

Sermon File # 645

Scripture Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Sermon Title: *We Are People of the Cross*

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and

Sermon preached at International Baptist Church, Brussels, Belgium

Sunday morning 5 August 2012.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (2011).

Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org

All Rights Reserved.

We Are People of the Cross

During this final month of my ministry with you, I want to share with you from the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which contains some of his most important messages to the church, dealing with the issues of church unity (1:10-17), the pattern of the cruciform life (1:18-2:5), the essence of pastoral ministry (4:1-7), and the supreme importance of love (13:1-13). In the first verses of this letter, Paul addressed the issue of division in the Corinthian fellowship as having the greatest urgency of all the problems in this new church. He knew that the underlying cause in the problem of division was spiritual pride that caused the people to gravitate to a particular leader, and hold in contempt those who belonged to other groups.

Paul, in our text for today, gives one of his most eloquent, profound, and important statements in all of his letters. He says that a life-changing experience with the cross of Jesus is the beginning point for the solution to all the problems threatening the Corinthian fellowship. God's children must know and live by this message of the cross.

Follow as I read **1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5**

The church in first century Corinth met with problems similar to those faced today. In retrospect, the culture and mindset of ancient Corinth presaged that of western society today. It was a culture that worshiped its heroes, who represented style over substance. Their heroes were the orators and scholars that articulated the conventional wisdom of the day. Those who could make the best appearance and impression were the ones who became the leaders, whether their speech and conduct had integrity or not.

The Greek religious mentality was able to divorce, in good New Age fashion, spirituality from revealed truth, and conventionally accepted behavior from ethics and morals. A person could be considered spiritually elite and his teaching regarded as philosophically profound, even if his ethics and morals were promiscuous. The human body was immaterial, so one could do behaviorally whatever one desired, as long as his or her spirit was ennobled by philosophical wisdom.

Even some in the congregation of the church in Corinth were caught up in the spirit of the age, and fancied themselves as being people of a specially-endowed wisdom. They worshiped their oratorical heroes like today's westerners do our super athletes, musicians and cinematic stars. The Corinthians were enamored by their public speaking celebrities who seemed to have the most power and control over their audience.

Henry and Richard Blackaby address today's style over substance mindset in calling for the kind of character in leaders that moves others to follow:

"The issue of influence is critical, especially in Christian leadership. In people's attempts to enlist a following, some have resorted to developing the appearance of a leader rather than developing the character of a leader. It has never been easier to create the image of a leader than it is today. In contemporary society, someone who writes a book or earns a doctorate is immediately labeled an expert. Professional consultants provide 'reputation management' for aspiring leaders to create the perception that they are genuinely qualified to lead. With the right kind of help, people can generate a lot of hype, but they are really only pseudo leaders. They have image but no substance" (Blackaby, 87).

As a genuine servant leader, Paul is reminding these misled congregants that they had forgotten the message of the gospel, which is centered in the cross of Jesus. The message of the cross is the source and essence of real wisdom, and also is the only power that can change a human life and can unite their divided fellowship.

Paul says, first of all...

The cross reveals the wisdom of God

When Paul speaks of the cross he is referring to Christ crucified, and says “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” (18).

Confronting the wisdom of this age

The wisdom of God stands in stark contrast to the so-called wisdom of the fallen world that surrounded the Corinthians. Like the godless wisdom of the fallen world of the 21st century, the wisdom and philosophies of the world apart from Christ omit the creator and Sovereign God from their concepts, constructs and equations. The result is intellectual futility and resultant moral degeneration, as Paul makes clear also in his letter to the Romans (1:18-32). Apart from a knowledge of the truth that God reveals in general revelation (nature and conscience) and special revelation (Christ in Scripture), man’s wisdom leads to the ancient futility of the Greeks and the twenty-first century futility of the nihilists.

