

Reflection and Application (1:10–17)

Addressed to us, Paul's words challenge our fleshly compulsion to align ourselves with ministers who appeal to us and to make unfavorable comparisons with others. Non-liturgical churches that have only the ministry of the word are more likely to focus their satisfaction or dissatisfaction upon the preacher. Though sacramental churches are not indifferent to preaching, they tend to focus more on the †mystery relived in the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, in which the personality of the priest is less important than the mystery being enacted.

In the Catholic Church, pastors are appointed by the bishop, not elected by the people, and although bishops are certainly aware of how much affirmation the parishioners give their pastor, the ultimate decision as to who is pastor and how long he remains at a given parish is that of the bishop (or the provincial, as the case may be). This policy avoids making the appointment a popularity contest; in its own way it reflects the sacramental nature of the Church, by affirming that leadership in the Church is not primarily a matter of competitive competence but of the grace of God. For centuries the Church had to fight to keep civil authorities and others from interfering with the appointments of bishops, and it still has that problem today in certain countries, such as China and Vietnam.

But more relevant for the mission of the Church everywhere is Paul's condemnation of party spirit. Catholic institutions have not avoided the secular pitfall of internecine rivalries, jealousies, turf fights, backbiting, and other sabotaging of the work of the Lord because of petty personal interests. An institution without any of this is rare indeed; an institution with a lot of it will eventually self-destruct. Many Christians need to learn that maturity means embracing the asceticism of the common good, being willing to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of the body, the Church.

The Gospel, Divine Paradox (1:18–25)

¹⁸The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written:

**“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the learning of the learned I will set aside.”**

²⁰Where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish? ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world did not come to know God through wisdom, it was the will of God through the foolishness of the proclamation

to save those who have faith. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

OT: Wis 13:1–2

NT: Matt 12:38; Acts 17:19–23; Rom 1:16, 19–20; 2 Cor 12:10

Catechism: Jesus' death on the cross, 619–23

Lectionary: St. Justin Martyr; St. Louis de Montfort; St. Paul of the Cross; St. Peter Chanel; Common of Missionaries; Common of Doctors of the Church; Anointing of the Sick; 'Mystery of the Holy Cross; 1:22–25: Third Sunday of Lent (Year B); 1:23–24: St. Mark

What will Paul do with this factious community? He will send them to the foot of the cross. He will do this in three ways: first, the message of the cross itself (1:18–25), then the reception of the message by the Corinthians (1:26–31), and finally, the cross in Paul's own method of preaching (2:1–5).

18

Before coming to Corinth, Paul stopped in Athens, where, according to Luke (Acts 17:22–34), he introduced his message to the Gentiles by appealing to the best of Greek culture and philosophy, hoping that his listeners would then be open to what was distinct about his message: that there will be a final judgment for everyone, and God has given proof of it by raising Jesus from the dead. Result? Except for a handful of converts, a scoffing rejection of his message. Luke of course does not give us a full picture of what Paul preached in Athens (he preached in the Jewish synagogue there too, 17:17). In his speech to the Gentile intellectuals on the Areopagus, Paul mentions only the resurrection, not the cross. This is Luke's report, not Paul's. Luke wants to stress the gospel's encounter with the self-sufficient cultured elite, who enjoyed being entertained by novelties (17:21) and expected Paul's show to be nothing more. Instead, Paul proclaimed a historical event that demanded conversion. They were ready neither for the thought of bodily resurrection nor for the cost of what it meant for their lives.

This lack of success of the "continuity" approach, whether at Athens or elsewhere, must have had an impact on Paul. There is continuity of the gospel with the best of human reason, yes, and Paul will say that in Rom 1:19. But there is also discontinuity, a break particularly with reason that has been wounded and turned in on itself by sin. The gospel collides with that so-called wisdom, and it is not only the resurrection but also the cross that meets it head-on. Arriving at Corinth, Paul resolved (2:2) to preach the "scandal" of the cross. Nothing appears so counter to Greek as well as Jewish thinking than the story of a man



Fig. 4. The Areopagus. It was here, just prior to his first visit to Corinth, that according to Acts 17:22–34 Paul told the Athenians that their "unknown God" was really Jesus Christ.

