

The Word of the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

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Introduction

I think we can probably say that we've lived through the major fallout of Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, released earlier this year. I'm aware that most of you saw it, even if you are not regular moviegoers. Some of you may have seen it since it came out in VHS and CD formats. I still recommend it, if you are of a mind to see it. It is not a perfect depiction of its objective when compared to the narrative in the Gospels. There are certain Catholic overtones to it (Mel Gibson is a Catholic, after all!) Yet even with these fairly minor issues, the movie is the best I have ever seen of a reasonable depiction of the events that took place during the last twelve hours of Jesus' life prior to and during the crucifixion.

I was browsing through some of the reviews of *The Passion of the Christ* the other day and it struck me how varied they were.

There have been plenty of positive reviews, some neutral ones, and then, as those of us who are familiar with a secular society's aversion to the things of Christ might expect, a host of negative reviews. Here are a few quotes from some of the negative critics:

"No child should see this movie. Even adults are at risk... the most virulently anti-Semitic movie made since the German propaganda films of World War II... It is sickening, much more brutal than any 'Lethal Weapon.' ... The movie is sanctimonious in a way that impedes dramatic flow and limits characterizations to the saintly and the drooling vulgar... Is Gibson devout, or is he mad?"

Those quotes are from the New York Daily News Movie Reviews on the Web. The following are from New York Magazine, also on the Web:

"To say that it's the bloodiest story ever told is an understatement; rarely has so much red stuff flowed in any movie... *The Passion* is not about reconciliation... the engine of this movie is not passion but anger... The damage will be to those who come to believe that Gibson's crimson tide, with its jacked-up excruciations, is synonymous with true religious feeling."

And one more from the New York Times Website:

"... this film seems to arise less from love than from wrath, and to succeed more in assaulting the spirit than in uplifting it."

My interest in these negative reviews is not that I'm upset or surprised by them. Nor is my interest in any way an attempt to get you to see this movie if you haven't. That's entirely up to you.

I just think that the intense backlash to the things depicted in *The Passion of the Christ* goes deeper than a critic's objection to violence. I think that many of those who object would do so even if the violence depicted were not so graphic, because they object to the

idea of a man being God, suffering and dying on a wooden cross for their sins. They object to anything that portrays them as needing forgiveness or help from God. That's the thing that has caused so many to howl in disapproval. It reminds me of what someone once said after the gospel was presented to him privately. After hearing about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus he said, "If that's the best your God can do, then you serve a miserable, impotent God." Such hostile responses shouldn't surprise those of us who know the Bible. Long ago, an inspired Apostle of Jesus wrote of this very thing and this morning I'd like to look at what he said. Please join me in your Bibles at 1 Corinthians 1:18-31:18 For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, 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 cleverness of the clever I will set aside." 20 Where is the wise man? 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 through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; 27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, 28 and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, 29 that no man should boast before God. 30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, 31 that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

I could easily preach for a week of Sundays from this passage because it says so much. For now though, I will confine my thoughts to just three points I'd like you to see. The first is this:

1. The Word of the Cross is the Power of God.

This idea of God's Son dying on a wooden cross for the sins of man that so many find repulsive and offensive in polite social circles is the very thing that holds the power of God. Paul says just that in verse 18 of our text: "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness [Gk. MORIA, from which we get our English word "moronic"] but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

Then again, in verses 22-23 he says: "For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified...."

"We preach Christ crucified." What so many, then and now, find repulsive and unbelievable (and even "moronic") about true Christianity, the proposition that God would actually come to earth and die on a wooden cross for the sins of men, is the very thing that those true to the word of God are supposed to preach! This message is the embodiment of the power of God. Yet is it getting done today? In many places you won't hear it preached for the very reasons I'm going to lay out in this sermon.

I received an email just this past week that says it fairly well. This is from popular Creationist radio speaker, Ken Ham. I quote it here so you might know that I'm not the only one who recognizes this problem:

"Some churches feel that all they have to do is address the social needs of their people, instead of teaching them theology and what the Bible says. Other churches claim that telling people they're sinners is harmful because it gives them 'a poor self image.' Some churches have shortened sermons and concentrated on dramas in order to entertain people. Other churches make political issues of everything.

