

SERIES: PRIDE AND PREJUDICE IN THE CHURCH

A CRISIS OF SELF-CONFIDENCE

by Doug Goins

We're in the middle of Paul's discussion of the difference between the wisdom of God, which is centered on the cross of Jesus Christ, and the wisdom of humanity, which is centered on intellect and natural resources. It's a choice between God-confidence and self-confidence.

This important contrast reminds me of a story about Paul Tillich that I heard during my student days at Fuller Seminary years ago. Tillich spent thirty years teaching philosophy of religion and theology at the University of Chicago. He was unabashedly a theological liberal. In the introduction to his three-volume Systematics he said that he had never had a conversion experience with Jesus Christ.

The story goes that when Dr. Tillich died about twenty years ago, he showed up at heaven's gates, and St. Peter was there waiting. Peter asked Tillich the question that Jesus Christ had asked Peter at Caesarea Philippi: "Who do you say that Jesus Christ is?"

Dr. Tillich stroked his chin and answered, "Theologically, he is the ground of all being. Existentially, he is the ground of the divine-human encounter. Eschatologically, he is the ground of ultimate hope."

Peter's reply was, "Huh?"

In 1:1-25 Paul was challenging the Corinthian Christians that behind their struggle to get along was an overconfidence in human resources and human wisdom. In this respect, we're really no different from the Corinthians. We live in a place of culture, wealth, power, and beauty, just like Corinth. We're much too impressed with human accomplishment. And beneath a veneer of intellectual sophistication, our culture is in a state of moral decay. Paul reminded the church in Corinth that unlike the surrounding Corinthian culture, they were to live on the basis of the wisdom of God rather than the wisdom of men. These are the two themes that are contrasted throughout the first four chapters of this letter.

Verse 25 ended with a ringing proclamation: "...The weakness of God is stronger than men." God on his worst day is far greater than we are on our best days. All the human resources we can muster are no match for his power and greatness.

Now Paul goes on to prove that God does indeed work through weakness. First, in 1:26-31 he asks the Corinthians to take a hard look at themselves and remember who they are and where they've come from as Christians. Then in 2:1-5 he asks them to look at him and remember what the year and a half was like when he ministered among them. He points out that they as a people were not very clever or bright, and that his ministry of teaching and preaching among them was not very persuasive. So the fact that they're Christians at all proves that God works through weakness-how else could the church of Christ in Corinth be explained?

As we read 1:26-31, let's make sure it's very clear what kind of people God calls to himself. Paul is addressing this to the Christians in Corinth, but we can apply it to ourselves as well.

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it

is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Not wise, mighty, or noble

Verse 26 uses three negative phrases to summarize what these people were not. Verses 27-28 use several positive statements to show what in fact they were. And then verses 29-31 explain why God called these kinds of people to himself—the weak, the foolish, the despised, and the base of the world.

Let's look at verse 26 again. First of all, they were not academically elite. They were not wise according to a worldly standard. There were some in that church from the educated classes in Corinth, but most of the people in the church were uneducated. In the second phrase Paul says that they were not political movers and shakers. The word translated "mighty," or "powerful" or "influential," referred to the ruling class of a society. There were some in the church who were politically involved in the city, but most of the church members in Corinth had no influence in Corinth's political power structure. The third phrase says, "...Not many noble," or well-born, literally the aristocracy. Again, there were some in the church from nobility; we know some of their names from the book of Acts. But by and large, most of the Corinthian Christians were from the lower ranks of society, including the slave class.

What Paul is saying to these people is, "You know what sort of people you were when God called you out of sinful darkness into the light of salvation. You know that he didn't accept you as his child because you were brilliant or wealthy or powerful, because most of you weren't at all. And those of you whose lives were defined that way were saved in spite of those positions, not because of them. If anything, they were obstacles between you and God's grace." The reality is that position and wealth and influence really can be hindrances, keeping people from the sense of need that leads to salvation.

