
Preaching in the Wisdom of God

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

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What kind of preaching (teaching, Christian reading, discussion) do you really pay attention to? What makes you go to church, sit in a gathering, tune in to a blog, buy a book?

Your answer to that question will reflect either the attitude we find in the church at Corinth or the attitude we find in the Apostle Paul.

In this opening section of the first letter to Corinth, Paul is addressing an immediate problem, the problem of what they wanted in preaching. But he is also laying the foundation to address later problems. As we have seen and I want to highlight, the gospel, cross-centered wisdom is the power of God by the Spirit creating, sustaining and transforming God's people.

The Message of the Cross (1:20-24)

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The message of the cross will be believed by those God is saving. It is God's pleasure to save people through the preaching of a crucified God-man. Without the preaching of the cross, people cannot be saved.

The message of the cross is to be proclaimed regardless of and even because it does NOT fit cultural expectations. A gospel that fits the world's ways and wisdom is simply not the gospel.

The message of the cross is the power and wisdom of God to those God is calling to salvation. Regardless of cultural or ethnic distinctions, the message of cross, the preaching of our crucified and risen Savior will call, will bring people to salvation.

This is Paul's point: the gospel must be preached for people to be saved and where another gospel or no gospel is preaching, no one will be saved.

Now let's be sure we understand what the cross is.

It is not the pretty gold or silver jewelry you wear.

It is not the lovely wooden decorations that adorn many religious buildings.

It is not the stylized decorations on your Bible covers, wall hangings, paintings, cross-stitch.

The cross in Roman days was like a Nazi gas chamber, a modern electric chair. You want to talk about a cross kind of death then we are talking about an hours-long, brutal, bloody, racking, torturous execution of a criminal by nailing them to two pieces of lumber in an X or in a T and allowing them to hang there until they died of exhaustion, thirst or suffocation.

The message of cross is neutered and eviscerated by the preaching of health, wealth, prosperity, self-actualization, self-improvement, psychological wholeness, cultural relevance, social justice... in other words, most of the popular preaching today has little to do with the cross, with the bloody, brutal death of Jesus for our sins.

So here is how the gospel ought to sound:

We believe and preach that God sent his Son into the world as a Jewish man to die for the sins of His people. He was both God and man, the promised Messiah of Jewish Scriptures we know as the old Testament. He lived a perfect, sinless life, was executed as a criminal rebel by the Roman government in collaboration with Jewish religious leaders. He was executed on the Roman equivalent of a hangman's noose by being crucified on a cross outside of Jerusalem. Three days later he was raised from the dead and 40 days later ascended into heaven. He now rules and reigns over His people whom He has saved and is now calling to salvation through this message. To be saved from sin and eternal judgment, to be received by God, you must believe this message and bow to this God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the message that must be preached to all people groups, all cultures, all false religions including Islam in order for saving grace and faith to be given to a person so that they will believe and bow and be saved.

This gospel is the wisdom of God. Now, there is more to the God's wisdom than what He did in the means and message of the cross. But there is nothing less than and nothing contradicting this message. All else is the wisdom of the world.

The Rejection of Human Ways (v. 1-5)

¹ And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

What he rejected (v. 1)

Paul rejected ornate, elaborate, elegant speech as the means by which people come to faith. He rejected reliance on oratory to gain or convince an audience. He rejected speaking of the gospel in a way that was intentionally making it easier for people to believe.

What he determined (v. 2)

Paul set his mind and heart to only proclaim Jesus Christ and His cross. What he preached sounded silly to the culture of his day and it was unacceptable to the religions of his day. But he absolutely believed that faithfulness in the message and means would result in the salvation of the people God had chosen and called to salvation.

How he appeared (v. 3-4)

How did this affect the way he was?

It affected his demeanor (v. 3)

He was not cool or confident. He did not move among them with personal carriage of the great orator or preacher. He did not fit the cultural mode of a powerful, persuasive person.

It affected his speech (v. 4)

He spoke, not with the eloquent words that were the cultural vogue of his day, but with a commitment to clarity so that no one could misunderstand. It was clear exactly what the gospel was all about.

