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THE APOSTOLIC MODEL FOR CHRISTIAN MINISTRY: AN ANALYSIS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5

Fred G. Zaspel

*T*he church is nothing but Christ displayed.

—WILLIAM GURNALL

*I*f we accept the divine entry of God into human history through the man Jesus Christ, we cannot help accepting the unique nature of the fellowship which he founded. For in a true sense it is an extension of the actual visit, sustained by the living God.

—J. B. PHILLIPS

*T*he Corinthian church is well known for its problems, and Paul's purpose in writing to that church is rather obvious. He had that all-too-common pastoral responsibility of fixing things. People do have a way of breeding problems, and pastors do have a way of getting into the middle of them. The problems must be solved. Error must be exposed. And God's design for His church must be realized in real life.

What is interesting is that the apostle Paul seemed to think that all problems need the same solution: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We will see something of how Paul works this out in other contexts also, but in this first problem, the problem of divisions in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10ff.), Paul works out this principle in a way that is particularly instructive.

Given that the people were divided over ministers and given Paul's attention to their mistaken emphasis on human "wisdom," it seems that the church was dividing over the comparative impressiveness of the preacher. Perhaps they were enamored with the various styles of preaching, and so they chose which one they enjoyed most and set that up as the "best." It is in response to this that Paul begins his discussion of the nature of the gospel ministry. Beginning in 1:17 he explains that his whole reason for being is to preach the gospel and that in such a way so as not to draw attention to himself. He would not minister in such a way

as to create a Pauline faction within the body of Christ. No, that would leave people impressed with the wrong person. And if they are impressed with the wrong person, the gospel is thereby emptied of its value, rendered useless (*kenothe*, v.17).

True Christian ministry cannot form factions or give glory to ministers. Gospel ministry has another character altogether. Both the form of Christian ministry and its content are shaped by gospel truth.



Further, he has come only to preach the gospel simply "because"¹ this is the only message that works (v.18). No other message can save but this one of Christ and His cross. Paul develops this thought at some length showing that the "foolishness of God" is wiser than man's highest wisdom (vv. 19-31). Man's highest wisdom never brought fellowship with God, and it never relieved guilt. God has set out to destroy human wisdom. And so all human efforts to reason the way to the Sublime fail, and they fail miserably. God has, in fact, destroyed human wisdom. God alone saves, and He does it only through the message of the gospel. This which men call "foolish" proves itself true and powerful.

All that is to say this: God saves in such a way that only He receives the glory for it. This is precisely what Paul says in verse 31. This, in fact, was the whole discussion about

"calling" in the previous verses (vv. 23ff.). No one is ever saved by any activity but God's. God is no spectator in His program of redemption. Men are saved, yes, but it is God and God alone who does it. No one may boast in His presence (v. 29). He saves in a glorious way, but with a glory that is only His (v. 31).

So Paul has established his two-fold theme: (1) Only the gospel works, and (2) only God receives the glory in salvation.

GETTING TO THE POINT

Now the question at issue is regarding the Christian ministry, and Christians were dividing over their answers. But Paul saw that this was an implicit denial of the gospel. True Christian ministry cannot form factions or give glory to ministers. Gospel ministry has another character altogether. Both the *form* of Christian ministry and its *content* are shaped by gospel truth. And if that is so, then there will be no room left for talk about the ministers.

So in 2:1-5 Paul applies this matter of the exclusive efficacy of the Christian gospel to Christian ministry. He in fact sets up his own ministry as the model. "And I" (*kago*, 2:1) harks back to 1:17 and Paul's apostolic commission to preach the gospel. It carries the force of "accordingly, in keeping with this, I . . ." He repeats the same expression in verse 3, and in both he is appealing to his own ministry among the Corinthians to show that his ministry was consistent with, indeed, the outworking of, the gospel itself. In doing this, he provides the model for Christian ministry.

THE LEADING CHARACTERISTICS OF PAUL'S MINISTRY

In verses 1-5 Paul points out four aspects of his ministry which are necessary marks of a ministry that is truly Christian.

And here is the preacher's first job description. He is to preach the words of God only. And here is the only reason we have to tell people that they need to hear us. It's not that we have thought of something ingenious or profound. They need to hear us but only because we declare the word of the living God. Not "our" convictions. Not anything but what God has said. There is precisely no reason at all why people need to hear us other than this.