condemned as a criminal and subjected to the most painful and shameful death the Romans could devise. But, Paul realized, that's it! As Hamlet said, "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the †conscience of the King,"⁹ so Paul concludes: "It's the paradox that will win souls for the King!" **The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.** But for those **who are being saved**, it reveals a God of love who thrusts himself into humans' deepest fears, suffering, and death and leads them out of their deepest alienation: sin. That is why **it is the power of God.**

At this point one might ask: is not the resurrection also, even more so, the power of God? Does it not too reveal the love of God? Surely, and Paul would not have avoided mentioning it. But resurrection is a phenomenon that goes beyond our normal human experience. Suffering does not: it is the lot of every human being. That is why we understand the cross better than we understand the resurrection. It is love, sacrificial love to the extreme. And that is quite likely why Paul began his preaching in Corinth with the cross. He will not end there, for neither did God. But that is where God started too. What is at issue here is not so much the objective power of the cross to redeem humankind but especially its *converting* power and hence its importance for preaching.

9. Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 2.2.603–4.

The gospel is power. This will become the central theme of his Letter to the Romans: “The gospel . . . is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: for Jew first, and then Greek” (Rom 1:16). What does that mean? First of all, the gospel is not the kind of †rhetoric that seems to have so enthralled the Corinthians. It is news about an earthshaking event. When we heard and saw the fall of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, we did not expect the reporter to entertain us with rhetoric. Give us the facts! The gospel is first of all a witness to the death and resurrection of the Son of God. It is the report of an event that also calls for a decision. It is not mere ideas or †sophistry or philosophy. Second, Paul’s preaching of the gospel was accompanied by signs, miracles, and especially healings (Gal 3:1–5). Third and most important, the event of the cross led to changed lives: the power of the cross was not merely the past event of Calvary but also a present event, producing changes in the lives of the Corinthians.

Note that in the present situation both of those who are perishing and those being saved is progressive, suggesting that the end of either path, perdition or salvation, is something not yet attained. Thus one should neither be presumptuous of one’s salvation, as if it could never be lost, nor despairing of the salvation of those on the other path, for if they yield to God’s grace, their choice can be reversed.

From power Paul moves to wisdom, recalling the words of Isaiah (29:14) in the †Septuagint version: “**I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the learning of the learned I will set aside.**” In the text of Isaiah, the kingdom of Judah, faced with the menace of Assyria, was turning to Egypt for help. Egypt! The land that had enslaved the Israelites’ ancestors, the land from which their ancestors were glad to be free once for all. God promises that he will destroy the misled wisdom of those who supported this plan. Paul applies this text now to the pretenses of a wisdom closed to anything beyond its own horizon, a purely human “wisdom,” which God will destroy by the wisdom of the cross.

Where is the wise one? is addressed to the Greek. **Where is the scribe?** is addressed to the Jew. **Where is the debater of this age?** “Debater” would typify both, in the pejorative sense of a person constantly discussing and disputing more for the art than for the matter (the Greek for “debater,” *syzētētēs*, even sounds like chatter), what Paul elsewhere calls “fleshly wisdom” (2 Cor 1:12).¹⁰ This type of wisdom, **the wisdom of the world**, God has **made . . . foolish**, meaning either

10. “Fleshly wisdom” is the literal translation of the Greek. Other versions render: “human wisdom” (NAB), “earthly wisdom” (NRSV), “worldly wisdom” (NIV), “human reasoning” (NJB), and “without ulterior motives” (JB).

“addled” or shown to be foolish by his intervention, “like the needle of a compass maddened by the approach of a magnetic force too great.”¹¹ The cross is not human speculation but divine deed. Human wisdom cannot match the deed of God.

21 Up to this point the “wisdom of the world” has been presented in such an unfavorable light that one might think it totally depraved. Yet even prior to God’s revealing word in Israel and in the gospel, there was a wisdom offered by God, and it was not totally at odds with human wisdom, for the created universe itself speaks something of the nature of God—enough to make humans’ incomprehension and rejection of it a sin and not just a mistake. Thus it was God’s plan (his “plan A”) that **the world would come to know God through the light of human wisdom**, as Paul explains in his Letter to the Romans:

For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes and eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made. As a result, they have no excuse, for although they knew God they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks. Instead, they became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened. While claiming to be wise, they became fools. (1:19–22)

Hence, since plan A failed because of sin, it was the will of God through the foolishness of the proclamation to save those who have faith. Saint Thomas Aquinas comments:

Because of the vanity of man’s heart, man went astray from the right path of knowing God. . . . And therefore God led the faithful to a saving knowledge of himself through certain other things that are not found in the patterns of creation. . . . These other things are the facts of faith. God’s manner of acting is therefore like that of a teacher who, realizing that his meaning is not being grasped by his hearers, strives to use other words to explain what he has in his heart.¹²

22–23 That other way (plan B) is the way of paradox. The tendency of the **Jews** who opposed the ministry of Jesus and that of Paul (compare Matt 12:38–42; Luke 11:29–32), was to **demand signs**, miracles or spectacular deeds of power, **and Greeks look for wisdom**, something that will captivate but not disturb the cultured mind. Paul here shows his grasp of the psychology of both cultures, which made him an apt instrument for reaching both, but he does so by

11. C. Spicq, “1 Corinthians” in L. Pirot and A. Clamer, *La Sainte Bible* (Paris: Letouzery et Ané, 1949), 182.

12. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 55.

No Crucified Messiah

In St. Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*, written in the second century, Trypho says: "Our entire race awaits the Christ, and all the Scripture texts which you have quoted we too recognize as having been said about him. . . . But, as to the question of knowing whether the Christ should be dishonored unto crucifixion, we doubt, for in the law it is said of the crucified that he is accursed [Deut 21:23], and for the present I would not easily believe it. The Scriptures foretell a suffering Christ, evidently; but that this should involve a suffering cursed in the law, we should like to know whether you can demonstrate it."^a

a. Saint Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 89.1.2.



proclaiming something that goes counter to, because it goes beyond, the natural tastes of each: **Christ crucified**. Jews indeed looked for a Messiah, but the fact that Jesus died on the cross proved that he was not the glorious liberator they desired (see Living Tradition sidebar). For them, the cross was a **stumbling block**, an obstacle to faith.

The Greek understanding of time and history was not †eschatological: it did not have a conception of a goal toward which history was moving. "Time," Aristotle said, "is a kind of circle." Thus a religious founder should be one who more than any other would lead one to contemplate the order and harmony of the universe and lead humanity to a more harmonious subjection to its inevitability. This was at least the view of the Stoics, who were Paul's contemporaries and with whom he argued in Athens (Acts 17:18). In short, such a founder should be a philosopher. A founder who stands the world's values on its head by going to death on a cross—the fate of the criminal dregs of humanity—would indeed have no chance of winning the Greek, even less by claiming that the cross was followed by the resurrection of the body. As for the Jewish critic, the apparent failure of one who claimed to be the Messiah was proof that he was not. That is why it takes a special grace, a divine call, to read in the cross more than stupidity and weakness.

But **to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God**. Although Paul condemns rhetoric for rhetoric's sake, here he is a master of rhetoric. Unlike the sophists, who were more concerned with winning a debate by pleasing the audience than with truth in argumentation, the truly great rhetoricians like Cicero, Quintilian, and Seneca

24–25

The Power of the Cross

What was it about the cross that accounted for its power? We do not know how Paul explained his theology of the cross to the Corinthians when he first preached to them, but we can put together elements of his teaching from his letters, realizing that some of what he says later may be more than what he preached in Corinth. Justification comes through the “sacrifice of atonement” of the cross (Rom 3:24–25 NRSV); reconciliation with God and between Jew and Gentile comes through the cross (Eph 2:11–22); the debt of our sins is canceled and “the principalities and the powers” are defeated through the cross (Col 2:9–15). Christ has died, therefore all have died (2 Cor 5:14); the cross is the means by which Jesus cleansed and prepared his bride for himself (Eph 5:25–27); the cross is the means of our dying with Christ in baptism (Rom 6:3–4); it is Christ’s death on the cross that we proclaim in the Eucharist (1 Cor 11:26). Beyond these theological implications, Paul must have depicted the horrible suffering and shameful death, which testified to the personal love Jesus had for each one of the Corinthians: He “has loved me and given himself up for me” (Gal 2:20).

**BIBLICAL
BACKGROUND**



the Elder believed that beauty should be in the service of truth. Paul does not hesitate to use it in service of the gospel. **The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.** Out of concern for inclusive language and proper parallelism, the NAB sacrifices some of the rhetorical impact of verse 25, which reads literally in the Greek, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

Reflection and Application (1:18–25)

Truth and beauty. One who is searching for the truth today often has to wade through sound bites and hawking commercials to find it. Politicians spend fortunes to put the right spin on their campaigns, appealing to the emotions sometimes at the expense of the truth. A single image associated with a name can convey a lasting impression, which may ultimately distort reality. But a mature Christian will not be taken in. However, use of the media, modern technology, and the best of rhetoric and art in serving the truth of the gospel is certainly in keeping with effective evangelization. As the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has maintained, entry to the good and the true is through the gate of beauty.

