded literary genius.

Bailey shows that the whole section is built as a single intricate **chiasm** made up very deliberately of **seven** ideas. Near the center the units become short couplets, and the exact middle lines—“**but we preach / Christ crucified**”—are each composed of seven syllables and even rhyme (*hēmeis de kēryssomen / Christon estaurōmenon*). None of this is accidental.

⁵ See **Kenneth E. Bailey**, “[Recovering the Poetic Structure of 1 Cor. I 17 – II 2: A Study in Text and Commentary](#),” *Novum Testamentum* 17.4 (Oct 1975): 265-96; **Bailey**, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011): 72-101.

- A I preach the cross (1:17)
- B Those being destroyed / We who are being saved (1:18–19)
- C The wise man (the scholars) made foolish (1:20)
- D God's wisdom and man's ignorance (1:21a)
- E The kerygma saves believers (1:21b)
- F Jews and Greeks reject (1:22)
- G We preach the cross (1:23a)**
- F' Jews and Gentiles reject (1:23b)
- E' Christ is power and wisdom for the called (1:24)
- D' God's wisdom and man's weakness (1:25)
- C' The wise men (the strong) shamed (1:26–28)
- B' Those who boast / You who are in Christ (1:29–31)
- A' I preach the cross (2:1–2)

The result is that the seven-fold preaching of the cross appears at the beginning, the exact center, and the end of the entire piece.

Even more striking is the way Paul draws on **two very different cultural streams at once**. For his **Jewish readers** the language and structure echo the **third Servant Song of Isaiah (Isa 50:5-11)**, where the suffering servant is vindicated by God while his opponents come to nothing. For his **Greek readers** the piece very much seems to engage the tradition of **the funeral oration**, especially the famous speech of Pericles praising the Athenians who died to save Athens during the Peloponnesian war, in which the Corinthians fought alongside. Paul meets both worlds on their own ground—and

then refuses to let either set of expectations reshape the cross. The Messiah is not made acceptable by signs or by noble heroic death. He remains the crucified one, and that is precisely where God's wisdom and power are located.

The literary sophistication is almost overwhelming and could be studied for a good long time. But hearing about in conjunction with the actual message of this passage might cause some to think that Paul is contradicting himself. Why not just write plainly, Paul? Why be so complex in your style and rhetoric? Are you trying to *empty the cross of its power*? As if what God wants is really bad writing and logic in order to make the cross all the more powerful! Or turned to the pulpit: the worse the preaching, the better!

Of course not. Rather, Paul puts everything in service of one unrelenting point: the method of proclamation must not empty the cross of its power. This is about packaging the message in a method that highlights rather than obscures it. Paul uses every available skill of language and cultural awareness, not to impress or to make the message more acceptable, but to keep the offense of the cross firmly in place, indeed front and center. The beauty and precision of the rhetoric are entirely directed toward one end: making the scandal of the cross unavoidable and unforgettable. Every

formal feature drives the hearer back to the same low, foolish, status-destroying center.

Seven Steps to the Center

A / A' – The Preacher and the Cross (1:17; 2:1-2)

Our first verse is **1Cor 1:17**, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” We looked at this **last week**, because it does in fact nicely end his baptism point that he makes in the introduction, so I do understand why the heading usually has this at the end of the last section.

But look at **2:1-2**, “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Both passages have the **same four-fold structure** (see below, structures in Bailey, “Recovering...”). “*Send me*” parallels “*came to you.*” “*Preach the gospel*” contrasts “*not in lofty words.*” “*Not with wise words*” contrasts “*the testimony of God.*” “*The cross of Christ*” parallels “*Jesus Christ and him crucified.*” It’s the same thing repeated.

Units A and A'

Unit A 1 For Christ did not *send me* to baptize
 2 but to *preach the gospel*
 3 *not with wise words*
 4 lest it be emptied of its power, the *cross of Christ*

Unit A' 1 *And I came to you* brethern, (*I came*)
 2 *not in lofty words (or wisdom)*
 3 *proclaiming to you the testimony*¹⁵) of God
 4 For I decided to know nothing among you except
 Jesus Christ and him crucified¹⁶).

