

Sermon 7: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5: Faithful Gospel Preaching

OUTLINE

The preacher's method
The preacher's power
The preacher's goal

INTRODUCTION

With society in a state of constant flux, many have felt the pressure to shape the message of the gospel and the method of preaching it to suit the times. For example during the golden age of Hollywood when the Western World was coming into the grip of the big screen Pentecostal evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson would regularly put on a big stage production as part of her sermon. When she was arrested for speeding she preached wearing a police officer's uniform; when it was Christmas she had real animals on the stage enacting a play; all the artefacts of the big stage came into her preaching. Or in 1982 Television Evangelist Robert Schuller wrote his book *Self Esteem: The New Reformation*, 'Dr. Schuller believes that virtually every problem a person has, every ill that plagues society, all sin and evil in the world, is a result of people having low self-esteem. Therefore, our greatest need is to have our self-esteem increased.

'Self-esteem then, or "pride in being a human being," is the single greatest need facing the human race today.'

'I strongly suggest that self-love is the ultimate will of man that what you really want more than anything else in the world is the awareness that you are a worthy person.'

'Do not fear pride: the easiest job God has is to humble us. God's almost impossible task is to keep us believing every hour of every day how great we are as his sons and daughters on planet earth.'

According to Schuller, in order to reach the multitudes of nonbelievers today, a new reformation is needed, a reformation based on building up their self-esteem. This reformation must be anthropocentric, that is, man-centered, not theocentric, or God-centered. Indeed, Dr. Schuller believes that classical theology seriously errs in insisting that all theology be centered around God instead of around man.¹

Throughout the ages people have attempted to mix up the way the gospel is delivered, or the message of the gospel itself to try and get a hearing and save the church from emptying. The Church of Jesus Christ is still here, and it is millions strong. And it is those parts of the church that are committed to the biblical gospel and teachings that are in fact growing. The Corinthians were like any generation of Christians, they were born and grew up in their culture and they were tempted to make Christ and Christianity more familiar and less alien; more acceptable and less jarring. The fight of faith for every generation of Christians is to cling to the truth of God in the face of the so called truths of their culture. Paul has started with the problem that they have allowed to develop, the problem of man-following resulting in disunity, 1:10-17. This problem of disunity is not merely a personality clash but the unrenewed minds of the Corinthians allowing the priorities and ways of their pagan culture to dictate how they view each other, who they listen to, what their priorities are, how the gospel

¹ <https://www.equip.org/articles/a-new-reformation/> accessed 2/29/2024

makes the most sense, etc. Paul has been calling these Corinthians to their senses. He does this by reminding them that the cross which does not fit this world's classification of wisdom and power is in fact the wisdom and power of God to save, v18-25. They have drifted from the cross because it is embarrassing and chosen a more palatable message of wisdom instead. Paul continues to help them see the folly of their choice by reminding them that God saves sinners, failures, broken people by faith, and not those who by pursuing some man-made teaching that casts us back on our own resources, v26-31. Through a consideration of their calling he reminded them that God is the author of our salvation not us, so clinging to any other message but Christ as our Savior is pure folly and glorifies man and not God. Paul now delivers a third hammer blow. God saves through an apparently weak and foolish Savior. God saves broken sinners through a weak message not self-made people following a man-made message. And now God saves through a simple, bare presentation of the gospel. Part of the problem with the Corinthians is that they had ideas about what a message ought to look and sound like, and the type of person that ought to be the messenger. Paul is now going to remind them of his presentation of the gospel to them so that they will learn to take their eyes off of man and trust in the power of God. He wants to disabuse them of putting their confidence in the flesh so that they will not be bamboozled by every well dressed, golden mouthed, magnetic personality who has a message. Paul points us then to the preacher's method in v1-2, plain speech and a pure gospel; to a preacher's power, the Spirit of God; and to a preacher's goal, faith in God not man.

The preacher's method

V1, 'And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.' Paul begins by talking about what he did not do, so that they can see the folly of what they are falling prey to. Paul did not use the lofty speech so common to the orators of the day, think of this as the 'style' of delivery. Nor did Paul use the 'wisdom' of the day, think of this as the 'content' of the message delivered. Paul avoided both the style of certain forms of public speaking; and the jargon and buzz words of certain acceptable and fashionable schools of thought. Paul tells the Corinthians that he came 'proclaiming'/announcing the gospel. It was not theatre or entertainment or a spectacle but the delivering of vital information. The content of Paul's preaching was he tells us 'the testimony of God.' Now there are two possibilities here. The word testimony is a legal word which has connotations of giving an eye witness account with no embellishments but merely the facts. Or as you can see the ESV indicates another possible word, mystery. Paul does talk about revealing the mysteries of God, namely Jesus Christ saving people from all nations. If it is mysteries, then Paul is using it provocatively because there was an addiction to mystery religions in the ancient world. This involved arcane ritual and mystical experiences for a select group of people who would get access once they joined the group to hidden truths. Paul may be using this idea ironically because the gospel is for all people. And if the Corinthians want a 'mystery religion' then they have it in Christianity so stop being seduced by false teachers.

