

Is It Stumbling or Foolishness?

Almost five years ago, when I was but 2 years into the “faith,” I wrote a 50 page paper titled “The Foolishness of God,” where I cited a number of God’s earthly interventions as recorded in Scripture, and which the “world” consider to be foolish myths. The inspiration and title for the paper came from First Corinthians chapter one, and in particular, verses 25 and 27 where the Holy Spirit, through Paul, has blessed us with a most precious pearl of information which can serve as a key to the understanding of God, His ways and, His purpose. Verse 25 tells us that the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and verse 27 explains that “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confuse the wise.” In essence, He toys with those who think they are wise by deliberately achieving His purposes through what the “wise” can only see as utter foolishness, while those who admit their ignorance and nothingness compared to Him, are blessed with true understanding. Of course, the ultimate absurdity from the world’s perspective is the Gospel, which tells us that Creator God Himself had to enter His own creation so that He could suffer and die, it being the only way in which we could be cleansed of our sins. Through the wisest of worldly reasoning and logic, it can’t get any more foolish and ridiculous than that! Yet, those of us who have admitted our ignorance and helplessly sinful nature, the Holy Spirit has seen fit to bless us with a deeper insight and understanding which opens our eyes to the sublime beauty of His supernatural love centered wisdom.

In that same vein, the purpose of this paper centers around verse 23, of First Corinthians, where we learn that the idea of Christ being crucified for our sins is to the Jews a “stumbling block” and to the Greeks it is “foolishness.” At first it may be difficult to find any modern-day relevance to this observation. But all scripture is for our learning and application, if we will but pray for and receive from Him, His blessing of understanding and discernment.

First, let us see what this “stumbling block” is all about. As the Apostles began their missionary teachings their audiences were made up almost exclusively of Jews. These were of course, quite well versed in what we now call the Old Testament, it being at the time, the only expression of God’s Word. They knew that there was but one God, the Creator God of Genesis, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. His many predictions through the Prophets were also well known. They knew the commandments, the nature and significance of sin, and the cleansing power of the shedding of innocent blood, as well as the much-prophesied assurance as to the coming of the Messiah. Their main area of confusion was the nature, purpose, and manner of His coming. They knew well that He would come and one day rule the world from David’s throne. They also knew from Isaiah 53 and other Scriptural references that a Messiah would also come as a Suffering Servant. The problem, among other smaller issues, was that they desperately wanted and, therefore, expected the King to come first to liberate them.

So here was the “stumbling block,” the idea that the Suffering Servant had already come, not only in a ceremonial sense, but also as the true final sacrificial Lamb of God to take away the sins; that the Messiah the King had not yet come, and that the same, not another Messiah would come later to be the King. Thus, we can see that the Jews had a well-grounded knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures, which allowed them to at least comprehend the Gospel message once the “stumbling block”, was removed. The evidence of this is found in Acts 2 when Peter preached the Gospel to the Jews at the first Pentecost and 3000 of them were saved. Peter spoke their language in terms that they understood. This is not referring to Greek or Hebrew, but to the language of the Scripture. He cited words of the prophet Joel, and of David, who both pointed to Jesus. He reiterated the words of Jesus as He preached of His divine purpose. Peter did not mince words when he reminded them as indicated in verse 36 “...know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.” His evangelical success was because those to whom he spoke were well grounded in God’s word. They may not have previously caught the full significance of Jesus, but when it was explained to them from Scripture, they had this solid foundation on which could be built, first understanding, then belief, and finally a saving faith. It should be noted that

even though they were well steeped in the ways of God as revealed in the Scripture of the times, this “window” of opportunity to receive the Gospel soon closed to the Jews as this truth became hidden from their eyes even as Isaiah predicted, and as Jesus, during His triumphal entry, most clearly stated in Luke 19:42. This time marked the beginning of the age of the Gentiles and it will end with the Rapture, after which God will again focus on the Jews, and come back to rule from David’s throne.

Now let us examine the Greek view of the Gospel as foolishness. In order to do this, we need to examine Paul’s ministry to the Greeks as recorded in Acts 17:16-32. In Athens, Paul found that the Greeks knew absolutely nothing about the Creator God, but instead worshiped numerous idols and false gods, one of which they called the “unknown god.” It was probably thrown in among their thousands of gods to make sure they didn’t miss any. How does one introduce the Gospel to those who have no foundation in which to build such a seemingly foolish doctrine as a Creator God becoming man and then allowing Himself to be tortured and killed for the remission of sins? They had no concept of sin or repentance, no actual history regarding creation, or knowledge of prophets, or the accurate and precise fulfillment of every one of their many prophecies. They knew nothing of God’s many early miracles or of those performed by Jesus. To start out preaching the Gospel without first establishing this foundation could only be, and was seen as foolishness by those who first heard it, and who would not accept it blindly. Think about it, if you knew nothing about God and the history leading up to Jesus, is there anything more ludicrous than hearing that the Creator God entered His own creation as a man and chose to be tortured and to die, and in that manner suffer the punishment due us for our own sins? Sins? There are four Greek words, which have been translated as sin or sins. They relate to “missing the mark, ignorant, willful error, or offense.” The concept of sins as defined by Scripture was completely unknown. Notice that the Greeks started out referring to Paul as the “babbling” (Acts 17:18). To even get their attention, he had to refer them to their “unknown god” and suggested to them that this was He, the Creator God who they worshiped ignorantly, the God who “...made the world, and all things therein, and who dwelleth not in a temple made with hands neither is He worshiped with hands.” In other words, he wisely began by preaching Genesis, the

essential foundation of Christian faith, without which a strong, solid, lasting, real saving faith is extremely difficult and, I believe, rarely achieved.

