

1 Corinthians 2:1-6
(Jeremiah 9:23-24; Luke 24:44-49)
“Not Men’s Wisdom, but God’s Power”

Introduction

With these verses, Paul concludes his opening salvo in response to the corrosive spiritual pride that had caused such division within the Corinthian church. It seems that the Corinthian Christians longed for cultural respectability, and so crafted an understanding and presentation of the gospel as a form of philosophical wisdom, removing the offense of the cross. But in doing so, Paul argues, they rob the gospel of its core message and empty the cross of its power (1:17).

He then gives three reasons that the gospel, rightly understood and properly presented, will always appear foolish to a world in rebellion against God: First, because of the message at its core, the cross of Christ, the necessity of a crucified Messiah. Secondly, the gospel appears foolish to the world because of those who believe and receive its message, and who worship the crucified Messiah as risen from the dead and glorified in the presence of God. Paul reminds them that not many of them met the Greco-Roman cultural criteria of wisdom or power or status.

Now, this morning, we come to the third reason, and here Paul turns the focus on himself and his fellow apostles and evangelists: The gospel appears foolish to the world because of the very manner in which it is presented, the way that the good news is proclaimed to the world by its messengers. In these verses, Paul reminds his readers why he and the other apostles appeared foolish and weak to the surrounding world, and yet why that was a good thing and the very mark, to those with true wisdom from God, that what appeared foolish and weak to the world was actually a demonstration of God’s wisdom and power.

Body

1. Paul appeared foolish because his message was Christ crucified (2:1-2).

Not with lofty speech or wisdom

Paul was brilliant, but not as eloquent as his friend Apollos. Paul had tried the rhetorical approach when speaking to the philosophers in Athens (Acts 17), but had been underwhelmed by their response to his message. From there, he had traveled to Corinth and, perhaps in the light of his experience in Athens, resolved to simply proclaim the gospel in all of its countercultural and counter-intuitive simplicity. It’s not that Paul gave up on reason and debate. Throughout Luke’s account of Paul ministering in Corinth is the recurring phrase, “he reasoned with them” (e.g., Acts 18:4&19).

But rather Jesus Christ and him crucified

But the heart of Paul's message, that from which he reasoned and drew applications, was the message of the cross: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2). As we saw two weeks ago, this message was nothing less than offensive and scandalous to those living under Rome. The cross was Rome's brutal way of terrorizing its subjects into obedience, and the idea of one's good news of salvation focusing on a crucified man was the height of bad taste. There seemed nothing weaker or more horrifyingly ridiculous and foolish than that anyone would decide to know and proclaim this one thing: Christ crucified.

And yet, as we have seen in this study, only this message could humble human pride to the dust and show us our need of God's grace. Only God's Son taking our humiliation, suffering and death – the consequence of our rebellion against God – upon himself, and entering death itself to break death's power, only in this way could we be saved from our rebellion and pride and made God's grateful children. And so, the message of the crucified Messiah always concluded with the message of the risen and glorified Messiah, as Paul does in concluding this letter in chapter 15.

2. Paul appeared weak because his strength was not physical but spiritual (2:3-4).

In weakness and in fear and in much trembling

Paul certainly had sufficient strength to persevere through all that he endured in carrying the gospel throughout the empire, but he did not, apparently, meet the standards of Greco-Roman manliness and physical strength and beauty. I suspect he did not come off well in a physical contrast with Peter, the big fisherman. And it seems that he may have been physically sick when he first visited Corinth. For whatever reason, he writes, "And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling" (2:3). If the Corinthians were looking for a Christian leader whom they would be proud to introduce to their pagan neighbors, Paul certainly did not seem to be the one.

And yet in demonstration of the Spirit and of power

However, Paul's physical weakness only served to highlight his "demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (2:4). What does this mean? While there may have been some reference here to the working of miracles through faith, the plain sense of Paul's words, and in this the Church Fathers agree, is in the power of God displayed in changed lives. In Athens, Paul tried rhetorical skill and philosophical argument, and saw very little faith response. But when he traveled on to Corinth and simply preached Christ

crucified, he saw a tremendous faith response and a dynamic church established. Paul would remind his readers in several of his letters that the proof of his apostleship was in their Spirit-transformed lives, including these Corinthian Christians in his second letter to them:

You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Corinthians 3:2-3).

We should never forget that the greatest proof of the truth of the gospel is in the lives that are radically changed through God's grace at work in those who believe and receive the message of Christ crucified.

3. But Paul's way of doing ministry was, in spite of appearances to the contrary, both wise and powerful, because it gave his hearers an unshakeable foundation for their faith: namely, the power of God (2:5).

Not in the wisdom of men

This is crucial, for if the gospel rested on human wisdom and eloquence, then it would be no different than the great religions of the world, and it would simply bring a passing, ephemeral glory to those who proclaim it and who embrace it. It would not provide an unshakeable foundation for those who believe.

But in the power of God

The Church Fathers make this point over and over again in their reflections on this text. The brilliant and eloquent John Chrysostom ("Golden Mouth") of Constantinople eschewed his own eloquence and said of this text:

Human wisdom denied the cross, but faith proclaimed the power of God. Wisdom not only failed to reveal the things which people sought after, but also it encouraged them to boast in their own achievements. But faith not only gave them the truth, it also encouraged them to glorify God (Homilies on Paul's Corinthian letters).

Conclusion

Why do we worry so much about sharing our faith with others, thinking that we need to take courses in evangelism or prepare presentations that meet standards of human wisdom and eloquence – today we would speak in terms of communication technique? When simple people simply tell what Christ has done for them, God's Spirit uses their message to save the lost in the only way that gives God all the glory.

It is still the message of the cross alone that can set free those in bondage to sin and death, that can give hope to the hopeless, forgiveness to the guilty, and life to the spiritually death. And it is only lives changed by the gospel that give living proof that the gospel is true. How good if there were again in the church a mighty movement of those who would resolve with the apostle Paul, “to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2).

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