

The problem in 1 Corinthians was not about doctrine, but about style (v. 17). Paul is addressing the primary issue of the factions — not what they preached, but how they preached. They had embraced something from the culture around them.

In Corinth the Sophists taught rhetoric to the people for a fee. Philosophically they were relativists. That led to style over substance, setting them against even Aristotle and Plato. So they were also pragmatists — personal advancement, status and the wealth that came with it. So they chose the content and form that would most please the crowd. That's what the Sophists were about — they were only about results. The message was the manipulated variable; for Paul the message was a sturdy, unchanging constant — Christ crucified.

They were selling a consumer-oriented rhetoric. This played into the problem of the Corinthians — they embraced the cleverness of the Sophists. 1 Cor. 1 identifies that some in Corinth rallied around Apollos; others claimed Paul; still other Peter or Christ.

Paul said they were all wrong. They should not have been enamored with anyone's style. God chose a foolish message, method and people to demolish human pride and to center all boasting in Himself.

Chapter 2 begins, *and I* — Paul preached with God's ultimate goal. His success in Corinth had nothing to do with him or his method but with the Holy Spirit. In chapter 2 he contrasts his message with the Sophists.

In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, Paul provides the clearest explanation of his theology of preaching found anywhere in his writings.

Paul's theme is that preaching that exalts God must always be in the demonstration of the Spirit and His power. How does that happen. Paul explains his own personal commitments that enabled him to rely on the power of the Spirit and not his own techniques and abilities.

Here are his own commitments that teach us how to preach...

1. Focus on God's message and not personal glory (v. 1)

Paul was not trying to outdo anyone else; he was not trying to impress anyone else. He came to preach Christ.

"No man can bear witness to Christ and himself at the same time." (James Denney)

Paul refused to draw attention to himself. Paul uses the terms that the orators in Corinth loved, and he repudiates them — his focus was on God and His message.

Proclaiming = an authoritative announcement. We are not called to share, discuss, or have a conversation about the Word, but we announce it with the authority of God.

What are we to announce? **The testimony of God** — especially of His Son (v. 2). Paul with these words is not changing his philosophy or method. Preaching a crucified Christ was his method from day one of his ministry (Gal. 3:1).

What does it mean to preach and Christ crucified? It doesn't mean that he only preached the crucifixion — cf. Acts 20:27 — nor does it mean to preach only simple gospel messages.

What Paul does mean is that everything we preach must be rooted in the truth of Jesus as Messiah and his substitutionary atonement. Whatever our subject may be, we must keep our eyes centered on Christ. Don't distort or spiritualize a text, but remember that God is redeeming a people for His glory. Our responsibility is to show our people how that is happening.

Every sermon we preach must be rooted in Christ and Him crucified. That phrase is Paul's shorthand for the depth of the riches of His death. Imputation and substitution and propitiation and justification. The heart of Paul's ministry of the Word was Jesus Christ and the implications of the truth of Him.

The evangelical church has taken its eyes off the center and focused on the peripheral. We shouldn't choose our next sermon series on what we think will draw the largest crowd. This will also determine the boundaries of our fellowship. We should be more concerned about protecting the gospel than the planet, the atonement than the environment. Nothing can be more important to us than the gospel.

Focus on God's message and not on personal glory.

2. Depend on God's grace and not personal ability

He moves from the content of his preaching to the content of his heart.

In this verse (v. 3), Paul may be referring to his physical circumstances (illness or even safety). But it is best to see this in the context as Paul contrasting his attitude to that of the Sophists. This is his own attitude in preaching. In Eph. 6:2, he uses these terms (fear) to refer to how slaves were to relate to their masters. This is the way he carried out his preaching ministry. He was overwhelmed by the task and a deep sense of his own inadequacy.

He experienced fear and trembling from that responsibility — and at that time, he'd already been preaching for 20 years, though still in weakness and fear.

This is in direct contrast to what the Corinthians admired. Self-assurance was the high point of an effective orator. The orator was confident he could not fail and gaining glory for himself.

Note 1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 2:14, 16ff; 3:4. Who is adequate for these things? No adequacy in

ourselves, but God who made us adequate. We, like Paul, are utterly inadequate. Our only hope is in His grace.

Do we come in fear and humility when we preach? We are tempted to think that we have the capacity and tools to preach the Word and make people respond to the gospel. When that thought comes, we need to repent in sackcloth and ashes.

Self-confidence is deadly in a preacher, indicating he has no clear understanding of himself or of the task he has been given.

To preach according to the power of the Spirit we must surrender every aspect of self-confidence. We must come to the preaching task with a conscientious anxiety. Only when we are weak will He manifest His power because only then will He get the power.

3. Trust in the Spirit's power and not any human method or technique (v. 4)

Paul deliberately structured his preaching so that the power was not in his form or delivery. Paul says that nothing about his preaching came in persuasive words — which would have been shocking in Corinth, because that was the very tactic of the Sophists.

What was Paul's preaching like? The demonstration of the Holy Spirit. ***Demonstration*** was compelling proof; the compelling part of our preaching is not in our persuasiveness but always in the Spirit and in His power. The real power is not in the preacher or the presentation, but in the work of the Spirit of God.

Today we are faced with the same kinds of temptation. We need to ask ourselves some probing questions about what we really believe persuades people when we preach.

- ✓ What is the style of our preaching? Our style ought to be a natural expression of who we are. But that is never where the power is.
- ✓ Others are convinced that we can use atmosphere and the visual arts to influence people.
- ✓ Even committed to exposition, we can put our confidence in our exegesis and homiletical structure and alliteration, etc... We can become pulpeters rather than preachers.

God never blesses laziness, but if our confidence is anywhere but in the power of the Spirit, God will never bless our preaching.

What is preaching in the demonstration of the Spirit's power? It's not a special experience or anointing. Paul is talking about the Word of God. All of the rest of chapter 2 flows out of verse 4 — and the rest of the chapter focuses on the reality that the Spirit's power is revealed through the Word of God. The Spirit takes the Word preached and illumines the minds of those who hear so they grasp its richness and their minds and hearts are changed.

The power here is not in us — some experience that happens to us or some technique, but the Word of God working through us.

God chose a message that undermines human wisdom and a method that cuts across human wisdom in every age. He did this so He alone gets the glory. When we move away from the message of Christ or the form and style of the message, the cross of Christ is made void — we empty the cross of its power (e.g., 1:31).

When we change the approach in the way we preach, we change the message itself (2:5). Paul is rejecting self-reliance.

May God help us to focus on His message and His grace and to trust in the Spirit's power and not in anything human at all.