

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Introduction

Paul now goes on to speak about himself as a preacher. He has already spoken on how the message he preaches, the Gospel message, is unacceptable to many, and he has shown that many of the converts were mere nobodies, by the world's estimation. Now he explains that he himself is a nobody, and he comes in weakness and with trembling. He does not rely on himself, his gifts and cleverness, but solely on God. His ministry is a demonstration of the Spirit and God's power.

The message points to God, the people in the church point to God, the preacher points to God. We cannot understand apart from God.

This passage is crucially important for young men preparing for the ministry. An older minister once gave the following advice to such men: "Learn by heart 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:2, and repeat it to yourself every morning."

The subject of Paul's proclamation

The heart of the Christian message is repeated again. In light of the many vague and woolly ideas about Christianity, we cannot be reminded of this too often. **For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified** (1 Corinthians 2:2). This does not mean, of course, that he never spoke of anything else (unlike some preachers of whom it can be said, "Ten thousand, thousand are their texts but all their sermons are one"!). But at the heart and core of all his preaching is Christ, and Him crucified.

He preached the great truth about God's saving work for men, and how He dealt with sin through the substitution of Jesus Christ, His Son. And from this core followed preaching about forgiveness, heaven, the family of God, being new people, the supreme motive for Christian living and service. This message glorifies God and meets man's deepest needs.

Reminder that Christianity is not a set of rules, ideals of a brotherhood, a philosophy, something to make people feel happier, or a scheme of ceremonies. It centres in the person of Christ Jesus, and what He has done for sinful man, and man's urgent need to have a personal relationship with Him. "Christianity is Christ". It is a message which God has given, a message which saves men, and a message which God will bless. God will always bless a ministry which is full of Christ. The great test of any ministry is not judged on one sermon. Where there is a continuous ministry, the minister needs to ask himself (and so do his people), "What is the supreme emphasis in my prayer and my preaching?" How this challenge has transformed many ministries.

Thomas Chambers ministered in Fife from 1803-1811. Sunday by Sunday, he preached about the biblical teaching on theft and dishonesty and adultery. Nothing happened. No one took any notice of the rules and laws he was laying down. Then in

1811 there was a sudden change. He himself was converted. He had a personal knowledge of Christ. His ministry changed. Henceforth he preached about Christ, His atoning death, the need to believe on Him. At his farewell service, four years later, he admitted that for the first eight years of his ministry he had preached all the virtues, but it did not have the weight of a feather on the moral life of the parish. Not till he began to preach the free offer of forgiveness through the blood of Christ did he ever hear of people's lives, habits and behaviour being changed. He had learnt that the only way to preach morality is to preach Christ.

Andrew Bonar once prayed at the church at Finnieston, "Lord, never let anyone occupy this pulpit who does not preach Christ and Him crucified." He himself never preached a sermon in which he did not commend Christ to the unsaved, and he rarely closed without urging immediate acceptance of the Saviour.

There are disturbing reports that even in evangelical churches the emphasis is not as clear as it used to be on Christ and him crucified. The Cross is sometimes only portrayed as an important staging post, important, but only the first step. By this, the Cross is not omitted, but it is downgraded. In some places the heart of the message is Pentecost and the gifts of the Spirit – that these are the things that make us first class Christians, and that the Cross is only for elementary Christians. Such teaching suits our experience-centred generation. And it certainly does not produce disciples with greater godliness than other evangelicals.

No, at the heart of the Gospel there must be the Cross. It is what the apostles made central. They expounded on why Christ had come, they taught that His death should be remembered in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. This message brings salvation, grips the conscience, reveals sin, glorifies God, promotes holiness, sends out missionaries, constrains us to pray earnestly and give sacrificially.

Here is a message about which we ought to be in dead earnest. It brings men to a crossroads. Presents the vital issues – weal or woe, salvation or condemnation, heaven or hell. There is immeasurable joy for those who welcome it, and irreparable loss for those who refuse it. It brings men and women to the great issues of eternal life and eternal death. Infinite consequences depend on our response to this message. We are "to preach as a dying man to dying men".

