

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Christ And Him Crucified I Corinthians 2:1-5

Does it make any difference what we preach and how we preach it? Is the content of the gospel important, and is the way we present the gospel to people significant? If people are coming to church and are happy with Jesus what difference does it make as to what and how we preach?

How many of us have honestly sat down with the Bible and tried to evaluate the general evangelical gospel of the twentieth century America? How many of us have tried to find out whether the mass evangelistic campaigns and the simple, canned gospel presentations of our day are actually scriptural? Have we swallowed hook, line and sinker the worldly philosophy that if something works it must be right? Have we sold out the gospel in order to play the numbers game? These are questions the Apostle Paul will answer for us by principles in this passage through the things which happened to the Corinthian church two thousand years ago.

In I Corinthians 2:1-5, Paul shows his message of Christ was not given to him by any worldly wisdom. Because human wisdom plays no part in man's salvation, Paul's message, method and his motivation were not based on human wisdom.

THE MESSAGE 2:1-2

When I came to you, brothers. The Apostle Paul refers to the time when he first came to Corinth. Before there were any Christians in that pagan city, Paul determined to have a message, method and a motivation in his evangelism which would please God and not men.

I did not come with eloquence. The professional Greek philosophers were masters at making speeches and while they may have said little, they always said it beautifully. Paul was not a great orator who could keep the people on the edge of their seats, who used great illustrations and flowery words to impress people. For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing" (I Cor.

10:10). Preaching the good news of Christ is not delivering edifying discourses beautifully put together, but it is bearing witness to what God has done in Christ for man's salvation.

It is interesting to compare possibly the three greatest evangelists in North America during the last 150 years -- D.L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham. Neither Moody nor Graham was known for impressing audiences with lofty rhetoric; frequently their sermons were deemed simplistic. Sunday was known for a flashy style, but he still preached a very basic gospel message. But all three centered on the cross and the need for personal conversion. As a result, they gave encouragement to millions of "down-and-outers," and countless came to the Lord through their preaching (Craig Blomberg, First Corinthians).

Or superior wisdom. Paul did not present human reasoning and philosophy to these Corinthians. He preached clearly, accurately and bluntly the Cross of Jesus Christ. Paul was not against using the mind or even using strong persuasion, but the mind was to be used to put down all the false arguments of the unsaved as to why they should not believe in Christ. But when it came to telling the gospel, Paul was a straight shooter and told it like it is.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, the whole city was given over to exploring methods of fulfilling life by various philosophical schools, by giving themselves over to fleshly indulgences in the worship of sex, by immersing themselves in various commercial and business enterprises, and by seeking after beauty, art, music and the aesthetic things of life. He knew the godless, self-centered culture of Corinth and made a definite decision he would not speak in lofty, flowing phrases or great high sounding words or tell people all they needed was a little knowledge in special subjects or some insightful approach to life represented by a human philosophy. He committed himself to preaching Christ and Him crucified.

Our American culture is much like Corinth. The wisdom of the world sounds so good. Through various media we are encouraged "to seek after the good life," "to become beautiful people", "to live life with gusto," "to find the real thing," and "to live only for today." In America we have swallowed a secular religious approach to life which says all that matters is the "here and now" and because man's basic nature is good, we need to discover the great hidden powers within us. There are ten thousand variances of this one secular philosophy which says man is "number one" and that he can improve himself, and that by so doing, he can save himself. The essence of the New Age movement is self-improvement through discovering man's higher powers which is god in us. According to the pollsters about 70% of all evangelicals believe people are basically good and become sinful by doing sinful acts, so the key is merely self-improvement where some of the bad things we do drop away.

As I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. Paul preached "the testimony of God," the gospel, God's message not man's message. He tells us he received this message from Jesus Christ Himself.

"I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11-12).

Notice carefully Paul "proclaimed" the gospel. He told the truth and let the chips fall where they may. He understood the gospel had power within itself to save. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

Suppose there was a lion in a cage. On the outside of the cage there were some tough guy hecklers who were saying, "That lion is harmless; it has no power; it can't hurt us." All the words in the world will never convince the hecklers that this lion is a very dangerous animal. However, if the zoo keeper comes and opens the door of the cage and lets the lion out, now unbelievable power has been unleashed and I can assure you the hecklers will flee. What's my point? Don't cage up the gospel. Open up the cage and let the gospel out. Tell the message with confidence and souls will be saved.

For I resolved. Paul made up his mind to preach Christ, and Him crucified, because this is the only message which can bring salvation to people. Why did he make this determination to preach a crucified Christ to them? The Cross of Christ is a judgment on the wisdom of man. The Cross says all of man's wisdom, all of his philosophy, all of his good works, all of his achievements cannot bring salvation to him. What did the smart, the powerful and the religious people of Jesus' day do to Him? They crucified Him. They denied, rejected and put Him to death because He brought judgment upon all their worldly ideas as having any merit in the salvation of a soul. Modern man still rejects Christ crucified because the Cross still says man cannot save himself by any human effort. Men basically do not reject Christ because they think He is crazy. They reject Him because they think He may be right, and if He is right then they are wrong. If they are wrong, then they have to set aside pride and humbly admit that Jesus is the Savior and He is God. Christ is a threat to modern man because He brings judgment upon human wisdom and says He alone is the way of salvation. The Apostle Paul understood it was only the message of the Cross which could save worldly men and women, so he made a resolve, a determination to preach nothing else.

