

THE FOLLY OF THE CROSS

Donald E. Green
Faculty Associate in New Testament

First Cor 1:23 indicates that both Jews and Gentiles refused to believe Paul's preaching of Christ crucified. They rejected the message in part because of the cultural connotations of crucifixion in the first century. Crucifixion was a vulgar, common execution that the Romans imposed on notorious criminals, prisoners of war, and rebellious slaves. Its harsh brutality symbolized the supremacy of the Roman government over the victim. Gentiles thus viewed crucifixion as a sure sign of the victim's defeat. Jews, on the other hand, held crucified men in even greater contempt because to them crucifixion was a sign of God's curse on the victim. Paul's preaching of Christ crucified thus cut deeply against the grain of his culture. Jews rejected the idea that the Messiah could be crucified (and thus cursed) and looked for signs instead. Gentiles rejected as foolishness the notion that a crucified man could be the only Savior of mankind and sought eloquent rhetoric in its place. Paul's example challenges today's Christian leader to confront the culture with the same message of Christ crucified and not to cater to the latest fads in marketing the gospel to the passing whims of unbelievers.

* * * * *

The Folly of the Cross in New Testament Preaching

When Jesus Christ commissioned His disciples to preach the gospel, He sent them with a message that collided with the cultural sensibilities of the day. His death and resurrection were the basis for the forgiveness of sin, yet both Jews and Gentiles found the manner of His death—crucifixion—to be a severe impediment to receiving the gospel because they viewed crucified men with complete disdain.

The apostle Paul mentioned these obstacles in 1 Cor 1:23. "Christ crucified" was "to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness." The reason for those obstacles can only be understood with an awareness of the historical background of crucifixion in the first-century Roman Empire. This essay will explain that background to enable the reader to understand why Paul's audience found the message of a crucified Savior so repulsive.

First will come a survey of the history of crucifixion in the ancient world, followed by a more specific examination of crucifixion in the Roman Empire. The discussion will identify the usual victims of crucifixion, together with the specific manner by which they were crucified. Then, it will describe the attitudes of Jews and Gentiles toward crucifixion. Once this historical background has been developed, it will explore its bearing on the interpretation of 1 Cor 1:23. Finally, it will briefly suggest some modern applications to Christian life and ministry.

A Historical Survey of Crucifixion

As practiced in the ancient world, crucifixion was a form of capital punishment in which the victim was attached to a wooden cross and left to die.¹ Its origin is generally attributed to the Persian Empire, although evidence indicates that diverse barbarians such as the Indians, Assyrians, and Scythians also employed the practice.²

The ancient historian Herodotus establishes the widespread existence of crucifixion by the time of the Persians, although the exact form of crucifixion is not always clear in his writings.³ For example, the Median king Astyages (585-550 B.C.) "impaled" his advisers after they persuaded him to allow his rival Cyrus to escape.⁴ Herodotus also records a corpse being hung on a cross as a final disgrace to the deceased;⁵ the narrow escape of Egyptian physicians from impalement by Darius;⁶ and a royal judge who was actually taken down from a cross when Darius reconsidered the death penalty he had ordered against him.⁷

Those examples illustrate the use of crucifixion for individual or small-group executions. Yet some leaders also employed crucifixion in mass executions, as shown in Darius' crucifixion of Babylonian inhabitants. Herodotus writes,

Darius . . . chose out near three thousand of the leading citizens, and caused them to be crucified, while he allowed the remainder still to inhabit the city.⁸

Crucifixion continued after the fall of the Persian Empire. Curtius Rufus records how Alexander the Great crucified two thousand survivors from the siege of Tyre:

Then the anger of the king offered a sad spectacle to the victors. Two thousand persons, for whose killing the general madness had spent itself, hung fixed to crosses over a huge stretch of the shore.⁹

Crucifixion is also recorded in the Hasmonean era (142-63 B.C.). A particularly brutal incident occurred when Alexander Janneus (102-76 B.C.) crucified eight hundred Pharisees while their wives and children were viciously

¹Andrew William Lintott and George Ronald Watson, "Crucifixion," in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1996) 411.

²Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 22-23. At least one modern writer casts doubt on the reliability of this evidence (Gerald G. O'Collins, "Crucifixion," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freeman [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 1:1207).

³Hengel, *Crucifixion* 24.

⁴Herodotus 1:128.2, in *The History of Herodotus*, ed. George Rawlinson (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1859) 1:205.

⁵*Ibid.*, 3.125.3, in *History* 2:424.

⁶*Ibid.*, 3.132.2, in *History* 2:428.

⁷*Ibid.*, 7.194.1, in *History* 4:133.

⁸*Ibid.*, 3.159.1, in *History* 2:442.

⁹Quintus Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander* 4.4.17, trans. John C. Rolfe, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946) 1:205.

murdered at their feet.¹⁰ This horrifying mass execution quelled the dissent against Janneus' rule for the moment and no doubt seared the awfulness of crucifixion on Jewish consciousness for many years to come.

When the Romans ascended to power in 63 B.C., they also employed crucifixion, apparently learning the practice from the Phoenicians through Carthage.¹¹ Josephus describes several crucifixions in first-century Palestine. Varus of Syria (d. 9 B.C.) crucified two thousand men after squashing a revolt in Judea just prior to the turn of the century.¹² An unspecified number of Jews underwent crucifixion after another revolt following a quarrel between Jews and Samaritans,¹³ and several prisoners of war were crucified in Caesarea.¹⁴

Felix, the procurator of Judea from A.D. 52-58, crucified many robbers—"a multitude not to be enumerated"—while he was in power.¹⁵ Nero crucified Christians in his garden following the burning of Rome in A.D. 64.¹⁶ Gessius Florus, procurator of Judea from A.D. 65-70, crucified many people, including men despite their Roman dignity as members of the equestrian order.¹⁷ Still further, Titus crucified so many Jews during the siege of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 that the soldiers did not have room for the crosses and exhausted their supply of crosses to hold the bodies.¹⁸

The heavy employment of crucifixion apparently lasted until the days of Constantine (d. 337). The fifth-century church historian Sozomen says Constantine abolished crucifixion in honor of Christ, nearly 1,000 years after the Persians used crucifixion during Astyages' reign.¹⁹

From this brief survey, it is clear that crucifixion was common for several centuries before the time of Christ. The manner of the Lord's death was common for that era, which partly explains first-century skepticism toward the message of "Christ crucified." How could Christ be someone exceptional (let alone God incarnate!) when He died a common death like thousands before Him?

The preceding discussion has addressed crucifixion only in general terms. The next section will explain more specifically the Roman use of crucifixion, specifically identifying the victims and the methods of crucifixion employed.

¹⁰Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.14.2.

¹¹G. F. Hawthorne, "Cross," in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 1:1038.

¹²Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.10.10.

¹³*Ibid.*, 20.5.2.

¹⁴Josephus, *Wars* 2.12.6.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 2.13.2.

¹⁶Tacitus, *The Annals* 15.44.

¹⁷Josephus, *Wars* 2.14.9.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 5.11.1. These Jews were crucified after their death to demoralize the remaining inhabitants of the city.

¹⁹Salaminus Sozomen, "The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen," in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2d Ser., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 245.

The Roman Use of Crucifixion

As a general rule, Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion. The punishment was used on rebellious slaves and during military conquests over foreign provinces.²⁰ The Romans also crucified notorious criminals such as robbers and assassins.²¹

Nevertheless, crucifixion was occasionally imposed even on Roman citizens guilty of treason or serious crimes that threatened national security. In those instances, the victims forfeited the protections of Roman citizenship because of their criminal activity.²²

The Empire's policies on crucifixion conditioned Roman citizens to view crucified men with universal contempt. The crucified were either rebellious slaves, the lowest of criminals, or defeated and humiliated foes of the empire.²³

