

# What Makes Us Special?

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

January 29, 2017

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## INTRODUCTION

In the old days, it used to be so easy. If you were looking for a job, you'd find the ad for a job you wanted, and drop off your resume. Later, getting a job became a little more difficult. Prepare your resume, write a cover letter and mail them in. Those were the good old days when jobs were plentiful and job hunters were scarce.

Nowadays, it's quite different. Everything has to be customized – even the resume. You have to realize that hundreds – maybe thousands – of people are applying for the same position. What makes you special? How do you stand out from the crowd? In 30 seconds or less.

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The same is true for Christianity. In the old days, it used to be so easy to be a Christian. Everyone was Christian and the challenge was which type of Christianity did you follow.

Nowadays, it's different. Religion is customized – people pick and choose what they like and avoid the rest. People are faced with hundreds of choices about how they spend their Sundays ... Work? Sports? Family? Shopping? Church?

Why should they come here? What makes us special? What does Christianity offer people today?

And how are we going to answer?

## BIBLICAL EXPLORATION

### Paul's Context

Fortunately, today's New Testament lesson gives us an answer. The question, you see, is not new. It's one that Paul was facing 2000 years ago.

In Judea, it was simple. If you were Jewish, you were expected to go to synagogue and to the Temple in Jerusalem. Whether you were Jewish or not, you probably knew something about Jesus – things he had taught; things he had done; how he had died and what people were saying about him afterwards.

But Paul wasn't in Judea. He was travelling throughout the Roman Empire. He was preaching to non-Jews who had no idea who Jesus was. He was preaching to people who had been raised on Greek and Roman myths (and others – Persian and Egyptian for example), who had been educated in Greek philosophy and logic, or who thought that religion was simply superstition.

He was preaching to Jews who had very clear ideas about the Messiah, prophets, and how God was expected to act in the world – and who had also been influenced by Greek philosophy.

If Paul was going to reach people, then he had to be very clear – what made Christianity stand out from the crowd? What did Christianity offer that other religions and philosophies did not?

### Greek Wisdom

Our New Testament passage today says, *"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."*

The basis of Greek philosophy is that something is either true or false. Students were trained to keep asking questions until they either proved something to be illogical – and therefore false – or logical – and therefore true.

We can almost anticipate the arguments that would have been thrown at Paul:

If God is perfect, then God cannot be imperfect.

- If God is infinite, then God cannot become finite.
- If God is spirit, then God cannot be flesh.

In other words, no matter how much Paul might argue logic, it is illogical to believe that God – who by definition is perfect, infinite and spirit – could ever become a human being – who by definition is everything God is not. Therefore, Paul must be crazy! He’s talking foolishness.

Surprisingly, Paul agrees. If you judge the Gospel by human logic, it doesn’t make sense ... but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true.

### **Jewish Demand for Miracles**

Jews had their own preconceptions about how God would act. If Jesus were a prophet, then he would have performed miracles and maybe he did, but it was all hearsay and other Jewish rabbis of the time were also known to have done miracles.

If Jesus were the Messiah, then he would defeat Israel’s enemies – he would defeat the Romans. So how could he have been the Messiah since the Romans were the ones who crucified him?

Where was Paul’s proof that Jesus was *the one to follow or listen to*?

### **Paul’s Response**

Again, Paul agrees. If you look for something in the Gospel that would support traditional views about the Messiah, you wouldn’t find it. The crucifixion points us in a different direction. *“Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”*.

Christ crucified. It doesn’t make sense ... unless you ask “why.”

- Why did God come to us as a human being?
- Why did God allow himself to be treated the way he was?
- Why did God allow himself to be killed?

Answer those questions and you have what makes Christianity special. Answer those questions and you discover what Christianity offers.

### **BRIDGE**

Paul’s answer was to emphasize the difference between human logic and God’s logic, but human understanding and God’s plan. But maybe – now that we know the questions – we need to find our own answers.

### **A MESSAGE FOR TODAY**

#### **The Logic of Today’s World**

Our **society** is the inheritor of Greek wisdom – Greek logic: true or false; black or white; innocent or guilty; rich or poor. Anything else, it seems, falls through the cracks. Our **science** is based on proving and disproving tests or facts. Our **computers** are based on Greek logic: on or off; 1s or 0s.

So it should come as no surprise that many people don’t believe in God simply because science cannot prove that God exists. It’s not logical to believe in something you can’t prove is real. Talk of miracles or raising from the dead is just hearsay – equally unprovable and very likely superstition based on ignorance.

