God's Choice of the Foolish: A Study of 1 Cor 1,26-31 and Its Implications for the Contemporary Society

Uzowulu C. Cosmas, OFMCap
Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu

Introduction

The mention of "the called" in 1 Cor 1,24 provides a segue for Paul's second illustration of God's foolish wisdom: the makeup of the Corinthian community that responded to God's call. The unit is marked off by an *inclusio* with an allusion to Jer 9,26 LXX in 1,26 and a citation of it in 1,31. Fee (1987: 79) captures the gist of Paul's argument: God's purpose "in choosing people like them is asserted to have the same design as the cross itself-to save them, but at the same time to 'shame' and 'nullify' the very values in which they are currently boasting." In the context of his denunciations of their divisions, he makes his case: Since all of them were nothing before their conversion, how can any of them think that they have become more special than others when in Christ?

In this study we shall attempt to analyse how God uses what the world considers insignificant and foolish to bring out his plan. In the end we shall consider its implication for the modern society and especially in our pastoral engagements.

1.1 Exegesis of the Pericope

26Consider your calling, brothers and sisters. Not many of you are wise according to the flesh, not many of you are powerful, not many of you are well-born. 27But God chose what the world regards as foolish in order to shame the wise, and God chose what the world regards as weak in order to shame the strong. 28And God chose what the world regards as insignificant and what is despised, the things that are nothing, in order that he might nullify the things that are, 29so that no flesh might boast before God. 30From him [and by him] you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption, 31in order that, just as it stands written, "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."

1.2 Verse 26

Paul offers empirical evidence of the foolishness of God from his audience's own experience: the founding of the Corinthian church (cf. Gal 3,1-4). The foolishness and weakness displayed in the cross and its preaching carry over to the kinds of persons who have responded to the preaching. Paul bids them to consider their calling.[1] That calling (cf. 1,1.2.9.24) alludes to the circumstances surrounding their coming to faith,[2] not simply their socioeconomic status.[3] It is shorthand for God's act of calling them purely on the basis of grace (2 Tim 1,9)[4]; without regard to their moral worthiness or their status as gauged by human standards. In choosing them, God overlooked their lack of spiritual merit and flouted all worldly measures of human worth (cf. Deut 7,7). If they were to take stock of themselves and their fellow

---

[1] The *gar* introduces a new topic, for instance, A. C. THISELTON, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*: A Commentary on the Greek New Testament (NIGTC; Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 2000) 179, and the verb *blepō* followed by the accusative means "consider", "contemplate" (see 1 Cor 10,18; 2 Cor 10,7; Phil 3,2; Col 4,17; mark 4,24).

[2] Cf. C. K. BARRETT, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 57; similarly G. D. FEE, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 79; likewise, THISELTON, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 180.

[3] B. WITHERINGTON, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*: A Social-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 113.

[4] Cf. G. G. FINDLAY, "St Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians", in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910) 771.

recruits, they would readily recognize that most, if not all, do not fall into the category of "the cream of society". Becoming Christians also has done nothing to enhance their social estate, which is why the missing copula to be inserted in the *litotes* should be "are," not "were": "not many of you are wise according to the flesh".[5] By addressing them as brothers and sisters (*adelphoi),* Paul allays any impression that he is holding their heritage in contempt. What he says of them applies also to himself as their brother.

The *sophoi* are the learned, clever, and experienced. The phrase *kata sarka* (according to the flesh) here means "according to unspiritual, worldly standards". It refers to evaluations made by unregenerate humans employing criteria that are revealed to be bogus in light of God's measures. These worldly norms only factor into the equation those things that can be shown off and admired. They foster boasting and self-reliance, which lead one to spurn God's truth which itself challenges all human illusions.

