

“Help Wanted: Fools for Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

Last month, a group of American tourists embarked on a Carnival Cruise Line tour. In Costa Rica, a dozen senior citizens got off the ship to take a bus tour. After sightseeing at a local beach, the seniors’ tour bus was held up by three assailants, armed with a gun and a knife. One of the men, a 70-year-old retired member of the U.S. military, overpowered one of the three muggers—who was 20-years old—by placing him in a headlock/sleeper hold. The young man never woke up from it. The other senior citizens likewise began defending themselves, causing the remaining two accomplices to flee for their lives.¹

Sometimes the most unlikely people use the most unusual means to protect and preserve others. I would like to suggest that this is true of the preaching ministry of the local church. The ministry of preaching is conducted by unlikely people through an unusual means to protect and preserve God’s people. Thus, preaching Jesus Christ is one of the foundational tasks of the church. Few Christians will disagree that preaching is essential. After hearing this statement, most Christians will nod their head in agreement and offer up an internal “Amen.” But immediately thereafter, a yawn will slip out and most Christians will quickly tune out. This occurs because most of us don’t consider ourselves preachers. Yet, the sobering reality is that God calls all of us to be preachers of Jesus Christ (see Rom 10:14).

In our last two sermons in the book of 1 Corinthians (1:18-25, 1:26-31), Paul has demonstrated that God deliberately chooses foolish and weak methods and messengers to shame those who are wise and strong. Now in 1 Cor 2:1-5, Paul uses himself as a prime example of foolishness and weakness.² In these five verses, we will learn that the effectiveness of the preacher and the preaching lies in one’s dependence on God’s power. However, if this is to be realized we must fulfill two objectives: (1) The content of our message must be Christ, and (2) the delivery of our message must be God’s power. In other words, *God is looking for “cross-eyed” preachers.*

1. The content of our message must be Christ (2:1-2). Paul writes, “**And³ when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom,⁴ proclaiming to you the testimony⁵ of God.**”^{6,7} Paul reflects back on his year-and-a-half ministry in Corinth (see Acts 18:1-18). He begins by reminding the Corinthians how he did not preach (“I did not come...”). Paul had not dazzled his listeners by his rhetorical or philosophical prowess; he had simply proclaimed the truth about God.⁸ Now this was certainly unusual in first-century Corinth. In Paul’s day, Greek orators followed certain well-established conventions when they entered a city. Great crowds flocked to hear them because they spoke in the style of traditional Greek rhetoric—with extensive quotations, with literary allusions, and with a refined style that made them seem brilliant, witty, charming, and entertaining. They combined the suave demeanor of Stone Phillips with the clever wit of David Letterman. Yet Paul utterly rejected this approach to preaching, although he could have done it himself. As a well-educated rabbi, he knew Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin. Trained at the feet of Gamaliel, he could hold his own in any argument. If Paul wanted to show off his intellect, he certainly knew how to do it. But he rejected that approach.⁹ Instead, he proclaimed “the testimony of God.” The word “testimony” is a legal word that refers to something one presents in a court of law. Paul was conscious that God is a Judge. He was speaking in the presence of a Judge and he was presenting His witness (2 Tim 4:1). He knew what the truth was and was announcing it boldly.¹⁰ Paul was not preaching his testimony about God; he was preaching God’s testimony about God (“the testimony”). His message came from God, not himself.¹¹

For many today “proclaiming” is a bad word. They say, “Don’t preach to me!” Many preachers, afraid of being thought arrogant, avoid talking about preaching. They prefer to think of what they do as “sharing.” However, if I only make suggestions or throw out a few ideas and opinions, I would be guilty of arrogance. My opinions are no better than yours. But I am not declaring to you my words; I am declaring to you God’s very words (see 1 Pet 4:11a). Therefore, I can preach to you with authority.