The victims' indignity went beyond their alleged crimes or military defeat, however. The Romans crucified their victims publicly to deter crime and help maintain public order.²⁴ Further, they had rather systematized crucifixion so that it thoroughly tortured and demeaned the crucified. First, the victim was flogged with a leather whip studded with bone or metal. This flogging reduced the back and shoulders to throbbing ribbons of bleeding flesh. The condemned then shouldered the crossbar upon which he was to be hung and carried it to the place of crucifixion (cf. John 19:17).²⁵

As he walked, a placard around his neck indicated the crime(s) of which he had been convicted. Once to the execution site, he was stripped naked and his outstretched arms were tied or nailed to the crossbar. Then, the crossbar was hoisted and fastened to an upright post. A small peg gave the condemned a place to sit to somewhat relieve the strain on his arms.²⁶

The time on the cross was one of grotesque agony for the victim. Though death could be hastened through breaking the legs (cf. John 19:31-33),²⁷ it was often delayed for days as the crucified slowly succumbed to exhaustion or suffocation.²⁸ The final indignity came when the corpse was left on the cross to rot or provide food for animals and crows. Occasionally, however, the body would be given to relatives

²⁰Colin Brown, "Cross, Wood, Tree," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 1:392.

²¹Hawthorne, "Cross" 1:1038.

²²Hengel, *Crucifixion* 39.

²³The distinction between citizen and non-citizen is consistent with the traditions handed down regarding the martyrdom of the apostles Paul and Peter. Paul, the citizen, was beheaded. Peter, the non-citizen, was crucified head down (William Byron Forbush, ed., *Fox's Book of Martyrs* [Philadelphia: Universal Book and Bible House, 1926] 4).

²⁴Brown, "Cross, Wood, Tree" 1:392.

²⁵Plutarch, "On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance," in *Plutarch's Moralia*, 9.554A, trans. Phillip H. De Lacy and Benedict Einarson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946) 7.215.

²⁶O'Collins, "Crucifixion" 1:1208-1209; H. L. Drumwright, Jr., "Crucifixion," in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 1:1041.

²⁷Lintott and Watson, "Crucifixion" 411.

²⁸Drumwright, "Crucifixion," 1:1041.

or friends for burial (cf. John 19:38).²⁹

The foregoing description of crucifixion represents only the most general pattern. In actual practice, the manner of execution could vary considerably depending on the whim and sadistic impulses of the executioners.³⁰ Josephus describes multiple tortures and positions of crucifixion during the siege of Jerusalem as Titus crucified the rebels.³¹ Seneca relays a separate incident that confirms this:

I see crosses there, not just of one kind but made in many different ways: some have their victims with head down to the ground; some impale their private parts; others stretch out their arms on the gibbet.³²

Those historical accounts help explain why modern writers have identified at least four different kinds of crosses, shaped as follows: the letter **T**; the letter **X**; the plus sign +, and the final form which was shaped like a lowercase **t**.³³

The **t** is most likely the one used in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It consisted of an upright beam that projected above the shorter crossbeam. The projection of the vertical beam above the horizontal beam would have provided room for the inscription of the charge against Jesus to be nailed above His head (Matt 27:37; Luke 23:38; John 19:19).³⁴

Modern archaeology has confirmed the ancient testimony about crucifixion practices. The remains of a first-century victim of crucifixion, replete with pierced forearms and heel bones joined together by an iron nail, have been discovered in Israel.³⁵ Those findings, though not directly related to the crucifixion of Christ, evidence a first-century Palestinian crucifixion consistent with the ancient records. They are particularly interesting since they come from non-Christian teamwork with no bias in favor of the biblical account of Christ's crucifixion.³⁶

Roman Attitudes toward Crucifixion

In light of the crucified's degraded status and the heinous nature of the punishment, Gentiles understandably and not surprisingly viewed the victim with the utmost contempt. Indeed, "crucifixion" was a virtual obscenity not to be discussed

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Hengel, *Crucifixion* 25.