The disciple of Christ is one who is committed to the message of the cross of Jesus Christ as the reference point for the wisdom that the world so desperately needs. Whereas the world’s wisdom begins and ends with futility, the cross of Jesus Christ reveals the truth about a holy and loving God. The cross shows that Jesus, the crucified now risen Lord, is the Truth of God. To know and follow him is to come to grips with our sin, and to be in possession of a life-changing relationship with a holy yet forgiving God.

But to the fallen world, whether in first century Corinth, in Brussels or your home city today, the message of the cross is foolishness.

The Message paraphrases verse 18 saying...

"The Message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hell-bent on destruction..."

The Jews of the first century regarded the message of the cross as a stumbling block (verse 23). The message of the cross is that all religious effort to merit salvation by works is futile. Only by the undeserved gift of the cross can sinners be made right with holy God. So, the religious dismiss the cross as an offensive replacement for their religious efforts and a nullification of all their acquired merit. It's scandalous to the dutifully religious to think that pagan outsiders will get the same treatment and eternal reward as they.

The Geeks, the secular folks, regarded Paul's message of the cross as sheer silliness. How could a crucified Jew claim to be a savior? The philosophy of Paul's world centered on what specially-endowed and privileged Greeks could know and articulate with eloquence. The culturally elite dismissed Paul and his

preaching about the cross as “sheer silliness.” But Paul knew that the message of the cross was God’s revelation of true wisdom, and those who believe this message are given the true wisdom of God.

Conferring the wisdom of God

Through the word preached

The child of God is one whose life has been changed by the cross of Christ. Our being in a love relationship with God is because of the sheer mercy and grace of God extended from the cross on which Christ Jesus suffered and died for our sins. The cross is the greatest fact about our lives and the center of our witness and our message as followers of Christ. And we can expect our world to regard the message of the cross as foolishness in the dim light of our information-glutted yet unwise age. We know that apart from Christ’s atoning suffering and death on the cross we too would be without hope and without God in this world (Ephesians 2:12). If we would be faithful followers, the cross must be the standard for our life and message.

During the closing decades of the twentieth century, America saw the flourishing of megachurches that drew large crowds by the appeal of a therapeutic message and a self-help gospel of personal improvement and solutions to life’s problems. While many super churches have been faithfully proclaiming the message of the cross to the salvation of sinners, others have substituted the cross’s call to faith in Christ and repentance toward God with a market-driven appeal to whatever message makes people feel good about themselves. Robert Webber calls these “Wal-Mart churches” (The closest comparison I have seen here in Western Europe are Carrefour department stores) that provide what people want, and not necessarily what they need. The Millennial Generation, those born since 1980, is looking for something authentic in place of ersatz Christianity. They are looking back to traditions like the early church and the Reformation to find examples of believers who held to, lived by, and proclaimed the true gospel of the cross (Webber, 23ff).

The Holy Scriptures, containing the gospel of the cross, are able to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). The cross is the only way of salvation. If there could have been any other way, then the cup would have passed from the Savior. The way of the cross is the wisdom of God, telling us about our sin, and about a holy God who must punish sin. For the born-again, there is an entrance into the life in the Spirit.

In the power of the Spirit

For those to whom God gives grace to believe, there is also given us an understanding of his word and will. He shares with us his truth and gives us a new and spiritual understanding of his word.

Only those who know God through faith in the Christ of the cross and who understand his word are truly educated. It was in *The Abolition of Man* that CS Lewis wrote that modern education is more intent on destroying what is perceived to be wrong notions than it is in planting truth in the minds of students. The result has been a cultural wasteland.

I have known truly wise people who lacked formal education, yet who knew the Lord Jesus and the Bible. Though deficient in cultural sophistication, they were educated in the truth about God and themselves. They understand life and God's creation and purposes far more than even the most scholarly who don't know the wisdom of God. Perhaps this is what Paul means by the foolishness of God being wiser than man's wisdom.