In **1:17** Paul states the governing principle of his entire ministry among the Corinthians: Christ sent him *to preach the gospel*. That's probably not news to you. This is the **first of our four Greek words** that deal with preaching. It is *euangelizesthai* (“**to preach the gospel / evangelize**”). Paul as a missionary **evangelized through preaching**.

But he adds something vital. He deliberately did this “**not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.**” This is the epicenter of Calvin's comment. Paul would not allow the *method* of proclamation to become a rival source of impressiveness or persuasion. If the hearers' confidence rests on the skill of the speaker rather than on the crucified Christ, the cross has already been drained of its force.

In **2:1–2**, Paul returns to the same points from **the other side**. When he came to Corinth, he did not arrive with lofty

speech or wisdom; he had decided to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and him crucified. The last of our four words appears in vs. 1: *katangellōn* (“**proclaiming / announcing**” the testimony of God), creating the parallel. Thus, the beginning and the end of the passage say the same thing: **The apostle refuses any rhetorical or intellectual strategy that would make the message more acceptable on human terms.** The cross must remain the sole center of power and wisdom, even if that means the proclamation itself looks weak and foolish to the surrounding culture. I’ll come back to this at the end, but the real key here is not how good or bad the speaker is, but is he actually preaching Christ and him crucified.

B / B' — Two Groups, Two Outcomes (1:18-19; 1:29-31)

Vs. 18 is where the section break usually appears. “**For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.**” In my opinion, this is **the thesis statement** of the entire letter. Nearly every major problem Paul addresses—divisions, boasting in leaders, sexual immorality, lawsuits, misuse of freedom, disorder in worship, denial of the resurrection—can be traced back to a failure to live as people who have been claimed by the upside-down wisdom and power of the cross.

- Unit B 1 For the word of the cross, to *those being destroyed*, is folly
 2 But to us who are being saved
 2' It is the power of God
 1' For it is written, "*I will destroy* the wisdom of the wise"
 a. (and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart)
- Unit B' 1 So that *all flesh might not boast* in the presence of God
 2 From him you are in Christ Jesus
 2' Who became wisdom for us from God f. (which is right-
 eousness, sanctification and redemption)
 1' Therefore it is written, "*Let him who boasts*, boast in the
 Lord " ²⁰).

The verse itself is chiastic (ABB'A'). It begins with the word of the cross being folly to those who are perishing or are being destroyed (*apollymi*). It ends saying that God will destroy (*apollymi*) the wisdom of the wise. Same verb. The middle is about those being saved and that the cross is the power of God. The focus is clearly on **opposites**: *being destroyed* vs. being *saved*.

Paul is pointing to the cross as an objective reality, both **historically** as the God-man dies on it, and as a **message** of what it is and does: atones, redeems, propitiates, appeases God's wrath, satisfies his justice, and is the ultimate expression of God's love. This very message, that Christ died on the third day according to the Scriptures, that he was hung on a tree and became a curse, that he was the Lamb of God sacrificed by the High Priest who was one and the same person, that he defeated the powers of sin and hell ... all this

simply is the power of God to save people. *It is an inherent power of the message itself.* There's literally nothing we do to make it more powerful—or less. And thus, it is the power of God to those whom this message is saving. (Frankly, this is the identical message of the thesis of the previous letter in your Bible; see **Rom 1:16-17**).

But *there are people it is not saving.* Hear this well. That *isn't the message's fault.* It is the providential timing and purpose of God combined with the hardness of the human heart. God doesn't use it as a power to save everyone, nor everyone at the same time. He is not obligated to save anyone. Because they misunderstand or misconstrue this, *many lose faith in the power of the message* and think that if they dress it up that it will be more persuasive, more practical, more powerful. Pity the fool who thinks he has more power than God's Gospel, for this is the very problem Paul is diagnosing this very moment. This is the root problem of the Corinthians.

