

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 1/3/99 PM
1 Corinthians 1:18 "The Message That Never Changes"

Almost 121 years ago, God moved in the hearts of a group of His people, and Wheelersburg Baptist Church was established. Since then there have been many changes. Four building projects. More than 25 pastors. Hundreds, even into the thousands of saints have come and gone.

Change isn't bad. If you would have visited on a Sunday in 1878 I'm quite sure you would have discovered a very different type of church. There was no RBP curriculum, no accompaniment tapes for the musicians, no amplification system, and no study Bibles in hand (the Schofield reference Bible was still 31 years away).

Yes, many things have changed since then. And the changes weren't haphazard, but prayerfully made with the intent of honoring God and maximizing effectiveness for the kingdom.

When it comes to methodology, change is not only valid, but often essential. Who would want to take the church back to the days of potbelly stoves and outhouses (especially in January)! No, God has blessed us with technological advances which aid rather than hinder the advancement of the gospel.

I thank God for Sunday School curriculum and Mission Agencies and Study Bibles and hymnbooks and overheads for worship and laser printers for bulletins. I'm grateful He's allowed us to benefit from more readable Bible translations and radio Bible teaching and email for almost instant correspondence with Papua New Guinea.

I'm glad for change. But there's something that must never change. What's that?

Our message. Our methodology has changed and will continue to change, but our message, our God-given message must never change.

What is our message? We find the answer in one verse, 1 Corinthians 1:18. "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." The KJV rendering goes like this, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God."

What's our message? It's *the Cross*, and in this one verse we discover two vital truths we must never forget about the cross of Jesus. First, its importance, and second its impact.

1. We must never forget the *importance* of the cross.

Paul begins, "For the message of the cross." The *preaching* of the cross. The *logos* of the cross. The *word* of the cross.

To Paul, the preaching of the cross was important. He devoted his life to proclaiming the Christ of the cross and the cross of Christ. It was that pursuit that took him to the city of Corinth, a Greek metropolis known for its idolatry and immorality.

How do you impact a pagan culture like Corinth? What can you possibly do that would loosen Satan's grip on such a city? Do what Paul did--preach the cross.

And what happened is a testimony to the power of the cross. Men and women who'd lived horrendous lives of sin repented and believed in Jesus Christ. God called them out of darkness into fellowship with His Son (1:9). A church was established. And

Paul ministered there for a year and a half, until he moved on to preach the cross elsewhere.

Some time later while in Ephesus, Paul caught wind of problems in Corinth. There were divisions in the church. Factions. Schisms. Politicking. Church members were taking sides (1:12): "I follow Paul." "Well, I follow Apollos." "I follow Cephas." And still others, "Well, I follow Christ!"

So Paul wrote a letter to the church (we call it 1 Corinthians). What did he do to help the church get rid of its schisms? What approach did he use to unify a fractured church? Simply put, it was this. He asked all the members to focus on one object. What was it? *The cross* (1:17).

Please don't romanticize the cross. In our day, we wear the cross as a piece of jewelry around our necks--and that's fine--as long as we remember what it's all about.

But it's difficult for us to fathom this. In Paul's day, the cross was a death tool. It's hard for us to realize the unspeakable horror and loathing the very mention of the cross provoked. In fact, the word "cross" was unmentionable in polite Roman society. It was the most base of all objects.

Why? Because the cross was what the Romans used to execute the most hardened criminals. The cross inflicted brutal, excruciating, incomparable pain on its victims. To the Romans, the cross represented shame and humiliation.

So why then did Paul preach the cross? It certainly wasn't because of its popularity. Galatians 6:12 speaks of "being persecuted for the cross of Christ." In Galatians 5:11, Paul mentions "the offense [lit. "scandal"] of the cross." No, you didn't decorate your body with the cross in that day.

But not only was the cross itself despised, even more so was one particular cross. Listen to Paul's explanation in Philippians 3:18, "For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ."

So, again, if the cross was so offensive, why did Paul preach it? He didn't preach a relic. He preached an event. The cross isn't a magical icon--like a rabbit's foot or a genie's lamp. The power of the cross is linked to what happened on one particular cross, a historical event described in Colossians 2:13-15:

"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the *cross*. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the *cross*."