The Apostle Paul understood the cross to be the *summum bonum* of his life and ministry, the supreme good in his life from which all other blessings were derived. Apart from the message and power of the cross Paul knew he would be eternally separated from God. That's why he was devoted to proclaim the message of the cross and to live by the power of the cross, and even boast in the cross, as the means by which God used to change his life forever (Galatians 6:14).

When Paul preached the message of the cross, he relied, not on "finesse of presentation, or logical persuasiveness...", but in the *message* itself, centered on Christ and his death for our sins, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, who convicts the human heart" (Mohrlang, 1930).

By grace alone can we as his servants live the life and proclaim the message that reveals God's wisdom as seen in the cross of Christ.

Also...

The Cross releases the work of God

To the called...

By God's gracious initiative, when the message of the cross is preached, he sends forth his convicting Spirit into the hearts of those he has chosen. This is why Paul determined to know nothing but the cross when he preached. This means he made the cross the central theme of his preaching. Contrary to what some commentators have speculated, Paul was not resolving to never again relate the message as he had done in Athens, where he visited prior to Corinth. He was not lamenting a failure in Athens and making a new resolve in Corinth. He was faithful and successful in Athens, despite a very challenging audience. His resolve in Corinth was his resolve everywhere, and that was to make the message of the cross central.

The follower of Christ is one for whom the message of the cross of Jesus Christ is central. Our understanding of the entire Bible, and our hermeneutic for preaching and teaching Scripture, must be centered in the cross of Christ. Not that every sermon or Sunday School lesson must be based on a passage from the Passion narratives, but our interpretation of all of Scripture must be against the backdrop of the cross.

The great preacher, CH Spurgeon, in one of his lectures to his students at The Pastor's College, admonished them in all of their sermons, whatever the text and theme, to "make a beeline to the cross."

This is what John Piper is saying to us today when he exhorts pastors and preachers to "live and preach justification by faith" (Piper, 17ff). Although we are to preach and teach a full and balanced diet of Scripture that covers all aspects of the life of faith, our messages are all based on the truth of the cross. No passage of Scripture or subject for teaching must ignore the grace of God received by faith in what Jesus did for us on the cross.

John Pollock's biography of Billy Graham, *Crusades*, relates a turning point in the now world famous evangelist's life. Young Graham was being influenced by Charles Templeton, a friend who was enamored by liberal theology, and wanted his friend Billy to take a broad view of Scripture and not "limit" himself to a narrow preaching of the simple gospel message.

Pollock relates that Billy went for a walk in the woods where he was leading a Bible conference in California, and confessed to God there were things in the Bible that he could not explain, yet he was going to, from that moment on, preach with authority the simple gospel, and trust that God's Word is perfectly true.

"So I went back and got my Bible, and I went out in the moonlight. And I got to a stump and put the Bible on the stump, and I knelt down, and said, 'Oh, God; I cannot prove certain things. I cannot answer some of the questions Chuck is raising and some of the people are raising, but I accept this Book by faith as the Word of God.'"

The world can be grateful that Billy Graham made this resolve, which was much like the resolve Paul made. We ought to go deep in our understanding of the Word, and even encourage great scholarship by evangelicals, yet our theme must ever remain the Cross, and we must keep our confidence in the power of the simple gospel of Christ crucified.

In verses 26-31 Paul reminds the Corinthian believers they have no reason to feel proud or to boast about their spiritual knowledge or giftedness. In the Greco-Roman world pride and boasting were considered virtues, and humility was a sign of weakness, a "dog virtue". Yet Paul reminds the church we belong to a

new community of the redeemed who all know we are debtors to the grace of God, and we find our strength in dependence on God.

...who confound the world

Paul says that not many of these Corinthians were socially or politically powerful, nor were they wealthy or of the nobility (26). There were some among them who were of the higher social strata, but Paul says "not many."

The 18th Century revival leader, Selina Hastings (1707-1791), the wealthy and aristocratic Countess of Huntingdon, targeted the upper classes with her evangelistic efforts, and was used of God greatly to lead many to faith. She said about this verse 20, that she was glad Paul included the letter "m", and that he said "not many" rather than "not any" of the wise, influential, and noble, or she and others in her social stratum who responded to the gospel would have been left out.

So, the gospel is universal to all who will believe and follow Jesus as Lord. We know from what Jesus said about the rich young ruler that it is particularly hard for the rich to let go of their riches and enter the kingdom. The wealthy and powerful find it more difficult to humbly trust Christ, even to admit of a need for God. And, Jesus announced he had come to give the gospel and deliverance to the poor, who were so neglected and often omitted from the realm of the temple.

The social composition of the church should be a sign of God's election of the foolish, the weak, the low, and despised. "We should look around our congregations on Sunday. If we see too many of the educated, the powerful, and the wealthy and too few of the poor, we should ask ourselves whether we have somehow gone astray from God's purpose, distorted the gospel of the cross, and fallen into captivity to human wisdom. Paul does not exactly condemn education, power, and wealth in this passage, but merely suggests that God has made it foolish and irrelevant and gathered a community around different norms" (Hayes, 38).

Paul certainly implies that it is through the apparent weakness of God's people that he draws the attention of this world to himself, this world that relies totally on human ability and strength. God uses weak people who readily boast in the Lord and not in themselves, and who through their total dependence on and worship of Almighty God bring glory to him (1 Corinthians 1:31; 2:4-5).

God's purpose is to glorify himself, to show himself strong in our lives and to the world. He does that more clearly when he does his great work through folks who are ordinary, and cannot point to self, and say "look what I did for God, with all my wealth, wisdom, learning and influence." Ordinary folks like us are to take the message of the cross to those in need, who recognize their need. I believe the poor and broken are the quickest to do so

...with converted lives

Our desire as God's people should be that we target the lost, throughout our spheres of influence with converted lives that give evidence of the cross. Paul knew that the only way the gospel would gain a hearing in a cross-despising culture would be through the lives of messengers of the Good News. God's being-converted people demonstrate the power of the cross and the converting power of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle to the Gentiles understood well that the way to the hearts of the religious Jews and the pagan Greeks was not by human wisdom, but by lives characterized by the cross and being remade into Christ's likeness.

In our day of "easy-believism," how crucial that the church examine itself, to be certain its members are truly in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). Are we glibly parroting the words of faith that Bonhoeffer dismissed as cheap grace? Or are we passing the test as people who are being supernaturally transformed by the Holy Spirit? Do our lives give evidence we have embraced the cross and have the wisdom of Christ, and that we have a share in his righteousness, holiness, and redemption?

As followers of Jesus, the cross is to be central in our lives. The late Henri Nouwen makes this disturbingly clear in his challenging little book, *The Wounded Healer*. Our rootless world is yearning for the healing grace of God, and we have the answer, not in theology, but in the person of Christ Jesus. We share, not out of our power, wealth, and worldly influence, but out of our own weakness and vulnerability. Just as the power of Christ comes from his surrender and death on the cross, so does the power of our life and witness come from our admission of weakness in ourselves. We have nothing to offer God or our neighbor anything of our own doing or making.

As never before I am gaining an understanding that as Jesus' disciples we are called to live a cruciform life, one that bears witness that we have entered into the pattern of Christ's life, the pattern of the cross and resurrection. In a real way, for those around us to see, Jesus is reliving his life through us. We are filling up the full measure of his suffering and death, but we are also giving evidence to the power of the resurrection (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:24).

Brad Kallenberg relates his experience of seeking a college teaching post wherein he was confronted with his helplessness. He noted how he was totally at the mercy of faculty search committees, and after months of being overlooked and/or rejected he saw the pattern of the cross being reenacted in his life. He identified with the death of Jesus, and sought to remain obedient to his lordship while he waited in a state of helplessness for God to resurrect his job prospects. While he waited for a faculty appointment "against all hope" Kallenberg said "I couldn't suppress a sadness in my spirit and a profound temptation to doubt myself. But I found solace in the hope that God intended the pattern of my life to

conform to the whole pattern of Jesus—to his life, death, and resurrection—not merely to his death. Although I could not engineer a happy outcome to my job search, it dawned on me that in trying to remain faithful to Jesus during the search, it was right to expect resurrection.

