

FINDING CONFIDENCE IN GOD ALONE**1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5**

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INTRODUCTION

In the passage which we considered last week Paul gave the Corinthian believers a humiliating history lesson—the history of their own conversion. It was a “blast from the past,” as it were. He asked them to “consider your calling” (vs. 26) so that they might be reminded of who they were when God saved them. Paul brought them back to the place and time of their own conversion in order to remind them of their sub-par status in life (vss. 26-27). What was his purpose? He wanted to take away any reason that they had for boasting (vss. 29-31). He wanted to remind them of who they were so that they might be keenly aware of the fact that there was nothing special about them, even from an earthly perspective, that made them more acceptable to God than the next man. He wanted to remind them that they had nothing to offer God. They had nothing to contribute to their own salvation. He wanted to remind them of this so that they might see how ridiculous it was for them to boast in themselves as if they were something special. His purpose was to ruin their self esteem so that they might learn to esteem Christ and Christ alone.

Well, Paul gives the Corinthians another history lesson in the text that we will be considering this morning (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). Just as in last week’s passage, in 2:1-5 Paul brings the Corinthian believer’s back to the time of their conversion. He will not, however, be focusing on the Corinthians and who they were at the time of their conversion. Instead, he will be focusing on himself, who he was, at the time of their conversion. It is another “blast from the past.” After all, as attested by Acts 18, it was Paul who first brought the Gospel to Corinth, and thus he was intimately involved in the details of their conversion. In our passage this morning, Paul sets forth to remind the Corinthians of the matter (content) of his preaching in vss. 1-2, to remind them of the matter (form) of his preaching in vss. 3-4, and to explain the mission (goal) of his preaching in vs. 5. This will set the flow for this morning’s sermon.

PAUL REMINDS THEM OF THE MATTER OF HIS PREACHING (2:1-2)

Paul begins by reminding them of the content of his preaching. Consider the text with me.

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.

Paul is clearly reminiscing a bit, taking the Corinthians back to the time of his first entrance into Corinth with the Gospel.¹ This is why I say that he “reminds” them of the content

¹ Paul starts vs. 1 with the word *kago* (“and I”). Anthony C. Thisseleton suggests the translation “as for me.” He says that Paul is “clearly... saying: ‘my own experience too, like yours, confirms the same point.’” Anthony C. Thisseleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 208. Ben Witherington III well explains the significance of Paul’s argument. “The connection between what precedes 2:1 and what follows is

of his preaching. And what was the content of Paul's preaching? He mentions two things. First, he says that he came "announcing the testimony of God." Although nearly all of the major translations translate this phrase as "the testimony of God" (i.e., NASB, ESV, HCSB, KJV, NKJV, NIV, etc.) the majority of the most up-to-date commentators are in agreement that it should be translated "the mystery of God."² The NLT most accurately translates it as "God's secret plan." The reasons for the difference among translators and commentators (and the NLT) is technical and at the end of the day is not all that significant. However, I do believe that the NLT's rendering of the passage is to be preferred. The point that Paul is making is that he came to them preaching a message that could not be tapped into apart from God's gift of revelation. The message that Paul came preaching was "God's mystery," it was not a message that a man could reason his way to or think up. Paul came preaching a Gospel that had its origin in the mind of God, and could only be understood and evaluated correctly when the Spirit of God opened the heart of man.

God was pleased to make the truth of the Gospel available only through Divine revelation. He did not make it accessible through the use of logic or reason. Rather, He deemed it best to make it accessible only through a supernatural revelation through the Spirit. I would (and desire to) discuss this at further length this morning; however, this is what the next section in 1 Corinthians is all about. So I will refrain from saying anything more this morning.

Second, notice from vs. 2 that Paul's proclamation focused on Jesus Christ. Jesus is the center of God's mystery. In vs. 1 Paul says that when he first came to Corinth he did not come "with brilliance of speech or wisdom." He then gives an explanation in vs. 2 for why he did not come "with brilliance of speech or wisdom." "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." Contrary to what most would suggest, although Paul may not have been schooled in the art of rhetoric (see 2 Corinthians 10:1-2; 11:5-6), Paul's poor public speaking when he first arrived at Corinth was not owing wholly to an inability to speak,

shown not merely by *kai ego*, but contracted to *kago* ('and I also'), but also by the content. 'And this divine rule was illustrated in my case also. Just as God ordained the weakness of the cross as the means of salvation (i.22-25), just as He has chosen the weak of this world as the objects of salvation (i.26-31), so I too observe the same rule among you...' 'Humility characterised my preachings (ii.1-2). Humility was stamped upon my person and penetrated my feelings (ii.3).' (J.B. Lightfoot) Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 122.

