

RELEARNING CHRIST CRUCIFIED

1 Corinthians 2:1–16

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1 Corinthians 2:1–16 (NIV)

“When I came to you, brothers, 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. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching 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. We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’—but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but

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he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: 'For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ."

Last week, I noted with you how offensive even the symbol of the cross was in the first century mind. A comparable way of putting it would be, today, to have as the symbol of our spiritual faith, as a symbol of the love of God, the figure of an electric chair. We can even expand that to the guillotine or the gas chamber or a picture of a firing squad, to express love. It was not a pretty symbol, but the cross is a great truth. It is the central truth of God, the central truth of the gospel. It is a truth which the Corinthian church was neglecting. It is a truth which the church, which we as individuals are continually tempted away from, might neglect as well. When the truth of the cross is neglected, then there begin to be all sorts of spiritual illnesses breaking out in the body of Christ. The immediate illness that broke out in Corinth, because of the neglect of the cross, was division within the body.

There then can come other things with that neglect of the cross. There can be an emphasis upon human programs and methodologies. And a moral and an ethical drift. Even theological heresy. So today, we look at relearning Christ crucified and seeing the cross, once more, as the center of our experience. In this chapter which I read, Paul basically is doing two things. He is correcting Christian foolishness, in verses 1–5 of chapter 2. The foolishness, which has found the church attaching itself to flamboyant and "charismatic" exciting kinds of speakers, to the neglect of the attachment to the person, Jesus, and Him crucified. So there is a subtle, at times even satirical, correction of the Corinthian church for its foolishness. Then verses 6–16 are a critique of the world's wisdom. The world feels that it is wise, but in the cross there is the wisdom of God. Let's look at the correction of Christian foolishness.

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I. The Christian foolishness at Corinth simply was this: an emphasis upon human personality.

Paul deals with some negative characteristics in his ministry, which show that he did not come to bring about a personality cult. He came, not to bring people to an attachment to himself but to an attachment to Jesus. So he writes first, “I did not come to you with eloquence or superior wisdom” (1 Corinthians 2:1). Here was the watchword at Corinth. The exciting speaker. The speaker that could discover the deep and hidden things of God, which were not aware and were not in the mind of the average believer, which were not even central to the gospel. A sort of emphasis upon oratory, rhetorical speech, flair, vim, excitement, personality and the like. Paul says, “I chose not to come to you with this superiority, which is a manifestation of pride.”

The old saying has been that when someone finishes proclaiming the gospel, the listener should go away, not with the statement, “What a great preacher!” But, “What a great Savior!” I can recall standing in pulpits where they have on the pulpit a simple little slogan to remind guest speakers of their mission, “Sir, we want to see Jesus!” Proclaiming the gospel, we become more of the artist and less of the prophet. God is not pleased with that. It begins to do bad things to the Body. It is, even in regard to the church. The question is not “what a great church this is” or any church is. That’s not the question. It’s “what a great Savior the church has.”

This is a real encouragement to us, by the way, as we witness. Sometimes we feel, as we come and proclaim the gospel in one on one relationships to someone else, that we must be eloquent, that we must have stored away in us the last three years of sermons. Or forty-three Bible verses that apply to the ten different situations which one faces in witnessing. Or however many situations one faces. Let’s not throw away, “Study to show yourself approved” (2 Timothy 2:15). Let’s recognize, as well, that when we come into a situation where we share the gospel with

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someone else, it's not the superiority of our language that does the job. It's not resting on that self-sufficiency in our speech.

Paul declares this. First of all, as a correction to the foolishness in the Corinthian church for supposing that the whole Christian message rested upon how well someone presented it. The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ does not rest upon how well someone presents it. Neither in personal witness or in preaching. The message of the good news of Jesus Christ rests squarely upon what Jesus has done for us by dying for our sins and by rising again from the dead.

II. Paul also corrects the foolishness in the Corinthian church on self-sufficiency.

He says, "I came to you in weakness and in fear and with much trembling." This does not sound like a person who has had his "faith Wheaties" for breakfast, does it? What is this? An apostle saying, "I came to you in weakness and in much trembling and in fear." Paul is saying, "There is nothing about me that is swaggering bravado spirit, which presupposes that simply because I arrive on the situation, things are going to change. Simply because I am here in my own ability, there's going to be a difference made for God. The balancing truth is that Paul may, because he was anointed in the Spirit, make a difference for God. But he had long-learned not to rest in his own flesh and in his own ability. There is not a spirit of self-sufficiency about him. It's a very easy thing to fall prey to the subtle temptation to be spiritually self-sufficient, so that we lose this coming in weakness and fear and trembling.