The *dynatoi* are the influential whose wealth gives them the social and political levers of power.[6] The *eugeneis* are the well-born who have a proud pedigree and belong to the wealthy ruling class, "the blue bloods" (cf. Luke 19,12; Acts 17,11).[7] Philo *(Cont. Life* 9 §69) uses "good birth," "high character," and "trained in philosophy" as synonymous qualities. Dio Chrysostom's *(Or.* 15.29-32) attempts to refute the assumption that "it is impossible for anyone to be 'noble' without being 'well-born'" reveal that it was a common bias. Being "well-born" and "noble," he claims, originally applied to persons with respect to "virtue or excellence", not to their parentage (cf. Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 4.3.16), but later what he calls the "common run ignorant men" used the term to refer to "the descendants of families of ancient wealth." Unless something quite exceptional happened to an individual, persons living in this era did not rise up the social ladder but remained within the confines of the social class in which they were born. Prestige belonged only to those of noble parentage. All the terms Paul employs here overlap and refer to the privileged elite as opposed to the plebeians. As Murphy-O'Connor[8] frames it, "'They' run the economy, "They' set the standards. "They' determine who succeeds and who fails". When Paul proclaimed the word of the cross, it did not attract the wise and powerful. They are not excluded (Conzelmann 1975: 50) but tend to exclude themselves by rejecting the wisdom of the cross, which does not honor their achievements but pours contempt on their pride.[9]

O'Day (1990) shows how Paul not only cites but interweaves Jer 9,22-23 (cf. 1 Sam 2,10 LXX) into the fabric of his argument in 1,26-31. Jeremiah warns with three parallel statements:

Do not let the wise [*sophos*] boast in their wisdom.

Do not let the mighty [*ischyros]* boast in their might.

Do not let the wealthy [*plousios]* boast in their wealth.

These things distort an individual's self-identity and a society's character because they deter one from finding identity and security only in "God's steadfast love, justice and righteousness.[10] For Christians, the

---

[5] Cf. A. LINDEMANN, *Der erste Korintherbrief* (HNT 9\1; Tübingen: Mohr, 2000) 49. W. WUELLNER, "The Sociological Implications of 1 Corinthians 1,26-28 Reconsidered", in *Studia Evangelica* 6 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1973) contends that the *hoti* introduces a question: "Were not rnany of you wise. . . ?" expecting the answer yes (as an example of Pauline irony). R. F. COLLINS, First Corinthians (SP 7; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999) 110 counters that Paul does not use an interrogative *hoti* elsewhere which makes this reading unlikely.

[6] D. SÄNGER, "Die dynatoi in 1 Kor 1,26" *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 76, (1985); see also Acts 25,5; Rev 6,15.
[7] In Homer's Iliad 6.123-231, Glaucus and Diomedes first exchange genealogies when they meet. Josephus stresses that biblical heroes were "well-born" even where it is not found in the Bible. Cf. L. H. FELDMAN, "Josephus' Portrait of Saul", *Hebrew College Annual* 53 (1982), 60.
[8] J. MURPHY-O'CONNOR, *1 Corinthians* (DBC; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 10.
[9] In Apuleius' novel (*Metam* 11.15), Lucius is told about the priest during his initiation into the sacred rites of Isis, "neither did thy noble lineage, thy dignity, nor neither thy excellent doctrine anything avail thee". This negative evaluation of such things would have struck a chord with many.
[10] O'DAY, 1990, 261-62.

categories "clever," "influential" and "high status" are replaced by "righteousness," "sanctification," and "redemption" in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:30).[11]

