

January 10, 2016

The Divine Contradiction

Annette Hill Briggs

I Corinthians 1:18-31

[Christ the Power and Wisdom of God]

¹⁸ For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ 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. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, ²³ but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

That God chose to redeem humanity by way of the crucified and resurrected Christ is what Paul means by gospel. He uses *gospel*, *cross*, and *message of the cross* sort of interchangeably to mean this same thing: *Christ crucified & resurrected*.

His church may decline or reject this gospel. They may attempt to improve upon the recipe, if you will. But Christ alone, crucified and resurrected, is THE gospel Paul will preach until his last breath.

Along with it for Paul, as critical and as strange and hard to grasp, the idea that God chose the likes of us – people foolish, weak, despised and low-born – to be the recipients of that gospel, the ones given it, the ones called to live it.

But in 55 B.C. in the Roman colony of Corinth, a former Greek city-state, that gospel just wasn't . . . that sexy. You know what was sexy in 55 B.C. Corinth? Sex, for one thing. The scholar I am reading describes Corinth as a Roman crossroads with the sex industry of Las Vegas, the money of LA, and the art and intellectual scene of New York.

But using Paul's letter to them as the source of what Christians there considered sexiest of all: it wasn't sex, but rather *wisdom* and *power*. They wanted a religion – a faith – that could compete with important people who thought important thoughts, with powerful people who got big things done. A faith to be proud of, to brag about to their neighbors and their friends – which seems perfectly fine when put that way.

But there was something about it that rubbed Paul wrong. Read the whole letter more than a time or two and it's pretty easy. It gets easier to hear him repeating the same four words: wisdom, folly (or foolishness), power, weakness; wisdom and folly, power and weakness in the cross; wisdom and folly, power and weakness in the ways of humans; wisdom and folly, power and weakness of the gospel; wisdom and folly, power and weakness of God. Wisdom was a particularly Greek thing, this love of learning, of philosophy, and the sport of debate.

Power – displayed in the signs so appreciated by Jews, but also by anyone with that special capacity to influence others, to motivate, to produce, to accomplish. The Corinthians had become Christians happily on no more than Paul's stripped gospel. But they are five years in now. Now they have to integrate their believing life into the non-believing way of life around them. Which is easier to manipulate? Faith? Or the world?

Especially if the world never heard of the faith you bear – a faith made of a story that sounds like nonsense: the all-powerful Creator of the universe decides to save humanity, but coming as a human and sacrificing himself on a cross to be buried in a borrowed grave; and then rises from the dead and is now alive and present with his followers – which you are invited to become too.

It is so, so simple: He rose and we will too. And yet defies human explanation. Desire as we might for a gospel more explainable or palatable, more respectable or winsome to people whose respect we covet, this is the gospel we have: one utterly independent of human effort or ability, of wealth or capacity or intentions, so that, as Paul says it, none may boast, either from arrogance or good intention. Our culture still prizes power. Wisdom, maybe not so much. Awhile back I read that if you ask a classroom of young teenagers what they want to be when they grow up, at least a handful will say “a celebrity.” Apparently we prize fame.

Twice a month I visit a 40-something-year-old man in a nursing home. In nearly 17 years he hasn't spoken, waved, or turned his head to acknowledge my presence. He has enough brain function to breathe and blink. He has to be diapered, bathed, turned in his bed, and fed through a tube. His name is Jason. Friends, of what value is the gospel to Jason? If one must be wise or powerful or well-born in order to enjoy the gospel, then of what value is it to a person like Jason? And who among us, in the church or anywhere else, is in the position to make the decisions about who is or is not . . . wise enough, powerful enough, well-born enough, or whatever-enough to deserve it? None. Of course.

Nor would any of us say we believe that anyway. But . . . there is what our speech says we believe and what *our lives* say we believe, what *our life together* says we believe, whether we say anything at all.

Dr. Fee wrote that the message of the cross is not one to which one may add human wisdom in any form and thereby make it superior. Rather, the cross stands in absolute, uncompromising contradiction to merely human wisdom. The "divine contradiction" he calls it. I know lots of other 40-something-year-old men and women, not in nursing homes, raising kids, Ph.D.'s, brilliant minds, people who have forgotten more math and history and music and theology and science than most of the rest of the world will ever know. Is to preach the uncompromising, absolute divine completion of the gospel itself to dismiss their giftedness and hard work as irrelevant . . . or worse, profane? Not. At. All.

Human wisdom is useful; useful for faith and for teaching, for discipleship, for knowing God. But human wisdom is not salvific. No more necessary than walking, or talking, or being able to turn over in bed. The only requirement is breath itself, life, existence, to be human. Because all that makes faith possible, God did. In Christ. Without our help. Without our consent. God did it.

The wisdom and power involved were God's. Leaving us, again quoting Dr. Fee, with an awful risk: to trust God and be saved by his wise folly, or keep our pretensions and perish. Either of which we are utterly free to choose. What we are NOT free to choose: both. Paul presses this over and over: you are not free to keep your pretensions and claim they are gospel-given. Not one of us would ever in a million years exclude Jason from salvation. But some, the pre-reformed Corinthians for example, would include him AND then turn right around and boast in how much they themselves deserved God's grace.

"No!" Paul says, "You have no more than him in which to boast. The cross alone, with all its foolishness and power, righteousness, sanctification and redemption."

A contradiction, no doubt, to everything else we know about how life is supposed to work. This way of life is rooted in self-preservation, while the gospel says *sacrifice*. To a world rooted in time, the gospel pulls back the curtain on eternity. Into the politics of fear, the gospel launches joy. Into conflict, peace. Into anxiety, contentment. And from the ceaseless focus on the self, the gospel calls us to life lived in service to others. It sounds like a contradiction, no doubt; but lived, Paul says, it truly is a life that boasts for itself.

Would you pray with me?