Paul says that the very same identical message is *folly* to those it is not saving. Folly is deliberately contrasted with power. "Folly" is the Greek word *mōria* and it literally *means absurdity, nonsense, or intellectual contemptibility.* It comes from the same root as "*moron.*" The Spirit is saying that this

same message is ridiculous, beneath serious consideration, stupid, and shameful to those who are perishing in sin. Friend, this is why the unbeliever cannot come to Christ of their own intellect, no matter how smart they are. In fact, Paul will say this very thing in the next chapter (1Cor 2:14). He interprets them through his own sin and pride. You can't make them unabsurd to him, no matter how you package it—unless you change the message, which is precisely what most end up doing once they do down the rabbit hole of changing the method. But if you do that, you lose the power of the Gospel altogether. He needs the cross itself to change him.

This absurdity begins to prove itself out *in Corinth* itself at the end of the letter when many of them are no longer believing in the resurrection. For why believe in the resurrection if the death of the God-man is itself is absurd?

The verse ends in an OT proof-text. Paul isn't making any of this up. Instead, he says, “*For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart’*” (19). This comes from Isaiah 29:14. It comes almost entirely from the LXX with one exception. The very last verb (*krypsō*; “I will hide”) becomes *athetēsō* (“I will nullify”), making the chiasm stronger.⁶

⁶ “By substituting the stronger *athetēsō*, Paul creates a chiastic parallel with the preceeding *apolō* [“destroy”] that serves to drive home his point to his readers.” C. D. Stanley, *Paul and*

The context is fascinating. Ciampa and Rosner say that the “surrounding verses suggest its attractiveness to Paul and its aptness ... Part of a woe oracle condemning various human practices (cf. 29:1, 3), the preceding verse associates wisdom with ‘lip service’ to God: ‘These people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’ (29:13).”⁷ The first part of the quoted verse shows that the judgment of the “wisdom of the wise” will happen when God will do “shocking and amazing” things with a three-fold appearance of the root for “wonder,” implying messianic involvement (Isa 9:6; Ex 15:11; Jdg 13:18). Stanley summarizes it well, “Paul’s point in 1 Cor. 1:18–29 is not that God has simply ‘hidden’ understanding from the ‘wise,’ but rather that he has done a work in the death of Jesus that defies all purely rational understanding.”⁸

Now if the cross is the power of God to save, then this means it has already done certain things to those it saves. Paul has already discussed this in the opening. The pair now reaffirms this. “So that no human being might boast in the

the Language of Scripture: Citation Technique in the Pauline Epistles and Contemporary Literature, SNTSMS 69 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 186, cited in Ciampa, 698.

⁷ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, “1 Corinthians,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 697.

⁸ Stanley, *ibid.*

presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (29-31). Christ is wisdom. Christ is righteousness. Christ is sanctification. Christ is redemption. It all comes from him and his work on the cross. How is this a pair with 18-19? What humans view as folly becomes “wisdom” from God, that is Jesus Christ. The only true boasting comes from the presence of God in Christ through his work in the very thing that brought him death.

Both open with a strong negative (folly / no boasting). Both contrast human pretension with what God actually does. The former focuses on the *destructive* side of the cross toward worldly wisdom. This one on the *constructive* side and how the cross gives us our only true boasting. Both close with a Scripture. In this case, Jer 9:23-24. By citing this prophet, Paul shows once more that this is not a new idea. God has always forbidden boasting in human wisdom, strength, or status and has always directed true boasting toward knowing him. The point is, the cross creates a sharp division. Boasting is either destroyed or redirected to the Lord alone.

C / C' — The World's Wise and Strong Are Shamed (1:20, 26-28)

Vs. 20 forms a short ABBA chiasm. It starts with **three questions** asking, “**Where is ... the wise, the scribe, and the debater of this age,**” which we can translate as “**scholar**”? This is followed by a statement that parallels the “wise”: “**Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?**” Having the first and last part parallel creates the effect of making scribe and scholar likewise become parallel.

- C 1 Where is the wise man
 2 Where is the scribe
 2' Where is the scholar of this age ³⁰⁾
 1' Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world ?
- C' 1 Not many are wise men according to the flesh
 2 not many powerful
 2' not many of noble birth
 1' Yet, the foolishness of the world, God chose to shame the wise men.

