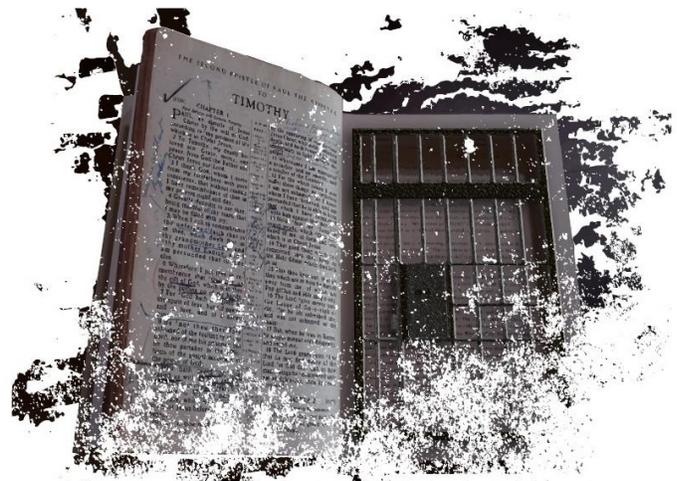


# TAMEONTA

## Things That Are Not: Prison Ministry and the Glory of God

By Mark Walker

*"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" (1 Corinthians 1:26-31 ESV)*



Above: Custom graphic designed for The Cell Church by an ex-prisoner at EsKyo Media

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians addresses several serious problems which had arisen in Corinth. In chapters one through four, the Apostle deals with a report he had received of divisions within the Corinthian church. Members in the church were aligning themselves with individual teachers who had preached the gospel to them, creating factions and resulting in conflict. “What I mean,” Paul explains, “is that each one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas [Peter],’ or ‘I follow Christ.’” (1 Cor. 1:12). The Greco-Roman culture of Paul’s day highly valued polished speaking abilities. The church members, adopting the culture’s values, took pride in claiming to follow a certain teacher, at least in part because of the teacher’s skillful argument and impressive delivery. Apollos in particular was known to be a great speaker.

Paul argues against such divisions on the basis that God’s values, as displayed in the gospel Paul preached, are not the same as the world’s values. In fact, the gospel seems to be foolish to the world, but in reality it is the power and wisdom of God. The world could not reach God through its own wisdom; instead, God displayed His wisdom by making a way to Himself

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through a gospel which the world sees as foolishness. What the world thinks wise is in reality foolish, because such wisdom cannot bring us to God. But what the world thinks foolish – the message of salvation through faith in a crucified Messiah – is in reality wise (1 Cor. 1:18-25). “Through the cross God has turned the world’s values upside down” (Ciampa & Rosner 102). Therefore, when Paul preaches the gospel message he does not rely on the foolishness of human wisdom, but on the true power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

To further prove this point, Paul directs the Corinthian Christians to look not only at the message, but at themselves as well: “For consider your calling, brothers” (1 Cor. 1:26). The “calling” is identified with God’s choice of the Corinthian believers (1 Cor. 1:27-28). Paul is saying, in essence, “If you doubt that God doesn’t value the same things the world values, just look at the people He chose to build His church in Corinth!”

First, he points out who God didn’t choose: “Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor. 1:26). When the people of this world set out to create a great organization or association, they choose its members according to the world’s values. They want people who seem wise to the world, who are highly educated, who are powerful and influential, who have the right connections and run in high social circles, who were born into prominent, wealthy, respectable families. But if the Corinthian Christians look at themselves, Paul points out, they will realize that God did not call many people like that into their church. God does not value such things.

Who, then, did God choose for His church? “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” (1 Cor. 1:27-28). Paul’s repetition of the phrase “God chose” three times in these two verses emphasizes that this is no accident – it is a deliberate, considered act of God. He chose not the wise, but the foolish; not the strong, but the weak; not the noble, but the low and despised. The word translated “despised”

**"The very people that the world treats as worthless are the ones that God values and chooses for His own."**

is related to a verb that means to show by your attitude or treatment of someone that they have no merit, worth, or significance. The very people that the world treats as worthless are the ones that God values and chooses for His own.