And, there are churches today that no longer preach from the Bible because it's 'too old-fashioned' and not 'relevant' anymore. Other churches just preach on topics to make people feel good about themselves, not daring to say anything that might make them feel uncomfortable with their lifestyle.

All of these churches have lost sight of the importance of teaching their people what the Bible has to say about our God, our origins, sin and its consequences, and thus the real way to overcome their problems."

Does that sound to you like something I have said before?

I want to say this kindly, but there is simply no way for me to take the sharp edge off of it, so I'll just say it. The central issue of what the Bible says about our God, my friends, is that every man and woman on this earth is a sinner and that sin will condemn them to hell for eternity. God's answer to this everlastingly important issue is embodied in a single concept: the cross of

Jesus Christ. God with us, God in the flesh, God hanging on, suffering on, and dying on a wooden cross to bear the penalty for the sins of men and women, including you and me – this is the message that men reject and this is the message that is the central issue in all God's dealings with man.

But with the trends on some places to focus on other things these days, are we sure we are right to conclude that something so repulsive as the account of the death of Christ on a wooden cross is supposed to be the center of our message and the most important message of the church? Isn't it a bit of a strange message?

That question leads me to my second point:

2. The Word of the Cross is a Paradox.

A paradox is something that seems contradictory but is actually true. A paradoxical statement frequently conflicts with what is expected.

Look again at our text. Verses 21-25 says, 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Paul's words in verse 21, "in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God," are probably a reference to man's history with regard to Him.

Early on the Bible's story of man, when God was more widely known and acknowledged, the descendants of Adam made a conscious and arrogant decision to turn away from what they knew of their Creator and pursue their own ways.

They didn't need a God who told them what to do. So they turned away from him to go it on their own. But it didn't lift them up. It took them in the opposite direction - down - away from the good things of God - until finally, in the days before the flood, their thoughts were so continually wicked that God destroyed them. Their arrogant rebellion culminated in a situation where only eight people were saved and the rest of the world's population was wiped out by water. The record of man's ability to live with his holy Creator before the flood was dismal.

God started again with Noah, his family, and their descendants. But soon they, too, turned away from their Creator, arrogantly preferring their own ways over His. During that time God made a covenant with one godly man, Abraham, who still acknowledged the rightful place of God the Creator. Through the descendants of this man, Abraham, God would raise up a nation that would serve Him and hold Him in His rightful place. But that nation, too, soon found other things to interest them, and other ways to do things fashioned after their own desires. Through a 1500 year-long, on-again-off-again history, they ultimately turned arrogantly away from their Creator, too, until God finally cut them off and destroyed their nation. Again, the record of man's ability to live with his holy Creator after the flood was dismal.

Then God did what He had planned since before the foundation of the world. He sent His Son into the world on a mission that would culminate in the most cruel, degrading, humiliating act that man could ever perpetrate - Jesus, the Son of God, hung on a wooden cross to die. They thought that they were rid of Him when he was dead. They thought that His preaching and calling men back to God was silenced. Little did they know that their cruel act was exactly what God had planned all along - an ultimate act of love that would call the humble among men into an eternal relationship with Him while at the same time justly condemning rebellious man and his arrogance for an eternity of just what he wanted - life without God. Please hear me on this: If men do not want their Creator in this life, they will not have Him in the next!

The writers of the New Testament repeated the paradox often in their teaching.

One way they put it was by saying:

"The stone which the builders rejected, this became the very corner stone."

In our text in 1 Corinthians we have two groups of people represented as seeking God on their own terms: The Jew and the Gentile (or "Greek" as Paul puts it.)

Each had his own agenda for finding God on his terms. The arrogant, self-serving Jew of Paul's day says, "I want a God who is powerful, able to perform great and amazing signs and wonders and lead me and my nation to world dominance. If God comes along on those terms, I'll accept Him."