² For translating it as "mystery" see Thisselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 210-211; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 83; Gary S. Shogren, *1 Corintios*. Comentario Bíblico Iberoamericano (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, forthcoming), 82fn56. N.T. Wright, *Paul For Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 20-21. For translating it as "testimony" 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), 91; C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1968, 2006), 62-63; Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*; Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 55-56. Morris gives no reason for his decision. Carson does not really take a stand on the matter, but merely asserts the fact that it bears no direct significance to his argument. DA Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 37. The reason why I prefer the translation of mystery is because it can be attested by "the best manuscripts." Shogren, *1 Corintios*, 82fn56. Not only is this the case, but it is also a word that Paul will use in vs. 7 to speak of the same reality.

but was rather the result of a conscious decision. He says that he did not come with brilliance of speech because (or “For”) he had “determined” to know Christ crucified alone. The word “determined” (*krino*) literally means “to come to a conclusion after a cognitive process”; to “reach a decision, decide, purpose, intend.”³

Paul’s sub-par speaking when he first came to Corinth was the result of a ‘cognitive’ decision. What was this decision? To know nothing among the Corinthians other than Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He wanted Jesus Christ to be the star of his proclamation. He wanted his message to highlight the person and cross work of Jesus Christ. Now when Paul says that he determined to know nothing other than Jesus Christ and Him crucified, he in no way means that the only thing he talked about was the death of Jesus on the cross. It is not as if he never said anything about the resurrection (just see 1 Corinthians 15) or about creation or about the second coming of Christ or about the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. Of course he spoke of all of these things, but the crucifixion of Christ was at the very center of the message he preached, and it was the model of his life. Carson is so helpful here:

What he means is that all he does and teaches is tied in to the cross. He cannot long talk about Christian joy, or Christian ethics, or Christian fellowship, or the Christian doctrine of God, or anything else, without finally tying it to the cross.⁴

So what was the content of his message? It focused on God’s secret plan which centering on His Son, Jesus Christ.

PAUL REMINDS THEM OF THE MANNER OF HIS PREACHING (2:3-4)

Second, Paul invites them to go back in time to remember the manner—or form or delivery—of his preaching.

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,

He first reminds them of his frailty while he was first with them. He uses three words to describe his disposition: weakness, fear, and trembling. Some suggest that his weakness, fear, and trembling were the result of some physical malady,⁵ others suggest that since Paul had come to them after being hotly persecuted in Macedonia he came with and preached with hesitancy not knowing how he was going to be received—even fearing for his life,⁶ others posit that Paul is speaking of doubts about his relatively low social status and troubled speaking

³ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Edited by Frederick William Denker, 3^d Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 568.

⁴ Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 38.

⁵ Fee especially takes this position pointing to Galatians 4:13-14; 1 Corinthians 4:8-13; 2 Corinthians 4:7, 10; 12:7; 13:4. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 93.

⁶ Shogren, *1 Corintios*, 84. Fee helpfully points to Acts 18:9-11 where the Lord encourages Paul to not be afraid, but to stay in Corinth because He had more people to save.

ability coupled with the enormity of his task before the Lord.⁷ Search it out for yourselves. But it seems to me that Paul knew his own inability to accomplish the task that the Lord had given him. He knew that he couldn't stand toe-to-toe with the best popular public speakers, and he ultimately knew that he needed the power of God if his Gospel ministry was to take hold at all. Although one cannot have exact certainty of what particular obstacles Paul is here alluding to (because Paul doesn't explain it—he just states it) it seems to me that Paul's humble and meek presence was the result of numerous factors, the greatest of which was the knowledge of his own spiritual dependency upon God to do for the Corinthians what he could not do. In other words, he preached in a spirit of meekness and dependency. He knew that God had given him a task that he could not fulfill unless God did the work through him. His dependency upon God evidenced itself through his preaching.

Second, you will notice in vs. 4 that Paul makes a contrast. He first explains what his preaching did not consist of and then he explains what it did consist of. He says that his proclamation was “not with persuasive words of wisdom.” Paul was not a showman and he knew it. He then tells us what his proclamation did consist of: “but with a demonstration of the Spirit and power.” So catch what Paul is saying here. He is saying that the power of his preaching was not in the words that he used or in the way that he used them, but rather in the working of the Spirit of God. His preaching was not built on the back of excellent oratory, but was rather built on the back of the power of God's Spirit.