I thought back, as I was looking at this Scripture this week, to how I felt when I came out here in 1971. I didn't come in weakness and in fear and in trembling. I came very cocky and very confident that God would do great things through me rather quickly. It wasn't until about one-third of the church had left that I began to realize that something was wrong. After some weeks of praying with the deacons on Saturday mornings, we came to the deep conviction, which the

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Spirit of God taught us, that there wasn't going to anything happening in our body unless Jesus built the church, unless we recognized Him as the builder of the church.

We're getting ready to go into a building program. Nothing could be further from the truth than to presume that if a church gets a building up, it is going to win people for the Lord or it's going to be powerful. Buildings are not what win people to the Lord. I don't care if we have the most adequate facilities in the world. I don't care if we have the best program for every age—from the tots up to the senior citizens. I don't care what we have in terms of methodology. If whatever methodology we use begins to be an end in itself and we begin to depend upon it and say, "This is what works. If you'll just come and study us, you'll know it works and you can take it somewhere else." That is all foolishness, because that's not where the power of the gospel is.

The power of the gospel is in the change that Jesus makes in our lives, because He died for our sins and rose again, that we might be righteous.

I want to learn from all the methods that are about me, but if I have a critique to make today, it is, for example, the church growth movement with the specialists that are everywhere at hand to tell you how a church grows. One of the subtle things that happens is that God will bless a church and give it the kind of grace of the Spirit which enables it to grow. Someone will come along and note what is working and take what is working and attempt to transfer it to the other situation. Simply saying that, if we use the same methods, we'll get the same results. Forgetting that that church that grew did not start out by using the right methods, but by worshipping the right Savior. It is out of its worship and out of its devotion and out of its honesty and humility before God that the church has had growth. And the church has gone forward in the name of Jesus, not because it was smart enough to organize some system. The system grew out of that concourse with the Lord in prayer and in discovering needs.

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We must be careful concerning our self-sufficiency. One of the things that made me feel very self-sufficient when I came here was that I had just gotten a doctor's degree. And anybody who has a doctor's degree is self-sufficient, right? But the real put-down of my doctor's degree—I got to looking at it this week and it made me laugh—is that it shows my ignorance. I can't even read my own doctor's degree. It's all in Latin. Whenever I need to be made humble to the fact that this degree doesn't mean a thing in terms of getting the work of God done, it represents training that helped me become a disciple of the Lord. But the degree itself is really kind of a paradox. Here's the degree and I can't even read it. So much so with all of our tags and the addendums we put on our names.

You may know, if you've been part of this congregation for a while, that I think the term "reverend" itself is an abomination. If there is one term I'd like to wipe off the face of church usage, it would be the term "reverend." I really think that the only one who is a reverend is God. The only one who is holy is God. How foolishly we can swing around that term, thinking if we had a title in front of our name like "reverend" or "doctor" or "his eminence" or something like this, it means power. Often it means just the opposite. It means that the power has gone because we've begun to rely upon a title.

Paul did not come as "Learned Apostle Paul," "Rabbi," or "Theological Doctor" to the Corinthian situation. He came as simply Paul, preaching one who is crucified, not a very impressive message, but to those who embrace the cross of Jesus Christ, it's the power of God for salvation.

Paul says he came not with self-sufficiency, but he came in this Corinthian situation in weakness, perhaps in bodily weakness, perhaps it had been, if you look at the background of the second missionary journey, one which had taxed every reserve in his body and spirit. He came, in a

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certain sense, even perhaps dreading the physical punishment that awaited him. In fact, the Lord has to give him a revelation that, while he's in that town, his body is going to be protected from the physical adversity of whips or the like. He has come to Corinth, he says, with fear and trembling and weakness.

I think so much of our self-sufficiency may be related to the size of the challenge that we allow the Spirit of God to speak to us about. I generally have no fear and trembling when I am in a bathtub. It is a rather safe place to be. I have no amount of fear and trembling in a swimming pool. It's a little larger than a bathtub, but not a whole lot. I know how to swim well enough not to drown. But if you took me about 250 yards out in the Pacific and threw me off, I want to tell you that I would have a great deal of fear and trembling. Why? Because the challenge is bigger than my ability to cope with it.

Paul is saying, as he goes into this Corinthian situation as a witness of Jesus Christ, that the challenge is greater than my ability. The idea of fear and trembling is not that he's coming like this. It's the same sort of thing where he tells the slaves, in Ephesians 6:5, to obey their masters with fear and trembling. It is what someone has described as the trembling anxiety to perform a duty. It is that, sort of. If you've ever had to speak publicly you know what this is like. It's that feeling on the inner lining of the stomach that makes you adequately tense enough to keep you on edge. After the years which I have preached, I've never been able to lose that. Just that sense of fear and trembling. The edge of service.

