

*1 Corinthians 1:17b***PREFACE**

As mentioned in our study last week, v17 is a transitional verse, connected to the earlier passage, but segueing into the next.

Paul brings up the subject of baptism, not to discourse on it at length, but to help make his point in two directions:

1. using it as an example for how their divisions may have come about, i.e., each of the opposing factions favored different leaders, because they had been baptized by them; and
2. to demonstrate that he, Paul, had come for a higher, more "mission-critical" purpose: "to preach the gospel."

Godet: To preach the gospel is to cast the net; it is apostolic work. To baptize is to gather the fish now taken and put them into vessels.

Now, in the second part of the verse, Paul cracks the door open to the next topic, on which he will be for the next several chapters.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:14-17.**v17B**

Many years ago, when Linda and I were touring in Southern California with our *His Company* drama group, we met and worked with the pastor of a church in San Diego. He was young, and earnest, but his sermons were rather stiff and dry. In person he was gregarious, with a comfortable sense of humor, but when he got behind the pulpit the humor seemed to disappear, and his delivery was that of a colorless lecturer. His delivery was a good match for the old, dusty church building in which the congregation met.

Some time later we visited his church—now meeting at a local theater—on a Sunday morning. And to us the pastor was barely recognizable. Now his suit fit better, and was stylish. His haircut was more refined. Instead of being glued to a pulpit, he now moved easily about the stage. Most changed of all was his delivery. Now his sermon was more conversational; he smiled more often, and his message was interrupted here and there with bits of humor.

But something else had also changed. The young pastor had lost much of his sincerity. Showmanship had replaced dull but earnest exposition. The pastor's sermons were more entertaining, but now *he* was the star, instead of God. And Linda and I left the service that morning saddened by the change in our friend.

The apostle Paul was much like this pastor *before* his change. In his own words he describes a lackluster delivery when speaking.

Read 2 Corinthians 10:10.**Read 2 Corinthians 11:6.**

What Paul fears for the church in Corinth is that they are being drawn to preaching of a style much like our pastor friend *after* the change. And he refers to this in the second part of v17.

...not in cleverness of speech,

Just what does he mean by “cleverness of speech”? The NASB is not the most literal translation, but it best captures the idea behind the Greek. When we look at the two words that are the root of this phrase—*sofia* (wisdom) and *logos* (word)—we might well wonder, *What’s the harm in that?*

ouk en sophiā logou = **cleverness of speech**^{nasb}, **with words of eloquent wisdom**^{esv}, **with words of human wisdom**^{niv}, **with wisdom of words**^{kjvs}

JFB: philosophical reasoning set off with oratorical language and secular learning, which the Corinthians set so undue a value upon in Apollos, and the want of which in Paul they were dissatisfied with.

Garland: a wisdom that Paul finds incompatible with the gospel because it relies on manipulative rhetoric.

Olshausen: word-wisdom, i.e., a wisdom in appearance and not in reality.

Lange: not in the style of a philosopher trained in the rhetoric and dialectics of the schools, [but in that of a witness, bearing testimony to the great facts in and through which God had chosen to reveal himself].

Note: The ESV seems to have this backwards. Of course we favor wisdom to be dispensed with eloquence—but that is not what Paul is saying here. What the Corinthians were guilty of was favoring *the wisdom of eloquence*, which is something entirely different. This is captured in the KJVs “wisdom of words.”

Note: The English use the word “clever” in conversation more often than Americans. When a Brit remarks, “How clever you are!” they mean it as a compliment, meaning smart, intelligent, or inventive. But the word can also be used sarcastically, “Well, aren’t you the clever one!” implying that the one being called clever is perhaps up to no good, or is at least being wily, or conniving, with ulterior motives. This latter usage is closer to the manner in which the NASB uses the word “cleverness.”

Garland: The result is that they are swayed by the power of the orator’s rhetorical skill rather than converted by the power of the cross. **Eloquence that elevates the status of the preacher cancels the power of the cross.** (emphasis added)

so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.

Sidebar: This is Paul’s first use of the word “cross” in any of his letters, just as his use of the word “crucified” in v13 is the first. Paul more often speaks of Christ having “died” for us.

I fear that most of us do not spend as much time as we should appreciating the explosive, universe-shaking ramifications of the cross. We may be profoundly grateful for His sacrifice, even dedicating our lives to Him for the unimaginable grace of the cross. But too often we restrict our understanding of Calvary to the personal, to the act itself, forgetting how that selfless act reverberated throughout all of creation.

