

The Imperfect Church – 4
The Powerful Church
1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Introduction

Have you ever had one of those moments where you saw something and it took a couple seconds to register that something about what you saw just wasn't right? So you do a double-take and discover that what you think you saw isn't really what you saw. For example:

[pic 1 – Live Schreiber] – this is not his body

[pic 2 – giant kid] – he is not picking up his tiny father

[pic 3 – football] – this is not a headless football player

[pic 4 – little man] – he is not getting a piggy-back ride

There are things in life that are a bit like Transformers, there is more than meets the eye. There is more going on than what it originally appears at first glance. This is the truth we see in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 2. Just a few verses earlier, Paul made a startling statement about preaching, one that can easily confuse and causes us to look a bit more deeply into what he means.

1 Corinthians 1:17 - **17 For Christ didn't send me to baptize, but to preach the Good News—and not with clever speech, for fear that the cross of Christ would lose its power.**

He had just confronted them with their prideful sin of division. They were dividing up into these factions, each claiming to follow different leaders in the church. One of the rhetorical questions he asked them was "Were you baptized into Paul?" Of course not! They were baptized into Christ, now under his ownership. He goes on to say how grateful he was that he hadn't baptized many of them because that would have contributed to their division. No, his mission wasn't to baptize but to preach the Gospel. And notice how he did that preaching..." **Not with clever speech."**

He is introducing this concern in the church (in the text we looked at last week, 1:18-31) regarding their love for human wisdom and intellectual prowess, brought to them by the leading scholars and orators of the Roman Empire. Why does Paul feel the need to differentiate himself from these Greek Wise Men? **"For fear that the cross of Christ would lose its power."** What does that mean? How could that even happen? What kind of preaching could empty the cross of Jesus of its saving power?

TS – In chapter 2, Paul picks up this thread after diverting over to deal with the paradox of wisdom and foolishness. Human wisdom and intelligence is actually foolishness, and what appears to be God’s foolishness (as shown at the cross of Jesus) is actually true strength and wisdom. Now he picks back up this argument and shows us there is more than meets the eye when it comes to preaching. Much more is going on behind the scenes when someone stands up and proclaims the Gospel message.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 - *When I first came to you, dear brothers and sisters, I didn't use lofty words and impressive wisdom to tell you God's secret plan. ² For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling. ⁴ And my message and my preaching were very plain. Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, I relied only on the power of the Holy Spirit. ⁵ I did this so you would trust not in human wisdom but in the power of God.*

As a preacher, this is one of my favorite, most formative texts. This text has come to influence me and my preaching more than any other. I love preaching, so much so that I have told the Elders, “I preach for free. It’s all the other stuff that you pay me for.” I hold some firm convictions about preaching and preachers, how things should be done and what should be avoided. There are countless types and styles of preachers, and while there are sometimes those who are just flat wrong in their message and methods, typically we aren’t talking about right or wrong, just different.

As we spend time today walking through this text about preaching, you get a window into my world for a few minutes. Know that I am not trying to present how I do things as a preacher as the only right and biblical way to do it. But what I do hope you see is why I do what I do, and why I do how I do what I do. That way we are all on the same page regarding why preaching is so important and why it occupies 50% of our time together each Sunday.

TS – I submit to you that preaching is the most important practice we participate in, in the church. Not that all the other stuff we do isn’t important, only that this one tops the list. Here’s why: preaching drives a church. Preaching is the steering wheel of a church. Where the pulpit goes, so goes the church. Any revival that breaks out, any turnaround where a church goes from dead to alive, any transformation from liberal theology to bible-driven...they all start in one place...the pulpit. As we dig into these five short verses in chapter 2, you will see why this is true.

This text shows us the Three Foundations of Biblical Preaching:

1. THE CONTENT OF PREACHING

v. 1-2 - When I first came to you, dear brothers and sisters, I didn't use lofty words and impressive wisdom to tell you God's secret plan. ² For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified.

"When I first came to you..." he is referencing back to about five years prior when he first arrived in Corinth while traveling on his second missionary journey (Acts 17-18). He had just finished preaching in Athens and made his way to Corinth. He describes what he didn't include in his preaching, and what he did include.

"I didn't use lofty words and impressive wisdom..." In a city and culture known for its use of lofty words (lit. high-sounding, pompous) and its fascination with worldly wisdom (the intellectual elite and latest/greatest ideas from around the world), he chose a different path. Why? Well, there are scholars who believe that Paul's time in Athens was a failure. Acts 17 tells us Paul made his way around that metropolitan, capital city and was heart-broken over the countless idols he saw. Once he begins preaching, he is invited to address the Areopagus, an elite group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers (intellectual elite) on Mars Hill and present this new idea they had never heard before. Mars Hill was like a global think-tank where the brightest in the world debated all the new ideas from around the world.

Some scholars dissect his sermon from the end of Acts 17 where Paul attempted to preach by pulling from pagan philosophy, even quoting one of their own philosophers. And if you read through his sermon you will see that it is a bit different from the others we have record of. He speaks of God in a vague manner, does not mention Jesus by name, and only references his resurrection vaguely toward the end. While a few people did become Christians (because that is the power of God in the Gospel), no new church began in Athens. We don't have a New Testament letter to the Athenians. So these scholars say Paul tried to utilize human wisdom and philosophy and it didn't work.

Now, we can debate all day about whether that is what happened in Athens, or all the reasons why that probably isn't what happened, the fact is that Paul gets to Corinth and declares he wanted nothing to do with this wisdom. He wants to focus only on the plain message of "God's secret plan." This is one of the ways Paul references the Gospel. He calls the truths of the Gospel a mystery (Gk. *mysterion*) in a few different places because no one would expect that God would do what he did. No one expected a crucified Savior. It's also a mystery because we cannot figure it out on our own.