But preaching is not just for pastors. You too can preach with authority to people in your life. My friend, Bill Meadowcroft, lives in Vancouver and is the CFO for Nautilus. Bill leads a weekly Bible study for interested employees. He simply teaches through books of the Bible with the goal of seeing people grow in Christ. In Portland, OR, there is a downtown Bible study during the lunch hour that people from all over Portland flock to. Whether we believe it or not, there are people who are looking for a man or woman to preach God's Word with authority. Could you host a Bible study at your state job? As a small business owner, how will you preach to your employees? Preaching doesn't require a large crowd and auditorium. You can preach wherever God has placed you to serve Him. The only question is, "Will you answer His call and proclaim His testimony?" *God is looking for "cross-eyed" preachers.*

In 2:2, Paul explains why he preached as he did: **"For I determined to know nothing¹² among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."**¹³ The word translated "I determined"¹⁴ means Paul made a conscious choice to do things a certain way. He didn't fall into it by chance or by force of habit. Paul preached as he did because he chose to do it that way. That same choice confronts every Christian messenger. It's so easy to be sidetracked by good and worthwhile things. We can preach about social issues, the political debates of our day, the crisis in the Middle East, or the decline of the family. We can tackle Bible prophecy or we can major on predestination or the gifts of the Holy Spirit. There is a place for all those things, but that place is never at the center. For Paul the choice was clear: "Jesus Christ and Him crucified." He started there and that became the center of his preaching. Once the center was in place, every other truth could be arranged around it. But Jesus must be in the middle of all things and all things must be properly related to Him.¹⁵

This verse cannot be taken absolutely, as if the only doctrine Paul taught on was the crucifixion,¹⁶ but refers rather to its centrality in his preaching. It is not enough for us to say that Jesus was a great moral teacher. He was, but the world largely believes that already. And it is not enough to say that He came down from heaven. Many already believe that. It's not even enough to say that He was born of a virgin. We must go all the way and declare that God Himself came down to earth in the person of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We must say that when He died on the cross, He paid the ultimate penalty to deliver us from our sins.

Think about it: If people want to know about sports or the latest news they can read the paper or turn on the TV. These days you can watch Fox, CNN, or MSNBC. You can surf the Net and watch 500 channels or listen to the radio. If it's news or sports or the weather or the latest world crisis, there are plenty of ways to follow the story. But if you want to know how to be right with God, if you want to know how to have your sins forgiven, if you want to know how to go to heaven, then you need the message Paul preached: Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

Note that Paul uses the perfect tense here for "crucified" (cf. also 1:23; Gal 3:1), which suggests that his focus was not as much on the historical event of the cross but on its ongoing effect for those who believe in Jesus, namely, that in this event they can find personal justification, redemption, and sanctification (cf. 1:30). The point is that the death of Jesus Christ covers everything. Jesus is the one person that fixes everything!

One final thought before we move on: To give people what they need sometimes you must not give them what they want. Most parents learn this early on. When your daughter is sick she may want another cookie, but what she needs is the medicine the doctor prescribed. If you love her you'll give her what she needs, not what she wants. The same is true as we speak to others about Christ. They may want to hear other things; we must tell them about Jesus, for He alone can save them. Do not back down from people. Do not kowtow to others. *God is looking for "cross-eyed" preachers.* He wants us to have a solitary focus and agenda.

[The content of our message must be Christ. Now Paul will share a second objective...]

2. The delivery of our message must be God's power (2:3-5). Paul again shares an autobiographical account: **“I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,¹⁷ and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom,¹⁸ but in demonstration¹⁹ of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.”** Paul did not come to Corinth with any degree of self-confidence.²⁰ Rather, he came “in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.”²¹ Corinth was a hard city in which to minister. Paul's reception there had discouraged him to the point that preaching was difficult, because of the inner doubts and uncertainty he faced.²² He wasn't the picture of confident self-assurance that many of us may associate with the apostle Paul. He responded in a totally human fashion, which I find greatly encouraging. Like Paul, we live and serve in a difficult city. We want to serve Christ and speak up for Him but sometimes it can be downright scary. Nevertheless, we press on. Even when we find ourselves tongue-tied or just plain forget what we were supposed to say, we must strive to preach.

Occasionally, someone asks me if I get scared or nervous before I preach. The answer is yes, and it happens every single time. No matter how many times I've preached or how well prepared I am there is always a sense of nervousness that comes just before I stand up. I hope I don't ever lose that, because if I do I need to stop preaching. If speaking for Christ ever becomes routine, then something has gone wrong inside your heart. We need “holy nervousness” when we witness to others lest we fail the Lord or fail the person to whom we are speaking.