Don't get lost in the Nativity. It was important for the Son of God to come in flesh, for only then could He be sacrificed for our sin. It was important for Him to walk this earth as one of us, for only then could He reveal to man the true nature of the Father. But never forget that the little one born to the maiden created the world to which He came. Never forget that He created time itself, and the thread of history into which He was born. And never, *ever* forget that the tiny helpless baby of the manger is the Lord and ruling King of all that is. He is the one who holds it all together. The Nativity is a tender moment expressing the love of God for man, but it pales against the moment that took hold of the entire universe and snapped it like the ragged tails of a cheap rug.

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now the centurion, and those who were with him keeping guard over Jesus, when they saw the earthquake and the things that were happening, became very frightened and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:50-54)

The Son of God just died for mortal man! The story was flashed throughout the universe, and all of creation quaked at the staggering truth. *He did it! He actually did it!* All of history came to a grinding halt in that cataclysmic moment. Then, a few days later, it restarted. Now it would have a different trajectory, man would have something it had never had before: both a Savior and the promise of resurrection. All because of Jesus.

This moment in time was like no other: the immediate effect was so powerful it split rocks and emptied graves, and the after-shocks of that moment reverberate still. This world and its people were and remain irrevocably changed by "the cross."

There was nothing special about the fact that Jesus died on a *cross*. The cross was just another means of execution, one of the more hideous means used by the Romans. The one being executed would slowly, over days, drown in his own fluid as it filled his lungs. At the same time his body would be wracked with agonizing cramping, being pinned to the cross in an unnatural position. It was a horrible way to die.

But the means of execution was not what made *this* execution special. It was not the cross, *but that **the Son of God** was on that cross, dying as a sacrificial lamb for the sins of all mankind.* That's what made it special—and it is from this that "the cross" acquires its power.

Examining how our modern translations interpret this phrase gives us a pretty good picture of what it means:

NASB:	would not be made void
ESV:	be emptied of its power
NIV:	be emptied of its power
KJVs:	be made of none/no effect

Of these I favor the NIV/ESV “be emptied of its power.” The operative word here is

kenoo (ken-ah’-oh) = from <G2756> (kenos); **to make empty**, i.e. (figurative) **to abase, neutralize, falsify** :- make (of none effect, of no reputation, void), be in vain.

Colin Brown: In the first instance [things], [the noun] *kenos* means lit. empty (e.g., an empty well or house). When applied to people, it means devoid of sense, foolish, senseless... With the verb *kenoo* the emphasis falls on emptying and making void. The cross and faith form the central subject matter of the gospel and thus constitute its power. Hence the offence of the cross which both condemns and saves should not be made void by word[s] of worldly wisdom.

This is one of those passages in God’s word that, when it is fully digested, takes one’s breath away! There is something supernatural going on here—which is realized when we flesh it out with a couple of verses later in this chapter.

Understand, Paul is not preaching against eloquence itself; there is nothing wrong with a preacher or teacher being well-spoken so as to effectively deliver his message. May God in His grace grant us more. But, again, as Garland writes, “Eloquence that elevates the status of the preacher cancels the power of the cross.” *There* is the offense.

Let’s see how some following verses help us understand the second part of v17. *Star Wars* gave us “The Force,” and God’s word gives us the Greek *dynamis*.

dynamis = from <G1410> (dunamai); **force** (literal or figurative); **specially miraculous power (usually by implication a miracle itself)** :- ability, abundance, meaning, might (-ily, -y, -y deed), (worker of) miracle (-s), power, strength, violence, might (wonderful) work.

First, notice how Paul connects v17 and v18. As we have seen, the word translated “speech” (NASB) is a form of *logos*, usually translated “word.” In v17 he employs it to denigrate those who would use “clever” speech to impress the crowd. That kind of *logos* empties the cross of its power.

Then Paul links v17 with v18 by referring to the *logos* of the cross. And what is the word of the cross? If you remove the contrasting reference to the unsaved, v18 would read, “For the word of the cross...is the *power of God*.” (emphasis added)

Read 1 Corinthians 1:23-24.

In v23 we are back at the cross; as we have cited a number of times, Paul declares forcefully that his calling is to “preach Christ crucified.” What *is* “Christ crucified”? It is (v24) the *dynamis* of God! *That* is what tore the veil in-two; that is what split the rocks; and that is what released the dead from their tombs!

And it is that same power, the same “force,” that saves us from our sin *because* the Son of God was nailed to a cross. And, incredibly, it is this same supernatural power that is squelched, extinguished by teaching that seeks to impress and exalt self, rather than pointing people to the cross.