



## A Post Tenebras Lux Sunday Sermon...

### The Way of Wisdom...

### 1 Corinthians 2:1-7

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 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. <sup>2</sup> For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, <sup>4</sup> and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, <sup>5</sup> that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. <sup>6</sup> Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. <sup>7</sup> But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

Father, we come to you this morning confessing to you our great need. Father we need and we desire that the Holy Spirit come now and take the things of Christ and make them real to our hearts...to come and take the written word and as its true author and therefore its infallible teacher to instruct us in the truth of your Son. Open the book we pray to see what you have accomplished on our behalf, in Christ, in whose name, we pray, Amen.

There is a famous piece of graffiti found on a wall near the Palatine Hill in Rome that dates back to the first or second century AD and has become quite famous historically. It is known as the **“Alexamenos Graffito”**.<sup>1</sup> It shows a man hanging on a cross with another man standing nearby looking up to the man on the cross holding up his hands in adoration and love. Beneath the two figures there is a almost childish, roughly scratched caption that reads, **“Alexamenos worships his God.”**

Now you might be thinking, **“Isn’t it wonderful that God has providentially preserved some ancient artisan’s perception of Christianity in first-century Rome.”** If you said that, you would be right. This particular piece of graffiti certainly expresses how the first century viewed Christianity.

On the other hand you may have been thinking, **“I bet the artist sketched that piece of graffiti to honor some Christian in the act of worshipping the crucified Christ.”** If you said that, you would have been wrong, definitely wrong. That was not why it was drawn. You see I left out one small detail. In the picture, the man on the cross is drawn with the head of a donkey.

Now a few scholars have argued that that shows that ancient Romans were confused about Christianity. They argue that the first century Romans may have thought that Christians worshipped a god who

was half man and half animal. But, of course, that's not what is going on at all. You don't have to read very many ancient Roman comedies to realize that they were just as vile and profane in their mockeries and sacrilege as many modern comedians are today. They even used some of the same contemptuous expressions we use today and one of those was to charge a man with buffoonery by calling him a "**mule, a donkey or an ass**".<sup>2</sup> You see the person who drew the sketch was trying to say that he thought both the worshipper and the one being worshipped were fools. He was saying that he thought the whole idea of a crucified god was idiotic. You see the artist used his graffiti to communicate his contempt towards the cross. He wanted to castigate both Christians and Christianity, and so he blasphemed our Lord by saying that the whole idea of Christianity was stupid and empty-headed. He wanted to end Christian adoration by mocking us into shame.

Now, whenever I think about that, my mind turns to Romans 1:16-17.

<sup>NIV</sup> **Romans 1:16**...I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. <sup>17</sup> For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

Of course when I read that majestic declaration my mind returns to this same piece of graffiti. I suspect that today, some twenty centuries after drawing it...the artist that did so...has had ample time to reflect

on just how wrong he was and I suspect that as each new day dawns, he wishes God would send an earthquake, a fire, a flood, or even some modern graffitist with a can of spray paint to smash to pieces or at least cover over the outline of the image he wishes to God he had never drawn. And I suspect that in another place far away as one glorious day of worship in heaven turns to another, the Lord Jesus Himself turns to the beaming face of Alexamenos and asks, **“What do you think? Should I destroy that contemptible piece that mocks us both?”** And I suspect that Alexamenos answers, **“Lord, do whatever pleases you. It doesn’t matter to me. For my part, O Lord...I am still unashamed.”**

You see Christians, most mature Christians understand the contempt with which the world views them and do not care. Still sometimes Christians can grow timid...sometimes, they can be a bit fainthearted about their faith...and the reason for that is that sometimes they are just a bit ashamed. It’s not that they don’t believe...rather it’s that the mockery of the world is hard to tune out. They know what the culture says and believes because the culture is so persistent. But it is not just the culture. Sometimes pastors and teachers inadvertently cause Christians to grow timid. And it’s certainly not because we don’t believe but rather because we take a little too seriously the fact that the world thinks we are pretty naïve, pretty unsophisticated, too simpleminded...that we are not really all that hip...not really all that

wise...sometimes there is part of that that if we were completely honest we would have to admit bothers us.

That is why my subject this morning is the wisdom of God or rather reclaiming the wisdom of God for our church, for our family and for ourselves. I want to draw my thoughts from 1 Corinthians 2:1-7.

Now, typically when I teach or preach, I try to go straight through biblical books. I do that because I want to keep the passage I'm dealing with in its proper context. So I'd like to take just a moment and set the context for what is going on in 1 Corinthians 2 so you can appreciate the nature of Paul's argument.

