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Guided by His Word,
Serving in His Love

As Foolish and Offensive as Ever

... ²²Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. – 1 Corinthians 1:22-24

If any man could understand the respective reactions of the Jewish and Gentile worlds to the cross of Jesus, it was Paul. A well-trained Jewish Pharisee, Paul was called by Jesus to become His Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul himself had stumbled over the obstacle that Jesus presented to his own religious beliefs that he had held from childhood. After he became a believer, on more than a few occasions he had been dismissed as quirky, to put it mildly, by Gentiles.

"Stumbling block" is *skandalon*. This word originally meant that part of a trap to which bait is attached. Eventually, it came to refer literally to anything over which a man physically stumbles. Metaphorically, it was used of anything over which a man stumbles intellectually. The Jews had many fiercely stubborn preconceived expectations of one they called *Messiah*. This king from God would be a deliverer for their nation. Under *Messiah*, Israel would be saved from her oppressors and exalted to a position of global prominence unmatched since the days of Solomon. *Messiah* meant "anointed or chosen one". The Greek equivalent for *Messiah* was *Christ*.

When a meek and lowly carpenter appeared to announce his identity as "the Anointed One," (*Christ, Messiah*) those most obstinately locked into their erroneous preconceptions rejected Him. The signs they demanded of Jesus to prove that He was the *Messiah* were not the signs He was willing to provide. But, when Jesus was crucified, His disciples did not abandon their conviction that He was the *Christ*. They testified that His humiliating death was essential to God's master plan of redemption and that Jesus had defeated the grave. For those Jews that rejected Jesus as the Christ, this notion of "Christ crucified" was "fightin' words." It enraged those who had expected a world conqueror, and, in fact, the most violent rejections Paul encountered when proclaiming Jesus as the Christ came from His fellow-Jews.

To the Gentiles, it was all pretty silly. Their many "gods" gave individual communities a religious rallying point, but none of their Gods could be considered absolute in terms of power and certainly not in terms of truth or goodness. They were little more than amplified human beings, depicted in art

with beauty and sculpted physiques. In lore, they were capricious, petty and, typically, ill-disposed toward men. Later, the Romans turned to authoritarian foundations for society; the senate, and later, the emperors. The common denominator throughout the Gentile world was the absence of any absolute truth or any foundation for society loftier than one that was, ultimately, of human origin.

For these Gentiles, the notion of estrangement from an absolute God that man is powerless to repair undermined the highly celebrated disciplines of philosophy. The notion that this God became a man in the person of a Jewish carpenter was silly. The notion that this carpenter died on a cross, an "emblem of suffering and shame" as the hymn writer puts it, for criminals and cantankerous barbarians was amusing. The idea that this villager's death was vicarious, *i.e.*, that he died in the place of sinners was approaching hilarious.

Little has changed in two thousand years. To this day, the cross of Jesus seems to evoke either anger or laughter from those who refuse to embrace it. There is seldom a middle ground. Of course, no one likes to be the target of either anger or laughter. As a result, the modern church is tempted to present Jesus in a manner that offends no one. We feel a bit awkward in this politically-correct environment about calling sin, "sin." We feel reluctant to insist on the exclusivity of Jesus to save. We feel hesitant to declare every other pursuit of God to be a blind alley.

There is another reaction. Some people with a sense of sin will embrace the gospel just as it is preached: "... but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Paul knew that the Corinthians were an intellectually sophisticated people, but while he was up to the task of communicating with them as an academic equal, he had no intentions of attempting to impress them with any fancy presentation of the gospel that undermined its core:

¹When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. – 1 Corinthians 2:1, 2



Karl's Korner