

United in Christ: Overcoming the Challenges of Diversity
Studies in 1 Corinthians
Why Paul Preached as He Did

Intro: In our studies so far we have discovered that the essential problem of the Corinthians was division centered in personal self-promotion and pride. The Corinthians' divisions reflected a fundamental lack of understanding as to how God had accomplished mankind's salvation (1:18-25), why He acted as He did (1:26-31), and why Paul had preached as he did (2:1-5).

So then Paul first points out that God chose to accomplish our salvation, not by human wisdom, but that which human wisdom could have never conceived (and that the wise considered to be foolish), namely, the preaching of the cross.

Second Paul points out that God made use of the weak and the base so as to eliminate human boasting and cause men to boast only in Him and what He has done through Christ.

Third, Paul now shows that it was these things that influenced the way he preached among the Corinthians.

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:1-5)

Paul's approach to preaching in Corinth

In this paragraph Paul focuses in on two features of his ministry in Corinth:

The content of His message

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

The sophists or professional speakers of the Corinthian culture were noted for seeking to impress their hearers with what they knew. They would sometimes ask the audience to pick a topic on which they would expound in order to demonstrate their knowledge.

As for Paul he would limit his knowledge to one subject—Jesus and His death for our sins. This is remarkable since the idea of crucifixion was as we have already seen foolishness to most of the Corinthians. Yet in spite of the lack of popularity of the message, Paul preached it anyway, refusing to accommodate the demands for a display of knowledge. Instead Paul came as a messenger of God Himself sharing with those who would listen, not his knowledge, but rather “the testimony of God.”

The method of delivery

Paul avoided the use of impressive rhetoric

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.

Again Paul's method of delivery was in stark contrast to the professional teachers who came to Corinth. They would have used every possible technique to impress their audience with their speaking ability. In Greco-Roman thought, the use of rhetoric was a sign of "wisdom."

Paul affirms that he did not come "with superiority of speech." This doesn't mean that Paul was disorganized or gave no thought to how his message was packaged. It simply suggests that it was not calculated to win others on the basis of rhetorical flair rather than the content of the message.

And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom,

Paul did not seek to persuade the Corinthians to believe on the basis of the power of his presentation, but upon the basis of the truth of the message he proclaimed.

Paul avoided the personal manner of the sophists

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

Ancient sophists would have never admitted such a thing. They would have done everything in their power to mask such things. One of the hallmarks of the rhetoricians was their ability to exude personal self-confidence—to convince the audience that they knew what they were talking about, that there was no uncertainty and that they were fearless and powerful in their demeanor. This ethos, as it is something called, was an important feature in rising to power in the Greco-Roman world. A confident, powerful speaker could exalt himself over others and win their vote with his speaking skill (just as today.)

Yet Paul in contrast acknowledges no such personal power or boldness. In truth, Luke tells us that Paul came to Corinth with considerable trepidation, such that the Lord had to console him by a revelation:

And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." (Acts 18:9-10)

Thus, Paul affirms that his teaching was not with persuasive wisdom, "but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power..."

The meaning of this phrase is not entirely certain. Some have suggested that the demonstration of the Spirit and power was manifest through the miracles Paul worked

in Jesus' name. However, Paul seems to have already said in this paragraph that he did not accommodate the Jewish demand for "signs" (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22). Another view is that "the demonstration of the Spirit and of power" came through God's use of Paul's weakness and the message of the crucified Christ to radically transform the Corinthians into people of faith. Whatever Paul means, it is clear that Paul is pointing to what God did, rather than what he did to bring about the Corinthians' salvation.

The reason for Paul's approach

In this paragraph Paul give two reasons for his approach:

... that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

Paul deliberately avoided using the mechanisms of the sophists so that the Corinthians' faith would not rest on the wisdom of the speaker, but rather upon the power of God exerted through the message of a crucified Savior.

Clearly the focus of Paul's message and method was upon God and not himself, so that the faith of the Corinthians would ultimately be placed in God, and not Paul.