Matthew 11 records a time when Jesus was preaching to the multitudes. In the middle of the sermon he stopped and prayed. His prayer was as much for the benefit of the people listening as it was offered to his heavenly Father. Verse 25: "I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes." He wanted them to understand that God desired only their faith, nothing more. I think it was also a subtle warning that wise and intelligent people are at a disadvantage as far as spiritual understanding is concerned. It's not that they can't accept and believe; the problem is that pride and dependence on their own accomplishments and abilities can keep them from the kingdom of heaven. A sense of weakness and inadequacy is the attitude through which God's strength is made manifest.

The fact that the early church was made up of poor people having very little social standing was offensive to the culture of the day. In 178 A.D. a pagan Roman philosopher named Celsus wrote these sarcastic words about Christians:

"Let no cultured person draw near, none wise and none sensible, for all that kind of thing we count evil; but if any man is ignorant, if any man is wanting in sense and culture, if anybody is a fool, let him come boldly [to become a Christian]...We see them in their own houses, wool dresses, cobblers, the worst, the vulgarest, the most uneducated persons...They are like a swarm of bats or ants creeping out of their nest, or frogs holding a symposium around a swamp, or worms convening in mud."

That's how most of the first-century world viewed the followers of Jesus. The simplicity of the gospel and the humility of faithful believers are still incomprehensible to the world. It seems abject foolishness.

The paradoxical choice of God

And verses 27-28 tell us that God planned it that way: "...But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are...." Three clauses make up these two verses. First, as the world views us, we are foolish, intellectually deficient. But God has chosen us to shame human wisdom. The promise we're going to

see as we move into chapter 2 is that God will use us to show the intellectual bankruptcy of the world whenever we share the gospel.

Second, as the world views us, we are powerless, weak, ineffectual, light-weights in the arena of social impact. But again, God has chosen us on purpose because he wants to change powerful social institutions one person at a time, one group at a time, as we live out the gospel. The power is in the gospel, not in the person.

Third, verse 28 uses strong words: "obscure," "insignificant," "base," "despised." Literally, the word "despised" means to be considered as nothing. The world basically says we are nobodies because we have declared allegiance to Jesus Christ. But God has declared us somebodies, and he will use us to turn the world's value system upside down.

What Paul is saying in these two verses is that God's wisdom is paradoxical. In human thinking, strength is strength, weakness is weakness, intelligence is intelligence. But in God's economy some of the things that seem the strongest are the weakest, and some of the things that seem the weakest are the strongest. Some of the things that seem the wisest are the most foolish. As I said before, the paradox isn't an accident; God designed it that way. The most simple, uneducated, untalented, clumsy believer who has trusted in Jesus Christ as Savior, who faithfully and humbly follows his or her Lord, is immeasurably wiser than the brilliant Ph.D. who scoffs at the gospel. The simple believer knows forgiveness, love, grace, life, hope, the word of God, and God himself. That simple believer sees into eternity. The unbelieving Ph.D., on the other hand, knows nothing beyond his books, his own mind, his own resources, his own experience. And from God's perspective, he is the one who can't be considered anything but foolish. The world measures greatness by many standards-intelligence, wealth, prestige, position, power-things that God has determined to put at the bottom, according to the apostle Paul. God reveals the greatness of his power by demonstrating that it's the world's nobodies that are his somebodies.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 11:11, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." John had no formal education or professional training, no money, no military rank, no political position, no social pedigree, no prestige, no impressive appearance or speech. John the Baptist met none of the world's standards, but he met all of God's standards. And what he achieved was all to the credit of God's power. John lit a fire in that nation of Israel in preparation for the Lord Jesus' coming. God sovereignly chose to use him. And Jesus promises that God will make each one of us greater than John in terms of spiritual impact.

Identity and worth only in Christ

In verses 29-31 Paul explains why God has chosen people like us. He first states it negatively in verse 29: "...That no man should boast before God." The reason is simple. God won't tolerate human pride, so he chooses people who will have nothing to brag about. And it's not just the world's determination, it's reality-we are foolish, weak, base, and despised. We could do nothing to save ourselves, God had to do everything. Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-10, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." We couldn't save ourselves, and God is the one who accomplishes whatever good effect we have. He prepares the good works-we just show up for them. He takes full responsibility for everything.

