

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ,

I write to you with a heart filled with gratitude for the faithfulness of your ministry and with humility regarding the challenges you face. I hope this letter will be received in that spirit.

I am persuaded that the content on roadside church signs tells us something important about the theological and scriptural convictions that drive the ministry and mission of the congregation gathered in that place. In recent months, I have made myself a student of the content that appears on your signs. Here are the preliminary results of my research. Messages tend to divide into three distinct categories.

First, straightforward event announcements: "Organ Concert: This Sunday @ 4:00pm."

Second, biblical verses or contemporary proverbs: "God is Love," or "Give God What's Right, Not What's Left."

Finally, cheesy church jokes: "Seven Days without Prayer Makes One Weak"

Most of your messages seem sincere, but not long ago I read one that unnerved me.

Perhaps you remember it. **Apply Here: Advancement Guaranteed.**

Perhaps I should lighten up and appreciate the humor, but when I read those words, I thought of the First Century Christians living in Corinth. I thought of the Apostle Paul's letter to that faith community. I thought of the cross.

The Corinthian church was in trouble. There was division. There were factions. I imagine there were debates over what the sign should say. Some ideas have apparently surfaced: "First Church Corinth, the most intelligent congregation in town" How about, "Corinth Central Church, where the power people pray?" Or perhaps, "Corinth Covenant Congregation, worship with a who's who of Corinthian high society?" Church members argued over whose name should appear on the sign. Some wanted to engrave Paul himself as the congregation's founder. Others Apollos, the silver-tongued preacher. Still others Peter, the rock on which the Christian movement was built.

It was getting heated. So Paul drafts a letter to the church. And, according to Paul, here's what belongs on the church sign: "We proclaim Christ crucified. Only fools welcome here." He insists that there is one symbol appropriate for the church—the cross. While others debate who is most important, intelligent, impressive, or impactful, Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that *their* salvation stands on a scandalous sign of suffering. We worship a crucified savior. We find the presence of God on a cross.

I share this to remind you that the message we preach has been unsettling from the outset. In the earliest days of the Christian movement, some sought ways to smooth over this unseemly symbol. Some claimed that only the human part of Jesus died on the cross; the divine part suffered no pain. Others, ignoring the Apostle's focus on Christ *crucified*, suggested that the resurrection had nullified that unfortunate detour through death. Concerned about the optics, some early Christians tried to cancel the cross, remove it from their roadside signs. It's a symbol of weakness. It represents Jesus at his lowest point; makes us look like losers; no way to attract or influence.

The same tactics of denial and erasure are still employed. **Apply Here: Advancement Guaranteed.** The way of costly discipleship replaced by the gospel of success. A message of effortless perfection insisting that the cross was a temporary trial on the way to total triumph, *and* that the same success is promised to any who truly believe. There is no cross to bear.

It's not difficult to understand the appeal of this message. We want a victory story, a hero's journey. Paul knew that the word of the cross would be a stumbling block to some and foolishness to others. This is still true. We prefer a muscular God, a powerful God, a God whose authority is unmatched and unquestioned. That's what we need. Or so we assume.

Until tragedy strikes. The unthinkable death of a child. The slow agonizing loss of a parent. The unexpected test result. A dream is shattered, a relationship is ended, violence is unleashed on the innocent, the world spins ceaselessly in series of senseless suffering. There is a cross to bear. And only the Gospel truth of a crucified savior makes sense.

This is the message of the cross. What appears as weakness is in fact the power of God. Vulnerable power. Relational power. Suffering power. The most transformative truth the world has ever heard. God's power in human weakness. Our expectations turned upside down.

What if it's true? What if our preoccupation with power and our inflexible insistence on self-interest serve to separate us from the source of our strength and the path to wisdom?

The cross of Christ confronts us with a choice. A crossroads. We can embrace a definition of power as domination, do whatever must be done to get ahead despite collateral damage. We can make the understandable assumption that the world is divided between winners and losers and then work to be sure we're on the victorious side. We can twist the gospel into knots to justify our actions. We don't have to look hard to find examples. You've heard the preachers. *God wants a powerful church.* Perhaps you've been reprimanded by those who say the way of Jesus – mercy, sacrifice, compassion – has no place in the contemporary context. Christians must seek authority in every arena. Dominionism. A mandate to rule. Forget the cross. Seize the throne.

At this crossroads, the question is crystal clear – which depiction of divinity deserves our devotion? If we worship power, we will be content to claim it no matter the method. The ends justify the means. We could sell our soul for perceived success. We will end up emptier than we began. There is no profit in gaining the whole world if we lose our moral courage and our conscience in the process. No amount of power is worth the loss of your soul.

In place of this tortured take on discipleship, we proclaim Christ crucified. Costly love. Selfless sacrifice. A call to serve. Such a message comes with a warning – the paradox of wisdom is that it often appears foolish. The paradox of divine power is that it *is* weak by human standards. And yet, this foolishness and this weakness offer the only path to life that is worth living, our only comfort when tragedy strikes.

I close with a parable. Our family just returned from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania where we were visiting my grandmother for her 95th birthday. Her home is a mile from the tiny hamlet of Nickel Mines. Most of her neighbors, and many of her friends, are Old Order Amish. Eighteen years ago this month, in that separatist Christian fellowship, a one-room schoolhouse became the scene of a terrible crime. Ten hostages taken. Five girls, ages six to thirteen, killed by a troubled man who then took his own life in the schoolhouse. It was a story of immense and seemingly irreparable pain in a community committed to simple living and Christian pacifism.

Violent hatred and tragic loss. The story might have ended there. Or, it could have spiraled, causing a cycle of retribution and vengeance, turning neighbors into enemies. An eye for an eye.

That's not what happened. Days after the attack we learned more. Members of the Amish community visited the family of the gunman after the shooting. One elderly man held the shooter's sobbing father

in his arms The grandfather of a victim said to a reporter, "We must not think evil of this man; he had a mother and a wife and a soul." About thirty members of the Amish fellowship attended the shooter's funeral. The man's widow, Marie Robert's, was the only outsider invited to attend the service for the children. The next week, she wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors. My grandmother clipped it from the local paper and mailed it to me, with a note that said, "Christian forgiveness." She underlined these words from the letter: "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

If you remember these events, you might also recall that some were offended by the swift and complete forgiveness offered by the Amish community. Too much. Too soon. It seemed outrageous, unthinkable, madness. Utter foolishness.

Maybe it was.

Or perhaps it simply exposed the madness that we have come to call normal: hatred, violent retribution, obsession with vengeance.

Perhaps they knew something most of us struggle to comprehend. The saving love of a crucified Lord. Perhaps those simple words of forgiveness, those acts of compassion, displayed the wisdom and power of God in ways the world will never embrace.

May we, who proclaim Christ crucified, pray for the courage to be so wise.
Forget the throne.
Cling to the cross.

Grace and peace to you,

Chris Henry