You have felt like that if you have sought to witness to someone else. You have known what it is to want to witness to someone and you fight witnessing because you are scared. It may be an intimidating experience for you, and you approach that witness with fear and with trembling. Don't let the fear and the trembling overcome you. Paul didn't let it overcome him. It was part of

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his dependency upon God. When you feel like your mouth is stuffed with cotton and you can't witness, go ahead. In the name of the Lord, overcome the fear and the trembling and come in His name.

Paul says that his critics indicated of him that his letters were weighty and forceful, but in person, he was unimpressive and his speaking amounted to nothing. That created in him a great sense of dependency upon the Lord. No self-sufficiency.

III. Another thing which is rejected and which the Corinthians evidently prided themselves on is adhering to persons who manipulated them.

Paul indicates he has written off manipulation as a form of ministry. Therefore, he says, "my preaching was not in wise and persuasive words." That is, I did not try to beguile you. I did not try to use my powers as an orator or a strong personality to wrap you around my finger and get your will to cave into mine. I didn't manipulate you.

I don't know how many of you have seen the little book *How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious*. It's a satire written by Charles Merrill Smith, a Methodist minister, who surveyed what often takes place in the church world, where people want to rise to positions of prominence and success, laying aside the emphasis on the cross. He noted what would make a good ability for a pastor to relate to people. He said every sermon should be made up of three ingredients. It should be simply this: make them laugh, make them cry, make them feel religious. People basically want to worship themselves, he says.

I don't feel that way about you. But I have to be careful when I'm proclaiming the gospel, that if I use humor, the humor is not simply for humor's sake, but it serves to illustrate something, lest manipulative humor be used. Or in telling a story which is true and which has profound pathos to it, the story not be told because "I know that story gets them every time." But that there be an

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honesty to ministry which is non-manipulative. That we, for example, in response to giving, do not use a stratagem which attempts to get a person in some sort of guilt-ridden complex so that they will reach into their wallet and empty it out as a means of justifying themselves with God. The Corinthians had responded, evidently, to people who moved them emotionally. It's so easy to see in the body of Christ an ability, or at times a tendency, for manipulative ministries to emerge which attempt to gather people around a word which is psychological more than it is spiritual.

Paul is saying that, in the foolishness of the gospel, we must write off things like pride and self-sufficiency and manipulation and be through with it. Why? Because our emphasis must be upon Jesus Christ. Our emphasis must be centered, first, on His crucifixion. Paul says, "I came to you, I resolved to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ." And the outstanding characteristic, first, of Jesus Christ: "Jesus Christ, the crucified one."

Paul's message is centered on Jesus and His atoning death for us on the cross. His message is not centered on Jesus and angels. His message is not centered on Jesus and demons. His message is not centered on Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Or Jesus and charismatic gifts. Or Jesus and dispensationalism. Or Jesus and prophecy. Or Jesus and financial prosperity. Or Jesus and my denomination.

The message is so very simple. Jesus, and Him crucified. Why would that be the case? Because it's only through the power of Jesus' death on the cross that we can be saved.

This week, I was sharing with a class I'm teaching. We were looking at the Gospel of Mark. That great statement that Jesus makes, "I have not come to call the well to repentance but the sick. The physician doesn't heal the well, he heals the sick" (Mark 2:17). I got to thinking of the implications of that in respect to the cross of Jesus and His being our great physician. I realized

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that there are several levels where we may hurt ourselves, where we may need some outside help. If I, for example, am shaving and I nicked myself at that particular point, I do not need to go to the hospital and have a tourniquet applied somewhere on my body. Simply a styptic pencil will do the job. Nothing more complicated than that. If I break my arm, however, it would be wise not to fool around with a styptic pencil. It would be wise for me to get medical help at that particular moment and have that arm set so that it can heal, and I would be advised, if possible, to get to a doctor or an emergency room and have that taken care of. If I have a tumor in the brain, again, it would be appropriate that I not use a styptic pencil to deal with it. It would be appropriate also that I not simply go to the general practitioner and have him operate for a tumor on the brain. I would be well-advised to try to get the best neurosurgeon that I could find and have him go at it, because he is more sophisticatedly trained to deal with what is in me.

I'd like to submit to you, who heals broken relationships? Who heals a broken life? Who heals a broken spirit? Where do you go for that? I say, you go up the ladder. You need someone with more skill than one who can apply a styptic pencil. You need someone with more skill than to set a broken arm. You need someone with more skill than can heal a brain tumor and excise it out through surgery. Only one Physician is qualified in this whole world to deal with the broken heart and the broken spirit. That physician is Jesus Christ.