³¹Josephus, *Wars* 5.11.1.

³²Seneca, *Dialogue* "To Marcia on Consolation," in *Moral Essays*, 6.20.3, trans. John W. Basore, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1946) 2:69.

³³D. G. Burke, "Cross," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 1:830.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵V. Tzaferis, "Jewish Tombs at and near Giv'at ha-Mivtar, Jerusalem," *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970):18-32. Scholars have debated the exact manner of crucifixion based on an examination of the remains and their accompanying inscription. One writer suggests the victim was crucified in the upright position (N. Haas, "Anthropological Observations on the Skeletal Remains from Giv'at ha-Mivtar," *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 [1970]:38-59); another argues the victim was crucified upside down (Y. Yadin, "Epigraphy and Crucifixion," *Israel Exploration Journal* 23 [1973]:18-22).

³⁶Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Crucifixion in Ancient Palestine, Qumran Literature, and the New Testament," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978):498.

in polite company. The cultured world did not want to hear about crucifixion, and consequently, as a rule, they kept quiet about it.³⁷

That attitude can be seen in Cicero's speech defending a Roman senator named Rabirius against a murder charge. As part of his trial strategy, Cicero warned against the runaway prosecutor who was suggesting crucifixion as the penalty for Cicero's client, a Roman citizen. Cicero sought to sway the jury with the plea, "The very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears."³⁸

The deep contempt Gentiles had for those crucified is best seen, however, in pagan statements against Christian worship of Christ. Several examples are worth noting.

First, pagan ridicule can be seen in a graffito scratched on a stone in a guardroom on Palatine Hill near the Circus Maximus in Rome. The graffito shows the figure of a man with the head of an ass hanging on a cross. Just below the cross, another man is shown raising his hand in a gesture of adoration. The inscription reads, "Alexamenos worships his god."³⁹ This comparison of Christ to an ass, so repulsive to believers today, vividly illustrates pagan contempt toward the crucified Christ whom Paul proclaimed.⁴⁰

Further animosity is seen in Justin's *First Apology* (c. A.D. 152). He summarizes the views of Christian opponents by saying, "They proclaim our madness to consist in this, that we give to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of all."⁴¹

Still later, Origen (A.D. 185-254) quoted his opponent Celsus as mocking Christianity by saying,

And in all their writings (is mention made) of the tree of life, and a resurrection of the flesh by means of the 'tree,' because, I imagine, their teacher was nailed to a cross, and was a carpenter by craft; so that if he had chanced to have been cast from a precipice, or thrust into a pit, or suffocated by hanging, or had been a leather-cutter, or stone-cutter, or worker in iron, there would have been (invented) a precipice of life beyond the heavens, or a pit of resurrection, or a cord of immortality, or a blessed stone, or an iron of love, or a sacred leather! *Now what old woman would not be ashamed to utter such things in a whisper, even when making stories to lull an infant to sleep?*⁴²

This animosity toward crucified men was deeply engraved on the social consciousness of the world to which Paul brought his message about a crucified

³⁷Hengel, *Crucifixion* 38.

³⁸Cicero, "The Speech In Defence of Gaius Rabirius," sec. 16, in *The Speeches of Cicero*, trans. H. Grose Hodge, The Loeb Classical Library (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927) 467.

³⁹Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 559-61.

⁴⁰Ibid., 561.

⁴¹Justin Martyr, "The First Apology of Justin," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 1:167.

⁴²Origen, "Against Celsus," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 4588 [emphasis added].

Savior.⁴³ It also helps explain the meaning of 1 Cor 1:23, as the following discussion will show.

