

‘The Folly of What We Preach’ Reflections on 1 Corinthians 2:1–5

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Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 2:1–2 has frequently been used to justify what is sometimes called ‘the simple gospel’. The Apostle says, ‘when I came to you I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified...’

The idea behind this is that everyone needs to hear the ‘ABC of the gospel’, so we should avoid being sidetracked. ‘Sharing the gospel’ means telling the person we are talking to that (a) he/she is a sinner; (b) Jesus is the Saviour we all need; and (c) he/she needs to repent and accept this message. By implication, philosophical or apologetic concerns are a waste of time. ‘The Scriptures are like a lion in a cage,’ a leading evangelical minister once said to me, ‘so all we need to do is let it out of the cage. The gospel is sufficient by itself. We simply let it roar’.

Now I want to suggest that this attitude is a complete misrepresentation of what Paul is saying here. So let us start with the two familiar ways people try to justify it:

First, *some take 1 Corinthians 1:17ff as a ‘gloss’ on Acts 17*. They argue that when Paul was in Athens, he misguidedly got into intellectual debate with the philosophers. Then he went on to Corinth and recognised and admitted his mistake. In other words, he should have stuck with ‘Jesus and him crucified’ — and nothing more.

Second, *some take Paul to be saying that the gospel is ‘foolish’*. In other words, we should not engage in discussion or argument because it does not make sense. Our mandate is to preach and proclaim. The ABC of the gospel reaches people in their *hearts* — the *mind* does not come into it.

I want to argue that Paul could not possibly have been saying this because elsewhere in the New Testament his approach is the very opposite: the truth about the existence and nature of God, he says, is evident in everything that surrounds us in creation; therefore, those who deny this are being fools. They are ‘without excuse’ (Rom 1:18ff). Moving to Christ’s historical salvation, the same thing applies. Paul says at one point, ‘you know this did not happen in a corner’ (Acts 26:26). His conclusion is that the only way people can avoid these realities is by ‘suppressing the



truth'.¹ He challenges them with the evident truth and is happy to discuss their doubts and questions; while in Ephesus, he did so daily and publicly for two years (Acts 19: 8–10). In short, Paul is quite clear that Christianity is objectively true and not merely, as people say today, 'true for you but not true for me'. He is not interested in getting people to 'have a religious experience'. He calls them to 'obey the truth' (Gal. 5:5).

For clarity's sake, we need to emphasise that none of this involves a negation of 'experience'. An individual's intellectual objections *can be* an excuse. But Paul did not decide ahead of time who were and were not genuine seekers. He was confident that Christianity was true and that he could and should challenge his hearers on that basis. The book of Acts is littered with references to reasoning, debating and arguing. Nor is this an appeal for 'intellectualism', as if everyone needs to be treated like a university student. It is just a reminder that Scripture takes people's minds seriously.

What is Paul getting at, then, when he describes the gospel as 'folly'? A detailed exposition is impossible in a short article like this.² But the following principles are important.

First, *the text must not be interpreted to conflict with either 1 Corinthians as a whole or with Romans 1:18ff.* In both passages Paul asserts the principle of rationality. His big point at the beginning of Romans is that human beings are guilty before God, not first and foremost because of their wrong *doing*, but because of their wrong *thinking*. Worshipping a creature like a bird or reptile is intellectually ridiculous.

Furthermore, Paul is at pains to show that his argument is both *self*-consistent and *reality*-consistent. The whole biblical narrative holds together and makes sense; it has a beginning, middle and end. It explains why human beings are unique within the created order. They are not just animals or machines but 'made in the image of God'. They are also a curious mixture of saint and sinner, of heroism and heartbreak. That is the way reality is around us. Humans mess up the planet — not insects and earthworms. But God provides a solution to this broken image by sending Jesus, who acts as our Mediator and Saviour. His life, death, resurrection and ascension are unique; his teaching is incomparable. The whole story makes sense.