That's why we preach the cross. On His cross, Jesus provided cleansing for sin, and there He canceled our debt. O beloved, that's why we must preach the cross--because of what happened *at the cross*.

"Alas and did my Savior bleed? And did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?"

Isaac Watts continued, "Was it for crimes that I have done He groaned upon the tree? Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!"

"Well might the sun in darkness hide and shut His glories in, when Christ, the mighty Maker died for man the creature's sin."

"But drops of grief can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe. Here Lord, I give myself away--'Tis all that I can do!"

In light of what Christ has done for us, what can we do for Him? What did Paul say that he did, and we should do, with the historical message of the cross? Preach the cross! Will our message be popular? No.

Notice verses 22-23, "Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." Well, if that's the case, if people don't want to hear about the cross, what good will it do to preach it? It wouldn't, except for the truth revealed in verse 24, "But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

In His sovereign grace, God has chosen a people He will call to Himself--a people who on their own think the cross is foolishness, but because of the Spirit's working responded to the preaching of the cross.

That's exactly how the Corinth believers came to Christ, as Paul reminds them in verses 26-31: "Brothers, think of what you were when you were *called*. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. *It is because of him* that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.'"

God will bring people to Himself. The Corinthian believers were living proof that salvation doesn't depend on anything in man.¹ God will call people to Himself. And He will use the preaching of the cross to accomplish it.

Brothers and sisters, that's why our message must never change. How can you improve on the cross? You can't. That's why we must tell everyone about the cross, and what happened on it.

Chuck Colson tells a story about a person who went into a store to buy a piece of jewelry. The young lady said to the clerk, "I'd like a necklace. Do you have the one that's a "T" will a little man on it?"

The world is full of people who don't know the meaning of the cross. When Paul first entered the city of Corinth, there were over one-half million inhabitants who were just as ignorant about the cross as the youth in Colson's story. But when he left 18 months later, there was the light of a church in that dark city.

God called a people to Himself, and He used the preaching of the cross to accomplish it. We must herald the cross. We must tell people about the cross. Why? Because that's the means God has chosen to use in bringing people to Himself.

Of that truth Paul reminded the Corinthians in 15:1-4, "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as

¹As referenced in the footnote of the *NIV Study Bible*, p. 1738.

of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures..."

Don't miss those words in verse 3, "of first importance" ["first of all" in the KJV]. They remind us that we must never forget the *importance* of the cross. We must preach the cross. But what will happen if we do? Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:18 by highlighting a second vital truth pertaining to the cross.

2. We must never forget the *impact* of the cross.

"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."

You see, when we preach the cross, we are preaching a message about a *real Person*, the living Son of God who not only died 2,000 years ago, but lives in heaven and whose Spirit indwells His followers. And in the biblical sense of the term, "preaching" is not limited to an activity performed by clergy behind a pulpit. It's the responsibility of every Christian. Whether your "pulpit" is a lunch table at school or your email on your computer or your car as you drive with work associates, God gives you opportunities to "preach" the cross to people around you.

What kind of impact can we expect the cross to have? According to our text, there are two--and only two--responses.

a. The message of the cross impacts some people *negatively*.

Paul says it's "foolishness" to those who are perishing--he word refers to people who are "alienated, condemned, and doomed." May I remind you that the cross is about the last thing a natural man would select as a reason for boasting. How did people in Paul's day respond to the cross. Just like they do today.

Notice again verse 23. To the Jews what is the cross? A *stumbling block*. Why is that? For two reasons. One, it was unthinkable to the Jews that God's Messiah would end up on a cross. They pointed out what the Law said in Deuteronomy 21:23, "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." And that's true. And that's what happened.

There was a second reason the cross was a stumbling block to Jews. According to verse 22, Jews wanted signs. At the very time Paul ministered, there was a crop of false Messiahs, all who beguiled people into following them by the promise of wonders.

In A.D. 45 a man called Theudas emerged. He persuaded thousands to abandon their homes and follow him out to the Jordan. He promised that the Jordan would divide, and he would lead them across.