Vv. 26-28 are the pair. The Apostle, remembering the beginning of the letter and how they were *called* by God to be saints and made sanctified (**1:2**) asks them to **remember their calling**—how they came to the Lord, what state they came to Christ from. Again, we have a chiasm. We get **a list of three stations** in life. “**Not many of you were ... wise ac-**

cording to worldly standards (or “the flesh”), not many *powerful*, not many of *noble birth*. This is followed by a return to the wise: “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the *wise*.” That’s almost exactly what he said at the end of the vs. 20: “Has not God made foolish the *wisdom of the world*?” This means that as wise according to the flesh and wisdom are paired, so then are the powerful and those of noble birth, and this likely means that *the powerful equate to the scribes* and *those of noble birth equate to the scholars*. We will see why here in a bit.

D / D' — God's Wisdom vs. Human Wisdom (1:21a, 25)

The first half of *vs. 21* takes us to the D/D' pair. “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom.” This is a *brilliant subversion*. Humans have wisdom. God has wisdom. Humans attempted to gain true, saving knowledge of God through *its own* wisdom. But this was *all planned in God's wisdom* to show that human wisdom is impotent for salvation. Human wisdom seeks to gain knowledge of God through wisdom. True wisdom *fears him* in order to attain knowledge of God. For *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*, not the end. Fearing God comes first. Then wisdom. That's the order.

The pair is **vs. 25**, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” Foolishness of God contrasts wisdom of God. Wiser than men parallels worldly wisdom. Therefore, the weakness of God being stronger than men contrasts how the world did not know God through its wisdom. This is all upside down, just like the message of the cross. It is the opposite of what we think. We think it’s about our sophistication, our genius, our eloquence. That’s what we call wisdom. But the true wisdom and power is actually to us foolishness and weakness. Suffering first, then glory rather than glory to escape suffering.

E / E' — The Message and the Called (1:21b, 24)

The second half of **vs. 21** takes us to the E/E’ pair. “It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” I’ve mentioned preaching as the chosen method of God to proclaim this message. This is the second time Paul talks about preaching (the third word we’ve seen). This is the word *kērygma*. By definition, it is a proclamation of someone else’s message, not your own ideas. That message is the message Paul begins, centers, and ends this “hymn” upon: The cross of Christ.

The pair is vs. 24, “But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Called parallels saved. Jews and Greeks parallels “those who believe.” “Christ the power of God and wisdom of God” parallels “what we preach.” Do you see how the whole hymn is folding in on itself, interpreting itself? The whole point here is that human wisdom, even at its best, cannot reach God. God’s “foolish” way is higher and more powerful than the wisest thing we can dream up to reach the same goal. Our wisdom are powerless to save; God’s foolishness is powerful to save. Therefore, you’d better pay careful attention to what God’s message and methods are, lest you lose the power of God itself, for the same message that looks like folly is, for the called, the very power and wisdom of God.

F / F' — The Double Rejection (1:22, 23b)

Vs. 22 takes us to the last pair before the center. “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom.” He has already hinted at the Jew and Greek distinction when he talked about “scribes” vs. “scholars.” Now he makes it explicit for

the first time as you read through the text from the beginning. Vs. 23b is the obvious parallel: “A stumbling block to the Jews and folly to Gentiles.”

Read in parallel, signs are a stumbling block. Is this not exactly what Jesus said? “Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation” (Mark 8:12). In Mark’s shortened Gospel, they would not interpret any sign properly. But Matthew and Luke add, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah” (Matt 16:4; Luke 11:29). The sign of Jonah is Jesus’ death for three days and nights. It is the sign of the cross. And this, we learn in many places, is in fact a stumbling block. In fact, this becomes the very center of our entire passage as we will see in a moment.