The city of Corinth was located on a narrow four and half mile wide isthmus right in the middle of the busiest trade route in the ancient world. Because of its location, it saved about two months sailing time in the winter. Boats would dock on one side of Corinth offload their cargo, have it haul it across the narrow isthmus and reload it on the other side. Now the passage of so many goods and people across the narrow strip at Corinth made it a very, very wealthy city<sup>3</sup>. And because of the wealth that passed through the place Corinth provided all kinds of entertainment. There were athletic contests and theaters. There were plenty of bars and brothels. Corinth was notorious in the ancient world for its fixation with the erotic.

The ancient historian Strabo even warned travelers: "**Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth.**"<sup>4</sup>

Anyway, Corinth was a bustling, thriving raucous sort of seaport Las Vegas...but it was also strangely enough a very religious city. There were lots of temples and places to worship to the gods of Rome and all the mysterious gods of the east.

A man could find just about whatever he wanted in Corinth.

I'm sure some of that figured into Paul's decision to visit Corinth on his second missionary journey. Paul, you see, would have known all about Corinth...he would have known about how many visitors passed through Corinth and he would have known intuitively that planting a church in Corinth would wind up spreading the gospel far and wide.<sup>5</sup>

Anyway, on his second missionary journey Paul visited Corinth for some eighteen months. And there in the midst of its pagan idolatry and extraordinary licentiousness, the Spirit of God caused people, many people, to respond to the gospel.

Now after Paul left, divisions sprang up in Corinth and almost all of them were formed around one famous personality or another. Now in the midst of all those divisions at least one of the groups involved

went after Paul and his teaching. And that group apparently argued was that Paul was much too simplistic and was in fact withholding his more mature instruction or teaching...his **“good stuff”** from the Corinthians.

Imagine that...the idea that Paul was a bit too simplistic and that he was withholding the deep stuff.

I can almost guarantee you that each of the contending groups was saying to the other groups, **“We possess genuine wisdom on this issue...not you.”** And I can just imagine that each group responded, **“Well of course you do possess some wisdom...superficial to be sure but our wisdom is the true wisdom.”**

Now the fact that the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians are largely concerned with the divisions that existed at Corinth tells us that the gist of the conflict concerned who was truly wise and who was not. In other words, the argument in Corinth had degraded into contest over who really possessed true wisdom...was it Paul, Apollos, or Peter.<sup>6</sup> Anyway in 1 Corinthians 2, Paul responds to the charge that his teaching lacked wisdom.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 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.

Now when Paul uses the words **“lofty speech”** he is talking about the style with which he preached. What he says is, **“I was not very stylish.”** On the other hand, when he refers to **“wisdom”** he is referring to the content of his message. And what he says pretty plainly is that **“I was not wise in terms of worldly wisdom. I was not very hip.”**

Paul, it seems, picks up his critics terms and turns them against them in the light of Christ crucified. Those who said they were seeking wisdom may have sounded like they were being noble but what they really wanted was a sort of mastery over each other. So they were dividing the body of Christ by their competition of both **“how”** and **“what”** they preached.

But Paul refused to play along. He wouldn't have anything to do with that sort of thing. He made it a point not to use a clever style or clever arguments when he preached the gospel. But his message did have content...genuine content. In fact, what he preached was the testimony of God and that testimony concerned the atoning work of Christ. In verse two, he explains what he preached.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:2**...For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Paul didn't attempt to distinguish himself in either eloquence or in wisdom because he determined in advance not to know anything but

Christ and him crucified. That doesn't mean that Paul went suddenly stupid or forgot everything he knew. Rather it meant that he had the gospel, with its crucified Messiah as his chief focus and passion.

Now after explaining the content of his message Paul focuses on how he presented the gospel. He emphasizes that method was not based on any sort of personal dynamic or even self-confidence, but on something else altogether.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:3...** And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, <sup>4</sup> and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

The weakness here is not bodily weakness. Paul does talk about that elsewhere but here he means his state of mind. When he preached to them he didn't depend upon his own strength or wisdom, but was burdened by a sense of weakness and insufficiency. Paul says he was out of his depth. His message and his preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom.

There are two important points to gather from this passage. First, his message was the same in private and in public. Secondly, he didn't resort to cleverness in either place. Now I should add that Paul was educated, very educated. He was well read and that he was schooled in both the rigors of Judaism and ancient literature and poetry. He

was equally at home in both the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament...and he quoted secular writers with ease. Paul spoke at least four languages...probably seven. But for Paul, all that receded into the shadows on the dusty road outside Damascus when he came face to face with the risen Christ. There Paul laid aside his worldly wisdom and picked up the foolish message of Christ crucified.