Why does God choose this way? “God chose what is foolish in the world **to shame the wise**; God chose what is weak in the world **to shame the strong**” (1 Cor. 1:27, emphasis added). The word translated “shame” means to dishonor or humiliate, and implies the disappointment that results when one’s hope is shown to be in vain (see, e.g., Rom. 5:3-5). The world puts its

hope in the things it values – worldly wisdom and power. In choosing for Himself those the world dismisses as weak and foolish, God puts the world to shame by showing that its hope in its own wisdom and power is vain. This is summed up by Paul in verse 28: God chose “things that are not”

in the world “to bring to nothing things that are.” “He preferred the nobodies over the somebodies” (Ciampa and Rosner 105; cf. Jam. 2:5; Calvin 91; Fee 82).

Paul reveals God’s deeper purpose in all this in verse 29: “so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” God chooses His people in such a way as to undermine the world’s values and leave no room for human beings to boast in themselves, in their own wisdom, or power, or pedigree. For the Corinthians to be boasting in human teachers for these reasons is foolishness, since none of these things can give us any true worth in the sight of God (see 1 Cor. 3:18-23). Instead, our true value and worth come only from God through Christ as a gift (1 Cor. 1:30). Therefore, no one can boast in themselves, and God in Christ alone receives all the glory (1 Cor. 1:31; cf. Jer. 9:23-24; Ciampa and Rosner 107; Barrett 57; Fee 79, 84).

This movement of God is nothing new, but is evident throughout the history of His dealings with humanity. “From Genesis onward, where he consistently bypasses the firstborn, God chooses the most unlikely figures” (Ciampa and Rosner 106). In His choice of, and dealings with, the nation of Israel (Deut. 7:6-8; Judges 7); in the Old Testament and its prophecies (1 Sam. 2:1-8; Is. 61:1-3; Jer. 9:23-24); in the earthly ministry of Jesus, the friend of tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 11:19, 25-27; Luke 1:46-55; John 9:39); in designing a way of salvation through faith in Christ alone apart from works (Rom. 3:27); at the cross, by the world’s standards a place of shame, weakness, defeat, and death, but made by God the pinnacle of majesty, glory, power, victory, and life everlasting – God consistently acts to undermine all human grounds for boasting, so that He may receive all the glory. God’s glory is the highest value in existence, and He displays it as the highest value by always exalting His own glory and abasing all others who try to glorify themselves (see, e.g., Is. 42:8; 48:11).

God chooses and uses the low, the despised, the marginalized, the weak, the disenfranchised, those the world sees as worthless, because in so doing He destroys every ground on which we might try to steal His glory for ourselves. At the same time He most clearly displays His own glory and all-sufficiency. Humanity’s values, which exalt humanity, are diametrically opposed to God’s values, which exalt God; therefore God chooses the foolish, weak, and lowly in the world’s judgment through whom to triumph over the world’s valued wise, powerful, and noble, to eliminate human boasting in self and show that all is from Him, through Him, and to Him, and He alone is to be exalted (cf. 2 Cor. 4:7; Rom. 11:33-36).

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So if you are a prisoner who hears the Lord's call to ministry, what does this mean for you? If you are afraid that Christ can't or won't use you because of who you are, where you are, or what you've done, Paul has a challenge for you. It is precisely because of those things that God delights to display His power, His sufficiency, and His glory through you! When The Cell Church says we believe that God is working to raise up great gospel ministers and kingdom leaders from prisons, where society has cast people it deems worthless to be forgotten, we ground this conviction on the proven character of God and on His unwavering commitment to display His glory and eliminate human boasting by triumphing over the world through "the things that are not." When we, the world's prisoners and ex-prisoners, begin to see ourselves as God's pastors, church planters, evangelists, missionaries, and theologians, we align ourselves with the character of Christ (look at who He picked for His disciples!) and the great value-reversing movement of God in salvation history. Why don't we - the "things that are not" - join God in shaming the world by asking Him to do great things through us to advance His kingdom? His glory and His name are at stake!