"I came proclaiming to you the testimony of God" (v.1). First, Paul reminds the Corinthians that he came declaring the testimony of God. "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom proclaiming to you the testimony of God" (2:1). Textual evidence is rather evenly divided as to whether we should read here "testimony" (*marturion*) or "mystery" (*musterion*), but the question does not affect the point substantially. Paul's claim is that he "came declaring" a message. But it was not just any message. He came declaring the message of God, and this in accordance with his apostolic commission (1:17). This was not some passing fancy, no fleeting idea. From day one in Corinth, he says, he "came preaching" the message of God. This was the conviction that carried him.

And this preaching was "not with superiority of speech or of wisdom." He did not come to impress with polished oratorical form ("superiority of speech") or with philosophical depth ("wisdom"). Now I am sure that what Paul had to say he said as well as he could; he puts no premium on shoddy preaching. His point, obviously, is that he would not preach in such a way that it would draw attention from the message of God. He came not concerned with what he could say but with what God had said. He was not concerned to sound brilliant about impressive things. He came as an ambassador with one thing in mind: to convey the message of the one who had sent him.

And here is the preacher's first job description. He is to preach the words of God only. And here is the only reason we have to tell people that they need to hear us. It's not that we have thought of something ingenious or profound. They *need* to hear us but only because we declare the word of the living God. Not "our" convictions. Not anything but what God has said. There is precisely no reason at all why people need to hear us other than this. Martin Luther was typically clear and surely correct, insisting that "When the preacher speaks, God speaks! . . . And whoever cannot boast like that about his sermon should leave preaching alone, for he surely denies and blasphemes God."² Christian preaching is declaring the message of God, or it is not Christian preaching. It is this, and this alone, which gives it its value.

"I came proclaiming to you the testimony of God about Jesus Christ" (v. 2). Second, Paul reminds the Corinthians that he came preaching the message of God *about Jesus Christ*. "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." Here Paul defines³ for us exactly what the message of God is. The message of God is a message about Jesus Christ.

Now it is important to notice the exclusiveness of

Paul's language. "I determined to know nothing." Nothing else was allowed in. And this not just in reference to his preaching but his whole ministry, indeed, his very thinking! He would bear nothing in mind (*eidenai*) but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And this he says was his driving conviction (*ekrina*); it was no passing thought. There was a deliberate renunciation, inwardly and outwardly, of every consideration but Christ crucified. Paul lived in a society ripe with issues to address. From philosophers who demanded a hearing, to civic and political problems and vices, there was much to be said. But Paul had nothing at all to say but Christ crucified.

*The Lord Jesus was the center of Paul's preaching because He deserved to be.
He is the Lord from heaven in whom the world is reconciled to God.
He is Savior, and He is Lord.*



Now this verse has been puzzling to many. But it is critical. This is the defining statement of Christian ministry. We must understand it and understand it well.

Did Paul mean that he preached only the scenes of the cross? Obviously not. Yes, he did say to the Galatians that "before [your] eyes Jesus was publicly portrayed as crucified" (Gal. 3:1). He no doubt did this everywhere so that believers would gain a greater appreciation of the cost of

their redemption. But this was not all that Paul preached. Indeed, this is the same apostle who could remind the elders at Ephesus that in his ministry among them he preached "the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:27). What, then, did he mean by this statement that he preached nothing but Christ crucified?

First, we must recognize that Paul is speaking in *comprehensive* terms. He has employed comprehensive terminology like this throughout this discussion. "The gospel" (1:17) and "the word of the cross" (1:18) and "Christ crucified" (1:23) and "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (2:2) are comprehensive phrases which relate to the same subject. Paul's claim, of course, is that he preached a message about the person and work of Jesus Christ. That is, he preached a message of Jesus' lordship and saviorhood. The Lord Jesus was the center of Paul's preaching because He deserved to be. He is the Lord from heaven in whom the world is reconciled to God. He is Savior, and He is Lord.

But still the question remains. How can Paul speak here in such exclusive terms? What about all the other doctrines he taught? What about all the other issues he addressed? How can he say he preached nothing but the person and work of Christ?

Perhaps the most obvious answer is that Paul's claim is that Jesus Christ is the *central focus* of his preaching, its primary emphasis. This is obviously true, and this is certainly a part of what Paul is saying. When men and women came to hear Paul preach, they came expecting to hear about Jesus. And they did.