Nine years later, a man from Egypt arrived in Jerusalem, claiming to be the Prophet. He convinced 30,000 to follow him to the Mount of Olives, promising that at his command the walls of Jerusalem would fall.

That's what the Jews were looking for. Signs--like many today seem to want. But in Jesus they saw one who was meek and lowly, one who died on a cross. And to them, the cross was a stumbling block.

What was the cross to Gentiles? Verse 23--*foolishness*. To the Gentiles, a characteristic of god was the total inability to feel. A God who suffered was a contradiction in terms. What's more, the very idea of incarnation--God becoming flesh--was revolting to the Greek mind. It was utter foolishness.

So to both Jews and Gentiles, the cross was absurd, insane, and unacceptable.

It's no different today. The cross today is unpalatable to many. Even in so-called churches. What do many churches do with the message of the cross? Sadly, they water it down, or ignore it all together. Many have reconstructed a Christianity without the cross. They teach that man is basically good. All he needs to do to earn God's favor is patch up his life a little. It's salvation by works.

They ignore the cross. Why? Because the cross pierces their pride. They don't want to accept the implications--the radical implications--of the cross.

My friends, realize this. God chose a symbol of weakness to be the banner of His people. The cross is a constant reminder that, as Paul states in verse 25, "the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."

Look at the cross. Every time we see it our eyes behold a symbol that reminds us of this undeniable truth. *The only people God saves are the people who realize they cannot save themselves.* Helpless people. Broken people. Hurting people. Humble people. There's no room for pride at the cross. And there's no one too far gone for the life-saving power of the cross, if they're willing to admit they need it.

What kind of impact does the cross have on people? For some, it's a negative impact. But there's another group.

b. The message of the cross impacts some people *positively*.

"For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but *unto us who are saved* it is the power of God." To the world, the cross is foolishness, but to another group it's something quite different.

What group? To those who are *saved*. The actual word in the Greek text is a present tense, passive participle, which is why the NIV translates it as "to us who *are being saved*."

We usually think of salvation as a past tense event, but that's only one aspect of it. Justification is past tense. We have been saved from the penalty of sin--that's a completed, finished, never to be repeated activity (Rom. 3:24). But we are being saved, right now, from the power of sin--in simple terms, that's progressive sanctification, and it's happening in the present (Phil. 2:12-13). And in the future, we will be saved from the presence of sin (1 Pet. 1:5; Rom. 13:11).

So we who know Christ have been saved, are being saved, and will be saved. That's our identity. We are *saved* people. That's what's true of us. And what makes it all possible is *the cross*.

What is the cross to us? It's the "power of God." Just how powerful is the cross? In this very letter, Paul mentions five things the message of the cross can do. It can save (1:18), enlighten (2:14), transform lives (6:11), give us victory (15:57), and equip us for service (15:58). What else in the universe can accomplish all that!

Perhaps you're thinking, "But wait. If the cross is foolishness to the natural man, how is it that some respond positively to it?" That's the question Paul addresses in chapter two. It has nothing to do with the eloquence of the messenger (2:2-3). It has to do with the inherent power of the message and the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit. Listen to Paul's admission in 2:4-5, "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."

That's what happened in your life if you're a Christian. The Spirit of God took the message of the cross, and by His power opened your eyes so you could see what previously had been foolishness to you. He enlightened your intellect so the cross made sense to you (John 16:8). And He regenerated your heart so that you admitted your need (Titus 3:5) and you were born again (John 3:6).

Yes, if you are saved you know that the cross is the power of God.

That's why we preach the cross. Our message must never change. We must never forget its importance and its impact. We can know that God will use the preaching of the cross to transform lives right here in Wheelersburg and around the world.

Now a question. An important question. What is *your attitude* towards the cross? All of us fall into one of two categories. There's no middle of the road. Either the message of the cross impacts you negatively or positively. Either it's foolishness to you, or it's the power of God in your life. Which is it?

I hope you can affirm with confidence the word penned by George Bennard:

"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."

"In the old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine, a wondrous beauty I see;
For 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died to pardon and sanctify me."

"To the old rugged cross I will ever be true, its shame and reproach gladly bear;
Then He'll call me some day to my home far away, where His glory forever I'll share."

"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."