I am comforted by the thought that Paul was a man like I am—a man of like passions, if you will. As I consider his life, I realize that nothing in Paul could explain his success—except God! The New Testament doesn't give us any descriptions of Paul's appearance, but Paul himself quoted his opponents who said of him, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible” (2 Cor 10:10). We do have this early description of Paul that comes from outside the New Testament:²³ He was “a man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were far apart; he had large eyes, and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long.” If that is accurate, then Paul was no first-century Brad Pitt. He wasn't much to look at and he didn't wax eloquent in the pulpit. Imagine two members of the Corinthian church meeting each other in the marketplace: “Hey, who's preaching this Sunday?” “Paul.” “Paul? Oh, no! I've invited my neighbors to church this Sunday. I thought Dr. Smartypants was preaching. Paul is just not very attractive. He is hard to understand. He's too deep for me. And his sermons are so long.”²⁴

Yet, Paul was all about the power of the Spirit. In 2:5, Paul explains that the power of God is the word of the cross (cf. 1:18).²⁵ Note the striking contrast—the wisdom of men versus the power of God. If you build on one, you cannot have the other. Paul's concern throughout this passage is self-reliance.²⁶ It's not that he doesn't want us to preach to the best of our ability—he most certainly does! He just doesn't want us to rely on our own gifts and strength.

In the late 90's a British company developed a product called “Spray-On Mud” so city dwellers can give their expensive 4x4 vehicles the appearance of having been off-road for a day of hunting or fishing without ever leaving town. The mud is even filtered to remove stones and debris that might scratch the paint. This product sold very well.²⁷ When it comes to preaching there are many who are more concerned with the outside than the inside. They wax eloquent and wipe fresh pastry speech all over the place. But this type of preaching has no place in our lives as followers of Jesus. Jesus was a carpenter. He was down and dirty! The Bible was written in Koine Greek, the language of the common man. God wants us to rely on His strength to preach Christ-exalting words. When we preach or share Christ our desire should not be that others say, “What a wonderful preacher!” Our desire is that they should say, “What a wonderful Savior!”

So how can we be foolish preachers for Christ? Several biblical principles may help.

- ***Pray for a prepared heart.*** Ask the Lord that He would supply you opportunities to preach His Word. Pray for boldness to be willing to walk through an open door (Col 4:3). Pray that those you speak to will be receptive.
- ***Meditate on Scripture.*** As you read God's Word, ask the Lord to speak to you. Pray for insights into the text. Think about this Scripture continually. Follow a crock pot approach. Let the Word sit, soak, and simmer in you. This will ensure that you are always prepared (1 Pet 3:15).
- ***Listen to people.*** When we listen to people's hurts we can learn a lot. Often the felt needs of people will well up sermons within us. God will actually bring a Scripture passage to mind that we can share.
- ***Focus on the essentials.*** Don't get lost in the minutia of theological details. Instead, focus on the testimony of God and Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Paul says that the power is in the gospel. Make sure that you keep the main thing the main thing.

This passage has communicated that the content and delivery of our message must be Christ and the power of His cross. *God has called us to be "cross-eyed" preachers.*

Telephone poles play a crucial role in developed countries. They support lines of communication that enable people to "reach out and touch" others in just about any corner of the globe. And in many communities, telephone poles carry power lines that make it possible for people to use lights and appliances. Think about these poles and the vast roadside forest they form. What is their shape? They look like crosses, don't they?

Telephone poles remind me of the cross of Christ. Think of the "lines" of communication and power it carries. Because of that cross, God listens to the prayers of any believer on the face of the earth. And because Jesus shed His blood on that cross for lost humanity, believers in Christ have a deep desire to "reach out and touch" others with the message of the gospel. For the apostle Paul, the cross was everything. He had one message when he wrote to the Corinthian believers: "Jesus Christ and Him crucified." The cross was the heart of Paul's communication and the basis of his power. The next time you see a telephone pole, think about the cross of Christ and how much it means to you.²⁸ *We have been called to be "cross-eyed" messengers for God.*

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Scripture Reference

1 Corinthians 2:1-5
2 Corinthians 4:1-6
2 Corinthians 12:1-10
Romans 6:1-14
Romans 15:17-20
Galatians 2:19-20
Galatians 6:14

Study Questions

1. What is true biblical preaching? How would I define what preaching is to an unchurched neighbor or coworker? How important is preaching in the life and ministry of the local church? What Scriptures would I use to support my position?
2. How do I assess a sermon? Is my assessment different than Paul's assessment? Why or why not? In what ways do I need to revise my views and/or expectations of preaching?
3. Why is Jesus Christ and His crucifixion so critical to biblical preaching? Why do so few preachers emphasize these cardinal doctrines? How does Jesus Christ's person and work encompass all the doctrines, philosophies, and ministries in the local church?
4. Do I come to church with an expectant heart? Am I hungry to hear from God? If not, why not? How well do I listen to sermons while they are being delivered? To what degree do I obey the sermon after it has been preached?
5. The apostle Paul was not an overly impressive individual. In what specific ways can I relate to Paul? Could God ever use me as a preacher? What might this look like? Do I have the courage to obey God?

Notes

¹ Police: Retired U.S. Tourist in Costa Rica Kills Mugger With Bare Hands Friday, February 23, 2007: <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,253959,00.html>.

² This section (2:1-5) ties back into 1:17 where Paul declared his mission: “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.”

³ The emphatic Greek conjunction *kago* (“and I”) indicates that Paul himself exemplified the principle which he had been expounding—in contrast with the manner in which the sophists introduced themselves at Corinth. The conjunction *kago* is used again in 2:3 to signal that 2:1-5 is divided into two sections (2:1-2; 2:3-5). See also Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 89.

⁴ The words of James Denney ring true: “No man can give at once the impression that he himself is clever and that Jesus Christ is mighty to save.” You can impress people with your cleverness or you can impress them with Jesus, but you can’t do both.

⁵ There is a textual variant. The weight of textual evidence is fairly evenly divided between *musterion* [“mystery”] and *marturion* [“testimony”]. Metzger says, “From an exegetical point of view the reading *marturion tou theou* [“witness of God”] though well supported, is inferior to *musterion*, which has more limited but early support. The reading *marturion* seems to be a recollection of 1:6, whereas *musterion* here prepares for its usage in 1:7.” This argument is rejected by Fee who asks why any scribe would substitute the less expected *witness* for the more familiar *mystery*. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 88 n. 1, 91. Thiselton says, “No one can exclude either possibility, but... we lean towards *mystery*.” Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 210. The bottom line is, the difference is not very significant. The gospel was both the message God had previously not revealed, that the apostles made known, and the message to which they bore witness. Although the two primary Greek texts (UBS4 and NA27) opt for “the mystery of God,” instead of “the testimony of God,” the vast majority of English versions (with the exception of the NRSV) prefer *marturion tou theou* (“the testimony/witness of God”). Therefore, to avoid possible confusion, I am satisfied with *marturion* (“testimony”).

⁶ Paul begins this verse with the personal pronoun *I* (the first word in the Greek text is in the combined form *and I*) to express intimacy with his audience. In the Greek, he ends verse 1 with the word *God* to indicate that his purpose is not to exalt himself but to point his audience to God and Jesus Christ. See Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistles to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 73.

⁷ “Preaching the word is not delivering edifying discourses, beautifully put together. It is bearing witness to what God has done in Christ for man’s salvation.” Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1958] 1990), 51.

⁸ Nigel Watson, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: Epworth Commentaries New Edition* (London: Epworth [1992] 2005), 23.

⁹ Ray Pritchard, “Jesus Christ and Him Crucified” (1 Cor 2:1-5): <http://www.calvarymemorial.com/sermons/SMdisplay.asp?id=377>.

¹⁰ Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Bible: 1 Corinthians 1-9* (Kent, England, 1998), 32.

¹¹ Paul never boasted in his ability to preach. He once wrote, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal 6:14). He also said in 2 Cor 4:7, “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” He compares himself to a cheap pot and the gospel to a treasure.