And here we get a glimpse into the Pauline hermeneutic. This one who claimed to preach the whole purpose of God claimed also to preach only Christ. That is to say, *to preach the whole counsel of God is to preach Christ*. He is the whole warp and woof of all biblical revelation, the single cohesive factor which holds it all together, the central and

overriding theme throughout. Christ is the centerpiece of Scripture. It is a Christocentric Book. And so Paul preached the message of God about Jesus Christ.

But we must take this still further. Paul does not say here that Christ is his primary focus, however much that may be implied. No, he says Christ is his *only subject*. Yes, of course Christ is the very center of his message, and of course He is his primary subject. But Paul is more precise than any of this. He said, "Christ is all I preach." Everything he has to say, he claims, traces back to Him. He is our only message. Apart from Christ crucified, there is nothing to say.

So we have here a glimpse into the Pauline hermeneutic and also his theological outlook. In our day it has become standard to divide up our theologies into nice, neat categories: bibliology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, soteriology, eschatology, and so on. For Paul Christology stood at the top, and all these other matters branched out from there. "Christ is all" was the apostolic theme. Everything we believe and have and are, we believe and have and are in relation to Him. He is our only theme.

This is where we began. When Paul confronted problems, he traced the problems back to the gospel. If the problem is divisions in the assembly, then it is to Christ he runs: "Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you" (1:13). If the problem is an immoral man in the assembly, he runs to Christ again: "Clean out the old leaven . . . for Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed" (5:7). If the problem is dealing with your own immoral temptations, still it is Christ crucified who is the answer: "Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (6:11). "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot?" (6:15). Or, "You are not your own, for you have been

bought with a price" (6:19-20). If he is to instruct on life in the home, it is "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22), and "Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (5:25), and "Children, obey your parents in the Lord" (Eph. 6:1). Everywhere, there is this Christward focus. When he tells us to be forgiving of one another, he reminds us of Christ, who forgave us (Col. 3:13; Eph. 4:32). When he exhorts us to be generous in our giving, he reminds us of Christ who gave so much for us (2 Cor. 8:9). When he exhorts us to humility, he tells us to put on the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5ff.). When he exhorts to every day holiness, it is "by the mercies of God" in Christ (Rom. 12:1), and on the ground that we are crucified and risen with Christ to new life in Him (Rom. 6:1-14). Indeed, he instructs Titus to minister in this same way: it is this grace of God in salvation through Jesus Christ that is "instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires" and to "live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11-12). Grounding believers in the "love of Christ" will stabilize them (Eph. 3:16-19) and "controls" them to live for Him (2 Cor. 5:14). Christ is the answer to every human problem. To the lost and to the saved, Christ is the answer. And so, Paul says, He is all I preach. He is the whole sum and substance of my ministry. He is man's only hope, yes, but He is more. He is our highest incentive to holiness also.

The practical value of this is immense. Do we want the people who hear us to be saved? Then we preach Christ. Do we want them to grow in grace? Then we preach Christ. Do we want them to gain increased victory over sins, to be more faithful to Christ, to His church, to their families, more loyal on the job, more joyful, loving, temperate, peaceful and virtuous? Then we acquaint them more with Christ. Unpacking, working out the implications of "Christ crucified" we provide them with all the "stuff" which the Holy Spirit uses

to bring them "from glory to glory" (2 Cor. 3:18). "And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ" (Col. 1:28). This, and nothing less, is our objective in preaching (Col. 1:29). As Paul says, we know nothing but Him.

Preachers today speak often of "balance" in ministry, and by that so many mean to say they are careful to balance subjects out equally. Paul tells us that if Christ is not the whole of our message, then we are not balanced at all. We do not relegate Him to certain aspects of the Bible or to certain aspects of life only. No, He is our only theme. This, Paul is convinced, is the only message that works.



Preachers today speak often of "balance" in ministry, and by that so many mean to say they are careful to balance subjects out equally. Paul tells us that if Christ is not the whole of our message, then we are not balanced at all. We do not relegate Him to certain aspects of the Bible or to certain aspects of life only. No, He is our only theme. This,

Paul is convinced, is the only message that works. That man who does not preach Christ to his people is little better than a secular moralist. "Christ crucified" is the distinctive of the Christian message. He is our only theme, yes, and He is the whole of it.