MacMullen[12] identifies the love of status and honor as the motivating force of Greco-Roman culture. It resulted in the well-to-do donating benefactions-large banquets, a variety of public spectacles, temples, and great monuments - to enhance their public reputation. Paul's attention to questions of social identity and status reveals his concern that the values of the culture in which the Corinthians live have inched their way into the Church and are creating the divisions. They have become puffed up over against one another (4:6-7). Beacham[13] observes "Rome was a highly stratified and therefore immensely self-conscious society characterized by complex systems for defining, signifying, and acknowledging status"[14]. Money *(Pecunia)* and Status *(Philotimia)* were worshiped as goddesses (Horace, *Ep. 1.6.37;* Juvenal, *Sat.* 1.113). When Corinth was reestablished as a Roman colony, it was settled by persons of lower social status, freedmen and slaves, but thoroughly imbued with Roman values, with the watchword "Whatever one's rank, it must be maintained".[15] The Church was composed of a cross-section of urban society, excluding the extreme top and bottom. The upwardly mobile members were people of "high status inconsistency," that is, "Their achieved status is higher than their attributed status".[16] This inconsistency may have exacerbated the yearning to bask in the glory of others, even if it was only in their reflected glory.[17] Murphy-O'Connor observes, "The sense of insecurity of the successful freedman became a favourite topic in literature."[18] He contends that this insecurity was rooted in "the bitter awareness that one was not recognized for what one had achieved." This was a dyadic society that sought self-definition from others. The pivotal values were honor and shame. People measured their lives by what a delimited group of others thought about them. If someone was an ex-slave, these others could still see that person only as an ex-slave. To compensate, many aspired to increase their social standing in a never-ending pursuit of social honor. Boastful Corinthian Christians are no different from their pagan fellow citizens obsessed with exalting themselves and trying to leapfrog over others to attain honor and prominence. Arrogance and contempt for others were at home in Corinthian society and seem to have a secure place in the church as well.

Murphy-O'Connor[19] observes, however, that many were attracted to the Christian faith because it "introduced them into a society committed to looking at them primarily as people, all equally valuable and valued. It gave them a space in which they could flourish in freedom." The cross "embodied the paradox they lived" and "made sense of the ambiguity of their lives." Paul's command that they consider their calling suggests that some Corinthian believers may have forgotten their humble estate. Given the values of their culture, they may not have appreciated Paul for reminding them of it.

1.2 Verses 27-28

God's choice *(eklegesthai)* is reiterated three times for emphasis, and the objects God has chosen are the antithesis of those persons described in 1,26. Godet (1886: 112; cf. Edwards 1885: 37; Thiselton 2000: 184) claims that this choice refers to God's "energetic action" that takes "from the midst of the world... those

---

[11] THISELTON, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,*178.
[12] MacMULLEN, 1974,125.
[13] BEACHAM, *Spectacle Entertainments of Early Imperial Rome* (London: Yale University Press, 1999) 34.
[14] According to BEACHAM, *Spectacle Entertainments of Early Imperial Rome*, 34-35), status and power were in part a function of *dignitas,* "an elusive but pervasive concept whose practical substance. . . consisted of the expectation that an individual's honor and authority enables him to protect and reward his clients. friends. and dependents, from whom in turn he demanded deference, tangible forms of respect for his status, and the assurance that his sense of 'face' would not be slighted, or if it were. that any affront would attract swift and forceful retribution."

[15] MacMULLEN, 1974, 106.
[16] Meeks 1983: 73.
[17] See Pogoloff (1992: 188).
[18] Murphy-O'Connor (1996: 270).
[19] Murphy-O'Connor (1996: 271).

individuals whom no one judged worthy of attention and made them the bearers of His kingdom".

God did chose the weak not to make them strong, to help them move into the ranks of the upper crust, or to begin a new class struggle but to subvert, invert, and convert human values. God chose the foolish because the wise thought the cross was sheer folly as a means for saving the world, the weak because the strong thought they were powerful enough without God, and the low and despised because the high and mighty did not care to debase themselves by attaching themselves to a crucified God. The foolish, weak, and despised, however, respond more readily to the shame of the cross because they themselves are already shamed. Unlike the powerful, those who are deemed foolish and weak are amenable to receiving the paradox of divine weakness that conveys strength. They respond more readily to the shame of the cross because they themselves belong to the shamed.

The image of shaming or dishonoring would have been vivid in the Corinthian context. Witherington (1995: 8) correctly notes that the worst thing that could happen was "for one's reputation to be publicly tarnished". Shaming was a familiar "public phenomenon" (Thiselton 2000: 186) in spite of Aristotle's *(Rhet.* 2.2.3-6) condemnation of *hybris* as gratuitously doing or saying things to shame another solely for the pleasure of it, because one has the power to do it, or to make oneself feel superior.[20] But Paul does not have in mind a moral-psychological shaming as in 2 Cor. 9:4 (Lindemann 2000: 50-51). Instead, the verb "to shame" should be understood in its OT matrix to refer to "coming under God's judgment". God vindicates the faithful and brings the ungodly to shameful ruination (cf. Ps. 6:10; 31:17; 35:4, 26-27; 40:15; 83,16-18; Isa 41,11; Jer 2,26). It has "eschatological" connotations: "In choosing the Corinthians God has already begun the final vindication over his enemies" (Fee 1987: 83; cf. Schrage 1990: 211).