How this paragraph speaks to the Corinthian problem

The Corinthians were using the rhetorical skills of their teachers as a basis for self-promotion and exaltation. In such a contest Paul might have appeared to be less than impressive.

But Paul wants the Corinthians to understand that his message and methods were totally in harmony with the way God worked to save man and why He acted the way He did. So that no one should boast in him, but only in God and His Son who saved us!

Hopefully the Corinthians' understanding of this would cause them to refrain from both their preacher comparisons and their self-exaltation based upon them and simply honor God and Christ who saved them all!

How this paragraph speaks to us today

First, this paragraph sends a powerful message to all of us who would teach the word of God.

Teaching the gospel is not an act of self-promotion with others. Our primary concern should not be, "What does the audience think of me?" but "What does the audience think of God?" When we get through teaching, are people saying, "What a speaker!" or "What a Savior!"? Those who teach should not only be aware of the focus of their message, but also the manner of presentation. Worldly people enjoy being entertained; and a gospel preacher may accommodate them by peppering his message with jokes, zingers, and all kinds of theatrics.

He may win a following by such things. But, are they winning people to the Lord or to themselves? Will people maintain their faith when that preacher leaves?

Disclaimer: I'm not suggesting that preachers/teachers should give no thought to the organization or even how they may present their messages. I'm not saying that there is no place for humor or that the only good preaching must also be boring as all get-out. It's o.k. to enjoy hearing God's word! (Mk. 12:37) But everything we do should serve to impress the message upon the listener and not to impress the listener with the messenger.

Second this paragraph sends a powerful message to today's church which seems ever more committed to winning the world at whatever cost.

Should we give the world what it is looking for in order to make more converts? Should we meet their expectations of what ministry should be? I wanted to share with a timely article by Paul Proctor in the Tennessean that Stanton passed along to me:

The power of money has replaced the power of God

By Paul Proctor • February 24, 2009

There's certainly a lot of fear, uncertainty and confusion in our world today, isn't there? Many of us are just downright scared; but few are prepared for what surely lies ahead. Recognizing storm clouds on the horizon really requires no discernment. Anyone with a TV can tell we're in big trouble. Oh, we can sit around and complain about all the bad news being reported and crave a more positive spin on it all — but really, that would just be living in denial, wouldn't it? And, I don't believe that's the answer. It seems to me that the vast majority of us find our solace these days in all the amusements our world has to offer as a means to evade and alleviate those fears and concerns — distractions and diversions, if you will — those who don't just surrender themselves over to drink or drugs to manage the stress of it all.

Sadly, those amusements have become a staple in the Christian life, too, as evidenced by all of the coffee shops, recreation centers, celebrity concerts and high-tech venues required now just to gather crowds and hold their attention at church. What does this say about the power of God to draw all men unto himself?

It says to me that today's church no longer believes that Jesus is enough — that the living word of God can't really compete in a sensory-driven world and that the Holy Spirit needs our help.

It's not even enough to "tickle our ears" anymore. Now, we need our eyes tickled, our noses tickled, our taste buds tickled and our funny bones tickled just to keep them coming back for more!

Is this what Jesus hung on a cross for — to see that his church could one day have the best entertainment and facilities that money can buy?

Could this be what the Apostle Paul was referring to when he wrote to Timothy about those who had a form of godliness but denied the power thereof?

Has the love of money so perverted the minds of Christians today that they can't evangelize without it? Who needs the power of God when you've got the power of money?

Maybe this is why the economy is crashing to the ground — to remind us, yet again, that man cannot live by bread and circus alone — that he needs the power of God in Jesus Christ to put his fears to rest, find forgiveness and peace with him and have eternal life in a kingdom not of this world.

Preparation for what's coming begins on one's knees in humility, confession and prayer.

Even if you didn't agree with everything in that piece, it is surely food for thought!

Conclusion: The success of ministry is not about personal talent, the size of the church bank account, or access to important people—it has always been about one thing—about God and His grace; about Christ and His sacrifice; about humble people who see their need for His forgiveness and who in grateful love unite together in serving Him! When that is our mindset we will always be “United in Christ.”