"...the Jew asks for signs," Paul says in verse 22 The arrogant, self-serving Greek or Gentile of Paul's day, in love with philosophy and the wisdom of the great men of the world says, "I want a God who is so wise and amazing that He can compete on the level of all of the wisdom of man through the ages."

"...the Greeks search for wisdom," Paul says also in verse 22.

So what did these sign seeking, wisdom seeking men who wanted God on their own terms get from God? How did He present Himself? Was He constrained to live up to their expectations?

They got a humble servant with a simple righteousness who refused to exalt Himself and who exposed their arrogant and self-serving ways. They got Jesus.

They didn't like that. He couldn't be God! God wouldn't allow Himself to be abused by men! Surely, if God were to come and present Himself, He would meet their expectations. So they killed Him, thinking that they were rid of Him, not knowing that they were assisting in making a way of redemption for the humble that they so loved to scorn.

Verses 22-24 again:22 For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Men expect God to come impressing them with great strength in signs and wonders or wowing them with wisdom that rivals the greatest thinking among men through the ages. Instead He shows up in a stable, grows up in a despised city, is scorned and rejected by the vast majority of those in the know. He is an instant hit with the common man but those stuck on themselves cannot abide Him for even a minute.

The longer I live and study the Bible, the more I come to the simple and understandable conclusion that God doesn't want to spend eternity with a bunch of people who think they don't need Him and acknowledge that they don't want Him except on their terms. That's why we preach Christ crucified.

But how is it that such a thing of revulsion, such a hideous and offensive account as God on a wooden cross, could be the very center of Christianity and the most important message of the church? If we preach that message, won't it drive people away who might otherwise become church members? And shouldn't we somehow water it down just a bit - take the edge off, so to speak - for the sake of reaching out to more people?

That brings me to my third point:

3. The Word of the Cross is that God did this on Purpose.

God's paradoxical way of doing things was intentional. By that I mean that God didn't place His most important communication with man in the repulsive message of the cross by mistake. He did exactly what He intended to do for the very reason He intended it. The message of the cross as the center of Christianity and that's just the way God wants it.

Here is how Paul put it in verses 27-29:27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, 28 and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, 29 that no man should boast before God.

The operative word in these verses is "chosen." God has "chosen" to do it the way He has done it. He didn't choose a humble approach because of impotence. He didn't choose a way that looks "foolish" to arrogant men because he had no other choice. He purposely chose the cross in order to shame the so-called "wise" among men. How will this shame the wise? When they, for all their accumulated self-absorbed "wisdom" and arrogance, are turned away from eternity with God, they will be ashamed while those whom they have hated and scorned will be honored.

A clear illustration of this is seen in the words of Jesus in Matthew 21:31 to a group of Jewish leaders who had come to demand an explanation for His teaching and miracles. In

their arrogance, they demanded, "Who gave you the authority to teach these things?" In essence, these little tin horn leaders were saying to God on earth, "What gives you the right to speak to us this way?" (Indeed!) He responded with these words: "Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you."

A crooked tax collector or a prostitute from the street who repents and humbles himself or herself to accept the benefits of what Jesus did on the cross stands a far greater chance of getting into heaven than the most learned, powerful religious leader among men who will not humble himself! And most in their exalted positions won't humble themselves. Paul says in verse 26 of our text: 26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble...."Just common, ordinary, humble folks in the kingdom, for the most part.

Don't misunderstand. It's not their professional position or status that keeps those of higher station out of the kingdom. It's their attitude. If they're going to have God in their life, they want Him on their terms. He must not usurp or hamper their exalted position. He must not embarrass them in their places of social status by bringing up their sins. Jesus of Nazareth, for most of them, just doesn't fit the bill.

So in modern times, when some filmmaker with a degree of human clout puts it out there anyway, in such a way that they can't arrogantly brush it away without notice, they howl in protest. That's what we're seeing today.

Conclusion

George Bennard has said it so well in his hymn. I'll close on this thought:

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.
O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above
To bear it to dark Calvary.
So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.