David Garland - "The mystery is truth revealed by God, not truth discovered by human investigation and argument. Humans do not find this truth; it finds them. The mystery goes against all human reason because it is above all human reason, and human cleverness only makes the mystery seem to recede into deeper obscurity. It is particularly impenetrable to those who pride themselves on their wisdom and status because it nullifies that wisdom and status. It reveals that the worldly appearance of status and power is only an illusion."¹

v. 2 - ² For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified.

"For I decided..." he intentionally makes a commitment to approach preaching in a specific way. He is going to "forget" everything except the cross (lit. determined to know nothing except). It has the idea of what is reflected upon, focused upon, pondered. What should we give our attention to? The Gospel. Jesus and him crucified.

For years I held to a philosophy of preaching that said preaching was a form of entertainment. Have short series of 4-6 weeks because people get bored after that. Have fun, topical sermons and series that focus on how to help people live better lives (marriage, parenting, personal finance). Have new stunning logos, stage props, be creative and clever. Then, the argument goes, people will flock to your church to hear the Gospel. Here is the problem with that (many problems): they aren't hearing the Gospel. They are hearing how God wants them to be better, successful, living an abundant life. Basically God becomes a means to achieve the American Dream. And the Bible becomes a manual for personal success and happiness. That can draw a crowd, but it doesn't build a church.

Now, does this mean we should never talk about the more practical side of faith? Of course we should do that! But those things need to be put in their proper place...as implications of the Gospel. When you read the NT letters, the practical stuff always comes towards the end...after the content of the Gospel. We don't start with how to have a successful marriage. We start with the love of Jesus. We don't start with how to be a better parent. We start with God our Father. We don't start with best practices for personal finance. We start with the generosity of God. In the NT, the Gospel comes first, then the practical manifestations of it. In grammar terms, the indicative always precedes the imperative.

¹ David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 83.

2. THE STYLE OF PREACHING

v. 3-4 - ³ I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling. ⁴ And my message and my preaching were very plain. Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, I relied only on the power of the Holy Spirit.

“I came to you in weakness...” He uses the same word from 1:25 where he said that “God’s weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.” Here’s the thing: God doesn’t have any weakness. Paul is making a play on words...what appears to be God’s weakness is actually strength. Now he uses it again here to refer to himself...what appears to be my weakness (there is more going on behind the scenes) is strength. Why? Because it’s not about Paul. Preaching is never about the preacher. He can come to them in weakness because the power doesn’t need to come from him. Power comes from the Spirit of God.

“...timid and trembling.” Timid is Gk. *phobos* or fear (phobia). What is Paul afraid of? Why would he tremble? Well, if he has just come off of a huge failure in Athens, then he’s got that in the back of his mind. He’s also in Corinth, surrounded by the Sophists (traveling orators, experts in rhetoric). Around him are literally the best communicators in the world. ILL – remember having to give a speech in high school or college. You were nervous enough, but then the person who went before you was amazing. That doesn’t help your nerves, it makes them worse!

But I don’t think any of that is what is happening here. Paul likes to use this phrase “fear and trembling” in numerous texts. It is, he believes, the proper response before God. He uses the same phrase in Ephesians 6:5 to refer to the proper attitude of a slave before his master. That’s what Paul is here...he is simply the Lord’s servant who is overwhelmed at the responsibility of speaking on God’s behalf.

He understands what is at stake when he preaches. And he understands how easy it is for his audience to put him in the same category as these wise philosophers. He is doing everything he can to make sure his preaching is not about him. ⁴ And my message and my preaching were very plain. His message (content) and his preaching (style) are plain. This is the opposite of the Sophists. They had grand oration, strutting around, the messages being received because of their confidence and talent, as they tried to impress people with their talent. It was all a means of personal glory. It was all designed to draw them a crowd.

Preaching is not about glory, prestige, or popularity. It is not about how gifted the preacher is. Paul is trying to match the plain, simple Gospel with a plain, simple style. All to ensure he never gets in the way of someone hearing the message. Now, this is not to say that Paul is against good rhetoric or a good turn of phrase, or solid logic and intellect in his message. His letters are full of all of those things. What he opposes here is a manipulative performance instead of biblical preaching.

I am not opposed to creativity, cleverness, wordsmithing, video clips, going note-less. I am opposed to any of those things becoming the point of, or what is remembered about a sermon. As a preacher, the worst thing that could happen is that I get in the way of God's Spirit powerfully transforming someone's life because I wanted you to be impressed. Garland continues, "Faith is based not on how entertaining, informative, or compelling the speaker is but on the power of God transforming the hearts of hearers."²

3. THE PURPOSE OF PREACHING

v. 5 - ⁵ I did this so you would trust not in human wisdom but in the power of God.

Why have solid, biblical content? Why have a simple style? Why focus more on content instead of style? Because our trust (Gk. *pistis*, faith) is not in wisdom. We don't trust in the world around us. We don't anchor in the latest, greatest ideas of our time. We don't build our lives on Ted Talks. Our faith is in the power of God. We trust him to do the saving work. We trust him to continue to transform us into Christ-likeness.

Romans 1:16 - ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes.

The reason we spend so much time in our worship gatherings devoted to preaching is because that verse is true. It is the Gospel that saves. It is the Gospel that transforms. We anchor our lives in the Good News of Jesus, trusting in the Spirit's power. Biblical preaching is the primary vehicle God uses to get us there. This marks the Church. This makes the Church. If preaching is the steering wheel of a church, may God use it to move us in the right direction.

² David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 87.