Jewish Attitudes toward Crucifixion

Jewish attitudes toward crucifixion are evident in two areas. First, the Jews detested the Roman practice of crucifixion. The Roman government had exclusive authority over the death penalty in Judea at the time of Jesus, having taken it out of the hands of the Sanhedrin in the middle of the first century B.C. Crucifixion was thus a reminder of the absence of Jewish autonomy in Palestine.⁴⁴ This helps explain the Jewish statement to Pilate, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death” as they sought the crucifixion of Christ (John 18:31).⁴⁵ The heavy use of crucifixion by the Romans in subjugating Judea also affected Jewish views. Hengel writes, “The excessive use made of crucifixion by the Romans in the pacification of Judea meant that from the beginning of direct Roman rule crucifixion was taboo as a form of the Jewish death penalty.”⁴⁶

More strikingly, the Jews viewed the victim of crucifixion with even more contempt than did the Gentiles. Though Gentiles viewed crucifixion as a punishment reserved for detestable people like rebellious slaves, criminals, and defeated foes of the Roman Empire,⁴⁷ the Jews believed the victim was cursed by God (cf. Deut 21:23). Consequently, the stigma went beyond social disgrace to a declaration of God’s spiritual judgment against the victim.

This attitude was deeply ingrained in Jewish thought. The second-century Mishnah indicates that blasphemers and idolaters especially were to be hanged in this manner. The Mishnah rhetorically states, “Why is this one hanged? Because he cursed the name, and the Name of Heaven was found defiled.”⁴⁸

Though normally the Jews did not crucify living persons,⁴⁹ they did hang corpses as a means of intensifying the shame of their death. The corpse was hanged by fastening the hands together and affixing them to a beam fixed in the ground with a crosspiece. The beam was leaned against a wall then taken down immediately. That fulfilled the curse of Deut 21:23, and also allowed the corpse to be buried the same day.⁵⁰

So the Gentile contempt for the crucified was exceeded only by the Jewish belief that the victim was actually under God’s curse. With that historical background in mind, attention can now turn to its significance for the interpretation of 1 Cor 1:23.

⁴³Joseph H. Hellerman, “The Humiliation of Christ in the Social World of Roman Philippi, Part 2,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (October-December 2003):427-28.

⁴⁴Brown, “Cross, Wood, Tree” 1:394.

⁴⁵Ibid. Their surpassing contempt for Christ can be measured by their desire to see Him crucified—a method of punishment they normally abhorred.

⁴⁶Hengel, *Crucifixion* 85.

⁴⁷Ibid., 83.

⁴⁸Herbert Danby, ed., *Tractate Sanhedrin, Mishnah and Tosefta* (New York: MacMillan, 1919) 6.5.

⁴⁹Hawthorne, “Cross” 1:1038. The Jewish ruler Alexander Janneus was an exception.

⁵⁰O’Collins, “Crucifixion” 1:1207; Drumwright, “Crucifixion” 1042.

Crucifixion and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1:23

Humanly speaking, these cultural attitudes toward crucifixion presented a formidable obstacle to the spread of the gospel in the first century. Jews and Gentiles alike viewed the crucified with extreme contempt and scorn. A crucified man was a societal reject; but a crucified god was a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, the centerpiece of Paul's message was "Christ crucified." A starker contrast with prevailing societal thought could scarcely be drawn.

But Paul's message did more than contradict prevailing wisdom. It also ignored the desires and demands of the first-century audience. In 1 Cor 1:22, Paul says Jewish listeners were looking for signs—miraculous wonders that would authenticate a messianic claim.⁵¹ By contrast, the Gentile hearers were looking for wisdom to satisfy their intellectual pursuits.⁵² "Christ crucified" was the polar opposite of both expectations. Obviously, Paul did not give his audience what they wanted to hear.

Paul describes the impact of this message in the midst of that hostile environment in 1 Cor 1:23. The reaction was hardly favorable. Jews saw "Christ crucified" as a "stumbling block," and Gentiles found it to be "foolishness." Those respective reactions will now be examined.