"I preach the testimony of God about Jesus Christ, relying on the Holy Spirit" (vv. 3-4). In verse 3 Paul describes for us his state of mind as he came to Corinth. It was a wicked city, and the task ahead must have seemed impossible for him. Indeed, it was impossible *for him*. And he knew it. So well did he know it that he came "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling" (v. 3). There was a profound sense of inadequacy. He did not come as one bounding with confidence, convinced of success and of his abilities. He did not believe he carried "revival in his briefcase," as certain evangelists have said. He felt very keenly that he was out of his league, not up to the job. Paul was a brilliant man, and he surely could have impressed many. He no doubt could have effected many "decisions." But he knew that he could not do that which would do men good. He just didn't have what it takes.

But, gladly, the story does not end there. He did enjoy success in Corinth, yes. But (*alla*) that success was not at all due to his abilities. "And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (v. 4). This was the source of his success. God the Spirit was at work also! The Spirit of God went alongside and "powerfully demonstrated" the truth of Paul's message to those who heard him. His gospel was made effective, not by external means, but by the inward, efficacious call of God (cf. 1:18-31).

So with all of Paul's fear and weakness, there was still a confidence. Not in himself, but in God. This is one of those strange things about preaching. We feel unequal to the task, nervous sometimes to the point of an upset stomach. But at the same time we are bold, preaching the message of

God. And knowing as we do that this is the event in which God works, we are excited.

Our faith must be in Him alone, and so Paul says our ministry must be conducted accordingly. We must not pretend that we can have success and take the credit. If we are to have real success, God alone will have the credit. People will stand back amazed and impressed at what He has done.



But these realizations shape our whole perspective. "Persuasive words" (v. 4) would no doubt get results, but not the kind that affect and transform the whole man, not the kind that last. And it is just this, it seems, that is so lacking in pulpits today. Confidence there is! But a self confidence. What lacks is a whole-hearted dependence upon God to do what He alone can do. We have taken it into our own hands to manufacture the results, but not the apostle. He realized that all he could do was preach the message. Preach with urgency, yes, but even that would not make the message effective. Only when and if that message was coupled with the mighty workings of God did it accomplish salvation. So Paul says, "I came preaching the message of God about Jesus Christ, wholly relying on the Holy Spirit to

make my work effective."

"I came preaching the message of God about Jesus Christ, relying on the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God" (v. 5) "that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God" (v. 5). Paul was a brilliant man, a rising star in Pharisaic Judaism. And he could have convinced many people of many things. But if he had done the convincing, in whom would those whom he had convinced be trusting? And what good is a faith if it is directed to Paul? "Preaching that depended for its effectiveness on the logical and rhetorical power of the preacher could engender only a faith that rested upon the same supports."⁵ Paul carefully intended (*hina*) that his ministry directed people to trust in God alone. To run to Paul for help would not do. No, they must run to God.

Unlike modern ministers, Paul never attempted to be the Holy Spirit. He was never so arrogant as to assume His role. He couldn't; it really wouldn't work. Put another way, Paul was very concerned that no one believe simply because he said so. No. God must work in them, and if their faith is a God-wrought faith, it will be a God-directed faith. All the attention must be heavenward (cf. 1:31). Our faith must be in Him alone, and so Paul says our ministry must be conducted accordingly. We must not pretend that we can have success and take the credit. If we are to have real success, God alone will have the credit. People will stand back amazed and impressed at what He has done.

Summary

This, then, is the apostolic model for Christian ministry, a ministry that is in keeping with the gospel. There is no room for personal glory in the ministry, much less divisions over ministers. To every preacher of the Word, Paul says, *Preach. Preach the message of God. Preach the message of God about Jesus Christ. Preach the message of God about*

Jesus Christ *relying on the Holy Spirit* to do what He alone can do. And do all this *to the glory of God*, Who alone is worthy. Amen.

Author

Rev. Fred G. Zaspel is pastor of Word of Life Baptist Church, Pottsville, Pennsylvania. He has contributed to numerous publications and produces a helpful theological web page for the internet. He is also a regular contributor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. Explanatory *gar*.
2. Cited in Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), 11-12.
3. Another explanatory *gar*.
4. *Apodeixei*, a New Testament *hapax legomenon*, but a technical term used commonly in Greek rhetoric referring to compelling evidence. See Timothy H. Lim, "Not in Persuasive Words of Wisdom, But in the Demonstration of the Spirit and Power," *Novum Testamentum XXIX*, 2 (1987), 146-47.
5. C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 66.