

The folly of preaching the cruciform God

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Abstract

This chapter engages with Johan Cilliers' claim, made along with Charles Campbell, that "The gospel is foolishness. Preaching is folly. Preachers are fools" (Campbell and Cilliers, 2012:1–2) from the perspective of the work of Michael Gorman¹ on the cruciform God (2001, 2003, 2009, 2015). The chapter will specifically focus on the kenosis of Christ (Phil 2:6–8) since, while all preaching should be Trinitarian, because God is the redeeming God, preaching that focusses on his works of salvation, according to Cilliers (2004:20–21), will always be Christological. It is for this reason that Paul himself declares that he wants to preach about nothing else than Christ, and specifically about him being Christ crucified. The reflection on the meaning of Jesus' kenosis and crucifixion according to Gorman, will be undertaken in order to respond to Cilliers' (2018:433–437) question of how preaching can help the church fulfil her missional calling within South African society.

Keyword

Cruciform god; kenosis; Christology; crucifixion

1. Between silence and struggle

Cilliers (2018:435, 2016:122) refers in at least two of his publications to the evaluation of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands' attempts to become a missional church by Marcel Barnard. Barnard's (2013:34) blunt assessment is that despite new programs and personnel nothing had in fact been achieved. The congregations of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands remains "spectacularly waning communities" (Cilliers 2018:435). The best that the church can therefore do according to Barnard,

1 Gorman is a Methodist New Testament scholar teaching at a Roman Catholic seminary, the Ecumenical Institute of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary and University, in Baltimore.

is to stop all missional activities and return to the Scriptures in order to attempt “to hear the foolish voice of the Gospel” anew. When the church gathers to break bread, and care for those in need, and they are possibly asked why they do what they do they can in the words of Barnard (2013:34), “stutter ‘You know, we belong to an executed criminal, crudely hung up on a piece of wood.’ That is it. Let us simply be. Our God works in secret. That is his mission” (Cilliers 2016:122). Following the lead of Barnard, the church should thus remain silent and only testify about the foolish gospel of a crucified criminal when asked by those who are curious enough to enquire for what they gather for. Otherwise she should remain silent.

Cilliers (2018:436) has, however, also reflected on the influential prophetic preaching of Beyers Naudé that calls on the churches in South Africa precisely not to be silent, but to instead struggle against the structural injustice in South Africa. For Naudé the church should play a fundamental role in not only confessing injustice, but also in the restructuring of justice (Cilliers 2018:426). In attending to both the critique of Barnard and the call of Naudé, Cilliers (2018:436) ultimately comes to the conclusion that the church is called to live in between the ethical tension of silence and struggle. While the manner in which this ethical calling is to be lived out needs to be determined by an open dialogue, Cilliers (2018:434–436) makes it clear that the church needs to develop a mature theology of creation and broaden both her narrow pietistic notion of salvation as personal sanctification and her often exclusive theological focus on ecclesiology.

In considering Cilliers’ call for the church to live amidst the ethical tension between struggle and silence, it should be remembered that for Paul salvation comes to those who confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and who believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9–10). Salvation is thus for those who *publicly* proclaim that Christ, and not Caesar is Lord, along with the socio-political implications thereof, and who also *inwardly* (silently) believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. The gospel for Paul thus always elicits a public witness and a personal, internal response. Silence and struggle are for him unmistakably intertwined with each other. References to “the gospel” in the New Testament furthermore do not primarily refer to a new idea or philosophy, but rather a series of events in history relating to the birth, death, resurrection and enthronement of Jesus (Wright 2012:6–20). The last two events, the resurrection and enthronement

of Jesus, are not just good news for Jesus because God had vindicated him after being unjustly executed by his enemies. It is good news – gospel – for all of creation for they enact the promise that God will ultimately do for creation what God did for Jesus at Easter (Wright, 2008:93). Humanity's relationship with God, themselves, the created world, and all others that has been tarnished by sin will be fully restored and renewed (McKnight 2007:22–24). The full gospel is thus that the hyper-relational effect of sin will finally be undone at the eschaton. This is the foolish hope that the church should speak of that is based on the foolishness of the gospel of Jesus.