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## Ministry Updates

- We hope you enjoy the inaugural edition of **Tameonta**, the newsletter of The Cell Church. The name is a transliteration of a Greek phrase found in 1 Cor. 1:28 which means "things that are not." Lord willing this will soon be a monthly newsletter, but for now it will probably be every few months.
- In February The Cell Church was able to attend a Summit for The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI) in Wichita, Kansas. We made a lot of great contacts, and learned what we need to do to become an approved TUMI Satellite. This will allow us to teach the TUMI Capstone Curriculum, a seminary-level biblical curriculum with an emphasis on urban mission, in one or more prisons. We are currently working on our Satellite application.
- Local churches in the Denver area have begun expressing an interest in supporting The Cell Church. We met with a local pastor in April to discuss the possibility that members of his theology class at the church could volunteer to teach TUMI classes. We pray that some are willing to be mentors as well!
- We are meeting with other prison and reintegration ministries to let them know what we are doing and to begin building relationships. We met with Doing His Time at the beginning of April.



Mark and Q representing The Cell Church at The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI) Summit in Wichita in February

- Our relationship with Prison Fellowship is off to a great start! Mark was invited to sit on the ex-offender panel at the Prison Fellowship re-entry conference in Colorado Springs in May. We will also be able to set up a table to display information about The Cell Church and spread the word to people who have a heart for prison ministry.
- We are starting to receive letters from prisoners, and we are excited about serving you and finding ways to support your ministries! Feel free to write us anytime with requests for support, resources, prayer, etc. **Remember that we are still in the development phase of our ministry, so please have patience with us as the Lord begins to put all the pieces in place and we figure out how everything will work.**
- Please remember The Cell Church before the Lord in your prayers!



Mark and Q in a workshop for new TUMI Satellites at the Summit

## Letters from the Church

"The Cell Church is making an impact here at this facility. Many of the brothers are excited to see how God will use your ministry for His glory. The publication - "Reaching Out from a Bleeding Heart" - is extremely insightful and a tremendous resource for all of us who struggle with the flesh. Please pass along my gratitude to the author for his diligent study and practical gift to the church."

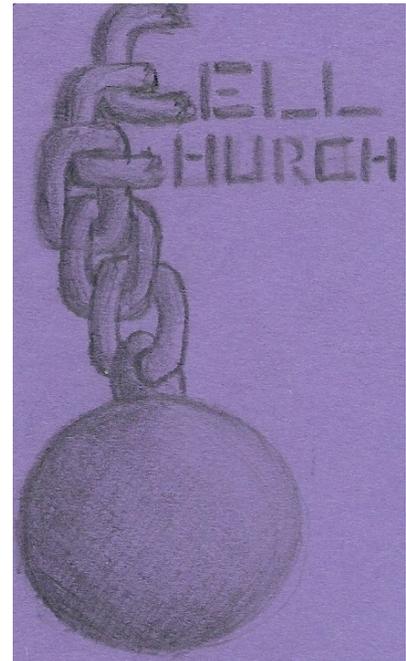
-Tim, Sterling Correctional Facility, Sterling, CO

"Your letter was inspirational, and makes me want to keep going. It was definitely prayer answered. My friend I am so willing to please God, I want to serve Him with all my heart and I know He has big plans for my obedience to Him. I truly hope

that you can and will be a part of that. I don't have a lot of support here in Colorado, but I know God has a perfect plan for me, and so I don't have to worry - all I have to do is listen. God bless you, my friend, and thank you." -Daniel, Sterling Correctional Facility, Sterling, CO

"Through our brother Tim I have received some information about "The Cell Church" and a leadership development program called TUMI. I would love to participate in this program - Tim believes I am perfectly fit for it. But I know that God has seen fit to equip me with the necessary tools to further advance His kingdom as we wait for the coming of our Blessed, Beloved Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I have an opportunity upon my release to attend a Bible college in Denver, but I've been limited in regards to biblical work through Bible colleges and seminaries while incarcerated...Know this, we are in here preparing for battle out there!"

- Shannon, Sterling Correctional Facility, Sterling, CO



Anonymous prisoner art created for The Cell Church - Buena Vista Correctional Facility, Buena Vista, CO