This “sign of Jonah” is the prophecy of the cross that is found throughout the OT, including all of the servant songs of Isaiah. The Jews knew this; still they stumble, because God caused them to stumble precisely so Gentiles could be grafted in (Rom 11:1ff). However, the Gentiles have their own issues. They aren’t stumbling over their own Savior and Scriptures, but rather over *themselves*! For their “wisdom” sees flesh, death, suffering, and the like as the opposite

of salvation. It is actually quite demonic. I listened to a recent *Blurry Creatures* where the man was talking about the voices heard by schizophrenics and he said that demons will regularly tell these people, “Why are you calling out to Jesus. He couldn’t even save himself.” This is precisely all people see in death. You go to the grave and what do you see of life? Only worms eating the dead. Therefore, the cross refuses to satisfy them.

That’s precisely why you must hear a message of what happens through the cross, because you can’t see it with your eyes. You have to hear the historical message that took place long ago in Jerusalem and was fulfilled according to the prophecies.

G / G' — The Center (1:23a): But We Preach Christ Crucified

The very center, the hinge of the entire passage is 23a: “But we preach Christ crucified.” “But we preach” in the Greek is seven syllables. “Christ crucified” in the Greek is seven syllables. The perfect number. They rhyme. Everything before it leads here. Everything after it flows from here. Paul will not adjust the message to remove the offense. He simply proclaims the crucified Christ—brilliantly, yes, but the brilliance is only here to serve the simplicity of the message.

Again, we see the method: *preaching*. A proclamation. An announcement of something outside of you. It is something in history. It is something you did not do. It is something done for you. It is something done to Christ. It was not a wasted death. His death on a Roman cross is righteousness, sanctification, and redemption because it fulfills God's law and brings about God's grace in the rewards of Christ's obedience. *The only requirement* to obtain these blessings is faith, simply receiving that this news is true for you. That's it.

Of all the people in history, save Paul and the Apostles, I know of no other that come as close to obsessing over the cross as Martin Luther did. Frankly, this is in my mind the whole reason there ever was a Reformation. His *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), his *Bondage of the Will* (1525), his *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/35), his *Commentary on Romans* (1515-16), all of them read like Paul here to the Corinthians. In his Disputation he writes, "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened" (Thesis 19) and conversely, "He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross" (Thesis 20).

Looking upon the invisible things of God is what he calls a [theology of glory](#), that is, [rationalism](#), [moralism](#), and [triumphalism](#), what he calls [the ladders](#) of speculation, merit, and mysticism. These are our attempts to throw off the shackles of the backwards cross to climb up to God to see him in the nude. “[A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is](#)” (Thesis 21).⁹ Any approach—ancient or modern, elaborate or plain—that begins to compete with or soften that center is already moving away from what Paul is centering on.

Conclusion

The message of the cross should be [transforming Christian behavior](#)! In fact, for Christians, it *will*, not it “should be.” His cross *will* become our cross—especially as we relate to others and being wronged by them. His suffering *will* cause us to not care if we suffer for his sake. If it isn’t, it is because it is being emptied of its power by our unwitting obfuscation or is in fact M.I.A.

The Corinthians were a people trying to operate with the world’s criteria of status, wisdom, strength, and honor.

⁹ Martin Luther, [Heidelberg Disputation](#) (1518). For a good commentary on this see Michael Horton, “[Fascinations that Lead Away from the Cross...](#)” *Modern Reformation* (July/Aug 1997).

It turned into a group of people who didn't think of others before themselves, didn't care about their neighbor or brother, trampled over those not "in the club." *No Christians do this today, right?* They were **narcissists** in the extreme, unbroken by the cross, obsessed with outward appearances and making sure everyone knew how swell, how cool, how groovy, how funky, how tubular, how dope, how sick, how lit, how slay they were—while ignoring "**love your neighbor as yourself.**" Doing the good thing because that's what Christ has done for you. Right from the beginning, Paul drags them to the cross, the great shamer of status, the whip of human wisdom, and the breaker of pride.

As I've thought for many years about this passage, my mind has shifted slightly in the way I now think it can and should be applied. For my paper in seminary, I was quick to go after those deliberately messing with the methods, even while they said that their message remained the same. This is still a vital application. I vividly remember hearing too many times to count the "Seeker" churches and their descendants all saying **we don't change the message, but we must constantly change the methods**, basically the exact opposite of how Calvin reads our passage.