To know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ. Paul preached Christ as the God-Man, Christ the Messiah, Christ the Jehovah of the Old Testament and Christ the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. He taught Christ was very God and very man. He held back no truth on the person of Christ

And Him crucified. Paul did not preach Christ the great teacher, or Christ the supreme example, or Christ the martyr, or Christ the ideal man, or Christ the great humanitarian, or Christ the first prophet. He preached Christ crucified. When Paul came to Corinth, he did not start with the power of positive thinking. He began with the fact that people are sinners and Christ died for sinners. To tell a brilliant thinker, or a mighty military man, or a suave politician, or a cultured person in the arts that he is a sinner is not the best way to win friends and influence people, but this is where Paul began in his preaching.

As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:10-12).

Paul explained the only hope for sinners is the crucified Christ, and the only way to be saved is to acknowledge one's total need of the crucified Christ.

Paul was no compromiser or man pleaser. He never watered down the message of the Cross. "Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I lying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10). To preach Christ crucified, encompasses many doctrines such as sin, judgment, hell, heaven, substitution, redemption, propitiation, reconciliation, justification, faith, repentance and salvation. The Cross touches every phase of the Christian faith and of Christian living. What Paul was saying is that "Christ and Him crucified" was the kernel of his message and the core of his preaching. He concentrated when preaching to the unsaved on the central truth—the crucified Christ.

The message of Christ was met with great opposition in Paul's day just like it is in our day, but we cannot stop preaching the message just because men react to it in that way. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (I Cor. 9:16b). Why? This is the only message which transforms lives. It is this message which will change the world, for if it turned the world upside down in the first century, it surely can do so today. Paul did not preach social reform but a crucified Christ because he knew people who were converted to Christ would have a social impact upon the world. Therefore, we must dedicate ourselves to spreading the message of Christ which transforms people who in turn transform society.

The story is told about a man who had been an alcoholic before he became a Christian. His old friends laughed and made fun of him and said, "You don't really believe that Jesus turned water into wine, do you?" He replied, "Well, I don't know about water changed to wine, but I'll tell you one thing I've seen. I've seen a lot of beer turned to furniture around my house!"

THE METHOD 2:3-4

I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. Paul came to Corinth in physical weakness for he had been physically persecuted just a few weeks before his arrival. He also had some kind of physical ailment. These things only made him totally dependent on God for results. He also came in "fear, and with much trembling." Paul was overwhelmed by the task of evangelizing the great city of Corinth. His fears were allowed by God to humble him, causing him to rest on the Holy Spirit for results.

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words. Paul's content (message) and method (preaching) were not in any way related to human wisdom. Again we must remind ourselves that the Greek professionals could argue so well they could convince just about anybody of anything. They could devise all kinds of systems for persuading people to acknowledge their particular philosophy or speculation. When Paul came to Corinth, he did not use previously designed methods for persuading people to become Christians and to accept the doctrines he was preaching. Rather, Paul's method was to rest in the sovereign work of the Spirit to convict and move men and women to respond to Jesus Christ by faith. Apparently Paul

did not beg and plead with the Corinthians to come to Christ but preached Christ crucified and trusted in the Holy Spirit to apply the message to the heart, causing them to be broken by the Spirit so they would turn to Christ in submission, yielding to Him alone for salvation.

But with a demonstration of the Spirit's power. Paul, in faithfulness and obedience, declared the message of Christ in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, and God started to work, and people began to come to Christ. A few from the higher class believed, and the Spirit of God saved hundreds of common folks in that city. God even reached down to the morally outcast in the community and some of these were marvelously saved.

"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ by the Spirit of our God" (I Cor. 6:9-11).

Soon there was a spiritual awakening in Corinth, and before they knew what had happened a church was planted in that sinful city. Christians began to witness. Home meetings sprang up. There was a lot of "coffee cup" evangelism. The city was alive with spiritual excitement. There was no mass, city-wide evangelistic campaign. There were people just like you and me sharing what God had done in their lives through Christ. This is the biblical way of evangelism. There may be a cultural place in our society for mass evangelistic campaigns, but they are not God's primary way of getting evangelism done.

What then was Paul's method? It was to share the gospel with everyone, depending upon a powerful demonstration of the Holy Spirit. A demonstration means "a convincing proof," so it is through the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit that men are convicted of sin and convinced of their need of Christ. Paul's methodology reflects his theology--God sovereignly saves sinners by grace through faith in Christ. When Paul came to Corinth, he did not have a fancy evangelistic organization. He did not have a team of advance agents with emphasis upon advertisements on radio, TV and billboards. He did not go after only the influential people, thinking that with them he could make a big impact upon the city. No! He came in the power of the Spirit to preach to any and all who would receive the message of Christ crucified. He didn't target just the rich or the poor, the educated or the uneducated, the corporate executives or the little people. He targeted any and all for Christ, letting the Holy Spirit save whom He pleased. This was his method in every city where he went.

