

*Proclaiming an Already-Powerful Gospel**1 Corinthians 1:17**Pastor Jimmy Snowden**Introduction*

We have been focusing our attention on 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. In this section Paul addresses a major problem that was plaguing the church at Corinth, divisions centering on leadership. For the sake of recap I want to remind you of Paul's thought flow in vss. 10-17. In vs. 10 Paul calls the Corinthians to unity, in vss. 11-12 Paul lambastes the Corinthians for their divisive spirit (they were dividing over leaders), in vs. 13 he demonstrates for them the heinousness of their division over leaders, in vss. 14-16 he expresses thanks that God had not given the Corinthians more reason to elevate him higher than he should be elevated, and then in vs. 17 Paul explains his primary role in Christ's church. To be more precise... as is clear from vss. 11-12 many of the believers in Corinth were elevating certain leaders to the detriment of other leaders. Consider the text with me.

“For it has been reported about you, my brothers, by members of Chloe's household, that there are quarrels among you. What I am saying is this: each of you says, ‘I'm with Paul,’ or ‘I'm with Apollos,’ or ‘I'm with Cephas,’ or ‘I'm with Christ.’

The church was splintering into warring factions because of their rivalries over leaders. This certainly was the situation that Paul was confronting. In vs. 13 Paul hits the Corinthians over the head with a series of rhetorical questions in an attempt to expose the ridiculousness of their leader-based divisions. He challenges them to consider what their Christianity is all about. The church is either all about the leaders of the Church or it is all about Christ. If our Christianity ever fails to be all about Christ, we have lost genuine Christianity. The Corinthian believers were well on their way to pushing Christ out by replacing His place of supremacy with that of their favorite church leaders. Consider how Paul paints them into a corner, showing them the folly of their unwarranted exaltation of church leaders.

Is Christ divided? Was it Paul who was crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name? (1 Corinthians 1:13)

Each of these questions demands an emphatic negative answer. You could imagine if my wife were to ask me for a Porsche for Christmas. I could very well answer, “Who do you think I am, Bill Gates?” If I were to answer her in such a fashion, my question would be just as much a statement as a question. The whole purpose of the rhetorical question is to demonstrate the ridiculousness of the request. This is how Paul's string of questions should be taken in vs. 13. He asks these questions to the Corinthians for the purpose of exposing the foolishness of their divisions over leaders. Of course Christ isn't divided! Of course Paul wasn't crucified for you! Of course you were not baptized in Paul's name! Paul's implied response then is, ‘Well... if Christ can't be divided and if none of us leaders were crucified for you and if none of you were baptized in our names, why are you exalting us as if this Christianity thing were all about us?!’ Then Paul goes on and actually thanks God that he did not baptize many of the Corinthian believers. This is a rather strange thanksgiving, indeed. Consider the text with me.

I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say you had been baptized in my name. I did, in fact, baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't know if I baptized anyone else.

Now why would Paul thank God that he had not baptized many in Corinth? The answer is quite simple; Paul is thankful because if he had baptized more of the believers in Corinth, they would have had more reason to elevate him higher than Christ. Paul was in no way devaluing baptism by thanking God that he had not baptized many. He is just thankful that God had not given the Corinthians more reason to elevate him higher than he should be elevated.

1 Corinthians 1:17

And now we get to the text for this morning's sermon. Verse 17 is a transitional verse: it connects what Paul said in vss. 10-16 with what follows in 1:18-25. In this verse Paul both clarifies his specific role in Christ's church and also introduces the next sub-section in 1 Corinthians, which focuses on the foolishness of preaching. Consider the text with me.

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with clever words, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect.

Paul first negatively establishes why God did not send him and then positively establishes why God did send him—God did not send him to baptize, but rather to preach the Gospel. Paul clarifies his role in Christ's church most likely for two reasons. First of all, the context of the passage would indicate that Paul was concerned that the church in Corinth had a funky, unbiblical view of baptism.¹ Many have suggested that although the Corinthians knew that they were baptized in Christ's name, they, in one sense or another, saw themselves as followers of whoever performed their baptism. It may be that some in Corinth believed that baptizers were worthy of special allegiance, second only to Christ. "Surely, I was baptized *in* Christ's name, but I was baptized *by* Paul. Paul is not greater than Christ, and yet Paul did baptize me, so he must be something special." Paul in no way wanted to diminish the importance of baptism, and yet he knew that he needed to correct their unbiblical exaltation of baptizers.

Second, Paul clarifies his role in Christ's church in order demonstrate for them the fact that his role is an inherently self-effacing, self-emptying role. In other words, Paul wanted them to see that his function in the body of Christ consisted of him pointing away from himself to another. Paul's job was not to baptize but to "preach the Gospel." His job was to make much of Christ, not himself. He was to be like John the Baptist, who when warned that Jesus was gaining more followers than he, replied, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Paul knew that this was his calling; not to call attention to himself, but to call attention to another, the Lord Jesus Christ. How do you discern a good sermon from a bad one? I know how conversations go in the car on the way home from church (I have only been in pastoral ministry for the past year and a half!): "Boy, that was an unusually good sermon this morning. Pastor A. was certainly on his game today!" How do you determine a good sermon from a bad sermon? What is your criteria? Usually it has everything to do with the delivery: How well did the pastor compose himself? How effective were his transitions? How articulate were his illustrations?