How do we counter such arguments?

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, mathematician Blaise Pascal came up with a proof of why people should believe in God – or be Christian:

- If God doesn't exist, and you don't believe in God, then nothing special happens when you die.
- If God doesn't exist, and you do believe in God, then nothing special happens when you die.
- If God does exist, and you don't believe in God, then you might go to hell when you die.
- If God does exist, and you do believe in God, then you might go to heaven when you die.
- CONCLUSION: Why take the chance? Believe in God.

Sounds good? Pascal's argument is certainly logical but it's hardly the way to being Christian or (perhaps better) a good Christian and doesn't capture the essence of the Gospel.

We have to agree with Paul: Christianity is not logical. That is not to say that it is built on blind faith, or that Christians leave their intelligence at the door of the church.

God gave us brains to use. He expects us to be intelligent and wise. We are to be thinking and rational human beings. We are to bring those gifts into our religious life. We use our brains to understand something better, to weed out fakes and lies, to recognize danger and avoid it.

But Christianity is not foolish superstition – it requires intelligence and wisdom. But Christianity is **more than** logic, more than human logic anyway. It's a relationship with God. It's a personal relationship ... and relationships don't always follow rules of human logic.

### The Miracles of Today's World

A similar picture emerges when we consider miracles. Many of us today are jaded.

- We've heard of miracles – maybe even seen them – only to discover that we've been deceived.
- We've seen magic acts that seem miraculous ... and then discovered the trick behind the magic.
- We've been wowed by things that couldn't happen but did ... and then learned about the special effects that went into making them.
- Worse, we've prayed for miracles ... and they didn't happen or the answer was "no."

And so, skepticism and disbelief is part of our make-up. We may believe in God and come to church, but we don't really expect anything special to happen. It's just habit. But miracles don't capture the essence and uniqueness of Christianity.

Miracles happen. Maybe they're not as earth-shattering or publicized on the news as we might like – but we wouldn't really believe them if they were anyway. Change the focus ... instead of focusing on miracles, focus on God and our relationship with God. We might be surprised by how often God has interacted with us ... maybe we might see miracles we never expected.

### An Answer for Today

Christ crucified.

We know the story. A lot of people know the story. God came to us as Jesus. He was born in a stable (or some such place) to poor parents. He lived among us. He healed the sick. He calmed the storms at sea. He died on the cross but didn't stay dead and rose again the third day. That's the Apostle's Creed in a nutshell.

But ... so what? How does that make Christianity special or show what Christianity offers?

Go back to **why**. Why did any of this happen? What was God's purpose – God's plan?

The answer – *For God so loved the world.*

**What makes Christianity special?** A personal relationship with God – almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing God. What Christianity offers is a relationship with God who loves us so much that He was willing to give up

His power – His greatness – His perfection – His infinity – just to be with us ... not just in Jesus 2000 years ago, but today in our own lives.

**What Christianity offers** is a personal relationship with a God who wants to be involved in our lives **and who invites us to be involved in his.**

### **A Move Outwards**

Christianity doesn't **end** with our relationship with God; it **begins** with that relationship.

As our relationship with God develops – as we let God work within us and as we gain a deeper understanding of God's love for the world, we begin to see others with new eyes.

As God loves us, we begin to love others. As God forgives us, we learn to forgive others. It's not always easy. As God challenges us to be the best we can be, we challenge others to be the best they can be.

- As Jesus healed the sick, the lame, and the blind – we are called to heal and bring comfort to the same.
- As Jesus fed the hungry – we are called to do the same.
- As Jesus reached out to the outcasts in ancient Jewish society – we are called to reach out to the outcasts in today's society.

### **CONCLUSION**

What makes Christianity special? What do we offer?

First, we offer a personal relationship with God in our own lives – a living relationship. It's not "*What would Jesus do?*" but rather *What is Jesus doing in me and through me today?*

Secondly, we offer a vision of a world transformed. Instead of everyone for himself (or herself) first and only later, if things permit, thinking of others – we offer ourselves responding to people and to a world in need of healing ... as best we can and recognizing that we are part of that world and need healing too. It's not a matter of putting ourselves last but rather of finding a balance (but that's another sermon).

Instead of offering the world a system of "tit-for-tat" we offer the world compassion, love. As God so loved us ...

We are special and have something to offer. We just need to learn our story. In 30 seconds or less.

AMEN.