

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS
I Corinthians 1:18-30
Preached by Dr. Cahill
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For two thousand years the cross has been the symbol for Christianity. We see crosses in cemeteries and on church steeples. We wear silver and gold crosses around our necks. The International Red Cross uses this Christian icon to represent itself as an institution existing solely for alleviating suffering and promoting wholeness and healing.

So, over the centuries the cross has been widely regarded as the definitive symbol for sacrificial love. However, if you were a seeker considering Christ in the first generation after Christ's death, the cross had an entirely different connotation that had to be overcome before it could be embraced.

Crucifixion was a slow, painful death meant to torture, dehumanize and shame. Stripped naked and hung out to die the condemned were intentionally and publically humiliated so the condemned man's family, friends (and in Jesus' case, his disciples) would think twice before ever mentioning his name in public again

Try to imagine all the psychological and cultural impediments surrounding the cross in the early days of the Church. Common sense would tell you the sign of the cross was counter-productive in the drive to win new converts. It was as offensive then as the swastika is today. Back in the '60's the Black activist/comedian Dick Gregory said if Christ was executed today, people would be wearing electric chairs instead of crosses around their necks. The point is, 2,000 years ago, when Christianity was just getting started, the cross was both controversial and repulsive. Even so, the cross endures as the symbol of God's sovereignty over our broken world.

This is what prompted the Apostle Paul to write in his letter to the Corinthian Church,

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

(I Corinthians 18:1)

Today we'd say Paul was thinking strategically (the best defense is a strong offense) when he wrote these words to the Corinthian Christians. Instead of apologizing for the cross, he stood tall and inferred that those not seeing the power of God at work in Christ's crucifixion might be well educated and have high IQ's, but are nevertheless down right foolish. He goes on,

"Where is the one who is wise?... Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation to save those who believe. For the Jews demand signs and the Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles..."

(I Corinthians 1:20-23)

Before we begin to parse Paul's words, let's remember Paul was a Jew, as were all the disciples and, of course, Jesus himself. Paul wasn't a self-hating anti-Semite, and yet his words have been twisted by anti-Semites over the centuries to stir up hatred. So let's put these verses in their proper historical and theological context by asking the question, "Why was Paul so hard on his own people?"

I believe a clue to his frustration can be found in the phrase, "*the Jews demand a sign...*"

In the gospels the Jews repeatedly asked Jesus for a sign from God to validate his legitimacy. Truth be told, we do the Jews a great disservice by thoughtlessly dismissing their legitimate request as a lack of faith. In point of fact, in the Old Testament scriptures the prophets promised a new era of justice, peace and joy when the Messiah appeared on the world scene. There would be radical disruptions politically, socially and spiritually as God's Kingdom descended to earth and all would be finally right with the world.

So asking for a sign was not an unreasonable request. Though some Jews followed Jesus, the majority of them couldn't since there wasn't any evidence that, through Jesus, there was any improvement in the human condition. What's more, Caesar, worshipped as a god, still ruled the world! How could Jesus, the Jews wondered, claim to be the Messiah?

On the other hand, the Gentiles, in Paul's mind, were equally obtuse. Though Rome ruled the world, the prevailing culture was Greek. The Greeks boasted a legacy of august philosophers whose mantra was always "seek the truth." Plato and Aristotle are generally regarded as the godfathers of western philosophy and the Greek word philosophy means "love of wisdom."

Now philosophy shouldn't be confused with theology. Philosophers think in terms of critical and rational argument as they consider the fundamental ideas of existence, knowledge and ethics. Theology, on the other hand, is the study of the nature of God and his relationship with his creation. While there is much room for critical and rational thought in the field of theology, there's even more room for accepting the unexplainable mysteries surrounding God.

Some, but certainly not all, philosophers are particularly critical of theology and theologians. Thomas Paine, the American revolutionary, no friend of Christianity, wrote, "*The study of theology, as it stands in Christian Churches, is the study of nothing!*" Another more contemporary philosopher A. J. Ayer wrote, "*All statements about the divine are nonsensical and any divine attribute unproveable.*" Much earlier in the 5th century B.C. the Athenian Greek philosopher Protagoras said, "*Concerning the gods, I cannot say that they exist or that they do not exist...for there is much to prevent one's knowing.*"

See the difference? Philosophy is based on the human capacity to think and know. The same can be said for theology but with this important caveat, anything we know about God can only come from God. It's not by human wisdom but by divine revelation as God reveals himself to us that we can see the unseen and enter the mysterious paradox of the cross.

That's why the Greeks thought the cross was foolishness. Their philosophy kept them locked up in the proverbial box. They were adamant that rational thought was the only way to go. They couldn't imagine that God, even if he existed, would debase himself by entering into our physical world to live among us. It was pure fantasy. As far as they were concerned, Paul's Gospel was utter nonsense, a fairy tale for children and idiots.

Familiar with the saying, "the more things change the more they stay the same?" Two thousand years after Paul, the cross remains a stumbling block for some and foolishness for others. How often have you heard sincere people say I can accept Jesus was a good man and a great teacher, but with millions of unfortunates living in misery and dying without hope, I can't believe "Jesus is Lord" while the world still suffers.

This isn't being said by first century orthodox Jews, it's being said today by reasonable people who ask the hard question for which there is no satisfactory answer. "Why is there still suffering in the world if Jesus is Lord? For them the cross is a stumbling block.

Then there are those who think Christianity is foolishness. Did you ever hear Bill Maher or Richard Dawkins rant against God and faith? They say the Bible is bunk and accuse believers for being narrow-minded haters. At the same time they pride themselves for being intellectually honest and believe themselves to be so much more sophisticated than any redneck Christian.

What should be our response to these people, some honest doubters who can't square a loving God with our broken world, as well as those who have a pathetic dysfunctional need to belittle believers, trash the sacred scriptures and dismiss the One who gave them the freedom to mock him?

Paul seems to be saying to us: focus on what's really important...

"Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were wise by human standards... But God chose what is foolish...to shame the wise. God chose what is weak...to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised...so no one can boast in the presence of God." (I Corinthians 1:26-29)

God inspired Paul to tell us not to get frustrated when friends and neighbors can't embrace Jesus and all hot and bothered when slick antagonists mock God and his Christ. Don't take it personally. Instead, be grateful God gave you the wisdom to realize God's ways are not our ways and God has a way of confounding and circumventing what we think are self-evident truths by making himself look foolish and weak to break the power sin and death has over us.

It's no accident the cross became the ultimate symbol of God's power, unleashed through Christ, for the sake of the world he loves. Behold the man nailed to the cross for in him divinity and humanity combine together to suffer and die for the sins of the world.

Maybe the cross and all it stands for defies our intelligence and maybe for some, the cross is a stumbling block because they see no real evidence that it ever solved the world's problems. Pray for them, and love them as Christ prays for and loves them, but also hope the time will come when their eyes will be opened and they'll recognize him and then gladly join us in singing

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the lights of sacred story
Gather round its head sublime.

Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure,
By the cross are sanctified;
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide.