



The Gospel Was Not Tested in Focus Groups

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

The Third Sunday of Lent

March 19, 2006

What if Jesus had had a media advisor? You know, one of those savvy specialists that polishes your image and refines your message. Media advisors measure your popularity rating and tell you how to increase it. Media advisors test your message in focus groups and find out how well it plays with the public. Think of all the good a media advisor would have been to Jesus. Imagine what he would tell Jesus at a morning briefing...

Advisor: Good morning, Jesus.

Jesus: Good morning, how is my ministry going?

Advisor: Not so good, Jesus, especially after you made that scene in the Temple and drove out the money changers. I'm sure you've noticed your crowds have been dwindling ever since. And your Q factor has been dropping like a rock.

Jesus: My Q factor?

Advisor: Your popularity, your likeability factor.

Jesus: Well, who do people say that I am?

Advisor: 1% say you're Elijah risen from the dead
 10% say you're a prophet
 15% say you're the Messiah who'll be King of Israel, but
 20% say you're the son of the Devil, and
 59% say they just don't know.

Jesus: Not so good, huh?

Advisor: Jesus, you're at a critical point here, but if you'll just listen to me, I know how to have them eating out of your hand.

Jesus: What?

Advisor: Jesus, you've got to work on your appearance. Shave your beard; you'll look more cosmopolitan. And you need to expand your wardrobe. That one seamless robe is just not enough.

Jesus: But it was a gift...

Advisor: But most of all Jesus, you've got to change your message. Ever since you declared you are heading to Jerusalem to be tried and tortured and killed, you've dropped 20 points in the polls. No one likes a loser, and believe me, death is a real loser.

And speaking of losers, you're hanging out with too many of them, all those tax collectors and call girls and all those tacky poor people. I tell you, the picture the people get from you is not success, and they're deserting you like rats off a sinking ship.

Jesus: If a man would follow me, let him deny himself and take up his cross.

Advisor: You see Jesus, that's the problem. Every focus group I've checked with just can't connect with that.

Jesus: Whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever would lose his life for my sake will find it.

Advisor: Jesus, have you not heard anything I've been telling you? ...

Well, you know what Jesus did with that kind of advice. He ignored it and went on to the cross. The gospel was never tested in focus groups, and the idea of a savior dying on a cross has always ever since been branded as a foolish scandal.

But the foolish scandal spread, and by twenty years after Jesus, little clusters of believers were popping up all over the Mediterranean world. The apostle Paul brought the gospel to a port city in Greece called Corinth. Since the Greeks were always thirsty for more knowledge, they were curious. So Paul told them that:

- The great promised time of God had come
- Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God with signs and wonders. He was killed, but God raised him from the dead.
- All this was the fulfillment of the prophets
- Jesus will come again
- Repent and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit that is promised by God.

That was the basic message that Paul told everywhere. But once Paul mentioned the part about Jesus being killed and then raised from the dead, many Corinthians stopped listening. They felt Paul was insulting their intelligence. The very idea that God would become so vulnerable as to die on a cross – it was all very un-godlike. What God would make himself so helpless? It sounded foolish to them.

Paul didn't even blink: "It sure is foolish, to you anyway, but to us who've been saved it is the wisdom of God." So Paul just kept on preaching Christ crucified. As far as Paul was concerned, the issue was a contrast between the wisdom of words versus the

word of the cross. The Corinthians loved wise words and cultured speech and eloquence. If you had a way with words in ancient Greece, then that was your meal ticket to success. The classic skill was called the art of rhetoric. Great teachers of rhetoric were in high demand. People were willing to pay big bucks to learn the art of powerful and persuasive speech.

But Paul was not offering the eloquent wisdom of words; he was offering the coarse and blunt word of the cross. The word of the cross didn't need the power of eloquent speech. The word of the cross had plenty of power on its own.