2. The foolishness of the gospel

For Cilliers and Campbell (2012:1–2), "the foolishness of preaching is inseparable from the folly of the cross." This view of preaching as being foolish since it is directly linked to the folly of the cross, agrees with Paul's appraisal of his own preaching about a crucified Christ being a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:23). The *Alexamenos graffito*, a key image for Cilliers for understanding how the Greco-Roman recipients of the gospel message would have understood it, supports Paul's assessment (Campbell and Cilliers 2012:2–6; Cilliers 2004:3–4). The crude carving of Jesus, the earliest extant visual depiction of Jesus (ca. 238–244), was discovered on the wall of a room near the Palatine Hill in Rome. It depicts a young Christian man, Alexamenos, worshipping a crucified, donkey-headed figure as is elucidated by the accompanying inscription that "Alexamenos worships [his] God." It is clear from the carving that the author thereof found the idea of worshiping a crucified person to be deeply offensive. The reason for its offensiveness was that if the incarnated Jesus was, as claimed by the early Christians, the very image of God, this image of God as the crucified Christ did not align with how both Jews and Gentiles understood the nature of God. For Jews the idea that God could be crucified like a criminal would have been blasphemous while in the Hellenistic world the carving's depiction of the divine would have been rejected as a distorted and repulsive form of aesthetics (Campbell and Cilliers 2012:5). The *Alexamenos graffito* should therefore more accurately be described as a *graffito blasfemo* (Campbell and Cilliers 2012:2).

It is important to note that the shameful manner of Jesus' death was not coincidental. It was a calculated, deliberate response by the leaders of Jerusalem (Mark 14:64) to the ministry of Jesus that had threatened to overturn their entire world. They did not just want to simply eliminate Jesus by stoning him. Or assassinating him with a concealed blade. They wanted him killed through a legally sanctioned crucifixion since it would mark Jesus as a tragically misguided fool. His death by being suspended on a wooden cross, and not by stone or steel, would signal to every Jew that his foolish actions had resulted in him being cursed (ἐπικατάρατος) by God since Deuteronomy 21:23 clearly states that "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree." It is this foolishness that Jesus, according to Paul, embraced as he states that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal 3:13). Despite Jesus being cursed Paul clearly states in 1 Corinthians 2:2 that "I decided to be concerned about nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

The reason why Paul insisted on proclaiming the foolish, crucified Christ, is that he had discovered that this proclamation, like the ministry of Jesus, not only challenged all established identities and theologies. It also transformed it. For Cilliers, the cross is therefore, not just a symbol of weakness, folly and death. It is also the transforming symbol of power and life (Campbell and Cilliers 2012:33). It is, therefore, not the task of preachers to make Jesus a reasonable man, or to sanitize his crucifixion. It is instead, to like Paul, make the offensive, foolish nature of Jesus' message and the horror of his crucifixion clear to their contemporaries for it has the power to interrupt and transform their lives.² It is this paradoxical transformative power of the cross that will be explored further in this chapter in view of the work of Gorman on the crucifixion of Jesus.

3. Gorman's cruciform God

The essence of Michael Gorman's reflection on Jesus is that the careful consideration of the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus is important for understanding who Jesus is, as well as the nature of God and the mission

2 This understanding of the power of the offensive, crucified Jesus is evident in much of the art of Cilliers that has been exhibited in the Faculty of Theology over the past two decades.

of the church. While not all of Gorman's proposal are novel, or universally accepted, his linking of Jesus, God and the mission of the church is worthwhile to explore for the way it can shape the praxis of the church in the South African context.

For Gorman (2009:12), Philippians 2:6–11 encapsulates Paul's master story of the gospel³ that is about the counterintuitive, cruciform acts of God. In his exegesis of the passage, Gorman firstly seeks to answer if the self-emptying (the kenosis) of Jesus, who was in the form of God, was in or out of character for God. Stated differently: did Jesus humble himself *although* he was God, or *because* he was God? The second question he wrestles with is how the self-emptying of Jesus should be understood.