Now it's impossible to think about Paul's statement here in 1 Corinthians 2 without thinking about the current state of the church in evangelicalism today. Today, the church longs to be considered wise. You don't have to look at many sermon titles in the newspaper, or many billboards outside of churches to see there is an innate desire to be clever. And it's the same if you watch television. There you see men strut across their stages desperate to reveal the glory of their wisdom and knowledge. But Paul refused to do that and I think perhaps we ought to refuse to do so as well.

You see Paul makes it clear that he didn't want to demonstrate earthly wisdom or cleverness but rather the power of the Holy Spirit. And Paul had a reason for not using earthly wisdom or cleverness. He wanted the Corinthians to realize that they had not been tricked by any sort of earthly cleverness.

**ESV 1 Corinthians 2:5...**that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Paul did not want the Corinthians to rest in his words or his wisdom but in the power of the cross. In spite of all that, however, the Corinthians were captivated by the idea of wisdom and had actually begun to resent Paul for withholding the deeper aspects of the gospel.

And you can see why. You see in the ancient world, most teachers had two tracks of instruction. First, they taught publicly to attract students. Such teaching was considered rudimentary; it was reserved for novices. It was only after students made a commitment to their teachers both in time and money that the teacher revealed his secret knowledge, his deeper thought. That seems to be the charge that was being made against Paul and you get a sense of how he despised that kind of thinking when he says, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

Still, Paul must have really gotten their attention in verse 6.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:6**...Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. <sup>7</sup> But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

Now it sounds like Paul is saying, "**When I am among the mature, I speak about the good stuff. But when I was with you I could not.**"

But the point Paul is making is just the opposite. What Paul is actually saying is that the message that he preached remained the same all the time. He is saying that when he is among mature people they

understand the wisdom of God as it is revealed in the preaching of the cross; it is the immature that think that there is another message, a better message. He is not saying, **“When I am among the mature, I speak about the good stuff. But when I was with you I could not.”** What he is actually saying is, **“I preach Christ and Him crucified and when I am among the mature, they recognize it as the wisdom of God that it actually is. But you did not.”**

I think that truth ought to have startling ramifications for the church in America today and for our own church here at Grace. At some point or another all of you will be asked to pick leaders in our church or even to fill a position yourself. What I want you to see is that the Pauline standard for doing that is a lot different than the standard that the world uses. For Paul the test of being mature is the recognition of God’s wisdom as it is revealed in the cross. It is an appreciation of what God actually accomplished in the atonement. But today, churches tend to pick leaders for other kinds of reasons. They tend to pick them for their skills in child rearing, or their skills in business. They pick them for their listening skills or even their skills in conflict resolution. And all of those things are good things, as are things like a man’s ability to express himself, or to pray, or to exercise self-discipline in areas like prayer or Bible study. But for Paul, the obvious sign of maturity for a Christian is an understanding of the wisdom of God as it is revealed in the cross of Christ.

Maturity, biblical wisdom, is objectively related to how one understands the atonement and there lies the problem that we face. In modern evangelical Christianity, there is an apparent distaste for things like the atonement. Oh we bring it out at Easter but the rest of the time we put it away because we fear the response we'll get. Listen to Gene Veith.

Today, the language of rational assent is replaced by the language of aesthetics. Instead of saying "I agree with what that church teaches," people say, "I like that church." Instead of saying, "I believe in Jesus," people say, "I like Jesus." Of course, they usually do not "like" the Bible's teachings on sin, Hell, and judgment. What they do not like, they do not believe.<sup>7</sup>

But for Paul it was just the opposite. For Paul the cross of Christ...Christ's atoning death is wisdom, true wisdom. But it is not the wisdom of the world.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:6**...Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. <sup>7</sup> But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

In spite of all that, it seems that the Corinthians were still enamored with the wisdom of this world. They wanted Paul to give them the good stuff like the world offered. They wanted their secret wisdom because the world had a secret wisdom so Paul tells them that the good stuff has already been revealed to them. The problem was not

with the message; the problem was with the Corinthians. They were too much like the world.

I wanted to make that point because if you listen to much of the teaching done in evangelicalism today you may get a sense that real wisdom includes things like a private word of knowledge, or the ability to laugh like an idiot, or bark like a dog. It may include a hidden understanding of the exact time of Jesus' return or even practical instruction for making rivers of wealth. But that's not what Paul thought. For Paul the wisdom of God is revealed in Christ and Him crucified...that's his point at the beginning of chapter two and his throughout the rest of the chapter.

Now, I want us to meditate on that for a moment. It has to be a concern for any of us that ever have the opportunity to speak publicly or stand before a classroom. There is something intrinsic in the heart of man that so longs for acceptance that we will sometimes focus more on the approval of the audience than on the approval of God. It is much too easy to spend hours on the turn of a phrase and only minutes making sure that we are transfixed on the cross. I am reminded of the quote that I heard my friend Larry Danner used dozens of times in the twenty years I worked with him...a quote he picked up from James Denney...