Paul is also careful to say that our teaching in church has to be intelligible. When unbelievers come in they need to understand what we are saying and so be

¹ Cf. also Ephesians 4:18: '[unbelievers] are darkened in their understanding ... due to their hardness of heart'.

² John Calvin's commentary on 1 Corinthians is helpful.

persuaded of the truth. (1 Corinthians 12–14). Even when he is emphasising the need for the Spirit’s work, he stresses the importance of our human minds, whether believers or unbelievers.

Second, *Paul’s expression ‘the cross of Christ’ ought not to be read narrowly*. Frequently one hears evangelicals say, ‘what was sufficient for Paul is sufficient for me’, whereupon they refer to the sentence, ‘*I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified*’ (1 Cor. 2:2). But Paul is not suggesting that these five words are the only thing he can talk about. We see elsewhere in the New Testament that that is not the case. He is simply staying clear of the oratorical techniques of the sophist teachers in Greece. He does not want to appear ‘clever’ and ‘stylish’: he just wants to make the *gospel* content clear, the whole truth revealed from heaven. His focus is not on technique but on content — the content of God’s revelation centred on Jesus. But that is already a *big* content that he describes elsewhere as ‘the whole counsel of God’ (Acts 20:27).

Interestingly, whenever we find Paul speaking directly to the pagan world, he does the opposite of ‘the-simple-gospel’ approach. He takes them back behind the cross to the fact that the biblical God is the Creator. Without that framework the cross is meaningless (Acts 14: 15ff). Similarly, he shows the Athenian philosophers that he is familiar with their own writers and thinkers and he capitalises on their obvious intellectual inconsistencies (Acts 17:28).

In fact, the glory of Christianity is that it *can* be expressed quite simply. And whenever people understand the framework of the biblical story, then all we need to do is state the ABC. What I am suggesting, though, is that Scripture does not require a ‘simple-gospel’ approach, and, second, that insisting upon it has ruined our evangelistic outreach within a sceptical society.

Third, *Paul does not mean that the gospel is intrinsically foolish*. When he says the gospel is ‘foolishness’ to unbelievers, what he means is that it is foolish to them *only because they are themselves fools*. He is gently taunting them. In Romans 1 his approach is the opposite: he is direct and blunt. They *think* they are wise, he says, but actually they are fools; they reject what they cannot reasonably deny and ‘so they are without excuse’. In reality the gospel is *divine* wisdom; it is not man made, but revealed — so in that sense it is not philosophy. But the Bible and philosophy cover the same territory, they are Grand Narratives explaining the whole of reality. The difference is that where other worldviews fail, the Bible, because it comes from God, stands secure. It is the *only* adequate intellectual system, which is why Paul challenges anyone who takes another view. He wants to ‘bring every thought captive to obey Christ’ (2 Cor. 10:5).

A finishing touch is provided by the fact that Romans was almost certainly written from Corinth. It is unreasonable to suggest, therefore, that while Paul was writing



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one thing to his Roman contacts, he was teaching his Corinthian audience something completely different!

In conclusion: as evangelicals, we ought to be ashamed of our flight from reason. The New Testament examples are against us. As John Stott puts it, ‘the Apostles sought to make an intellectual conquest, to persuade men of the truth of their message, to convince them in order to convert them’.³ Moreover, we are surrounded by the fruits of a culture that is both truth-less and intellectually barren, which is why people are so adrift. By contrast, Christ and his Scriptures are objectively true. Therefore we need to launch out confidently into the waters of ‘evidences’ and ‘argument’ as in the book of Acts. God’s truth is not ‘hidden in a corner’ and only with difficulty brought into the light. We need to argue the point that the gospel is in fact the only true light.

³ J. R. W. Stott, *The Preacher’s Portrait* (London: Tyndale Press, 1961), p. 49. The evidence to support this, briefly summarised, is (a) the description of preaching in Acts as ‘teach’, ‘argue’, ‘dispute’, ‘confound’, ‘prove’, ‘confute’ etc. (b) the Apostles’ practice of arguing and reasoning and not just declaring; (c) the fact that conversion is frequently described as ‘acknowledging the truth’.