In Philippians 2:5, Paul teaches the believers in Philippi that they should have the same attitude ($\varphi\pi\sigma\omega$) as Christ. In the following verses he elaborates on what he understands as having the same attitude as Christ⁴ entails by quoting an early Christian hymn. The hymn, often referred to as the *Carmen Christi*, can be divided into two parts that focus on the humiliation (2:6–8) and the exaltation (2:9–11)⁵ of Jesus respectively (Gorman 2009:16). The first part has been described as the *cursus pudorum* of Jesus.⁶ In contrast to the *cursus honorum*, the sequential order of public offices held by aspiring politicians in both the Roman Republic and the early Empire as they climbed the ladder of power, Jesus is depicted by the *cursus pudorum* as undergoing a progressive humiliation described by three main verbs which are each modified by participles that corresponds to different social status positions in the Roman world (Hellerman 2005:130, 203). The *cursus pudorum* indicates that the pre-incarnational Christ's self-emptying incarnation continued with his self-humbling obedience till his crucifixion (Gorman, 2009:17). It is the *cursus pudorum* of Jesus that is key

3 Cf. Gorman (2009:12–13, 2001:88–92, 164–172, 278–280, 316–319, 357–358).

4 Louw and Nida (1989:351) provides the following gloss for $\varphi\pi\sigma\omega$ “to keep on giving serious consideration to something – ‘to ponder, to let one’s mind dwell on, to keep thinking about, to fix one’s attention on.’ ‘let your mind dwell on the things which are above’”

5 The exhortation is not, according to Gorman (2009:30), the reward Jesus receives for his incarnation and death, but the recognition that his behaviour was in fact lordly, even godly.

6 Philippians 2:6–8 is, according to Hellerman (2005:129–133), a *cursus pudorum* the opposite of Rome’s *cursus honorum*.

for understanding who he is, as well as the nature of God and the mission of the church.

3.1 The Carmen Christi as *cursus pudorum*

There are two key exegetical questions that need to be clarified in order to understand the true nature of Jesus' *cursus pudorum*. The first exegetical question is how the adverbial participle phrase ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων should be understood. Is ὑπάρχω (a) a *concessive* participle ("who *although* he existed in the form of God");⁷ (b) a *causal* participle ("who *because* he existed in the form of God") or (c) a *circumstantial* participle ("who *being* in the form of God"). All three of these options are grammatically possible which means that the literary and theological context of the phrase determines which use Paul had in mind.⁸ For Gorman the understanding of the participle as either *concessive* ("although he was in the form of God") or *causative* ("because he was in the form of God") depends ultimately on the perspective from which the phrase is read. Is the incarnation and humiliation of Jesus namely being described from the Greco-Roman perspective of their gods, who did not humble themselves, and that the action of Jesus as God thus went against the general accepted understanding of what it meant to be divine (implying that although he was God, Jesus had done what would have been unexpected for his hearers)? Or should it be understood as reflecting the unique character of God from a Christian perspective who humbles himself (thus "because")? According to last perspective, Christ's crucifixion was not a contravention of his identity, or a negation thereof, but rather the true embodiment thereof. For Gorman (2009:26), Jesus acted in an ungodlike manner in terms of the Gentile Philippians' expectation of the gods of their world, but not in terms of the Christian God. Kenosis, therefore, does not mean Christ's emptying himself of his divinity so that he could act contrary to his nature, but rather Christ's exercising of his divinity, his equality with God. The cross, therefore, reveals the divine majesty (Gorman 2009:28).

7 The normalcy of imperial divinity forms the basic assumption behind the readings of the participle as a concessive participle (Crossan and Reed, 2004:284).

8 According to Hellerman (2015:111), it should be read as being concessive, and not causal, since it preserves the sharp contrast between verse 6 and verse 7. For an alternative understanding of the relationship between the two verses in support of understanding the participle as being causal see O'Brien (1991:214).