"For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (I Thess. 1:4-5).

We are living in a day and age in which the methodology of most Christians in America reflects their theology—one that is more man-centered than God-centered. Consequently, Christians have capitulated to methods of human persuasion designed by wise and intelligent men but which are human wisdom at best. Many Christians are incensed if an altar call is not used at the end of a church service. The altar call is helped along by soft music and constant pleading of the pastor or evangelists for people to come forward to make a decision for Christ (“Just one more verse”). During this time of coming forward, there are no doubt many emotional psychological factors taking place. Yet, altar calls are not found in scripture and were not used in the church until about a hundred and fifty years ago. It is not sin to use an altar call, but it is a human method and in my opinion does not depend wholly on the Holy Spirit for results. Then there are all the canned methods of presenting the gospel, whether they have four, six, eight or ten steps to easy conversion. A person is led along by clever questions and salesmanship psychology, resulting in a point of decision where a person prays a canned prayer or mimics the prayer of the one witnessing to him. Please do not misunderstand me for I do use the gospel presentation in Evangelism Explosion when I have the time to make a longer presentation. I also use a tract called “Would You Like To Know God Personally?” by Campus Crusade for Christ when I just have a short time to make a presentation. However, I do make a few changes in these presentations to make them a more scriptural. Then in our generation within a few short years the popularity of the “seeker friendly church” has sprung up in which Sunday mornings are used to bring unbelievers to church and a non-offensive, watered down presentation of the gospel is made so as to help people like and enjoy Christ. Then hopefully they will come back and more direct evangelism can be used. Again, do not misunderstand me. There are many things in the “seeker friendly church” we all can learn from but the one thing we can never do is water down the gospel in order to make it pleasing to people. Certainly we need no human, man-made gimmicks to get people to Christ. What we want is for the Holy Spirit to convince men of their need of Christ and He can do His work without any artificial means of persuasion. We need common men and women, preachers and evangelists, to depend upon the Holy Spirit for results as they declare the message of the crucified Christ to all men. When we do it God’s way there will be two basic results: one is that there will be souls saved and the other is that there will be lots of opposition from the non-Christian world and also from the unsaved and unspiritual people in the church. When we declare Christ’s message with Christ’s methods, depending on the Christ’s Spirit, we will get Christ’s results. Probably not as many people will make professions of faith but far more of those who make professions of faith will stay with Christ and follow Him all the days of their lives when the biblical methods and message are used.

THE MOTIVATION 2:5

So that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power. The reason Paul preached the message of Christ and did not use the persuasive methods of men’s wisdom was that he wanted their faith to be founded and grounded on the power of God. Saving faith is ultimately rooted in the power of God. Saving faith is the result of the work of God, the Holy Spirit, convincing a man of his sin, of God’s wrath on his life, of the death of Jesus Christ for him and leading him to a personal commitment to Jesus

Christ. Supernatural saving faith is what Paul preached without any superhuman, superficial methods of persuasion.

Rationalistic faith which accepts Christianity as the most acceptable and logical philosophy of life is not saving faith but a false faith. Emotional faith that conjures up all kinds of psychological responses and religious experiences in man is not saving faith but false faith.

How often when I talk to people, especially in the deep South, and ask them if they are saved, born of God's Spirit, at peace with God, they answer, "Well, I went down front in one of the church services. I wept publicly with the pastor. I prayed the sinner's prayer," but this is not necessarily saving faith. It is possible for a person to walk down a hundred sawdust trails, pray a thousand canned prayers, weep over sin and still never be saved. Why? Saving faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, convincing a person of the work of Jesus Christ on his behalf and leading him into a permanent acceptance of Jesus Christ into his life as Lord and Savior. It would be a tragic thing indeed if a person had a faith which rested on some rational approach to Christianity or a faith which was placed on some emotional experience but was not true saving faith. The person would be deceived, thinking he or she was a Christian only to die and discover in hell he or she never had true saving faith in the crucified Christ for salvation. Human wisdom and methods may deceive men but when men truly are moved by the supernatural power of God, they cling only to Jesus Christ for salvation. Jesus put it this way, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

CONCLUSION

If you are a non-Christian and the Holy Spirit is convicting you of your sin and is working in your heart, convincing you that Christ died for you, that His death for sin paid your debt to God and that you can have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life through Christ by receiving Him as Savior and Lord, then quietly bow your will to Him and by faith say, "Lord Jesus, thank you for dying for me a sinner. I cannot save myself. I accept you at this moment as my Savior and Lord. I have heard your voice calling me. I yield to you alone for salvation, and I promise to follow you all the days I live." When you do this and mean it, you will know saving faith has come to you through the power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit.