

Small Group Guide

A Cross-Centered Community

The Church at Brook Hills

November 29 - December 5, 2010

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

This guide is to help you facilitate discussion with your Small Group. Use it as a resource to lead your group in discovering and owning the truths of God's Word. There may be questions you do not want to use and there may be instances where you just want to focus on a particular point or truth. Some questions may bring out emotions and cause people to dwell on their relationship with God. Your role is to facilitate this experience not to complete the discussion guide. Use this as a flexible teaching tool not a rigid teaching task list.

A Cross-Centered Community

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to a dysfunctional church. The church in Corinth did not know how to survive, much less thrive, in the hedonistic, narcissistic culture that was first century Corinth. The Corinthian culture tended to boast in all that served a person's self-exaltation. Popular philosophies, powerful personalities, impressive presentations of oratorical skills and intelligence, as well as excessive demonstrations of wealth or even religious or irreligious devotion determined the degree of esteem a person or group would receive from society. This staple trait of the Corinthian culture seeped into the young Corinthian church. As a result, the glory of Christ and His cross began to be depreciated within the newly-formed Christian community, which introduced a host of problems.

Every local church experiences tension in the relationship between the carnal-cultural atmosphere they have been saved out of and the eschatological-culture they have been saved into. This is certainly the type of situation Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians. Conforming the Corinthian believers' behavior to a Gospel-centered, Holy Spirit-empowered ethic proved to be a difficult task. The tentacles of the Corinthian culture latched onto the new community and threatened to extract authentic spiritual life from her midst and render her inept at fulfilling her mission. So, Paul opens 1 Corinthians with a resolute reminder of the centrality of the cross in the people's salvation, significance, and spirituality.

Study the Text . . .

The Centrality of the Cross

Paul begins 1 Corinthians by greeting and encouraging the congregation (1:1-3). He then expresses gratitude to God for their faith (1:4-9). In 1:10-17, Paul proceeds to address the division and quarrelling that has come to characterize their community as a result of losing a cross-centered focus. He learned from Chloe's people that the congregation had begun dividing into camps devoted to a particular leader (i.e. Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and even a smug devotion to Christ). The factions occurred because the congregation assessed the men and their ministries based on a depraved set of

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criteria informed more by the Corinthian culture than by the cross of Christ. Members attached themselves to the prestigious gift sets of a leader and began drawing Christ-diminishing comparisons between themselves and other groups. Such elitist, tribalistic approaches to Christian community undermine the glory of Christ's cross. Paul further learned of several other issues that plagued the church—the compromised relationship between Christians and their surrounding pagan culture, the disordering of church practices such as head coverings and the Lord's Supper, the misuse of spiritual gifts, and matters of personal morality such as sex, marriage, celibacy, and the virtues. Paul writes a practical letter addressing each of these issues. Paul finds the remedy to the Corinthian ills in the central message of Christ crucified.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 contains Paul's resolution to *re-establish* the centrality of the cross in the life and ministry of the Corinthian congregation. The cross of Christ is the central theme of today's text. But more important than being the central theme of a biblical text, the cross of Christ must become the central theme of every biblical community. Paul reminds his readers that their community was formed in response to hearing the message of Christ crucified (2:1-5). However, clearly they had pushed the central message of the cross to the fringes of their community. The message of Christ crucified became just another spoke in the wheel of their community rather than the unifying hub. Consequently, their community began falling apart. In order to retain God-honoring markers of unity, holiness, and humility, the centrality of the cross must be reasserted into the community of faith in Corinth.

- How many times does Paul mention the cross of Christ in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25?
- What does Paul encourage his readers to do in v. 26?
- How did Paul approach the Corinthians in 2:1, 3?
- What was Paul's resolution in 2:2?
- Paul's selected manner and method for ministering to the Corinthians contradicted their chief cultural values. Why do you think Paul approached the Corinthians in such a counter-cultural way?
- What implications should Paul's methodology have on how we minister in our own 21st century American culture?

Group Discussion . . .

- If someone asked you, what is the central message of Christianity, what would you say?
- What might threaten to decentralize the message of Christ crucified from our community?
- How might we maintain a cross-centered focus in our lives? Faith family?
- Is it possible for our methods of ministry to undermine the message of our ministry? If so, how might we avoid doing so?
- How might we structure our ministry methods in such a way that reinforces the central message of Christ crucified?

The Cross and Salvation

Study the Text...

Here, Paul asserts that the “word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1:18). Salvation, then, comes to people who hear the message of Christ crucified. The power for salvation is found in the message spoken rather than the messenger speaking. This undermines the tribalistic practices of the Corinthian Christians acknowledged in 1:11-17. Scripture always attributes salvation to the power of God inherent in His word and never to a particularly gifted person or charismatic personality (1:3-5; cr. 3:5-9).

We live in a culture that collectively smirks when Christ’s death on the cross is proclaimed as salvific. Modern advancements in science and technology along with Post-Modern developments in philosophy and sociology have served to swell the Western ego. Many people consider the cross of Christ foolish, archaic, unsophisticated, barbaric, and/or unnecessary. Often times such salty sentiments are considered new perspectives that have risen in harmony with the sociological evolution of the human race. However, our 21st century, North American cultural context is not unique in viewing the cross of Christ with condescension. The Corinthian culture of the 1st century did the exact same thing. Because the cross of Christ is an affront to human pride, sinful human beings of every historical-cultural context have viewed its message with contempt.

The message of a crucified Messiah stands in sharp contrast with what customarily constitutes a Jewish sign or Greek wisdom (v. 24). Crucifixion was a crude method of execution. No Jew or Greek could have imagined ever worshiping a person who died on a cross. Yet, such a death was central to God’s plan of salvation. As a result, God accomplished salvation for His people in such a way that ascribes glory exclusively to Himself (v. 29, 31).

- How is the “word of the cross” described in verse 18?
- What is the Jewish response to the preaching of Christ crucified (v. 23)? Why?
- What is the Greek response to the preaching of Christ crucified (v. 23)? Why?
- Why is Christ considered the power and wisdom of God? (v. 24, cr. Romans 3:21-27)
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Group Discussion...

- How does the cross of Christ reveal the power of God?
- How does the cross of Christ reveal the wisdom of God?
- Why does the cross of Christ undermine human pride?
- In what ways does the message of Christ crucified prevent people from boasting in the presence of God?
- Why do you believe the gospel?

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- If the power of salvation is primarily located in the message rather than the messenger, then what effect does that have on our personal evangelism?

The Cross and Significance

Study the Text . . .

Corinthian culture tied a person's significance to his or her social status. This tendency massaged its way into the Christian community in Corinth. Rather than boasting in the cross of Christ, Corinthian Christians imitated the Corinthian culture by boasting in a plethora of flesh-pleasing, eye-brow raising activities. They sought significance in the eyes of their peers by making sure they belonged to the "right group." As already mentioned, some members boasted in the oratorical skills of their preferred preacher (cr. 1:10-17). Other divisions were drawn between groups of people who were part of different socio-economic classes. Qualitative lines were drawn between the wealthy minority and the un-wealthy majority. Wealthier people assumed positions of authority and influence because they practically determined where the church could gather and how the church could serve. They erroneously considered members of a lower socio-economic class to be under their authority.

However, Paul encourages his readers to consider who they were before hearing the message of the cross (v. 26). He reminds readers that the cross of Christ renders boasting in any person, place, or thing other than Christ senseless (v. 31). Moreover, in verses 26-31, Paul calls attention to how God transformed them into His people in spite of the unimpressive status many of them held in society. In so doing, God renders significance obtained through ancestry, accomplishments, or affiliations illegitimate. The only significance that matters is that which comes to a person who is rightly related to the crucified Christ. In fact, such significance should be considered more than sufficient regardless of how a person is perceived or is treated by society.

- Who did God choose in vv. 27-28? For what stated purposes?
- Examine the themes of the lifting up of the down trodden and the reversal of human status found in the OT prophets (i.e. 1 Sam. 2:1-8; Isa. 61:1)
- Who is credited with having endowed the Corinthian Christians with significance (v. 30)?

Group Discussion...

- Where do people search for significance?
- How might we become more satisfied with our status in Christ so that we don't search for significance outside of Christ?
- Where are lines drawn between groups of people in our culture today? In our church?
- How might we erase lines that may be drawn between people in the church today?

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- In what ways can we reinforce each other's significance in Christ?

The Cross and Spirituality

Study the Text...

Trusting in the death of Christ should not merely be considered the point in a Christian's spiritual experience, but the posture of a Christian's spiritual existence. Christ's death for our sins is the ultimate expression and embodiment of the power and wisdom of God. As such, in dying for our sins, Christ became to us righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (v. 30). He is the beginning, means, and end of true Christian spirituality. The Corinthians treasured a spirituality that was devoid of a Christ-centered nexus. They sought to grow beyond their need of Christ and His cross. However, true Christian spirituality never outgrows the cross of Christ.

The cross of Christ is the source of all God-honoring spirituality. When a Christian community ceases to focus on the centrality of the cross, the result is not exponential growth in spiritual maturity, but, instead, excessive expressions of spiritual immaturity. All the issues apparent in the life of the church at Corinth resulted because they lacked a cross-centered approach to their faith and practice. Exponential growth in spiritual maturity seeks to grow deep in one's knowledge of and wide in one's application of the death of Christ in day to day life.

- What did God make Christ Jesus to be for us in v. 30?
- What do righteousness, sanctification, and redemption mean?
- Spend time reflecting on the relationship between the cross of Christ and Christian spirituality (i.e. Why is it that we can approach God and benefit from the means of grace (i.e. prayer, Bible study, praise, preaching, etc)?)

Group Discussion...

- What does Christian spirituality look like?
- What constitutes spiritual maturity?
- How can/should spiritual maturity be gauged?
- Can the cross of Christ be detached from the spiritual life of the Christian? Why or why not?
- In what ways can we grow deep in our knowledge of the death of Christ?
- In what ways can we grow wide in our application of the death of Christ?