Chrysostom on the Cross

Saint John Chrysostom, himself no slouch at rhetoric, preaching from the vantage point of the fourth century, when the cross had proved its efficacy through two centuries of persecution and the conversion of the empire, could say:

How greatly did Plato labor, endeavoring to show that the soul is immortal! Yet even as he came he went away, having spoken nothing with certainty, nor convinced any hearer. But the cross achieved persuasiveness by means of unlearned men. Yes, it convinced the whole world—and not about common things but it wrought its conviction speaking about God and the judgment of things to come. And of all men it made philosophers: the very rustics, the utterly unlearned. Behold how “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” and “the weakness stronger”! How stronger? Because it overran the whole world, and took all by force, and while men were endeavoring by tens of thousands to extinguish the name of the Crucified, the contrary came to pass: the name of the Crucified flourished and increased more and more; while the persecutors perished and wasted away. The living at war with the dead were powerless.^a

a. Saint Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 4.3.



Reason and faith. In our world today, after the extreme exaltation of human reason during the Enlightenment, a reaction called “postmodernism” has set in, with many doubting whether truth is objective at all—a fallacy known as relativism. Pope John Paul II confronted this issue in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (*Faith and Reason*), and Pope Benedict XVI has written and spoken extensively on the perils of relativism. It is important, therefore, not to interpret Paul as if he is rejecting all philosophy or theology that uses reason, enlightened by faith, to reflect on the meaning of revelation. He is speaking about the self-sufficiency of those who rely on reason alone—and reason distorted by sin and pride—to attain the fullness of truth.

The personal power of the cross. “To us who are being saved the cross is the power of God” (1:18). I have seen the power of the cross in many ways in my ministry, especially in its ability to bring the grace of forgiveness. When Rose Mary arrived for the summer program in theology at St. Mary’s University, I no longer recognized the bubbly personality I had known in previous summers. Her face was drawn in obvious grief and smiles were forced. After I preached about forgiveness at a retreat she attended, she came to see me.

“I can’t do it,” she said.

“What can’t you do?” I asked.

“Forgive. Six months ago my brother was killed in an automobile accident. He was my closest friend; I loved him dearly. But what makes it worse is that the man who was driving the car claimed—maybe for insurance purposes—that my brother was the driver. I’ve been filled with grief but also with anger and bitterness toward that man. How can I forgive him for what he has done?”

“Jesus can help us do things we can’t do by ourselves. You wouldn’t have come to see me if you didn’t want to do something about it. I’ve noticed how drained you are, and now I understand why.” After letting her pour out more of her grief, I suggested that she kneel and look at Jesus hanging on the cross. I led her through a meditation on his wounds, not merely his physical wounds but especially the wounds of his heart: put there on the cross by the betrayal of one of his own friends, his disciple of three years; rejected by the leaders of his people, denied by his chief disciple, abandoned by the Twelve, mocked and spit upon.

“And what does Jesus say?” I asked. “Father, forgive them. . . .’ Now ask Jesus to give you his heart, his forgiving heart. And when you are ready, call that man into this room in your imagination and say to him, ‘In the name of Jesus, I forgive you.’” It took a long time, but eventually she was able to do that. And when she stood up, she smiled, a genuine smile, for the first time that summer.

The cross had set her free. The power of the cross had set her free.

I have experienced the power of the cross in similar scenes many times in my ministry. The power of the cross!

A little postscript on Rose Mary. Later that evening I prayed that she would not take back the forgiveness she had given, and I dared to ask the Lord for some kind of confirming sign. Then I went to the kitchen for a glass of milk. It was a large kitchen, and on a distant shelf my eye caught “Rosemary” written on a box. There was smaller print under the name, so I moved closer and read the second line: “Leaves.” Then getting a little closer, I could make out the third line. The whole message read: “Rosemary Leaves Whole.”

And so it happened. I cut out the words and sent them to her. She has kept them until now, a reminder of the power of the cross.

The Receivers: Divine Paradox (1:26–31)

²⁶Consider your own calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

²⁷Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, ²⁸and God chose the