Rick Warren of Saddleback Church continues to be on the cutting edge of these things. He wrote as recently as 2017,

Our message must never change, but the way we deliver that message must be constantly updated to reach each new generation ... our message of transformation must never change while the transformation of our presentation should be continual ... One of the secret strengths of Saddleback Church is that we're constantly adapting; we've changed styles of worship, programming, and outreach many, many times in the last 24 years, and we'll continue to do so because the world keeps changing. The only way to stay relevant is to anchor your ministry to unchanging truths and eternal purposes but be willing to continually adapt how you communicate those truths and purposes.¹⁰

Curiously, however, though they do often (sadly, though in many instances less and less) *confess* the basic doctrines of Evangelical Christianity on paper, when they actually talk about what their message is, it more often than not turns into comments addressing **felt-needs** people have that

¹⁰ Rick Warren, "[Reaching a Changing World with God's Unchanging Word](#)," *ChurchLeaders* (June 8, 2017).

the message meets (meaning, purpose, forgiveness, love, right decisions, family protection, handling suffering, etc.) rather than the actual literal message itself. Is that the message of the cross *or of us*? And yes, I pose this as an either/or, not a both/and.

Speaking of methods, a story as told by Samuel Logan Brengle in his *The Soul-Winner's Secret*, a manual on evangelism, speaks about [a woman so far away from George Whitefield](#)—the great orator of America's First Great Awakening who spoke to crowds of 20,000-30,000 without the aid of sound systems—that [she could not hear what he said, yet was weeping](#). A bystander asked her why she wept, since she knew not what he said. “[Oh,](#)” she said, “[can't you see the holy wag of his head?](#)”¹¹ For Brengle, writing from a holiness / Salvation Army revivalist tradition that prized “Spirit-anointed” intensity, this was *a good thing*. The non-verbal manner, the earnestness, the gestures, the “holy-wag,” this is what you need to convince people of the truth. Ironically, William Leach tells [the exact same story](#), but comes to the exact *opposite* conclusion, saying that this is nothing but “[blind fanaticism](#)” which “[cannot grow intellectually or spiritually,](#)” “[where words of truth have no effect, for the mind](#)

¹¹ Samuel Logan Brengle, [The Soul-Winner's Secret](#) (The Salvation Army, 1948), Ch. 17.

is closed and the heart has chosen its final love.”¹² Leach is much closer to Paul in terms of the “method.” In Brengle’s book, while the cross appears as something the soul-winner must personally embrace and live under; it does not appear as the thing that must dominate and define the content and method of the entire ministry. Not even a single time. And it’s a book about *soul-winning*. Rather, it’s about personal holiness and using the right methods.

But these days, I fear more and more that **Paul is walking a tightrope** that people fall off of *both sides* into the chasm below. There are people that literally pride themselves on how faithful they are to not compromise the methods or the message. Some take this (and have done so for 500 years) to such an extreme that they proudly refuse every adornment, strip the worship service (and building) utterly bare, and then quietly begin to boast in the plainness itself. The very refusal to dress up the cross becomes a badge of superiority, a mark of purity, a source of confidence.

¹² William Leach, “[Religious Fanaticism: Asset or Debit?](#)” *The Biblical World* (1919): 240-44. This rabbit hole was interesting. Gerstner, as I recall, said it was Benjamin Franklin who talked to the woman. Leach and other say it was William Hume. Godfrey says it was Peter the Hermit (Charles Godfrey Leland, “[War-Songs and Their Influence in History](#),” *The United States Service Magazine* I [New York: Charles B. Richardson, 1864: 37]). The earliest sources said it is an old joke! (e.g. “[Joker’s Budget](#),” *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* VII [Boston: M. M. Ballou, 1854], 335).