So he could make a stunning affirmation (v. 4).

He spoke with the Spirit's words and the Spirit's power.

The effect? Paul was contrasting his message and manner with that of the "super-Apostles", the preachers in vogue at the church. I do not believe any of the Apostles would have been able to pastor most modern churches, and certainly not the megamonoliths.

Why he chose this (v. 5)

He chose to do this so that the faith people professed did not rest in how he preached, but in the power of God in the mystery of the cross.

The cross is the only dividing line among humanity. All the rest, race, nationality, language, financial status, master, slave, all exist but in the church are not significant. Whether one rejects or believes the message of the cross kind of death, the crucifixion of the Jesus Christ is the only, unchanging, significant dividing line in humanity.

The Revelation of Gospel Wisdom (v. 6-13)

⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written,

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" —

Imparted from the Apostles (v. 6-9)

This cross-wisdom is imparted among the people of God (v. 6). Notice that it is "among" not "to" as is commonly read. The proclamation of God's wisdom is first to be declared in the community of God's people. The mature here are contrasted to the natural people. But there is going to be a play on the word. The Corinthians thought of themselves as having arrived at a higher maturity and spirituality because they were culturally in and spiritually superior. Paul says that the cross-wisdom is for all God's people, even those who think themselves too sophisticated for such a bloody mess.

This cross-wisdom is not a new thing. It is not a plan B. It is not what God decided to do when Adam fell or Israel failed. This wisdom was decreed by God as His eternal plan (v. 7). This is why we can expect to find it in the Old Testament. It is also why we need the work of the Spirit and the Apostles' impartation to know it.

Why? Because this was unimaginable, undiscoverable, unfathomable by this world (v. 8-9). As one author wrote:

In verse 9, Is. 64:4 is cited because it draws attention to the totally unexpected grace God bestows on those who love him. The Isaiah verse is not a reference to what we will discover in the future by way of God's individual purposes for his people, nor to unanticipated gifts, because Paul uses the past tense when he states but God has revealed it to us, the apostles, through the activity of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Pet. 1:12). Just as each person alone knows what he actually thinks, so too only God's Spirit knows the thoughts of God. (NBC, p.)

The rulers of this world, means not only those who were directly involved in the execution of Jesus, but all of those who set the religious and cultural tone of the day. If they had understood the wisdom of God in the cross, they would not have executed Jesus - they would have prevented His execution in order to thwart the plan of God. If this was so in that day, it is so today. The wisdom of God in the cross of Jesus is still not understood by the religious and cultural movers and shakers of this age. That is why there is so little genuine preaching of cross-wisdom of God.

Exposed by the Spirit (v. 10-13)

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him” —

¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

Man cannot know the mind of God. The mind of God is not open to natural discovery or human investigation. Cross-wisdom, the gospel, could not have been created or even imagined by man. And then you add sin into the mix and it puts the wisdom of God at a further, inconceivable distance from human reason and logic.

The Spirit knows the mind, purposes and plans of God. Just as we know what we are thinking through our spirit, our inner person, the Spirit of God knows the mind of God. He is privy to God's thoughts, plans and purposes. He knows them intimately, transparently and exhaustively.

The Spirit reveals to use what could not be known and is not known. So it is the Spirit who takes the mind of God and the cross-wisdom and reveals them. As the Scriptures attest, He has revealed in many different ways through the Old Testament and now has fully revealed them in Christ. Furthermore, He has revealed, through the Apostles, the full and hidden meaning of the Old Testament revelation. So the objective revelation by the Spirit now resides in the Scriptures. It is a revelation given in human languages. Anyone can read it. Anyone can study it. However, not just anyone can understand it.

We not only have that revelation given through the apostles, but we also have received the Spirit so that we can understand what the Spirit is revealing. There is an inward work by the Spirit in the person reading, hearing or seeing the Word of God so that what they take in is made real in them. There is an inward, subjective work of the

Spirit. Now that revelation in us is never separate from the revelation to us. The Spirit has revealed the Word. The Spirit takes the revealed Word and discloses it in us so that we have spiritual understanding. To truly understand the Bible, a person must have the inward work of the Spirit.