The *agenê* (those of mean parentage) are the opposite of the *eugeneis* (the well-born, 1,26), but the former word is used more frequently to refer to the insignificant or base. It was assumed that the low-born were inherently boorish and morally weak because of their lowly origin. They are defined further as the "despised," "disdained" (*ta exouthênemena,* 6,4; 16,11). The verb appears in Acts 4,11 to refer to Christ as the stone disdained by the builders, which has now become the cornerstone (Ps118,22). They are also identified as *ta mê onta,* "the nothings," as opposed to *ta onta*, "the somethings". Godet (1886: 112) and Edwards (1885: 38, citing Winer 1877: 608) distinguish the *ta mê onta* ("things that are no better than if they were not") from *ta ouk onta* ("things that actually do not exist").[21] It is not that they do not exist, but that they are regarded as if they do not exist.[22] They are without standing in a social hierarchy that may be characterized as "binary": a person was either a one or a zero. The "nothings" were treated as zeroes. By choosing "the things that are nothing," however, God upends the hierarchy and reduces the "somethings" to nothing.[23] The verb *katargein* means "to nullify," "to render inoperative" (2 Cor. 3:7; 13), but it also has an eschatological nuance (Fee 1987: 83; cf. 1 Cor. 2:6; 6:13; 13:8, 10; 15:24,26) and refers to final destruction.

Throughout the biblical narrative God consistently chooses the most unlikely figures, and Paul maintains that God has continued this pattern in choosing the believers in Corinth. Rays (1997: 32) thinks that Paul's statements parallel Hannah's prayer (1 Sam. 2:1-10) and Mary's Song of praise (Luke 1 :46-55), which acclaim God, who "raises up the Poor from the dust" and "has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." Conzelmann (1975: 51) draws a different conclusion: "Paul does not teach that 'the' lowly will be exalted, but that faith becomes the receiver of salvation regardless of worldly stand-ing. He teaches not resentment, but freedom". God's choices disclose that the church's creation and success

---

[20] See the discussion of hubristic behaviour in P. MARSHALL, 1987, 182-94.
[21] But cf. Lightfoot 1895: 166.
[22] The phrase differs from its use in Rom 4,17-19. There Paul links God's calling "things into existence that do not exist" to God's power to raise the dead and to bring forth a child from Sarah's dead womb (Rom 4,17.19).
[23] Similar language appears in 2 Bar 70,3-5, but Baruch regards it as a sign of the end-time confusion that will befall humankind. Paul regards it as part of God's paradoxical means of overthrowing human pride (cr. SCHREAGE, 1991, 205).

can be attributed only to God's power. P. Lampe (1990: 127) writes, "When the cross is proclaimed and through this act a community is founded, human wisdom and strength do not contribute anything to it. God rejects them as legitimate tools". When this principle is applied to the Corinthian situation, Paul's point is that no apostle, let alone any house-church leader, can receive credit for the creation of the group of redeemed saints in Corinth. All stand empty before God.

1.3 Verse 29

God's ultimate goal in choosing the foolish, weak, and despised was not simply to shame the wise and strong and to nullify the somethings, but to preclude all human boasting. "Flesh" (*sarx*) is a Hebraism for human beings, and the "all" (*pasa*) embraces Jew and Greek. Using the concrete term "flesh" serves notice more forcefully that human beings, as frail, mortal creatures, have no business boasting about themselves in the presence of the immortal God.