¹² Thiselton takes issue with most translations which link *ou* [“nothing”] with *eidennai* [“know”] or with *ti* [“anything, something”]. He considers that *ou* [“nothing”] belongs with *ekrina* [“decide”] and implies that Paul *had not* come with a plan to use the methods outlined above. The only plan he had come with was to proclaim the crucified Christ. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 211.

¹³ “What Paul avoided was artificial communication that won plaudits for the speaker but distracted from the message. Lazy preachers have no right to appeal to 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 to justify indolence in the study and careless delivery in the pulpit. These verses do not prohibit diligent preparation, passion, clear articulation, and persuasive presentation. Rather, they warn against any method that leads people to say, ‘What a marvelous preacher!’ rather than, ‘What a marvelous Savior!’” D.A. Carson, *The Cross & Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 35.

¹⁴ The Greek verb *krino* (“determined”) can be defined “to come to a conclusion after a cognitive process, reach a decision, decide, propose, intend” (e.g., Acts 3:13; 16:4; 20:16; 25:25; Rom 14:13b; 1 Cor 5:3; 7:37; 2 Cor 2:1; and Titus 3:12). See BDAG s.v. *krino* 4, Electronic Ed.

¹⁵ The subject of all Christian preaching is Jesus Christ. If the preacher doesn't finally get around to Jesus Christ, it isn't a sermon. It might be inspirational. It might be evangelistic. It might even be biblical. But it is not yet a sermon because Jesus Christ is the subject of our preaching, as He is the subject of Paul's preaching.

¹⁶ Cf. 1 Cor 15:3-8, in which the resurrection proves equally crucial.

¹⁷ "Maybe stressing that Paul saw himself as one standing *before God* with fearful sense of responsibility to deliver God's message. Though 'No doubt, if we draw on the narratives in Acts, the temporary absence of Paul's co-workers Silas and Timothy (Acts 17:15; 18:5) added a psychological dimension of loneliness or isolation which exacerbated Paul's fear and trembling (cf. the absence of Titus in 2 Cor 2:13).'" Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 214-215.

¹⁸ Paul did not want the Corinthians' faith to be based on how clever he was or how beautiful his talking was. Someone might come along after him whose Greek wisdom was even greater. Paul wanted his hearers to be conscious of God. He wanted them to hear God speaking through him.

¹⁹ The word "demonstration" (*apodeixis*) is a term used in a court of law for testimony. The term signifies that no one is able to refute the proof that is presented. This word is only used here in the NT.

²⁰ One wonders whether Paul is reflecting on the actual historical context in which he found himself upon his arrival. He had just left Athens where in his speech in the meeting of the Areopagus he had tried a significantly different style of preaching to reach this audience (see Acts 17:23-31). He began with general revelation and quoted at least two Greek poets, hoping to endear himself to these sophisticated Greeks. But when he eventually mentioned Jesus Christ and his resurrection (there is no record in Acts 17 of Paul's referring to Jesus' crucifixion), he was laughed out of the meeting (17:32). Verlyn D. Verbrugge, "1 Corinthians" in the *Revised Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, awaiting publication), 62.

²¹ Paul uses the phrase "fear and trembling" of himself in 2 Cor 7:15 and of the Philippians in Phil 2:12 (cf. Eph 6:5). It has as its origin in the LXX where the expression is typically found in a context which characterizes the "fear and trembling" felt by someone who is faced with the threat of an enemy's hostile and perhaps deadly assault (Exod 15:16; Deut 2:25; 11:25; Ps 54:6; Isa 19:16). Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians: Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 119.

²² At one point Paul felt so abandoned and alone that the Lord came to him in a vision with these words, "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).

²³ See the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (which is much more focused on Thecla than Paul).

²⁴ Pritchard, "Jesus Christ and Him Crucified."

²⁵ Paul uses an inclusio in 1 Cor 1:18 and 2:5.

²⁶ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 96.

²⁷ Our Daily Bread, "Spray-On Mud," February 26, 2007: <http://www.rbc.org/odb/odb-11-23-97.shtml>.

²⁸ Our Daily Bread, "A Reminder Of The Cross," February 25, 2001: <http://www.rbc.org/odb/odb-02-25-01.shtml>.