Gorman's (2009:9–10) understanding of kenosis is in line with a number of scholars whom he refers to as sharing his view:

Some interpreters, however, have concluded that this text also reveals something extraordinarily significant about Paul's theology proper, his doctrine of God. For instance, N.T. Wright (1992:84) concludes that the “real theological emphasis of the hymn … is not simply a new view of Jesus. It is a new understanding of God. Richard Bauckham (1999:61) argues that this text asks whether “the cross of Jesus Christ actually can be included in the identity of the exalted God of Israel, and answers that Christ's “humiliation belongs to the identity of God as truly as his exaltation does. And John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed (2004:290) wonder rhetorically, as they contrast the Philippians text with imperial ideology, “is kenosis not just about Christ, but about God … , not a passing exercise in ultimate obedience, but a permanent revelation about the nature of God? … Does, then, a kenotic Son reveal a kenotic Father, a kenotic Christ image a kenotic God?” (citations added).

Gorman thus argues that Paul, by quoting the *Carmen Christi*, is saying that what would have been out of character for the gods of the Greeks and Romans, was fully in character for both Jesus and the God in whose form he was. The incarnate, crucified Jesus is thus not an exception to the how God acts, but rather in line with who he is. It is important to recognize the offensive nature of this claim by Paul. The claim of Paul is not only that Jesus humbles himself for others, but that this also characterize the God in who's form he is. In the suffering of Jesus, the character of God can thus be seen. According to Moule (1978:97), while ordinary human valuation recons that God-likeness means that one can have one's own way, Jesus saw it as giving and spending oneself out.

The second exegetical question is how the noun ἀρπαγμός in verse 6 should be translated. It broadly connotes something one can claim by grasping it. In a negative sense that which is grasped can be “a booty,” or in a positive sense, “a piece of good fortune, windfall, prize or gain” (Gorman 2009:22). A related question is if the object is something that one already possesses or is it something that still need to be appropriated. Gorman follows Roy

Hoover (1971) in translating ἀρπαγμός as «something already present and at one's disposal [such that the issue is] not whether one possess something, but whether or not one chooses to exploit something for your own benefit.” Accordingly, he translates Philippians 2:6 as “who *because* he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited for *his own advantage*.” Unlike Roman aristocrats and emperors, or their deities, Jesus thus did not exploit his power and status for his own gain (O'Brien, 1991:214). He, however, also did not just discard it. This is a very important point in that it means that kenosis should not be understood as the “emptying” or “stripping” of something, but instead as describing for whose benefit something is used. In this vein Louw and Nida (1989:740) defines κενώω as “to completely remove or eliminate elements of high status or rank by eliminating all privileges or prerogatives associated with such status or rank – ‘to empty oneself, to divest oneself of position.’” Qualified by ἀρπαγμός the notion in the *Carmen Christi* is thus not simply the getting rid of one's status or privileges, but of not using it for your own advantage.

This understanding of the *Carmen Christi* has important implication for followers of Christ since Paul had stated that they should share in the attitude of Christ (Phil. 2:5). To indicate the essence of what Christians need to emulate, Gorman simplifies Paul's narrative of Jesus' kenosis to reveal the formula, or pattern for faithful living, required of his followers.

According to Gorman, the argument that Paul is making is that:

You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had. Who because he existed in the form of God [x] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited for his own advantage [y] but emptied [z] and humbled himself [z].

The argument can be shortened and rearranged to clarify its logic: You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had, who because [x] did not regard [y] as something to be exploited for his own advantage, but ... [z].

The logic of the argument can be further simplified: Who because/although [x] did not do [y] but ... [z].

This provides the formula or pattern underlying Paul's theology: Although X not Y but Z

This pattern can be called a *cruciform pattern* because it can be seen the clearest in the crucifixion of Jesus. It, however, appears throughout the Pauline corpus, sometimes implicitly and at others times in an abridged form (Gorman 2009:22).

3.2 The formula of fools

That Jesus, according to the *Carmen Christi*, did not use his divinity for his own advantage, but for the benefit of others, provides a narrative structure in *Philippians* and elsewhere for a cruciform life in contrast to “normalcy.” Since Jesus lived a kenotic life (defined as “although X, not Y, but Z”), Paul imitated Jesus in his kenotic ministry whilst expecting believers to follow his example of imitating Jesus, as is summarized in the Pauline dictum: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1) (Gorman 2009:22). This kenotic understanding of the work of Jesus, Paul and believers is evident in three types of texts in the *Corpus Paulinum*: Christological texts, Paul’s apostolic autobiographical texts and hortatory (ethical) texts. Since *Philippians* 2:6–11, which have already been referred to, is a Christological text, example of autobiographical and ethic texts will be briefly discussed.

