

# The Stewardship of Alternative Values

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**March 4, 2018**

**I Corinthians 1:18-25 and John 2:13-22**

My parents, I believe, as youths, attended a Billy Graham revival in Akron, Ohio. Perhaps you saw Graham at some point, in person, certainly on TV. Thousands, perhaps millions, were impacted by him. With no personal bias at all, I confess no real influence by him, except to be aware of him as a cultural phenomenon and as being given consideration in my church history books.

Graham's death has produced a steady stream of opinion pieces that I continue to work through. He "filled stadiums and counseled presidents," one such piece commented. I need to do more thinking on this – about his brand of evangelicalism, his action or inaction on social issues, his continuing impact and legacy.

I do have a concern, however, and much of that concern has nothing to do with Billy Graham himself. It has to do, rather, with a melding of religion and politics and culture, whereby any brand of religion is equated too closely, aligned too squarely, with a particular party or position. Don't get me wrong – I want stadiums filled, preferably with Presbyterians, though that's not likely to happen. And I want faith values to influence the culture, though I'd rather it be influenced in ways agreeable to me.

That's the problem -- faith becoming too cozy with culture, too popular, whether evangelicalism in this era or progressivism in another era or any stripe of faith in any era. That seems inherently unjust to any American who is not a practitioner or believer in that particular set of values. And, more importantly for us – we who seek to follow Jesus – it challenges the very nature of our faith itself, which is by definition counter-cultural and wary of earthly power.

That is what we encounter when Jesus overturns the tables in the temple – a dramatically clear clash of faith with culture and power.

And that's what the small, struggling first century church in Corinth was trying to figure out, what they believed and how to live the faith. To them the Apostle Paul wrote about the "foolishness" of the cross. Foolishness? Who wants to believe in that? Paul writes: "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human

strength.” God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

These are alternative values to the values of popularity and culture and conventional wisdom. We live in a zero-sum world, with haves and have-nots, winners and losers. Not with God, Paul says. Not with the cross of Christ. Here, wisdom equals foolishness and foolishness equals wisdom. Here weakness equals strength and strength equals weakness. Here death equals life and the cross equals hope.

Kyle Fever writes that “Paul takes the language of ‘wisdom’ and subjects it to the cross, which now has become the criterion, the benchmark, for understanding and for grasping reality. The ‘foolishness of the cross’ redefines nothing less than the ordering of the world.”

Scott Hoezee writes: “The world has its standards. The world knows what is strong and what is weak, what is effective and what is ineffectual. The world has defined intelligence and wisdom and can identify them when it sees them. The world has likewise defined stupidity and foolishness and can spy those things pretty readily too. It’s a dog eat dog world. Only the strong make it to the top. These are things the world knows well.” Hoezee continues: “Well, no, Paul says. This is the way the world works, true enough. But not with God. Not with the way of salvation. No, here God upends it all. We are not saved by power but by weakness. We are not saved by worldly wisdom but by apparent folly. We do not enter the pathway to eternal life through the portals of Wall Street but by heading down a blind alleyway that appears to be a dead end. It’s a parallel universe in which the weak are strong and the foolish are wise and dead end cul-de-sacs lead somehow to shining streets of gold in a kingdom without end.”

A meditation from the Taize community poses this question: “Why is the cross—the worst failure, and utter folly, since Jesus really did nothing to escape it—the language of God’s wisdom? Because it reveals the power of love and it shows how far Jesus’ gift of his life goes.”

Several years ago, a few of us – leaders of congregations across our denomination in various settings, were thinking about all of this. We knew the statistics and reality well – loss of membership in our denomination, declining financial support. There was also a perceived loss of cultural influence, thought that’s harder to measure, and is one of the things Jim Hudnut-Beumler will consider in next Saturday’s seminar. Yet rather than bemoaning the fate of our denomination and complaining about our reality, or seeking to recover what might never have been, we sensed a deep hunger for something new and vital. We gathered a few people, and then a few more, and started something called Next Church, a movement, a conversation, about what was next for the Presbyterian Church. Could there be a revitalized, faithful future.

This past week we held our national gathering, in Baltimore, with nearly 700 in attendance. And while of course we all would welcome more members and more dollars, what we really seek is renewed faithfulness, new and creative ways to think about mission and education and worship, new ways of connecting and serving in this very polarized and evolving cultural moment.

Our theme was “the desert in bloom,” how we find hopefulness in wilderness settings. And it occurred to me that Christians, us, we are continually called to do that, to live out our faith in the wilderness. If things are too easy, or cozy, if our popularity is too accommodating, our faith too-aligned with the status quo, then it’s time to reevaluate and recalibrate.

Frederick Buechner writes: “The message that a convicted felon was the bearer of God's forgiving and transforming love was hard enough for anybody to swallow and for some especially so. For...the Greeks, as Paul puts it - it could only seem absurd.”

It still seems absurd. It still is absurd. Yet it is our faith, our belief. We believe it will transform lives and transform the world. God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. We experience that in the cross, toward whose reality we continue to move in this Lenten season, fools, all of us, fools with faith in the love that will not let us go, love that dies for us, in order that we may live. Amen.