We as Christians are gathered together around the cross. Too many times in life we are so quick to take our problems to someone other than to Jesus. I think, if we would spend time with the burdens that lie on our hearts and recognize that—while the Lord appoints in His body those who have ministries of healing, both physically and in counseling situations—first and foremost, Jesus is the healer whose healing we simply administer, whose healing we simply seek. Healing at the cross. Coming to the Lord when we have been so selfish that we have driven a rift in a

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relationship with someone else, that maybe perhaps some moments and hours on our knees—looking at what Jesus did for us and the fact that He did not put himself first but came as a servant and suffered and died on the cross for us, that He was willing to let His love experience death on our behalf, His marvelous healing to the moments we want to stand in our own rights, our own self, our own position...Jesus and Him crucified—there is no one else that can help us be forgiven of our sin and be whole other than the Lord.

David Brainerd, the great early colonial and missionary to the Indians, said, “I never got away from Christ and Him crucified. I found that when people were gripped by this great evangelical doctrine, I had no need to give them instruction about morality.” No need, when we understand what Jesus did for us on the cross, to give detailed instruction on morality and ethics, because of what the cross itself produces when we understand it. The cross itself produces righteous living. Paul says, “This emphasis among you is Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” That emphasis, then, has brought unmistakable evidence of change in human behavior. “My message and my preaching was not with wise and persuasive words. But with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith may not rest upon men’s wisdom but upon God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). There’s this recognition that Paul has as an apostle, that the real essence of the validity of the Christian message is, on the one hand, the fact that Jesus died and rose again, but on the other hand, the fact that our lives have been changed and transformed by the power of God.

This is why Paul is able to say here that the Spirit power is demonstrated in you. He may have been talking about miracles. More likely, I think he’s talking about the unmistakable evidence of the change in behavior. The fact that 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 says, “Before some of you were

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idolaters and robbers and adulterers and fornicators and homosexuals and revilers and the like.

But now, in Christ Jesus, you have been washed and you have been made whole.”

When the emphasis gets away from Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and the emphasis begins to be placed upon human programs and methodology, then we find a reversion begins to set in and we become more and more like the world. We get away from the cross and we become more like the world. And then there's less and less change that is produced in our life. But the more we come to the cross of Jesus Christ, the more centered we become on Jesus and the more change takes place in our life, as we let God's power and God's Spirit speak to us.

I don't want to rush the next 10 verses, so I'm going to stop right here and take that passage next Sunday.

Closing Prayer

Lord, I feel it very strongly in my heart that on this Sunday, when we have dedicated significant parts of our resources financially to Your work, that we ought to say again before You who we are. And in what our dependency rests. We begin, Lord, with confession. I confess the time and the times when I, as pastor, have thought that there was something in my expertise or wisdom or insight that would make this church a better church. I confess, Lord, the times when we have thought together in a prideful way of what we had to offer. The programs, the personality, the people. Lord, we relearn again from You that we have nothing to offer except that which You have given us. That if we have any degree of gift in any area, it is You who have given the gift, and You who, through the grace of Your Spirit, have abided upon us that that gift might be developed and be called forth. We seek, Lord, as we look at our future as a body, not to build Newport Mesa Christian Center, but to see Your body brought into existence, the body which is known by Your name. We seek, not to discover some methodology which will make us better.

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We seek, Lord, to discover more of You; and ask that You put within our hands the tools and the power that You want to go with those tools, that we'll forsake everything that You do not especially want for us as a church body, and that we will cleave to You and that which You want. Keep us, Father, from pride and from self-sufficiency and from manipulation. Help us, Lord, in Your name, to authentically represent You and give glory and honor to You and who You are. We're all sinners who have been forgiven by You. We have no ground upon which to stand in boasting. It's simply upon Your blood and Your righteousness that we stand. As we individually examine our lives in this moment, we would look at areas in our own life in which we may have hidden from the gaze of the cross. Areas in our life which, because of our own grip to sin or carelessness or bad temper or anger, we have therefore closed the door and not allowed the Spirit and His power to enter us. Lord, it is with open hearts that we come before You today, asking You to wipe out any forces within us that are still camping out and holding down some fortress of resiliency and rebellion within us towards You, having opened the gates of our temple, the gates of our life to You, let there be now no small bastion within the city of our personality which is against You and the force of Your Spirit. But may there, within every street and avenue and room and aspect of our personality, be surrender to the invading power of Your Spirit. And may Your blood cleanse us from all our sins and all our unrighteousness. For we come again to You today. It is through You we are saved. And it is to you that we are going. We have nothing in ourselves but to praise and glorify and magnify You. Through Jesus our Lord. Amen.