

These days, the fashion industry is huge. You can even buy designer jeans, something that amuses me somewhat. The problem with fashion is that it changes. I read recently that red is the fashionable colour in women's clothes right now. Meanwhile black is never really out of fashion. However, I must admit that I had never realised that black was ever 'in fashion.'

The idea of fashion 'spills over' into the world of religion. Yes, we have 'designer gods.' If you could design your god, what would you come up with? Perhaps you could carve an image and worship it. Well, that has already been done, many times. The prophet Isaiah points out just how ridiculous that is.

Isaiah writes about a man cutting down a tree. He uses some of the wood to cook his meal. Some of it he uses to make a god for him to worship. Isaiah 44:17, *From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, "Save me; you are my god."* Then Isaiah concludes that such a man is *deluded*, his *heart misleads him* (44:20).

Other people see god in nature. They worship birds, or animals, or plants and trees. A slightly different version suggests that the universe is god, yet their god is greater than the universe. (Try and work that one out. I can't.) That god is impersonal. In addition, that god is only known through what he/she/it has made.

You could even say that the meaning of life is 'nothing.' In other words, life is meaningless. There are many variations on this theme, from Buddhism through to Christian Science. The former seeks enlightenment. This, to me, is elitist, for very few can ever attain it. The latter is another form of spiritual blindness. Christian Science teaches that there is no such thing as sin, sickness or disease.

An extreme faith is atheism. Yes, I meant to use the word 'faith'. At the centre of atheism is the belief that science can answer all questions. We could even say that atheists worship science. Little do they realize that the study of science is grounded on a Christian worldview. It would be far better, however, if they saw the Intelligent Designer behind the wonder of nature. (Further discussion of these issues must wait another day.)

What would well-known, militant atheist, Richard Dawkins, say if, after he died, he met God? When asked this question, he replied, quoting the atheist, Bertrand Russell, "Sir, why did you take such pains to hide yourself?"

God will surely reply, "Why didn't you open your eyes and see what I have done? You heard how my Son, Jesus, died on the cross to pay the price for sin. Why did you ignore the truth, when it was so plain? Why did you refuse to believe?" For, we Christians know that ignorance and unbelief are no excuse in the presence of our Creator and Redeemer. We read in Romans 1:18, *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness*. As someone once said, 'There are none so blind as those who refuse to see.' Belligerent ignorance is no excuse in God's sight.

We can have some sympathy for those who want to find God in nature. After all, nature is God's creation. But, God wants us to worship Him, not what He has made. Someone else has said, 'God has made us in His image. But we return to Him the compliment and make Him in our image.' In other words, we think of God being just like us. Clearly, that's not how we understand the God of the Bible. We can also understand those who worship an object (an idol). We don't agree with them. Rather, let's note that all people have an inbuilt desire to worship. Instead, we worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Among the world's religions, only three can be classed as 'religions of the book'—Judaism, Islam and Christianity. All three claim to worship God, who has revealed Himself. For Judaism, He is the God of the Old Testament. For Islam, He is Allah, revealed through his prophet, Mohammed. Yet, for these two religions, God isn't personal. He's not knowable in a way that we can have a personal relationship with Him. I don't want to be unfair to these two religions. Yet, they're set apart from Christianity. For, Christianity, at its heart, is not a religion. Instead, it's based on faith. Our right relationship with God comes through faith in the Lord Jesus, God's Son. And so we read in John 1:12, *Yet to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*

What we've considered, so far, has been a brief look at religious thought. It hasn't been comprehensive, though I've tried to be fair. Before getting to the heart of Christianity, I want to ask you what kind of God you'd prefer to worship.

Well, I don't expect an answer right away. Instead, let's consider what kind of God you and I would *want* to worship. Clearly we want a God who is far more intelligent than we are. Like the God of the Bible, we want Him to be knowable, loving and kind. We want Him to care for us, provide for us and watch over us as He guides us in His ways.

Within limits, we want Him to fight for us and with us and keep us from evil, from anything that could harm us. But, if we think like this it shows that we want a God who is cross between Santa Claus and Superman. We simply cannot make the God of the Bible in our image or create Him in our imagination.

What sets Christianity apart from any religion? The cross! Who would ever think to make crucifixion central to faith? Crucifixion was the death penalty for common criminals. To the world, it is utter foolishness that the Saviour of the world should die such a shameful death! It's unthinkable that God would allow His precious One and only Son to suffer such a cruel death. And, how could He allow Him to die for sinners? It's almost beyond belief!

Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, 5:7, ***Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly die.*** In times of war, men and women have sacrificed their lives for the sake of others. Their deaths have had long-lasting effects. We, their descendants, are grateful. But those deaths cannot save us from the wages of sin. They cannot restore a broken relationship with God.

Truly, we want our God to be powerful to save us from sin. God will be our hero, the One who rescues us. We want Him to be faithful, to keep His promises. And, above all, we want Him to help us get to know Him. A god who is remote and disinterested cannot help us. An unpredictable god who requires an endless struggle for us to do good deeds cannot help us. Any god who needs constant calming down will be unable to identify with our weaknesses.

What we find, as we read the Bible, is the Lord Jesus Christ is just what we need. But, he's not what we'd expect. We need His death for us on the cross. His power is revealed through what appears to be weak. Listen again to 1 Corinthians 1:18, ***For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*** Here, the apostle Paul makes two main points, centred on the cross of Christ.

1. The foolishness of the cross

To the ancient Greeks, philosophy was most important. They loved to discuss wisdom. (Philosophy means *love of wisdom*.) But there were as many different philosophies as there were philosophers. Most probably the Christians in the church at Corinth brought their philosophical views into the church. As a result different groups began to develop behind each leader.

Paul writes about this earlier in 1:10, ***I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions...*** Division only leads to quarrelling. Paul considers the Corinthian church's division over who baptised their members. He concludes in 1:17, ***Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.***

John MacArthur writes, *'When man elevates his own wisdom he automatically attempts to lower God's wisdom.'* God's wisdom conflicts with much of what we call human wisdom.

Sam Harris, an atheist, writes, *'All complex life on earth has developed from simple life-forms over billions of years.'* He writes this without any evidence to prove his point. In fact, complex life cannot 'evolve' from simple life-forms. It's just not possible. This theory disregards the laws of nature. Yet it's the laws of nature that he claims to uphold. He continues, *This fact no longer admits of intelligent dispute.* This statement is very revealing. Again he writes, *If you doubt that human beings evolved from prior species, you may as well doubt that the sun is a star.* Among other things, what Sam Harris writes defies logic. I'll mention just one issue. His statement that evolution is a fact abuses logic. Yet he would claim to be logical in his conclusions.

His form of abuse is called *poisoning the well*. For, you see, what he's really saying is that if you believe in creation then you're not intelligent. Frankly, if that's the best that Sam Harris can do then his books would be better used for feeding worms.

Sam Harris cannot admit that God created the heavens and the earth. If he agreed to that, then he'd have to accept that he's a sinner and that God punishes sin. His worldview cannot admit that Jesus was crucified for our sins. To him, this is utter foolishness. And so, his argument for evolution is close to moronic [= stupid/foolish]. Note Paul's words in 1:18 about the cross. ***For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...*** The Greek word for *foolishness* is the one that gives us the English word, moron.

Perhaps the idea that God would send His Son to take on human form, be crucified and raised from the dead is too simple. That the death of Christ provides the way for you and me to be forgiven and to be reconciled to God *is* foolish to the natural man. For, Christ died, nailed to a piece of wood, on hill outside Jerusalem. He died in a country that wasn't even a world power.

Perhaps the hardest thing for people like Sam Harris to accept is that there's nothing we can do to save ourselves. Can you see how this is nonsense to those who do not believe? But Paul uses a stronger term than unbelief. 1:18, ***For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...*** These people, who are perishing, reject Christ. They are on their way to eternal punishment.

The ***message of the cross*** is shorthand for speaking about the person and work of the Lord Jesus. It includes the entire gospel, God's plan to rescue His people. Because the cross is the high point of God's plan, it's foolish to reject His revelation and thus perish. Paul writes in 2:1, 2, ***When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom... For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.***

Human wisdom often cannot comprehend the cross. To the natural mind, the cross is offensive. It's unacceptable and weak. For the natural mind wants to save itself. And so the world would rather focus on humanity's achievements. Worldly belief seeks salvation in good works. But we know that we're saved by grace and grace alone.

2. The power of the cross

We read in 1 Corinthians 1:18, ***For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*** It's the cross that divides humanity.

Earlier, Paul spoke about the church dividing over baptism. Recall his words in 1:17, ***For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.***

Sadly, arguments over baptism have caused great division in the church over the years. Paul doesn't call it foolish, but I will. OK, I'm Presbyterian and I'm very happy with our reformed view of baptism. But it should never cause us to refuse fellowship with those who hold to a different view.

Paul is not concerned here in 1 Corinthians about these issues. So too, people outside of the church have no interest in who baptized you. Nor are they concerned about when and where you were baptized. Instead, it is the cross that divides the world.

There are only two groups of people, ***those who are perishing*** and ***those who are being saved***. Again, note the divide: People are either ***being saved*** or ***perishing***. There's no middle ground. At the same time, notice that salvation is an ongoing process. We are ***being saved***. Salvation will continue until the Lord calls us home, to heaven.

So it is, that Christians are often criticised for not being perfect. Well, no one is perfect, believer and unbeliever alike. *But*, there is a difference. Those who are saved are in a right relationship with God, *now*. This is the power of the cross. Listen again to 1:23, ***We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.***

Briefly, let's note that God's power is first seen in His creation. Out of nothing, God created the heavens and the earth. Literally, He spoke the creation into existence. For example, Genesis 1:11, ***Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so.***

We see God's power in calling Abraham to leave Ur and later arrive at Canaan (the land God later promised to Israel). Many years later, God's power is revealed in the rescue (redemption) of His people, Israel, from Egypt. In the book of Judges we read about how God delivered His people time and time again. Despite the fact that they rebelled against Him, God heard their cries and saved them.

Can Richard Dawkins really claim that God has hidden Himself? Not at all! Rather, it's better to say that Richard Dawkins has ignored the evidence. Like the proverbial ostrich, he has put his head in the sand. He ignores the evidence. For us, who believe, the greatest example of God's power is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. We read in Romans 1:4 that the Lord Jesus *was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead.*

1 Corinthians 1:19 is a serious verse. *"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."* This quotation from the prophet Isaiah (29:14) emphasises that human wisdom will be destroyed. Finally, at the return of the Lord, Jesus will reign supreme and unopposed. Then, all people will know Him as *Lord of lords and King of kings.* (Revelation 17:14).

The message of the cross is a word of hope. Christian friends, we read in Romans that we've been buried with Christ in baptism and raised to new life with Him (6:4). In Ephesians the Holy Spirit assures us that we've been made alive with Christ and are saved by God's grace (2:5). In Christ, we're now seated with Him in the heavenly realms (2:6). Furthermore, heaven is where we belong. Our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20).

What would you say to someone who 'turns a blind eye' to this good news? One word comes to mind, it is *foolishness.*

The great news of the gospel centres on the power of the cross. For the cross is where the Lord Jesus suffered and died. And He rose from the dead so that you and I, through faith in Him, might know God's salvation. The rest is up to you and to me.

Trust in the Lord Jesus death for you. Receive Him as your Lord and Saviour. Don't be blinded by the foolish wisdom of the world.

When you and I receive Jesus as Lord and Saviour we know that we have come under the power of the cross. We have assurance of a right relationship with God, forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

Friends, how is it with you? You either join with those who are perishing, or you're united to Christ by faith. Remember, there is no middle ground. 1 Corinthians 1:18, *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* Amen