The word “demonstration” (*apodeixis*) in the phrase ‘but with a **demonstration** of the Spirit and power’ “means the most rigorous proof.”⁸ The public speakers in Corinth relied on their great and convincing speaking skills to provide proof for their assertions. Paul, on the other hand, pointed to the regenerating, converting, and transforming power of the Spirit as proof for the truth of the Gospel he preached. The proof was in the pudding, as it were. He

⁷ Garland seems to take this position. “It is more likely that he has in view something more general... His weakness, then, may include any of the following that made him or others question his sufficiency for the task (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5): an unimpressive presence, a repellent physical malady, his toiling with his hands, his relative impoverishment, his vulnerability to persecution, his refusal to play the crowd with silver-tongued oratory.” Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 84-85. Carson holds a similar position. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 39. Thisselton's statement is definitely the most insightful. “Since he [Paul] makes such play of not seeking the esteem of the audience, we must infer that the root cause of Paul's **much fear and trembling** lay largely in his sense of responsibility before God to fulfill God's call to be an effective messenger of grace perhaps in conjunction with some circumstance which added to his ‘weakness’ about which we can only speculate.” Thisselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 213.

⁸ Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 56. Garland explains it well; “What is clear is that Paul attributes the Corinthians' conversion to the powerful intervention of the Spirit. He understands God's power, then, to supplant the preacher's weakness.” Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 87. Witherington is helpful here as well; “*apodeixis* in vs. 4, a technical rhetorical term that Quintilian says refers to 'a clear proof,' 'a means of providing what is not certain by means of what is certain' (*Inst. Or.* 5.10.7). Cicero defines it as a 'logical proof' (*Academia* 2.8). If we bear in mind that the standard definition of rhetoric in Quintilian's day was the *dynamis* ('power') of persuasion (*Inst. Or.* 2.15.2-4) and that Dio Chrysostom refers to the gift of eloquence simply as *dynamis* (33.3), this passage becomes clearer. Paul says that the 'proof' he offered of the truth of the gospel about Christ crucified was not in the form of formal rhetorical proofs, but came from the experiential proof that the powerful Spirit had changed the Corinthians' lives when he preached.” Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 125.

didn't need astounding technical speaking skill to demonstrate (prove) himself true. He had the evidences of the powerful work of the Spirit to point to.⁹

Just like at work, some men boast of their great ability to be hard working, productive work horses. They spend more time bragging about their production than they do working. A quiet, normal-looking man who is a true work horse may not be all that big and bad in talk, but at the end of the day will be able to point to what he actually did as proof of his hard work. So it was with Paul; although he could not spin a speech with the best of them, he preached in the power of the Spirit. The proof of the truth of his message was found in the tangible results of the power of the Spirit evidenced in changed lives.

So what does this say about the manner of Paul's preaching? His preaching was not powerful in appearance but was powerful in its lasting effect. He did not preach with pizzazz, but the results of his preaching said much more than any public speaker could. One life changed by the Spirit of God through the simple proclamation of Christ crucified speaks louder than one thousand eloquent speeches. Let me put it this way; every preacher has a silver bullet. Some use tricks and methods that seem to bring success every time—some use emotion, some use fear, some use money. Paul's silver bullet, however, was dependency on the Spirit of God. Paul firmly held to Zechariah 4:6; "'Not by strength or by might, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of Hosts."

PAUL EXPLAINS THE MISSION OF HIS PREACHING (2:5)

In other words, Paul had a calculated approach to reaching the Corinthians with the Gospel. He did not merely go out and shoot from the hip—he had a goal, and he crafted the content (matter) and form (manner) of his preaching around his ultimate goal (mission). He was on a mission; his preaching was not without aim. Paul was convinced that the medium of the message could hinder the intended goal (or mission) of the message.

Suppose I was to get the original painting of the Mona Lisa. Suppose even further that I was to put it in the center of a large wall with the intent on constructing a picture frame for the Mona Lisa that was to fill up the rest of the large blank wall. So I go about constructing a frame that is literally thirty times larger than the painting. Because of my appreciation for the Mona Lisa I decide to go all out. I craft a frame full of extravagant colors. I embed hundreds of thousands of dollars of diamonds and rubies and emeralds in the frame. I hang strobe lights and disco balls from the frame. I do everything I can to give the Mona Lisa as fancy a frame as I possibly can. What's the problem? The frame becomes as much of an attraction as the painting itself. Instead of highlighting the beauty and uniqueness of the painting, it actually robs the painting of its brilliance by getting in the way.

