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Lent 3 • 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 • March 8, 2015 The Word of the Cross

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The Word of the Cross

We are no strangers to scandal, and we know a scandal when we see it. Whether it involves a politician, a Hollywood star, a sports figure, or even a church leader scandals are, unfortunately, rather common occurrences. Scandals involve shameful, distasteful, offensive behavior. A scandal is an action or event regarded as morally or legally wrong and causing general public outrage. That being the case, why would St. Paul refer to the cross of Christ as scandalous or offensive? (Gal 5:11).

1 Corinthians 1:18–31 confronts the scandal of the Christian faith. The cross is a scandal, a stumbling block. St. Paul makes that clear in our text. The church in Corinth was located in a climate in the greater community that was characterized by some as “vicious morality.” The city was known for depravity. The members of the congregation were tempted to make themselves at home and comfortable in that climate while they waited for Jesus to be revealed (1 Cor 1:7); a temptation, by the way, that is not lost on many Christians today. The context for ministry now is not far from that of Paul’s world.

Unfortunately, while the Corinthians waited for Jesus to be revealed, internal divisions occurred in the church. St. Paul’s response to these factions is centered in Christ. The gospel he proclaims is the “word of the cross.” This “word of the cross” announces salvation to the whole world through the suffering and death of Jesus. The wise of the world who seem to possess every advantage cannot by their wisdom find God. He comes “through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” He comes through the word of the cross. The Jews wanted spectacular signs from heaven so the cross was scandalous to them. The Greeks wanted logical reasoning so the cross was scandalous to them. God doesn’t come through terms established by human desire. He comes on his own terms and that offends many. Paul states that what looks like undignified foolishness to us is far above any human reasoning. This word of the cross is the power of God! God chose what is foolish in the world. God chose what is weak in the world. God chose what is low and despised in the world. He chose all of that so that we do not boast in our own strength, but in his strength. God made Christ our wisdom and our righteousness and our sanctification and our redemption. “We preach Christ crucified . . . Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23–24).

C. F. W. Walther writes this about the word of the cross, “Following Christ’s death, the cross is now the only boat upon which even the greatest sinner can escape from the raging floods of his sins into the harbor of eternal salvation. It is a ladder

ascending to heaven, upon which faith climbs confidently, as well as the key of heaven, with which the gates of paradise are opened. Once a sign of shame, the cross is now a sign of eternal honor and glory. Christians should never be ashamed of the cross. Instead, they should carry it secretly in their heart as their most precious treasure and they should carry it on their banner triumphantly throughout the world as a wonderful sign of the redemption of the world and as the dearest symbol of their holy religion, their faith, and their hope.”¹

Suggested Outline

The Word of the Cross

The preacher has the wonderful opportunity in this text to invite his hearers to respond to Christ by believing the word of the cross and living according to it.

1. Not power as the world sees it, but Christ the power of God.
2. Not wisdom as the world sees it, but Christ the wisdom of God.
3. Not me, but Christ in me.

Wayne Knolhoff

¹ C. F. W. Walther, *God Grant It* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 839.