Based on what Paul says here what sort of a preacher should I strive to be; what sort of a preacher should you look to listen to? Some might take what Paul is saying here to cover up a lack of preparation and go into the pulpit and meander around the text with no structure and no point and no gospel focus and expect Christians to take it because of what Paul says here. Let us be clear Paul would have been a very prepared person, he would have spoken with conviction, with

volume, he would have used various things like stories, illustrations, quotes, but he would not go in for the manipulative tactics and tools that stir emotions, get applause or a reaction. Paul was not an anti-intellectual or inept. He would insist on making Christ look good not himself look good. As someone has said, if you walk out of church and say to yourself, 'What a great preacher' and not 'What a great Savior.' Then the preacher has failed. You should be looking for a preacher who gets out of the way and presents Christ. These 5 verses have a very important part in my own journey. I had the opportunity of sharing my testimony along with a friend at a number of high schools. I had a background in death metal and drugs and my friend had a similar testimony. At the time I had long hair torn jeans and walked around everywhere with a guitar on my back. I had a marketable testimony and my friend and I were seen as 'desirable' in terms of what young people could identify with. Then one day I was reading about Paul who did not use reliance upon a marketable appearance or a message filled with things that appealed to his audience. Immediately I grabbed a pair of scissors and cut my hair and I threw all my torn jeans in the bin. I remember being determined that God would be the focus and not me in any way, that like John the Baptist, I become less as He becomes more.

V2, 'For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.' Paul is here taking the minds of the Corinthians back to how they got saved, and what sort of message it was that saved them. When Paul came to preach to them he did not come with a sense of self-importance and a know-it-all, he came knowing nothing but Christ. It has been highlighted that Paul came to Corinth after Athens. You remember Paul's ministry in Athens, it was a little underwhelming, he was mocked for bringing a message that was out of synch with Greek sensibilities talking about Jesus being resurrected from the dead. There were a few converts but not many believed. You might think that Paul would be discouraged after such a reception, that he would be in a place of self-reflection and wanting to rethink his approach so that he can get a better response. You might think that he would be willing to put the offensive elements in the background and fish about in their philosophies and ideas for something they can relate to and then slowly but surely bring them to Jesus. No, Paul decides to keep it simple, he committed himself to preaching a pure gospel, 'Jesus Christ and Him crucified.'

Now granted there will be a lot bound up in that simple gospel. To talk about Jesus Christ one would have to talk about God being three persons in one Godhead, and how the Son became a man. You would want to go over the OT and show how from the very first promise of the Gospel in Gen. 3:15 that God promised a Savior who would be both God and man, and how this servant of the Lord would fulfill all the types and prophecies and promises of the OT. You would want to point out how the OT has a scarlet thread running through it, how it was only through the death of an innocent sacrificial animal that sinners could approach a holy God in worship, and how this pointed to Christ. You would want to go to some of the OT stories and talk about how Jesus is the Passover lamb who saves us from God's punishment of death; or how Christ is the Ark who gives refuge and life to all who take refuge in Him. As Jesus did with the disciples on the Emmaus road you would show how Jesus is at the center of the whole story line of the Bible, and at the center of God's plan for the world. You would have to talk about why He had to be born—because we cannot save ourselves; why He had to be born sinless by a virgin—for we need a sinless sin bearer; why He had to live a perfect life under the law—He was the Last Adam under a Covenant of Works filling up a positive righteous to be credited to His

people; why He had to die on the cross—the wages of sin is death and He died to pay for what we could not pay for; Why He needed to resurrect from the dead—as a vindication of His personal righteousness, and as a completion of His victory over sin and death, being the firstfruits of a resurrection harvest that we will one day participate in; that He is presently seated at the right hand of God—this is to reign over this age while patiently allowing the world to hear the gospel before He comes again to judge, and then build a new heavens and earth free from sin. You would then need to talk about how He is Lord over all, and how we need to trust in Him alone and what He has done for salvation; how He is Lord and we are to repent of sin and submit ourselves to His lordship. We must not think that Paul would have preached a terse 5 minute message, there is so much bound up in Christ and Him crucified. Paul would not have neglected the other necessary doctrines that accompany this. Sin, propitiation, substitutionary atonement, faith, justification, etc.

Now we have mentioned more than merely the crucifixion, was it because Paul left out the resurrection? No, we see 1 Cor. 15:3-4, 'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.' He places the crucifixion front and center because this was the major offense to Jews and Greeks, the very thing the Corinthians were embarrassed to own. Now it should also be understood that Paul knew nothing but Christ when he arrived and preached the gospel to them. But he then also stayed for another 18 months and he would have followed up by teaching the whole counsel of God, Acts 18:11, 'And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.' Acts 20:27, 'for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.'