"Stumbling block" comes from the Greek term *σκάνδαλον* (*skandalon*), which refers to a "temptation to sin" or "an enticement to apostasy and unbelief."⁵³ A stumbling block was "an obstacle in coming to faith and a cause of going astray in it."⁵⁴

In other words, the spiritual offense of the cross actually worked to make some Jews go astray. Remarkably, the crucifixion—so essential to eternal life—actually hindered Jews from coming to saving faith. They simply could not overcome their preconceived notions about the significance of crucifixion. As one writer puts it, "He who is placed there for faith Himself becomes an obstacle to faith."⁵⁵ The very content of Paul's message caused Jews to turn away.

In some respects, this reaction could be expected. The Jewish mind, unenlightened by the Holy Spirit, could only have concluded that the proffered Messiah was cursed. To believe in Christ would be to embrace an oxymoron. They would have had to jettison their messianic presuppositions about a conquering Messiah, and also overlook centuries of conditioning about the accursed nature of all who were crucified. The gospel called them to surrender to the very one they considered "smitten of God and afflicted" (Isa 53:4). The challenge of the message was extreme and the Jewish reaction against it predictable.

The Gentiles, by contrast, considered Paul's message to be "foolishness," which comes from the Greek term *μωρία* (*mōria*). The significance of "foolishness" in this context is debated. One theological dictionary says *mōria* in this context indicates only superficial foolishness. Paul's preaching of "Christ crucified"

⁵¹Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 74.

⁵²Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians* (reprint; London: Tyndale Press, 1969) 46.

⁵³J. Guhr, "Offence, Scandal, Stumbling Block," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 2:708.

⁵⁴Gustav Stahlin, "σκάνδαλον," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 7:345.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 7:352.

“must have seemed very tactless” to his hearers because crucifixion was not discussed in polite company, as noted above. According to this view, Paul violated prevailing etiquette by openly discussing a crucifixion.⁵⁶

That view, however, does not adequately account for the historical background underlying 1 Cor 1:23. True, worthy citizens did not discuss crucifixion in cultured company, but Paul obviously intends far more in this context. He was addressing the impact of an exclusive message of salvation that had as its central component an itinerant preacher from Judea who had been crucified at the hands of the Roman army. Given the degraded status of crucified men, Gentiles would have found Paul more than uncouth. In the midst of Roman power and world domination, they would have found Paul’s message to be utterly ridiculous. Paul was speaking absurdities not worthy of serious consideration. That is the foolishness Paul described in 1 Cor 1:23.

An examination of contemporary Roman writers bears out that conclusion. They variously call Christianity a “pernicious superstition,”⁵⁷ a “depraved and excessive superstition,”⁵⁸ and “figments of an unhealthy belief, and vain sources of comfort.”⁵⁹ Obviously, “Christ crucified” was utterly mad and contradicted all prevailing rational thought.⁶⁰ Thus, though the Jews had to abandon their notions of a curse being upon the crucified, the Gentiles had to abandon their associations of weakness and contempt before they could believe in Christ. It was simply preposterous to suggest that this crucifixion was the focal point of the redemption of mankind.⁶¹ Hengel writes,

To believe that the one pre-existent Son of the one true God, the mediator at creation and the redeemer of the world, had appeared in very recent times in out-of-the-way Galilee as a member of the obscure people of the Jews, and even worse, had died the death of a common criminal on the cross, could only be regarded as a sign of madness. The real gods of Greece and Rome could be distinguished from mortal men by the very fact that they were *immortal*—they had absolutely nothing in common with the . . . one who . . . was bound in the most ignominious fashion and executed in a shameful way.⁶²

The importance of this perspective on the first-century preaching of the gospel can scarcely be overstated. When Paul boasted in 1 Cor 1:23 that he preached “Christ crucified,” he understood that his message cut deeply against the grain of his culture. Yet the apostle was undeterred. Paul understood that cultural expectations did not alter his responsibility to preach the truth, nor did those

⁵⁶G. Bertram, “μωρός,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 4:845-46.

⁵⁷Tacitus *The Annals* 15.44, trans. John Jackson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937) 4:283.

⁵⁸Pliny *Letters* 10.96, trans. William Melmoth, rev. W. M. L. Hutchinson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958) 2:405.