No man can at the same time show himself to be clever and Jesus as mighty to save.

Now, I am not a proponent of sloppiness with regard to preparation, but what we are seeing in the world today is an all out concession on the part of the church to worldly wisdom. Listen to James Montgomery Boice:

And as a result or consequence of that lack of a well-defined theology, we find evangelicals buying into all of the world's ways of doing things. I sometimes say what you've got in the evangelical church today is what a generation ago the liberal church was guilty of. They were guilty of pursuing the world's theology, the world's wisdom, and the world's agenda, using the world's methods.<sup>8</sup>

But what I want to remind you is that the wisdom of God is found in the cross of Christ. You can be a great academic without being biblically wise. You see the cross has to permeate our minds and souls to the degree that everything we teach and think and do is affected by it and its message. We have to teach and evangelize and do works of mercy and whatever else we do through the cross colored lenses.

But when we do what we are called to do it will relieve us of ten thousand temporal concerns or worries. I was talking to someone the other night about a man that once went to visit the great Martin Luther in Wittenberg. Now there was never a bigger obsessive compulsive than Luther. Anyway the man got into town late at night

and went straight to the local inn to try to find a room. He went into eat supper and he thought he noticed a man that looked like Luther back in the corner drinking a beer. Eventually, he could restrain himself any longer and went over to the table where Luther and his protégé Melanchthon were indeed drinking a beer. “Dr. Luther” the man asked, “it’s a Sunday night what are you doing here?”

Luther turned to the man and smiled and said, “Not much, we’re letting the word do its work.”

Now I ought to add that there is one other thing that happens when we view the world through cross colored lenses. We tend to forget about who gets the credit when the word rightly proclaimed. The reason for that is because the message is infinitely more important than the messenger. It won’t matter if it’s Kyle or me or Doug or Andrew or someone else that wins someone to the Lord or is given a public forum to proclaim the gospel and the reason it won’t matter to any of us is because them won’t matter to him as long as the cross of Christ, the wisdom of God, is placarded for everyone to see.

Let me close and see if I can explain that by relating a story I once heard Dr. Criswell, the former pastor of First Baptist Dallas, tell. Dr. Criswell was traveling with his wife in a rural part of New Mexico. It was a Sunday night and they were looking for a place to go to church when they stumbled on a Southern Baptist church located in a

dilapidated old adobe building. Dr. Criswell entered a few minutes before the evening service started and the pastor recognized him immediately. Of course, he was only natural that he would. Dr. Criswell was president of the Southern Baptist Convention at the time. It would be a little like having R.C. Sproul just drop into one of our church services. Anyway, the pastor became so agitated because of the presence of this famous man of God that he finally broke down and went to Dr. Criswell in tears.

**“Dr. Criswell,” he sobbed. “I just cannot preach with you here. I am too self-conscious of my inadequacies. Won’t you take the pulpit? It would be such a blessing to the people to hear someone great.”**

Dr. Criswell said his heart was melted.

**“Brother”, he asked, “how long have you been preaching the gospel here?”**

The man looked around at the 10 or 15 people sitting in ancient chairs and swallowed and said, **“I’ve been here almost forty years.”**

Dr. Criswell choking back tears said, **“Brother, It isn’t me and it isn’t you. It is the Christ that we preach that is great. Of course, it would be an honor to preach for your people, but the real honor would be for me to hear one of God’s faithful servants stand up with tears**

**and humility of heart and proclaim the gospel that has kept him going all these years.”**

Dr. Criswell said the man regained his composure and went up before the people to preach one of the best messages he had ever heard. Later Dr. Criswell invited him to First Baptist to preach to his own congregation. Imagine preaching to 10 or 15 people one week and 10 or 15 thousand the next. But you know it isn't really about the numbers, or even about us, it is about Christ and Him crucified and the reason it is about that my brothers and sisters is because that is the wisdom of God. Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987; reprint 1993), 560.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 561.

<sup>3</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Harper & Row Publishers: New York, 1968), 1. The term “wealthy Corinth” appears as early as Homer.

<sup>4</sup> **Strabo, *Geography* (eds. H.C. Hamilton, Esq., W. Falconer, M.A.) 8.6.20.**

<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1975), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce, 24.

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article\\_Display\\_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID561416%7CCIID1415424,00.html](http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID561416%7CCIID1415424,00.html)

<sup>8</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace? Rediscovering ines that Shook the World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2001), pp. 20-29.