In verses 30-31 Paul states this positive reason why he's chosen folks like us. He addresses two issues that our culture is obsessed with, identity and self-worth. Verse 30 talks about the identity that is a gift from God in Jesus Christ: "But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption...." What God wants is for us to find our identity completely in Jesus Christ. In fact, we've been given every resource we need to live lives of purpose, influence, wholeness, and effectiveness in him. In Ephesians 1:3 the apostle Paul says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ...." We can substitute the word "resources" for the word "blessings." Since every believer is in Jesus Christ, we have all been given resources in the person of Christ. There are four words that describe the resources that we have in him: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Let me expand those for you briefly.

First is this gift of wisdom that we have in Christ. Remember, we weren't wise enough to get saved on our own. It was the wisdom of God that brought us into his family. But we're also given God's wisdom to replace our own wisdom. We can really say without being proud or boasting about ourselves that we have become wise in Jesus Christ. And the Scriptures promise us that we will grow in spiritual wisdom. We will gradually be able to understand the nature of things more and more clearly, to distinguish truth from lies, the longer we're in Christ. We will grow in the ability to separate the important from the trivial in life, to put things in proper perspective. Finally, wisdom will give us the ability to blend truth and love. We will grow in the capacity to be honest and frank, but also patient and gracious with people.

Second, we've been given the righteousness of God. We are made right with God as we participate in his rightness. Rightness means to be something or someone that you should be. It is being right as opposed to wrong, good as opposed to evil, sinless as opposed to sinful. God is totally righteous because he is totally as he should be. He can't vary from his rightness. And when we trust his Son, he shares his Son's righteousness with us. He makes us right with him, right within ourselves (so that we have a wholeness inside), and right with other people.

Third, we receive God's sanctification, or being set apart, consecrated, made holy. This is the daily manifestation of the Christlike character that has been placed into us. The character of Christ is gradually revealed in us more and more the longer we're in relationship with him, as we learn how to handle life according to God's wisdom. We'll become more patient, more loving, more insightful, more courageous. It's a wonderful lifelong process.

Finally, believers receive God's redemption. To redeem means to buy something back. God through Christ has purchased us from the power of sin. It's because of Christ's redeeming work on the cross that wisdom and righteousness and sanctification are given to us.

Verse 31 tells us that our self-worth is a gift from God. Quoting Jeremiah 9:23-24, Paul says, "...That, just as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" God wants us to find all of our worth in Jesus Christ. We ought to be giving thanks continually for these great gifts in Jesus. Our worth is not derived from anything we can contribute to our salvation—our religion, education, wealth, or position. That was the point of the parable Jesus told in Luke 18:9-14 of the Pharisee and the tax gatherer. The latter humbled himself as a sinner, but it was he, Jesus said, who would be exalted. All we can boast in is the Lord, who gives us our identity in Christ and all of our spiritual resources.

I had an encouraging talk recently with a dear sister in Christ who has been at PBC for a few years. She reviewed with me eighteen or twenty years of her own history. She talked about the degradation of a horrible background that God had purchased her out of. She confessed her own foolishness, horrible choices in life, and weakness in the face of all kinds of influences. She talked about a base lifestyle that she had committed herself to. She talked about people who despised her for her choices and her own self-loathing.

But she also talked about eighteen years of slow, gradual change in her life: wisdom that God has given her to understand the world she's in, a greater sense of her identity in Christ. She is not held captive by that horrible past life. The righteousness of Christ is what defines her now. Her awareness that God has been faithfully changing her little by little through the years to stabilize her and give her hope for the future has made her a very grateful person. She can identify with the Corinthian Christians in their calling. I hope you can, too.

Now in 2:1-5 Paul writes a brief autobiographical section to show that in his own life he depended on God's wisdom rather than men's. He uses the year and a half that he spent ministering among these people in Corinth to illustrate the spiritual principles that he has just outlined for them. He appeals to their conversion experiences; they were saved because of his preaching of the cross. It was simple preaching, based on humility. He says honestly that it came out of great personal weakness. They weren't saved because of his effectiveness as a communicator. Paul's point is that God will use these same people whom he called out of darkness into light to change the world, to turn the value system upside-down. Let's think about ourselves and how God can use us in the same way.

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

The first four verses talk about this commitment to simplicity that Paul made in his ministry among them. Then verse 5 explains why he chose to minister that way. There are three negative clauses that indicate things that Paul was not doing in his ministry among them, and then four positive clauses indicating things he did do.

Not trusting in eloquence, credentials, or persuasion

First of all, Paul said he was not trusting in sophisticated rhetorical devices. Paul's teaching and preaching while he was in Corinth were not patterned after the styles of communication that the Corinthians loved so much, "superiority of speech" and "wisdom." The New International Version translates the phrase "eloquence and superior wisdom." C. K. Barrett writes: "The two nouns are close together in meaning, for 'eloquence' literally means 'rational talk.' And 'superior wisdom' literally means 'worldly cleverness.' They represent the outward and inward means by which men may commend a case, effectiveness of language, and skill of argumentation." Paul refused to give the people what they wanted in terms of communication style.

Second, in the first clause of verse 2, he refused to show off his theological knowledge, philosophize, or psychologize. He didn't encumber the message with Paul Tillich vocabulary. He himself was a gifted rabbi, one of the greatest minds of his age. He probably knew four or five languages. And yet he refused to compete with the articulate philosophers of Corinth or show off his credentials.

This issue of credentials is significant in terms of what we trust in when we're talking about Christ with people. My wife Candy is reading John White's book *Pathway to Holiness*. She told me about one section where he talks about how God humbles us. He makes the observation that a number of years ago he quit putting "Dr." in front of his name, because he realized it was too important to him. He was simply John White, a sinner saved by grace.

Third, in the beginning clause of verse 4, Paul didn't try to persuade with a powerful, compelling delivery. Paul's plain way of speaking was not compelling. In 2 Corinthians 10 Paul admits that he wasn't a very impressive public speaker. I thought of the way modern-day athletes say, "Show me what you've got!" If the itinerant philosophers and teachers of Corinth had said to Paul, "Show us what you've got!" he would have said, "I don't have much, actually. I choose not to compete with you." They depended on their powers of persuasion to gain followers. But Paul says, "I am not a salesman. I will not use emotional manipulation or theatrics. I am an ambassador. I proclaim truth."

Proclaiming the cross by the power of the Spirit

In the second half of verse 1 Paul tells us the first of the four things he did do among them. He uses two important words: "proclaiming" and "testimony." Proclaiming was a simple announcement of fact, not the modern usage in which proclamation is a big, showy thing. And the word "testimony" takes us into the courtroom. It's a clear summary of the facts. When he chose to proclaim a testimony of the gospel of God, he was just making an objective statement of what was true as he taught the word.

The second thing he says he did, in verse 2, is center exclusively on the person and work of Jesus Christ. "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." Remember the concern he expressed earlier in 1:17,18 that the message not be diluted: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be made void. For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Paul's message was the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ the divine Savior and his accomplished work of the cross. "Christ plus nothing" was Paul's consistent message in all of his preaching, teaching, and writing.

The third positive statement is in verse 3. This is wonderful, gutsy, amazing transparency for somebody in public leadership: "And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." What Paul is doing is summarizing the feelings that he struggled with when he first arrived in Corinth. He had known about the reputation of the city before he got there: how intellectual it was, how depraved the culture was, how licentious the lifestyle. He had just come from a disappointing time in Athens. Earlier he had been driven out of Thessalonica and beaten in Philippi. He was tired and fearful and lonely. Even after a period of immediate fruitful ministry, with some people coming to faith in Christ, the book of Acts tells us that Paul was still very discouraged.