"Boasting" is not a common word in Greek literature, but the practice of praising oneself was quite familiar. The verb *kauchaomai* and the nouns *kauchêma* and *kauchêsis* appear predominantly in Paul's letters in the NT, and the majority of those occurrences are in the Corinthian correspondence.[24]

"Boasting" can be good or bad, depending on the object of the boast (cf. 9: 15-16) or the attitude behind the boasting. It is used in a negative sense of those who boast of their special relationship to God (Rom.2: 17); in the law (Rom. 2:23); in works that they assume earn salvation (Rom. 3:27; 4:2); in human birth or accomplishments according to human standards, which Paul characterizes as "foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:29; 4:7; 13:3; 2 Cor. 10:15-16; 11:12, 16-18; 12:1; Gal. 6:13; Eph. 2:9); in outward appearances (2 Cor. 5:12); and in human leaders (1 Cor. 3:21). It is used in a positive sense of Christians who boast in their future hope (Rom. 5:2); in God, who has saved them (Rom. 5:11; 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor.10:17); in Christ (Phil. 3:3); in the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14); in the working of God in oneself (Gal. 6:4; Rom. 15: 17) or in fellow Christians, which is closely related to joy (1 Cor. 15:31; 2 Cor. 1:12; 5:12; 7:4, 14; 8:24; 9:2; Phil. 1:26; 1 Thess. 2:19); in sufferings (Rom. 5:3) and weakness (2 Cor. 11:30; 12:5-6,9); in the salvation of other Christians on the day of the Lord Jesus (2 Cor. 1:14; 9:3; Phil. 2:16); and in authority given by God (2 Cor. 10:8, 13).[25] In the present context, God eliminates all human boasting by "conferring his salvation on those who are too foolish, weak, base, and contemptible, and hence too humble, to take any credit for their new exalted position in Christ" (Savage 1996: 58). They have nothing worth boasting about that they did not receive freely from God. Rather than praising themselves, they must humbly await praise from God (4:5). This lesson was difficult to drive home to a congregation enmeshed in a culture in which people were accustomed to tooting their own horns to gain and maintain status.

1.4 Verses 30-31

The phrase *ex autou* (of him) expresses both the source and cause of their being in Christ. Their existence in Christ Jesus is from God (NRSV; cf. Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6), and it is also because of him (NIV) that they have this being.[26] This phrase explains what precedes: "If things that were not have now become something, it is due to God alone" (Godet 1886: 115). The emphasis falls on God's gracious act of "election" (Conzelmann 1975: 51), that is, God's pleasure to save them (1:21), call them (1:24, 26), and choose them (1:27-28). The theological meaning of this abbreviated phrase is amplified in Eph. 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from you that is, not of your own doing; [it

---

[24] Thirty-five of thirty-seven occurrences of *kauchaomai* occur in Paul's letters and twenty-six of them are in the Corinthian correspondence. Ten of eleven occurrences of *kauchêsis* appear in Paul and six of them are in the Corinthian correspondence.

[25] On Paul's boasting about preaching for free see 1 Cor 9,15-16.
[26] *ek* is employed to express cause in Joh 6,66.

is] the gift of God; not out of works lest anyone should boast". All that believers have comes from God, which explains why they can boast only in what God has done for them in Christ and not in themselves. Their identity and security are created by belonging to Christ and being marked by the sign of the cross (Furnish 1999: 43).

Christ became the "wisdom from God *for* us" (dative of advantage).[27] God does not overturn the world's wisdom and pride just for the fun of it but to bring salvation. The crucified Christ became the manifestation of God's wisdom, which here refers to God's long-established plan for the world's salvation (cf. 1:21; 2:7; Eph. 3:10).

The triad of *dikaiosynê te kai hagiasmos kai apolytrõsis - righteousness,* holiness, redemption - is a unit separate from wisdom (Godet 1886: 117; Edwards 1885: 40). Paul's syntax indicates that the four terms are not treated as coordinate (contra NIV, NKJV). They are the fruit of God's wisdom in Christ. It is not that Christ *is* these things but that believers *have* these things in Christ (Witherington 1995: 117). What did not exist before-righteousness, holiness, and redemption-now exists in Christ (2 Cor. 5: 17). These three are not bestowed on believers so that these things now belong to them; they share in these things by virtue of belonging to the crucified Christ (Schrage 1991: 215).