Now we can see that as Peter preached the Gospel to the Jews, it was a “stumbling block” until it was explained to them that it was consistent with their Biblical background and that it filled in the gaps as well as completed, that is, brought to a closure, what they could now understand had always been God’s plan for salvation. The “stumbling block” was readily removed because they had the background required to understand and were thus capable of being enlightened. However, Paul was preaching to those absent any such background, those who could only find the Gospel to be foolishness, unworthy of serious consideration. Therefore, Peter was enormously successful numerically in converting those early Jews, while Paul had much less success with the Greeks.

It is my understanding that theological seminaries teach this distinction of methods and their relative success, but fail to recognize the subtleties of why, and, therefore, misapply the message. So they continue to teach that to effectively preach the New Testament with its Gospel is sufficient to bear fruit, and that there is relatively little need or value to spend much time in the Old Testament. Perhaps up to 50 or 75 years ago, this may have been true and, therefore, appropriate and effective, because in those days, this was a Christian culture. Most homes had a Bible and it was read daily, both the Old and New Testament. This, along with serious prayer, dedicated church attendance, and convicting sermons, was a solid part of family life. Preaching the Gospel was, for the most, commonly understood. “Stumbling blocks” remained impediments for some, but inspired preaching and witnessing could readily remove them for many others. By comparison, and used here as an analogy, most Americans were Jews, in the sense that they had a foundation on which the Gospel could more readily be set in their hearts. Today, this is no longer a Christian culture. We are for the most part “Greeks” without that foundation, and the Gospel is, therefore, seen as foolishness to most people. So, continuing to preach the Gospel to “Greeks” will continue to be but foolishness until the Church recognizes this and begins to take seriously the dire need for real basic Bible study, study of the foundational Old Testament, as well as the Gospel. Overcoming

foolishness is much more difficult than guiding someone over a stumbling block. Until the “churches” realize the nature, as well as the gravity of the problem, it will continue to succeed only in drawing entertainment seekers and “graduating” multitudes who are absent of any saving faith, but filled with false, vain and very fragile beliefs which do not meet the criteria for salvation.

In the 1800’s, men like Wesley, Whitefield, Bunyan, and Spurgeon, and even up to around 1940, men like Ironside and Barnhouse could rightly claim thousands of true conversions, because they powerfully preached the foundation as well as the Gospel, the whole Word of God, the unpleasant along with the pleasant. And when they preached, their words were not just superficially accepted, but they were foundationally understood by audiences who had a basic knowledge of Scripture. They were speaking mostly to “Jews” in this sense. The process was, therefore, a matter of removing “stumbling blocks,” not first needing to overcome Biblical illiteracy and the perceptions of “foolishness.”

Today, in our “Greek” culture, perhaps through the mass marketing techniques, many are coming to churches to hear, and some tend to stay, at least for a while, and others keep coming back as long as the “feel-good Gospel” doesn’t take too long, is sufficiently entertaining, not too heavy, and above all not convicting. “Guilt trips” are the kiss of death to the goal of simply filling pews. But what are the results? What is the fruit? Is there a deep rooted, firm belief followed by real lasting conviction, confession, remorse, repentance and faith unto salvation? Or is it a shallow acceptance of a fanciful image without any depth of knowledge or understanding, an image which will easily fade when the “going gets rough?” If it’s a faith at all, it may be a blind faith based on a faith and love for a certain pastor who says what they want to hear, and not necessarily a faith based on a belief in the infallible Word of God as personally understood and proven through the study of Scripture. Will this “faith” survive when its professor is thrust out into the world of mass denial, attractive false gods, humanistic logic, temptations, and tragedies? Polls tells us that seven out of every ten young people from “solid” Christian homes, after a year out in the world, renounce their faith! Why? Was it ever real? Had it

been based on a solid in-depth learning and understanding, starting with a lateral belief in Genesis:1-11, along with pulpit messages expressing the whole Word of God, rather than just some comfortable niceties, this statistic would be much different. How can a superficial faith not founded on the rock foundation of the whole Word of God possibly survive the prevailing government school's indoctrination of evolution, "billions of years" scientific "proof," and the "great" philosophers of the "age of enlightenment," all of whom were atheists? Add to this the multitudes of alternative faiths, temptations and pleasures of the world thrust upon the hormonally excited, curious, and still moldable characters, how can anyone without the solid rock foundation of the entire Scripture possibly even hope, let alone expect faith to survive?

In today's basically non-Christian culture, it must be understood by those who preach, teach, and witness, that one is dealing with "Greeks" not "Jews" and all evangelizing must deal with that fact or it is doomed to failure. Saving souls must be the goal, and not merely filling the pews. To think "if we just get them in here, we can lead them to salvation" is like chasing rainbows, unless the whole Word is preached, both sweet and sour, and unless Paul's strategy with the Greeks is applied.