This is the only message to live and die on. If you are unsaved, this is the only message you need for salvation. If you are saved, this message gives you a reason to hate sin and live for Christ. The supreme reason – the Cross, where the Son of God loved me and gave Himself for me. The Cross compels us to be solely His and to live for Him with all our might.

The manner of Paul's proclamation

It is not enough to have the right message. It has to be presented in an effective manner if it is going to be received. Both matter and manner must be right.

There are two sides to Paul's proclamation – negative and positive. **I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom... My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words.** Paul was not there to show how clever or witty or

smart he was. He did not rely on human wisdom and cleverness, or human skills and oratory. But clear, plain, straightforward speaking with reliance on the Holy Spirit. He gave them the plain unvarnished truth. Of course there is a place for knowledge and proper technique to make the message meaningful. The use of illustrations, the need for careful preparation, these are useful in their place. But we ought not to rely on them. They are strictly subordinate to the message.

How easy to rely on human matters. Some congregations rely on their minister's scholarship and ability to speak, or his pleasant bouncy personality to fill the building, and entertain with stories. He may fill the place – but that does not necessarily mean a spiritual work will be done. Paul admitted that he was nothing in himself, and he did not lean on his own self, ability and gifts. **I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.** He was not afraid for his own safety or ashamed of his message. But he was anxious lest he let down the Lord, and fails in his task, and not be true to God's truth.

It is such a serious matter to preach the Word. Far better to be a preacher with butterflies in his stomach, and who cannot endure a meal on Sunday till suppertime, and whose knees knock in the pulpit, than a breezy, bouncy personality, full of self and his own importance in the pulpit, drawing attention to his own cleverness and ability. "No man can at one and the same time give the impression that he is clever and that Christ is mighty to save" (Denney). The task is not to dazzle people with intellect and oratory and personality, but to bring them face to face with God, leaving them with a sense of God and His claims.

Secondly, there is the positive side to the manner of Paul's proclamation. **My message and my preaching were... with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.** Paul relied on the Holy Spirit. He wanted to be an instrument of the Holy Spirit, through whom the Holy Spirit would bring the message home and confirm the truth of the Word. He was not there to tickle the ear or move the emotions, but in God's hand to bring God's Word with authority, speak to the conscience, and spiritually influence and change the hearers.

The preacher's work is not oratorical display, cheap entertainment, intellectual lecture or psychological pick-me-up. It is to bring the Word of God, regarding the Son of God. The preacher comes to men on the authority of God in the power of God. **But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us** (2 Corinthians 4:7). The more the human vessel recognises his weakness and nothingness, the more the power of God will rest on him. The trouble comes when we concentrate so much on men that we know little of God's power.

Over 150 years ago there was a preaching convention in Wales. Everyone was gathered, but the preacher did not turn up. So a maid was sent to the house to tell the preacher that everyone was waiting. She returned, saying she did not like to disturb him because she could hear that he was talking to someone. She was sent again, but returned with the same conclusion. She reported hearing him say, "I will not go and preach if you do not come with me." The ministers in the conference realized the significance of his words – and were content to wait.

Conclusion

Paul describes himself as a preacher, the matter and the manner of his preaching. What he preached and how he preached. There are lessons here for all, preacher or not. The Gospel is Christ and Him crucified. Must have a clear grasp of that, and the issues involved. There are so many different voices about Christianity, so lets be clear about the Biblical view.

Those who serve the Lord have a thousand and one opportunities to put themselves in the centre. The more we know, the more qualified we are, the greater our danger. The Holy Spirit is God's method. His authoritative power directs us. We are merely instruments, weapons and tools in His hand. He is master workman, and no one else.

*“How I praise thee, precious saviour,
That thy love laid hold of me.
Thou hast saved and cleansed and filled me
That I might thy channel be.
Channels only, blessed master,
But with all thy wondrous power
Flowing through us, thou canst use us,
Every day and every hour.”*