“I knew I could not predict in advance what resurrection would look like, but I wrote to a friend that it was fitting, on the basis of the story of Jesus’ resurrection, for me to hope that in ten years I would be able to look back and say, ‘Hah! Resurrection!’” (Kallenberg, 113).

As Paul says, we have been crucified with Christ. We have died to all claims and pretension based on our own ability and independent wisdom and knowledge. Yet we do live, and the life we now live in the flesh we live by the faith of the Son of God who loved us and who gave himself for us (Galatians 2:20). Because we have repented of sin and trusted in God, we are forgiven. We are in the sight of God perfectly accepted and righteous, as though we had never sinned. We are justified by grace through faith. This is the message of the cross.

All our life is now to be lived by the power and the pattern of the cross. We are in Christ and he is in us. We are to come after Jesus in a daily relationship of love, trust, and obedience. We must take up our cross of self-denial and spiritual discipline, and follow him. Then we lose our self-centered, self-seeking life, and find his life. As my college pastor, Dan Stone, says, Christ now lives his cross life in us. He lives his life through us, and his life as us (Stone and Smith, 67). And, you can be sure, if Christ is free to live his life in us his life/our lives will take the way of the cross. Then the resurrection power of God will take over and enable our lives to glorify him fully.

The Holy Spirit is at work drawing people to the Father the same way he drew them to himself when Jesus walked the earth. He draws them to the holy loving Savior who has always been the Christ of the cross. As the cross had its magnetic power when Jesus was lifted up at Calvary, so the cross still draws people through the faithful lives and words of his followers (John 12:32). Only when we are clothed with the presence of Christ himself will the cynical culture around us give a hearing to the gospel of the cross, which to them first appears as foolish as was the gospel to the Jews and Gentiles of the first century.

Os Guinness calls the Christian life that follows the pattern of Christ’s death and resurrection, of human weakness that is transformed into God’s powerful witness as “fool bearing” for God. God’s fools are those willing to follow the way of the cross, which often comes at the price of the world’s ridicule and even hostility. With good wit Guinness notes that “Talk of jesting and clowning sounds purely fun. Indeed, fool-bearing might be fun for followers of Christ if it were not deadly real and did not begin with a cross.” And Guinness adds that “foolbearing is essential to calling because it is the true way to count the cost of identifying with Jesus.” (Guinness, 217).

This “foolish” and weak way of the cross gets little favorable coverage by the “user friendly” gospel (Guinness) promulgated from many pulpits today.

DA Carson assesses the “signs and wonders” movement promulgated by John Wimber and the Vineyard Churches, which as a rule practice “power evangelism.” Although Carson’s comments are respectful toward Wimber’s understanding of the kingdom, he concludes that the foundational theology of this movement is inadequate. “He (Wimber) has tried to establish a theology of healing and power encounter without a theology of suffering; he has a theology of victory without an adequate theology of the cross.” Carson reminds us that God works triumphantly through human suffering and weakness to reveal his power and glory, and through our apparent defeat releases his grace and resurrection power (Carson, 124).

I know that in my life and ministry ten years ago, it was necessary for me to experience an amount of cross bearing and death to self-will. It was a time of coming to absolute surrender to and trust in Christ, believing that he would resurrect me in his time and in his own way.

As God’s people we must live the life of the cross and be armed with the message of the cross. It’s a hard one for the unbelieving world to understand and accept, but it’s also the only message that can change the world. We are entrusted with the message of the cross, which reveals God’s wisdom and releases his powerful work.

Paul says that his message and preaching about the cross “were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (2:4f).