This revelation was hidden in the Old Testament but is now being unfolded through the Spirit's teaching of the Apostles who then interpret these texts to us. The Old Testament means what the New Testament says it means. This fundamental to our understanding of the Bible. The Spirit through the Apostles has given us the authorized meaning and message of the Old Testament. To reject that is to in some way reject the Spirit's revelation and disclosure in the Bible.

The Reason for Spirit's Work (v. 14-16)

Why is this work of the Spirit necessary? Why do unbelievers not truly understand the Bible? Paul is emphatic...

¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶ "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

The Inability of the Natural Man (v. 14)

The natural man in Paul's writing is the unbelieving, unsaved, unconverted person. What he says here is true of anyone who has not believed the gospel. This is true of the lowliest person, the most intelligent scientist or philosopher or most adept commentator or theological writer.

Two assertions and two reasons; the natural man:

Does not accept the Spirit's cross-wisdom.

Because the gospel appears to be foolish, unsophisticated, un...

Does not understand the Spirit's gospel-wisdom.

Because they are disclosed and understood by the Spirit of God in the soul of a person.

The Power of the Spiritual Man (v. 15-16)

The spiritual man is the person who has the Spirit of God. This is not some higher level of spirituality. There are levels of spiritual growth and maturity, but a person is either natural or spiritual, lost or saved, dead in sin or alive in Christ.

The Christian then, who accepts the gospel, the cross-wisdom of God and has the Spirit of God is fully equipped to understand what is actually going on in the world. He has the key and the ability to rightly understand the plan and purpose of God. He is not subject to the judgment or critique of the world.

Brothers and sisters, we do theology in community. We work together to more and more understand and apply the cross-wisdom of God. But we must not allow the critique of unbelievers to sway us to different understanding and opinions of the world. As for me, it does not matter to me the criticism, the attacks, the derision of any unbeliever on what the Bible teaches, what we believe and what we teach.

They will only be able to repent and believe IF, and ONLY IF, the Spirit of God grants them faith.

Reflect and Respond

Two important quotes from *The Cross and Christian Ministry* by D.A. Carson.

In other words, there has not only been an objective, public act of divine self-disclosure in the crucifixion of God's own Son, but there must also be a private work of God, by his Spirit, in the mind and heart of the individual. That is what distinguishes the believer from the unbeliever, the "mature" from the people of this age and the rulers of this age. If we "see" the truth of the gospel, therefore, it has nothing to do with our brilliance or insight; it has to do with the Spirit of God. D. A. Carson

(Biblical preachers) will want to use plain, clear, forceful, truthful, frank, compassionate, compelling, cross-centered speech—"spiritual" language that is appropriate to the spiritual message they are bearing. For they recognize that the Spirit of God who has opened their eyes to embrace the cross has also taught them to proclaim "Christ crucified" in a way that conforms with the humbling immensity of the message. D. A. Carson

For me, there are several important implications of Paul's words here:

We must be sure that we preach is the gospel, the cross-centered, true wisdom of God. Whether it is in our evangelism, in our edification, in our exaltation, every sphere of ministry must be rooted in the wisdom of God that appears to be foolish to the world.

Personally, this text as well as others, is a control on what I read and rely on to help me understand the Scriptures. I simply do not use things from people I know to be unbelievers or who claim the Lord yet reject the gospel. May I at least caution you to weigh carefully what Paul is saying about the inability of the natural man and the necessity of the Spirit to understand the Scriptures.

In our preaching, may we depend utterly on the work of the Spirit to reveal the truth to people. Yes, let's write carefully and clearly and even with a sense of excellence in preaching. But we must understand that eloquence and beautiful speech and tight logic do not give saving grace. It is the gospel, sometimes, bare, plain and bleeding that the Spirit uses to give faith and repentance.

While the implications and applications of the gospel are often deep and intricate, we must train our hearts to hear the gospel all through the Scriptures.

In this we rest:

¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.