I've never been beaten for the sake of gospel, and nobody has ever thrown me out of their city. But I do have a love-hate relationship with the call to be a truth-teller. When I have a chance to share with individuals the gospel, my relationship to Christ, and what the cross has done in my life, I get as tongue-tied and overwhelmed as anybody else. If I'm engaging someone who is great with words, I can get tangled up very easily.

Every time I'm asked to teach, whether it's in the Sunday morning worship service or at a Discovery seminar or in a Sunday School class, whether it's ten people or five hundred people, I struggle with my right to be there-why would those people want to listen to me? What do I have to say that's worthwhile? Every couple of years I invite a number of men to study the Bible with me in a men's discipleship group. I've been doing this for twenty years, but every time I make the list and start asking men, I really believe that no one will want to do it. That may sound strange, but I struggle with a sense of inadequacy and weakness. That's how Paul felt.

The Lord Jesus knew the pressure that Paul felt, his discouragement, his depression, his desire to bail out of the ministry. There's a beautiful vignette in Acts 18:9-10 where the Lord Jesus himself shows up to Paul in a vision at night. He says, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." What an encouraging, upbuilding message for the apostle Paul. So Paul did keep on teaching in spite of his weakness and fear and trembling. And many people were saved, and God birthed the church in Corinth.

Finally, Paul describes that result in verse 4: "And my message and my preaching were...[a] demonstration of the Spirit and of power..." Paul understood that he had to depend on the Holy Spirit for results, not his own skills or sensitivities. In spite of Paul's weakness and fear and trembling, he shared the message of the power of the cross, the gospel. The Holy Spirit took that message, delivered in weakness and humility, and began to change lives. Paul was not the persuader. That was the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul was the proclaimer of what was true. It was straightforward and simple: He just told the truth and trusted God for results.

Faith in God's power

Paul explains in verse 5 why he did it this way: "...That your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." Paul is saying, "I didn't come to you Corinthians with human wisdom, because I knew that if I came that way, that's what you would trust, and that's useless. You would invite me into your heart as Savior instead of Jesus. I came to you in my own weakness, but in God's power. And what happened? You trusted God's power, and it changed your life."

First Corinthians 6:9-11 shows the enormity of what God did among those Corinthian folks: "Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate [by perversion], nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God." Dramatic things happened in their lives because of this simple witness of the Spirit by the apostle in the midst of his own personal sense of weakness, fear, and trembling. The power of God was at work bringing freedom to captives.

God is still in the business of doing that. I hope that's an encouragement to you. God is still calling out people like the Corinthians and like us-not wise or influential or powerful people, just sinful, ordinary folks. God has saved us through the message of the cross and given us identity and worth in Jesus Christ. Yesterday when I

was reading through the list in 1 Corinthians 6 of the kinds of folks that God chose and claimed and changed, I thought of a lot of you. I've been at PBC a long time, and I know many of your stories of the deliverance and change that God brought in your life. It was encouraging for me to review how we line up with the folks in that church in Corinth.

So are you clear now about the kind of people God uses to impact the world with the gospel? God wants to use us as he used Paul to bring freedom to captives. There are people in your world, family members and neighbors and co-workers, who desperately need to hear the simple message of the cross. And God may open up an opportunity for you to share with them over a cup of coffee or at lunch. You may be struggling with your own sense of weakness, fear, and trembling. You may not know how to say it. But I promise you, God will use your testimony of what the cross of Christ has done for you no matter how garbled it may sound to you. All God wants is sincerity, transparency, a willingness to appear weak and a little foolish, and a desire to love people with the truth, straightforward and unvarnished. That's what Paul had, and that's what we can have in the power of the Holy Spirit. God will turn the world upside-down and challenge power structures through us, one person at a time. He calls each of us, as he called Paul, to walk into situations that are frightening and start telling the truth about the cross of Jesus Christ, how it has transformed us, and what it can do for them.

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