As a college student I first read Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*, and was challenged by the message of this young theologian, who was executed by the Nazis just days before the Allies liberated Germany. Bonhoeffer called the spiritually dead churches of Germany to replace cheap grace, which failed to realize the cost of our redemption, with radical faith in and obedience to Christ, who calls us to follow him in a life patterned after Christ’s death and resurrection. The life of the believer is to take the form of Christ crucified. (James Sanders had a theology student who called cheap grace “sloppy agape”! See Lischer, 225).

“The image of God is the image of Christ crucified. It is to this image that the life of the disciples must be conformed: in other words, they must be conformed to his death (Phil. 3:10); Rom. 6:4). The Christian life is a life of crucifixion (Gal. 2:19). In baptism the form of Christ’s death is impressed upon his own. They are dead to the flesh and to sin, they are dead to the world, and the world is dead to them (Gal. 6:14). Anybody living in the strength of Christ’s baptism lives in the

strength of Christ's death. Their life is marked by daily dying in the war between the flesh and the spirit, and in the mortal agony the devil inflicts upon them day by day. This is the suffering of Christ which all his disciples on earth must undergo. A few, but only a few, of his followers are accounted worthy of the closest fellowship with his sufferings—the blessed martyrs. No other Christian is so closely identified with the form of Christ crucified. When Christians are exposed to public insult, when they suffer and die for his sake, Christ takes on visible form in his Church. Here we see the divine image created anew through the power of Christ crucified. But throughout the Christian life, from baptism to martyrdom, it is the same suffering and the same death" (Bonhoeffer, 302).

The cross of Christ is every believer's pattern for life and story to tell. May God help us to do it well.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Consider the following quotes:

We know full well that the marks of the passion, the wounds of the cross, are now marks of grace in the Body of the risen and glorified Christ. We know that the image of the Crucified lives henceforth in the glory of the eternal High Priest, who ever maketh intercession for us in Heaven. That Body, in which Christ had lived in the form of a servant, rose on Easter Day as a new Body, with heavenly form and radiance. But if we would have a share in that glory and radiance, we must first be conformed to the image of the Suffering Servant who was obedient to the death of the cross. If we would bear the image of his glory, we must first bear the image of his shame. There is no other way to recover the image we lost through the Fall.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In a controlling, calculating age, the world's ideal is always to be in charge, never to be caught out—in short, to be "nobody's fool." On the contrary, say the fools for Christ, in a world gone mad through its own worldly wisdom, true wisdom is to "go mad for God" even at the price of being hopelessly vulnerable—to be "everybody's fools."

Os Guinness

How would you interpret these quotes in the light of our text?

2. Read Luke 9:23-24 and Galatians 2:20, and ask yourself if you are seeking to live the cross life. What needs to change in order for you to live the cross life? Are you willing to make those changes now?

3. Can you relate an experience in your life, perhaps a current one, in which you identified closely with Christ in his suffering, death and resurrection (such as an experience that led you to renounce self-will, or to suffer an injustice) and then to trust God to give you grace and deliverance/"resurrection"?
4. Pray alone or with your family or small group that God might enable IBC Brussels to live the life of the cross and faithfully proclaim the message of the cross.

Sources quoted in this manuscript:

Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Touchstone, 1995)

DA Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*

Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*

Richard B Hays, *First Corinthians (Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*

Brad J Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age*

CS Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: or Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools*

Richard Lischer, *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching: Augustine to the Present*

Roger Mohrlang, *NLT Study Bible (New Living Translation, Second Edition)*, notes on 1 Corinthians

Henri JM Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society*

John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: a Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry*

John Pollock, *Crusades: 20 Years with Billy Graham*

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Lectures to His Students: a Condensation of the Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Pastor's College, Metropolitan Tabernacle*

Dan Stone and Greg Smith, *The Rest of the Gospel: when the partial Gospel has worn you out*

Robert E Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*

All Rights Reserved.