N. Watson (1983: 387-88) explains why the list of the four things shared by believers (wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption) begins with wisdom rather than righteousness. Unlike the Judaizers, who rely on their works, the Corinthians are tempted to rely on their own wisdom. As in Romans, Paul begins his letter by demolishing false self-reliance. Humans cannot boast before God of their wisdom any more than of their works (Rom. 3:19). N. Watson continues, "In the same way as the cross is the condemnation of the righteousness of man, so it is the condemnation of the wisdom of the world. As it is through the renunciation of righteousness that man attains righteousness, so it is through the surrender of his own wisdom that he receives wisdom. Whoever wishes to be wise in this world must become a fool and thus find wisdom".

The metaphors have been assimilated from the OT but have undergone transformation when refracted through the lens of Paul's Christian faith. He does not discuss what they mean, because he must assume that the Corinthians are already familiar with the concepts. "Righteousness" refers to the state of having been acquitted and sharing Christ's righteous character. When they are arraigned in God's court, God will not judge them on the basis of what they are but as those who are guiltless in Christ Jesus. "Sanctification" refers to the state of holiness, which they have only in Christ Jesus and which allows them into the presence of God. "Redemption" refers to the state of being delivered from sin and its penalty (Rom. 3:24-25; Eph. 1:7, 14; 4:30; Col.1:14).

2. Implications for the Modern Society

Our society is almost a replica of what the Apostle of the Gentiles encountered during his own apostolate in the land of Corinth. A situation where money, power, status, and perhaps birth define a person's worth. The great Apostle challenged this pitiable and human situation by reminding the Corinthian Christians what they are and should be before God. When God calls, He does not employ those human ways of classifying people, rather He uses what the world thinks as nothing to achieve his great work. The history of our salvation is a great example. We were nothing before God called us and how then could we divide the

---

[27] Note that Paul switches from the second person plural to the first person plural.

community of believers by using such human way of thinking and create division in the community? Paul asks.

Such manner of thinking is a sign that the Word of God has not yet permeated the hearts of believers. For when the Word permeates the heart, something new happens, thanks to the force of the Holy Spirit! Something new and surprising such as we see in the life of Paul, that he could consider everything as rubbish for the sake of knowing Jesus Crucified, will take place in the life of a Christian.

God loves those who are humble in spirit. He shows his greatness by working with anyone on the street who is willing to be used by him. Spiritual greatness is not a matter of social class, monetary clout, or decreed background; it is solely a function of the heart. God's approach stands in contrast to the type of credentials our world looks for and honors, unfortunately in the Church too. Paul the Great Apostle warns against this. Externals count for little with God; other issues matter much more. God can do great things through those who entrust the journey with him to his care. That means that when God leads, the Christian soul must simply reply, "May it be according to your will", just as Mary did in the Infancy narrative of Luke.

Mary reflects the proper response of anyone who has been called by God with no important credentials other than availability and a responsive heart. Behind the availability to service is an attitude that trusts God for direction and enablement. God has called all believers to minister to the body (Eph 4,7-16), and he does not call us to a task he will not prepare us to perform. With God's call comes the need to be responsive to his leading. Submitting to God's will mean realizing how that road is best travelled. It means allowing God to lead. It means being open to the voice of God that speaks to us. Any other human consideration or qualification is anti-Gospel. Only the ungodly and the foolish do such things.

Conclusion

To conclude this unit, Paul cites a major theme from the OT that he adapts as a general principle to address the Corinthian problem. The citation "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord" is loosely recited from Jer 9:23-24 (cf. 1 Sam. 2:10 LXX; 2 Cor. 10:17). The foolish and ungodly glory in themselves (cf. Ps. 52: 1; 49:5-6; 94:3; Judg. 7:2). The wise exult in God (1 Sam. 2:2-3; Ps. 5: 11; 34:3; 44:8; Sir. 17:6-8). The Corinthians can boast only in what God has accomplished among them. All other boasting based on comparing themselves favourably to others uses sham, mortal criteria.