Back to the question that I asked at the beginning of the message: What, then, was Paul's reason (or purpose or mission) for preaching what he preached in the form that he preached it? Look at vs. 5 with me.

⁹ This is the very point that Paul makes in 2 Corinthians 3. Unlike some, Paul was not in need of literal letters of commendation. After all, the Corinthians themselves were his letters of commendation. In other words, the Corinthians themselves, by their radically changed lives, gave hearty evidence to the validity of his apostleship. Paul's apostolic ministry had all over it the finger prints of the work of the Spirit. Thus, the Corinthians themselves were the proof of his apostleship.

so that your faith might not be based on men's wisdom but on God's power.

Paul's goal was to preach in such a way where men would be directed to place their faith—confidence or dependence—in God's power. He did not want the manner of his preaching to get in the way of goal (or mission) of his preaching. His goal was to point men to the transcendent power and faithfulness of God. You see, for Paul the goal was not just to preach and teach truth, but to do so in a way that would serve the truth the best. Manner and method and medium and form were extremely important to Paul.

He wanted the Corinthians to have an encounter with God, not with Paul. He wanted them to have no faith crisis. He didn't want to get in the way. Paul wanted to conduct himself in such a way that if he were to fall off the face of the earth, the faith of the Corinthians would not be shaken. Surely, they would grieve, but the basis of their faith would remain intact. How many people do you know who have left the faith because they have been disappointed by a leader in the church? I know more than I can even begin to count! Certainly, some situations are horrific and are never easy to deal with.¹⁰ However, there are many who fall by the way side as soon as they are let down by a respected leader in the church. Why do people have the tendency to do so? Because their faith is "based on men" and not on the power of God.

So let me ask you, is your faith based on men or on the power of God? Is your confidence in men or in God? Have you experienced the power of God in your life? Is your hope in men or in God? Kids, is your Christianity propped up by your parents, or have you really come to know God yourselves? In what or whom is your faith grounded? Is your faith grounded in fantastic, eloquent preaching? If so, beware. If your faith is grounded in eloquence, what is going to happen when a false teacher—lets say a Mormon or a Jehovah's witness—comes along and communicates his/her false Jesus with more eloquence and clarity than your present pastors? If your faith is grounded in the vibrancy/eloquence of speech, your faith will be as unstable as shifting sand. Your only hope is to put your faith in the person (the character) and work of Jesus Christ as revealed in the word of God.

CONCLUSION

Why would Paul need to remind the Corinthians of the matter and manner of his preaching? Because they needed to remember not just the content (matter) of his preaching, but the goal (mission) of his preaching. His whole goal was not simply to proclaim truth, but to proclaim truth for the purpose of grounding the faith of men in the power of God. In 1:26-31 he gives them a history lesson, taking them back to the time of their conversion to remind them they had no reason for boasting in themselves. In 2:1-5 he gives them a history lesson, taking them back to time when he first came to Corinth preaching the Gospel, in order to show them that they have no reason for basing their faith in him or in any other leader. Really 1:26-31 and 2:1-5 are complimentary. Paul is ridding them of every reason they might have of boasting in themselves in 1:26-31 and is ridding them of every reason that they might have to put their confidence in other men in 2:1-5. Or to put it another way, Paul seeks to ruin their self-esteem to make way for God-esteem in 1:26-31 and he ruins their trust in leaders to make way for trust

¹⁰ I am in no way making excuses for any leader who has failed a congregation (morally, etc.). Sins of leaders are to be dealt with in a most swift and serious manner (1 Timothy 5:19-20).

in God alone in 2:1-5. Why would Paul want them to stop boasting in themselves or in other men? Because boasting in men always leads to division. God alone is to be boasted in, and God alone is to be trusted in. Paul is not simply against them making too much of themselves, but is against them making too much of any man. He wants the spotlight to be on Christ and Christ alone. God is our only boast, God is our only hope. Proverbs 18:11 says, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower, the righteous run into it and are safe." Paul wanted to remind the Corinthians that he, Apollos, and Cephas are not "strong towers." God and God alone is to be our strong tower. As soon as we place men where God alone ought to be, the church will be racked by division and chaos. This is why Paul seeks to dethrone himself and his fellow ministerial servants. The key to unity is found in seeking the glory of God alone.