¹ As Fee cautiously suggests. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 63.

How well did he capture my attention? Although these are certainly important questions to ask (a called, Spirit-filled preacher will have a certain level of skill), these ought not be the first questions to ask. There is a fatal flaw in judging the value of a sermon by asking these sorts of questions first. What is the fatal flaw? All of these criteria have to do with the preacher and his gifts!

When you drive home today after the service and discuss the sermon, how will you evaluate the worth of the sermon? Will it be determined by the skill of the speaker or will it be determined by the content of the message? You see, this is why Paul clarified his role in the body of Christ; because he wanted to communicate the fact that his role (as a preacher) is inherently self-emptying. His role as a preacher is to point away from himself to another. Paul saw preaching as a tool that was to be used not to put his own glory and talents on display, but rather as a tool that was to be used to put the transcendent glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ on display.

Biblical preaching is a proclamation which points away from the messenger to the message. And if you want to determine the true worth of a sermon you must first ask questions like these: Was God glorified in the face of Jesus Christ? Was it faithful to biblical teaching? Did it come not in word only but also in power? Was the glory of Christ on display or did the skills (or lack thereof) of the preacher get in the way?

This is why Paul states that it was his goal to **not** preach with eloquent words of wisdom. Isn't that amazing; A preacher who not only doesn't seek to use the pulpit to exalt himself but actually strips his message from all external baggage so that the spotlight might be on the glory of the crucified Christ as opposed to being on his own rhetorical and communicative ability! He purposefully cut all of the flowery language out of his preaching so as not to distract from the purpose (or shall I say "Person") of the message. Let me put it this way; *Paul's goal was not just to proclaim Christ-centered content, but to actually package it in such a way where Christ alone was seen as worthy of all the glory. He wanted to preach a self-emptying message in a self-emptying way. He wanted to preach a Christ exalting message in a way in which Christ alone would be exalted.* This is just what Paul communicates in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

1 When I came to you, brothers, announcing the testimony of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. 2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 My speech and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and power, 5 so that your faith might not be based on men's wisdom but on God's power.

You see, if you have the power of God on you, you don't need fancy rhetoric—if you have an unction from the Holy Spirit, you may be the boringest preacher in the world but it will still come in power. Notice the word 'determined' in verse 2. Paul did not preach the Gospel in weakness when he was in Corinth because of an inability to rev the crowd up. No! He 'determined' to preach Christ in such a way. And why? So that the Corinthian's "faith might not be based on men's wisdom but on God's power." Consider how Paul spoke of the advancement of the Gospel in the midst of severe persecution in Thessalonica.

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit, and with much assurance.

The word came not in word only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit. Paul did not need to spice up the Gospel to make it a bit more flavorful. You don't take extra-crispy chicken from KFC and throw croutons on top of it to give it an extra crunch. It doesn't need an extra crunch, it is already extra crispy! So it is with the Gospel. If the Gospel is being preached in the power of the Spirit, there is no need for the frills of well spun oration. Paul knew that the power of the Gospel was in the offensive message of the crucified Christ, and thus he knew that 'words of wisdom' were not needed to secure converts or to change lives. God does not need our help to spice the message of His crucified Son up a bit. God only asks that we only get out of the way so that Christ may present Himself through us. Paul was convinced that the Gospel was the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16), and his preaching reflected his posture of confidence in this truth.

Preaching is a Tool

Preaching, as important as it is, and as central as it should be in the life of the church, is not an end in itself. Preaching is a tool. It is like posthole digger: how silly would it be if I went to the hardware store, bought a posthole digger, and then went home and started aimlessly digging up the back yard just for fun? A posthole digger is a tool. It is tool used to dig holes in the ground for erecting sturdy fences. To dig a bunch of holes without erecting a fence is a waste of time! Similarly, preaching is a tool, and it is only useful in so far as it is used for the right reason. Preaching is only useful in so far as it is used to bring glory to God by pointing needy sinners to Jesus and by equipping the saints for the work of ministry through the word of God. In so far as the pulpit is used as tool for self-advancement or selfish ambition or as a platform for driving home a personal agenda, it has been rendered useless.