Paul did not test the gospel message with focus groups either. He knew that, in God's wisdom, it is not by wisdom that you come to know God (1 Cor. 1.21). It is not by having the right ideas and doctrines and interpretations that you can come to know God. It is not by being committed to conservative ideas or liberal ideas that you can come to know God. Something greater must happen -- a *relationship* must happen, a trusting relationship of total dependence on God. It is not by wisdom that you come to know God, it is by relationship that God comes to know you! That relationship doesn't come about by the wisdom of words; it comes about by the word of the cross.

If Paul had a foolish message, the church he started was just as foolish. It was a foolish collection of ragged and tacky people. Most of them were not skilled debaters. They were not well-spoken and they were certainly not well-born. Most of them had been born into the massive, poor underclass of the Mediterranean world. The church of Corinth was full of nobodies. But Paul told them not to be intimidated in the least bit:

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise;
 God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. (1 Cor 1:27)

So Paul bore witness to the foolish message of the cross to a foolish collection of people called the church at Corinth.

Fast forward from the first century to the twenty-first century. Now you and I are the ones who bear witness to the foolish message of the cross to our generation. And ours is a generation that seeks signs, especially the sign of success. And ours is a generation that desires wisdom, like the Greeks. Go to any bookstore and look at what they sell: thousands and thousands of self-help books. Yet every book contains the same basic message: "If you buy this book and read it, you will find in it the secret knowledge that will give you the power to be successful." Back in Greece, people flocked to great orators with wise words to give them power to be successful. Today, people do the very same thing with book: we are looking for that secret knowledge that will give us an edge toward success.

So the mind of our own generation is not much different from the mind of the ancients – the modern mind values the word of wisdom as the way to power and success. But you and I, we are bearers of the word of the cross. And that word of the cross is not the way to power or success. It is the way that follows after Jesus. It is still foolishness

to the world. It does not offer any insider knowledge that will lead to financial or social success. It is simply Christ crucified, the power of the gospel. Some will think it is foolish. Others will realize it is the power of God to save them.

So don't worry how foolish it sounds. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. You may think that your own story of how God came to know you through Jesus will sound foolish to someone else. To some it will. But to others your story will unlock the power of God to save.

One of the more foolish and yet one of the more powerful moments of the annual National Prayer Breakfast in Washington came when the featured speaker was not a wise theologian, nor a powerful politician, but an Irish rock and roll singer named Bono. Now Bono is no saint, as you might remember from his appearance at one awards show. And if anyone ever tried to liken him to a Billy Graham or a Mother Teresa, Bono would probably choke on his cappuccino. But he has been shaped by a decades of scripture reading and prayer. And he is one of the few rock singers who has stayed married to the same woman for 25 years and kept the same friends.

When he's not in concert, Bono is crisscrossing the globe with the message that that weak people matter to God. At the National Prayer Breakfast, he stood there among pastors and presidents, and admitted, "There's something unseemly about rock stars mounting the pulpit and preaching to presidents and then disappearing to their villas in the south of France." And he said, "I am not here as a man of the cloth – unless that cloth is leather." And then to that august assembly of 3000 leaders, Bono teased about how "self-righteousness rolls down like a mighty stream from certain corners of the religious establishment." And then Bono proceeded to call upon the nation and its leaders to remember the weak and the lowly and the despised in the world. He's been able to convince a lot of leaders and nations to relieve African nations of suffocating debt, and paralyzing hunger, and fatal disease.

A man has been interviewing Bono to write his autobiography. Michka Assayas is a skeptical agnostic. And yet as he hears Bono tell of a religious instinct in him that is "more important than intellect," Assayas is "sometimes bewildered, sometimes annoyed..." sometimes maybe also envious. (See the article on Bono in *Christian Century*, early March issue, 2006.)

In other words, in his own way, Bono is making a witness to the foolishness of the cross. He's no intellectual, he's no political heavyweight. When he attends a prayer breakfast or meets with a president, he's more of a holy fool, a fool for the sake of the cross of Christ. But that doesn't stop Bono, for he knows that

God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,
And God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

May you and I go out into the world with that same kind of trust, that no matter how foolish the gospel sounds, no matter how simple and unrefined we may feel, God's power will be made perfect in our weak witness as well.

-- Douglas E. Murray