There was a reason I showed you [the rhetorical skill](#) of Paul as he wrote this “[Hymn to the Cross](#).” I only half-jokingly said that some could easily see this as a contradiction. We should write as badly, study as quickly, prepare as poorly, educate ourselves as little, preach as quietly and unemotionally as possible—all to let God do all the work. [That is not what Paul is talking about either.](#)

Ironically, this also focuses on method and in that moment the method has once again taken the place that belongs only to Christ crucified. The form is empty, but our trust is no longer in the cross; *it is in how rigorously we have kept the form empty*. Paul will not allow that either. Whether the method is elaborate or plain, the moment it becomes the thing we rely on or the thing that distinguishes us, the cross has been [pushed aside](#). The simplicity Paul defends is not a style to be proud of; it is the deliberate decision to let the word of the cross remain weak and foolish in the world’s eyes so that the power may be seen to be God’s alone.

When people recognize this for what it is, it is no wonder that they go over to the first side! When trusted in as a badge of honor, this is a kind of fundamentalistic legalism that is perhaps even more deadly than the other. But together, both create [deep seated problems of the soul](#) in many

people. I am increasingly disturbed by how restless the past couple of generations have become with worship. Too many are not members of a body; they are consumers. If there is a real problem in a local church, I get it. And there are many real problems, and I've just addressed two of them.

At the same time, a church can adorn the message of the cross with barely nothing and *not trust in this*. They can also adorn the worship with many things *and not trust in that either*. Granted, I think that's a lot more difficult. The key is, **is the cross of Christ central**? Do you honestly think that every church in the NT was a cookie-cutter? As much as the Orthodox and Rome want you to think they were, just start reading the letters and you'll come to a different opinion pretty quickly.

So why are people so **restless**? Why is it that when the cross and the Gospel and Jesus are put forward every single week, as the only thing that ultimately matters and as the only thing that will actually change hearts and souls, that people still don't care and are looking for something "more" (or "less")? I suggest that it comes down to the same exact problem they had at Corinth. **They were simply not satisfied in the cross of Christ**. It's that simple. They had not learned

what it means to be content *wherever you are*—so long as where you are is not overtly sinning against God.

This is a subtle, pernicious, invisible, dangerous evil. Understand, *the root problem* of the Corinthians was their craving for human distinction, status, wisdom, and boasting combined with their refusal to let the cross abolish every claim to their own independent significance. The *immediate consequence* of this was that the plain, “foolish,” weak form of the cross feels insufficient, of low-status, unable to carry any real weight. Give it more. Prop it up. The *experiential response* to this, however, is a restless soul. There must be something more substantial, beautiful, or impressive than this! Isn’t this precisely why so many refuse to get involved with or are abandoning perfectly good churches as they look for the newest, latest fad? They aren’t satisfied in the cross.

The *behavioral outworking* of this is the constant search for a “better” method / form / aesthetic. One that’s more polished, has a thicker liturgy, incense, icons, historic density, choirs, rock concerts, gives a more emotionally powerful experience, and so on. It is a movement from tradition to tradition to tradition and ultimately, I think, right on out of all traditions altogether. This isn’t to pick on all of those

things (though I would some of them). It is to say the constant search of the restless soul that needs these to be satisfied has a deep problem that Paul addresses today.

And here we come **full circle**. Remember the re-edited *Shining*? The same scenes, the same faces, the same story—yet the moment the music changed, the entire meaning inverted. Horror became romance. The medium emptied the original message of its power and replaced it with something else entirely. That is precisely what happens whenever the method—whether elaborate production or proud plainness—begins to compete with the cross. The same gospel scenes remain, the same words may even be spoken, but the cross has been re-scored. Its offense is softened, its weakness is covered, its power is relocated to the form itself. And once that happens, the cross has already been emptied.

Paul's counter-move is not to bless the restlessness, the pride, or the need to dress up the cross. It is to demand that the cross remain the sole ground of power and significance—both to save and to make us live as he commands. “**Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.**” The root is the heart's refusal to have every distinction, every felt need, every longing crucified with Christ. Beloved, beware of asking forms to supply what only the crucified Christ can give.

You are only asking for trouble, on both a corporate and individual heart level. Here alone, at the cross, do we finally come to the end of ourselves. Here alone do we find the secret that makes living *anywhere* God has put you a joyful experience with Him and with His people.

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