Paul was convinced that anything that detracted from the light of Christ was ultimately a hindrance to the task of preaching. If eloquence or philosophical reasoning removed the person and cross work of Christ from the center of the lime light, he would cut it off. To him the goal of preaching was to make the person and cross work of Jesus as central as possible. Paul was in no way against eloquence in preaching. Paul never once dissed Apollos for his exceptional preaching skills. It must also be asserted that Paul's writing was eloquent itself. Just consider the many word pictures throughout first Corinthians (e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:13; 3:5-17; 4:1; 9:24-27; 12:12-26; 13:1-3; 14:6-9; 15:35-44). Jesus Himself can rightly be deemed the greatest communicator in the history of mankind. One cannot read, for instance, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13), His debates with the religious leaders of Israel (Matthew 21-22), or His string of woes against the Pharisees (Matthew 23) and not be absolutely speechless at his profound yet simple way of communicating.² However, Paul was careful in his use of eloquence, lest it ever get in the way of the person and cross work of Jesus Christ. Eloquence is a tool, entertainment is a tool, illustrations are tools, anecdotes are tools, word pictures are tools, visuals are tools, and all of these different tools can be used to highlight the glory of Christ. However, it is so very easy for each one of these different tools to be abused, and thus used as a tool for puffing up the preacher or tickling the ears of the people as opposed to being used to magnify Christ.

Consider the following words by Gary Shogren on this passage.

² This is not even to mention the almost endless number of quotations from the Wisdom and Prophetic literature in the Old Testament that evidence the highest degree of communicative genius.

Paul implies that the message of the cross could have lost its efficacy because of the style in which he announced it. The cross is wise and powerful and life-changing precisely because God says that it is so in the face of human disgust and rejection. However, it is possible to mismanage the gospel's power by exalting the messenger. The medium becomes the message, the attraction. People come to love the Gospel, not because God's love form them in Christ, but because so-and-so presents it so beautifully. The beauty of the Gospel becomes merely aesthetic, and that beauty rises and falls with a particular communicator of it. Such a presentation of the gospel may be pretty and pleasing, but it is not powerful, because people are not finding in it a connection with God through His Spirit.³

The pulpit is the place where Jesus in all of His glory is to shine, not the preacher. Preaching should not be evaluated like a performance on a stage. Singing a solo and preaching a sermon are two totally different tasks. Preaching is not merely the art of public communication, it is a work of the Spirit of God. It is not the place to show off superior speaking abilities. The music stage is set to showcase the vibrato and excellent tone of the tenor. The pulpit is set to humble the preacher and exalt his Savior

Why do people seek out John Piper, R.C. Sproul, and other such Christian 'super-stars?' We must be honest. The conversations on the way home from the conference or service oftentimes have more to do with personalities than with God. Do we not oftentimes seek them, their sermons, and their books because we are captivated by their ability to communicate, their passion, their charisma; are we not often captivated by everything except the God they are proclaiming? Hearing a sermon by Piper may cause you to download another sermon to listen to later, but will it drive you to your knees to commune with the Christ proclaimed by Piper? This would be a great question to ask yourself.

This is why Paul clarified for the Corinthians his primary role (preaching the Gospel); because he wanted to demonstrate for them even further how silly it was that they were exalting him so high. He wanted to remind them that his primary role in the body of Christ consisted not in pointing to himself, but pointing away from himself to Another, Jesus. They should follow Him in his Godward focus.

1 Corinthians 1:18

Paul goes on in the context and demonstrates how backwards the Corinthians have been in evaluating the worth of her leaders. It seems that they have been using wisdom, philosophy and fancy rhetoric as the yardstick to determine the worth of her leaders. Paul, however, refused to avail himself to such techniques. Why? Because he knew that the Gospel—the offensive message of the crucified Messiah—was the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16). He knew that rhetorical eloquence could be a stumbling block to those living in a culture which elevated public discourse and debate. Consider what he says in vs. 18.

For to those who are perishing the message of the cross is foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is God's power.

³ Gary S. Shogren, *1 Corintios*. Comentario Bíblico Iberoamericano (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, forthcoming), 67-68.

Paul didn't have to resort to fancy rhetoric to advance the Gospel in Corinth. One never has to resort to the tricks and methods of the world to advance the Gospel in the world, if, that is, if... he is preaching Jesus Christ crucified. Only the one who doesn't believe in the power of the Gospel to change and transform feels the need to turn to flowery and even sometimes manipulative rhetoric. This is not to say that eloquence (flowery speech) is bad, but if it used as a 'must have' to gain what could otherwise could not be gained, one must wonder whether the divine life is flowing through the preacher.

Conclusion

Well, we will pick up next week where we left off this week. Here is a bottom line statement: the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Preaching is nothing other than a tool to proclaim this offensive message. Preaching must be adapted not to whatever will elicit the greatest response, but rather to whatever will cause the greatest light to fall on the face of the crucified Christ. Paul's preaching was self-emptying. It was not the ideal job for one seeking the applause of man. And why? Because the warp and woof of his role as an apostle was to preach in such a way that the spot light might be cast away from himself unto Jesus. If he made use of eloquence it was for the purpose of making much of Christ, but he was not about to preach in such a way that confused where the true power of preaching lay.