The preacher's power

Not only did Paul preach an unadorned message, but he himself was very unimpressive, v3, 'And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.' There are all sorts of theories about Paul's weakness. Was he recovering from his beatings? Was he suffering from some sickness or ailment? Was He depressed and deflated from the constant running and persecutions? Was it just his normal fallen sinful humanness with no Spiritual power in itself? We are not told, it could be all of the above. What we do know is that Paul reveled in his weakness where others would revel in their strengths, because when he is weak God is strong, 2 Cor. 12:9-10, 'But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.' Added to this weakness Paul experienced fear and trembling. Is this the fear and trembling that comes from being hunted by persecutors; or fear of the authorities being suddenly roused against you so that you have to flee again? Is this fear and trembling the deep sense of responsibility that comes from knowing that we are speaking as a dying man to dying men and eternity is hanging in the balance, that we speak for God and not dare to make up our own message? Someone has suggested that 'fear and trembling' is a common way to speak of someone who is showing religious piety. So instead of the self-assured; self-promoting; braggadocio of the typical public orator, Paul came as a servant of God and had a humble demeanor. Either could be possible. The point is this. If we compare the state of mind and strength of Paul who was transparently

human and frail with those who were pretending strength and self-sufficiency and wisdom while they made themselves an advert of their message, Paul was not impressive at all. This may even have presented a problem. In 2 Cor. 10:10 Paul talks about how he is accused of being a big talker in his letters but is unimpressive in person, 'For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account."

Paul did not sell himself, nor did he dress up his message, but still the power of God was at work, v4, 'and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.' Here he is reminding the Corinthians of what truly saves a person. It is not because the messenger is clever, is fashionable, is attractive to the hearer, but because the power of God is at work. Here Paul is highlighting for us the truth of how a person gets saved. Salvation is not an act of the flesh where a child of Adam merely has to come to a better understanding of truth; or to have their opinion changed in an argument; or try a bit harder and show more determination. Flesh gives birth to flesh. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that the new birth is the birth from above, that is does not depend upon the intelligence and winsomeness of the messenger nor the brains and will of the one receiving the message, but in the power of God who opens our hearts to believe. The conversion of Lydia is a case in point, Acts 16:14, 'One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.'

This is a tremendously liberating doctrine, that we believe by the power of God and not by the cleverness of ourselves or those preaching the gospel to us. When we stand before God on judgement day, He is not going to ask you, 'How many people did you save?' You cannot save anyone, that is His job, He will ask, 'Were you faithful in delivering the message?' Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God, so preach that word faithfully. Yes there may be a lot of resistance, the person you may be sharing the gospel with may be smarter and better educated than you; this should not deter you. A person is saved by God's power not how fashionable, able or intelligent you are. Present Christ clearly, and yes try your best to be interesting to keep their attention, but rely on God to change their hearts. 'Charles Spurgeon said:

The power that is in the Gospel does not lie in the eloquence of the preacher, otherwise men would be the converters of souls, nor does it lie in the preacher's learning, otherwise it would consist in the wisdom of men. We might preach until our tongues rotted, till we would exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless the Holy Spirit be with the Word of God to give it the power to convert the soul.'²

The preacher's goal

V5, 'so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.' Here Paul reveals why he, generational genius; a man of giant intellect who had one of the best educations of the ancient world, who had a high birth as a Roman citizen; who held a prestigious position in the religious world is willing to appear like a nobody, to endure the ridicule of those who were probably not his intellectual equals. It was all so that God's work of salvation in Christ would

² John F. MacArthur Jr., [1 Corinthians](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 57.

take center stage. Any preacher who draws attention to himself and not to Christ is a fool, more than that is evil. For no preacher can save anyone, and to detract attention away from the only one who can—Jesus Christ, is sin.

Where is your confidence today? Do you believe that you are saved because you are having a good week, you have had your quiet times; you have preached the gospel; you have said no a few times to some besetting sins? Are you putting your trust in human flesh or the finished work of Christ to justify you? Are you confident in your faith because Christianity has some smart people who can debate and beat atheists online? As long as you are convinced Christians are the cleverest you will feel assured in your faith? What about if Christianity wanes and we lose numbers; or if a best friend who was a believer suddenly turns their back on Christ? Is the confidence of your faith built on how others are believing in Christ or do you see your need for Christ yourself, convinced of His sufficiency yourself? Are you being bamboozled by some Christian teacher who pretends to have the answers to all the mysteries and you are being drawn away from the simple gospel of Christ and Him crucified? Are you embarrassed of your church because we sing old hymns and the worship is not very entertaining? There are so many ways we can fall into the same weaknesses of the Corinthians.

Let's conclude. Protect yourself from false teachers and false teaching by remembering that we are not saved by human strength or wisdom. Do not be taken in by some new thing that pretends strength or wisdom. Make sure that in any teaching you hear you hear about your inability and the sufficiency of Christ alone to save. Don't fall for big or successful ministries, don't go after human teachings and teachers, it is God who saves not your pastor, not your parents, not your church, not the church in NZ, make sure you are building on that rock and nothing else.