⁵⁹Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 11.9, in *the Ante-Nicene Fathers*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 4:179.

⁶⁰Hengel, *Crucifixion* 1; Fee, *1 Corinthians* 76.

⁶¹Hengel, *Crucifixion* 19-20.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 6-7.

expectations hinder the power of the gospel to save.⁶³ Remarkably, Paul did not alter the message even though it often turned his hearers away.⁶⁴

So instead of signs, the Jews got a stumbling block. Instead of wisdom, the Gentiles got foolishness. God was pleased to manifest His power through that enigma to save sinners from doom (1 Cor 1:18, 24).

Practical Application

When evaluating 1 Cor 1:23, the expositor is struck by the lack of modern analogies to crucifixion, at least in American society. The haze of time has obscured the repulsive connotations of crucifixion. Modern executions provide no comparison, because they occur behind penitentiary walls, away from public scrutiny. Consequently, a crucified Savior does not sting today's ears as it did in the first century.

Still, Paul's insistence on preaching Christ crucified is rich and vital to the modern believer. First, 1 Cor 1:23 strengthens him to overcome antagonism and rejection in personal evangelism. Modern man does not differ from the first-century Roman. Neither one wants to hear about a sovereign Lord who demands allegiance, repentance from sin, and faith in the crucified Christ. People today still reject the gospel even though crucifixion *per se* may not be the catalyst of the rejection. Paul's example can guard the believer from the temptation to conform the gospel to the perceived desires of the lost. A recollection that Paul was scorned lessens the believer's fear of rejection in personal evangelism.

On a broader scale, this verse shows the church of Jesus Christ that it must return to cultural confrontation with its gospel preaching instead of pursuing cultural accommodation. "Christ crucified" was not a "seeker-friendly" message in the first century. It was an absurd obscenity to Gentiles and a scandalous oxymoron to Jews. The gospel guaranteed offense.

The modern church would do well to reflect on that example. Its efforts to remove the offense of the cross flatly contradict the apostolic pattern. Paul did not meet the expectations or desires of his audience. Rather, he honored God by preaching the message entrusted to him. In so doing, he gave the culture what it *needed*—the transforming power of Jesus Christ leading to salvation—and God was pleased through such seeming foolishness to save those who believed.

That truth must significantly impact how everyone in Christian leadership proclaims the gospel. The content of the message must be determined by the Scriptures that speak of "Christ crucified," not modern marketing concerns that cater to audience desires. The audience does not dictate the message; the message dictates to the audience. Such a conviction will anchor preaching in the eternal, unchanging truth of God's Word instead of the passing fancies and sensibilities of man.

In the final analysis, 1 Cor 1:23 shows that allegiance to the truth supersedes any desire to please men. Far better to live under the smile of God than to dilute the gospel for the approval of men and thereby empty the cross of its power (1 Cor 1:17). True, the church of Christ may face ridicule, rejection, or persecution

⁶³Ibid., 5.

⁶⁴One can only speculate how the seeker-friendly model of ministry would respond to Paul's example at this point. For a popular-level exposition showing how this material affects the proclamation of the gospel to unbelievers, see John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 19-36.

for being “out-of-step” with the times. But let the praise of the world pass by. Perhaps the Lord would be pleased to use such foolishness to call some of His own through the ministry of the good news of the cross.

Conclusion

The historical background of 1 Cor 1:23 shows that Paul’s message of “Christ crucified” directly collided with the cultural and spiritual wisdom of his day. The gospel was utter folly to the natural mind of both Jews and Greeks due to their abhorrence of crucifixion. Consequently, its success in the conversion of thousands during Paul’s ministry can only be explained by the power of God (1 Cor 1:18).

Though crucifixion does not offend the modern ear as it did in ancient times, the gospel itself still offends. Today’s Christian leader should not shrink from that offense. Those faithful to the truth will find their message stamped with the authenticity of God—even if unbelievers spurn the truth as they did in Paul’s day.