Autobiographical kenosis – Paul the fool

1 Corinthians 9:12 – [x] If others receive this right (financial support) from you, are we not more deserving? [y] But we have not made use of this right. [z] Instead we endure everything so that we may not be a hindrance to the gospel of Christ.

While Paul possessed the right as an apostle to receive financial support for his ministry, he chose not to use his apostolic status for his own needs, but rather to exercise it in order to serve the church in Corinth. A *kenotic life for Paul is thus not the denial of a status already possessed (that of an apostle to receive financial support), but rather the not exercising thereof not for personal gain, but for the good of others* (Gorman 2009:24). As an Apostle of the kenotic Jesus, Paul is here not acting *out of character* as an apostle, but *in character*, since his ministry follows the pattern of Jesus’ ministry. Apostles should after all represent the one who sent them.

Ethical kenosis – living foolishly

1 Corinthians 7:4 – [y] It is not the wife who has [x] the rights to her own body, [z] but the husband. In the same way, [y] it is not the husband who has [x] the rights to his own body, [z] but the wife.

In this example, Paul teaches that while both wives and husbands have a particular right or status since they possess their own bodies (x), they should not make use of it for the satisfaction of their own needs (y), but instead for their partners' satisfaction (z).

The implication of following a cruciform God, according to Gorman (2015), is that the church must not just believe the gospel in the sense of intellectually affirming a list of assertions about the life and teaching of Jesus. The church must also *embody* it. She must become the gospel. The church should thus not just believe in the reconciliation brought about by Jesus. She must become reconciliation. The same can be said about justice, peace, hope and being vulnerable. Not just as individuals, but as new communities the church must embody the gospel (Gorman 2015 loc:78–124). In this embodying of the cruciform gospel preaching is of the utmost importance for directing the foolish praxis of the church.

4. Living as fools

The many paradoxes of South African society calls for a homiletic that preaches the promises of God within, and against, these paradoxes (Cilliers 2016:109). In order to do this, Cilliers (2016:436) has argued that the church must go back to the source of her identity as followers of an executed Criminal and then to go out into the realities of South Africa. What is needed, in line with the title of Kritzinger and Snyman's (2011) book dedicated to the praxis of David Bosch's missiology is prophetic integrity and *cruciform praxis*. In the work of Gorman both aspects are linked to each other.

If contemporary Christians apply Gorman's (2009:23) formula to the praxis of their lives they should ask what their power/status/privilege or agency [x] is, and not deny it, but exercise it not for their own advantage [y], but rather for the benefit of others [z]. The implication of a cruciform ethic is that believers are not called on to deny their privilege or power. It is

also not a kenotic ethic in that they should renounce or discard everything. They are rather called upon to not grasp their privilege or status for their own advantage. They can thus, for example, choose to use their knowledge, connections and capital for their own gain – or they can use it for the benefit of others. A kenotic life is thus not to deny their privilege, but to use it instead for the benefit of others. The reason for this is that believers are called upon to be imitators of Jesus who did not use his status of being in the form of God for his advantage, but for theirs, not because they deserved it, but because of who he is. Their following of the kenotic Jesus challenges all believers to reflect on what they grasp, as everyone has something that they grasp and use for their own advantage.

In conclusion preachers, according to Cilliers (2009:195), should step back and allow the Word “to create its own paradoxical spaces within which people’s paradigms might be shattered and shifted.” They should step back because they are powerless to do this out of their own power. Ultimately it is the strange, subversive texts of the Bible that reshape and reframe our God images. Like Gorman has argued, Cilliers (2009:195) states that preachers should take the vulnerability and weakness of God seriously. The Word that is preached is indeed fragile and foolish. It is in preaching this Word that Gorman’s work on the crucified God is helpful because it provides a pattern, formula or rhythm that helps communities and individuals to embody the cruciform gospel in their specific context.

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