

THE POWER OF PAUL'S PREACHING

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Brethren, I speak to these, who like myself, have been divinely called to communicate the message of God's Word to a lost world, albeit in various capacities. We want to do our work rightly and effectively but we cannot do it without power. I speak I am sure as unto wise men who already knew both the object and source of this strength; and yet, I believe it is wise to frequently stir up our minds by way of remembrance. In order therefore to further stimulate your reflective thought in this area I would draw your attention to the words of the apostle Paul in First Corinthians 2:1-5. The power of Paul's preaching is seen by a careful consideration of both *his message* and *his method*.

I. THE MESSAGE.

A. "The testimony of God" - verse 1.

The words "of God" (*θεου*) may be taken either as a subjective or objective genitive. If the former, the apostle would simply mean the testimony which goes forth from God; if the latter, the testimony which has God as its object. Grosheide maintains that the genitive of (*θεου*) is both subjective and objective. He states that this testimony is one which God gives and which has God as its content. "Paul holds a mandate from God and he speaks of no one else but God."¹

Textual note: In the place of "testimony" (*μαρτυριον*) some other ancient authorities read "mystery" (*μυστηριον*).

B. "Jesus Christ and him crucified" - verse 2.

Paul deliberately determined that among the Corinthians he would only know the one great central truth of Jesus Christ. Christ is described in 1:24, 30 as the power and wisdom of God. The particular point about Christ that is singled out is the *crucifixion*; that is the heart of the Gospel, on that the apostle especially concentrated. Hodge writes, "It has been well remarked that *Jesus Christ* refers to the person of Christ, and *him crucified*, to his work; which constitutes the sum of the gospel."²

In summary then, Paul's message was the testimony from God and/or to God concerning the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ.

1. F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians. The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), pp. 58-59.
2. Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Bm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1953), p. 30.

II. THE METHOD.

A. Negatively.

1. "I came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom" - verse 1.

Paul did not come to the Corinthians with a determination to display an oratorical style or philosophical subtlety. "Preaching was St. Paul's great work, but his aim was not that of the professional rhetorician. Here he rejects the standard by which an age of rhetoric judged a speaker. The Corinthians were judging by externals. The fault would conspicuously apply, no doubt, to those who 'ran after' Apollos. But the indictment is not limited to that party. All alike were externalists, lacking a sense for depth in simplicity, and thus easily falling a prey to superficialities both in the matter and the manner of teaching."³

The term (*λογου*) is probably best understood here as referring to the manner in which Paul did not present his facts; whereas, the term (*σοφιας*) indicates the way in which his mind did not marshal these facts.

2. "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom" - verse 4.

The distinction between "speech" (*λογος*) and "preaching" (*κηρυγμα*) - if indeed there is any - has been variously explained. Some of these views may be briefly noted:

- a. Paul's private and public discourses.⁴
- b. Paul's instructions in general and his public preaching in particular.⁵
- c. Paul's matter and his form. Godet writes that "the *λογος* is the gospel itself; the *κηρυγμα* is the testimony the apostle renders to it."⁶ Concurring in this view Grosheide states. "*λογος* probably concerns the contents, *κηρυγμα* the public proclamation of the Gospel to all men.⁷ Finally, Leon Morris suggests that "probably Paul is not differentiating between the two with any exactness. He employs both terms to stress both the message he preached and the way he preached it."⁸

One thing seems clear, regardless of how we interpret the meaning of these two words, the main thrust of Paul's statement is to disclaim any confidence in rhetorical phrases and rational demonstrations. This he had done already in 1:17, "For Christ sent me to preach the gospel: not with the wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect."

3. Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians. The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1914), pp. 13-14.
4. Hodge, *Op. cit.*, p. 31.
5. *Ibid*
6. F. Godet, *Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, Vol. I, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. Co., 1957), p. 127.
7. Grosheide, *Op. cit.*, p. 61.
8. Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1958), p. 52.

An important word of caution needs to be sounded here lest there be an unfortunate misinterpretation of Paul. The apostle certainly had no objection to persuasive words or logical thought per se, he was a master of both. The point is however, that he would not allow either to operate as ends in themselves but only as instruments to be employed under the guidance of the Spirit for the interpretation and communication of divine revelation.

B. Positively.

1. "And I was with you in weakness and in fear, and in much trembling" - verse 3.

The expression "in weakness" is probably best understood to refer to the apostle's physical condition. "Possibly the malady which had led to his first preaching in Galatia (Gal. iv. 13) was upon him once more. If this was epilepsy, or malarial fever (Ramsay), it might well be the recurrent trouble which he calls a 'thorn for the flesh' (2 Cor. 12:7)."⁹

The words "in fear, and in much trembling" probably speak of his psychological frame of mind. He was properly fearful for the success of the ministry of the Word among the Corinthians. His was a trembling anxiety to perform a duty. The apostle was not carnally confident but spiritually dependent in his heart attitude.

2. "Declaring" - verse 1.

The word *kataggellein* (*καταγγελλειν*) means to announce or to proclaim, but the chief emphasis in the word is on the authoritative nature of the proclamation. This is one of the great New Testament words for preaching. From its usage therein we learn that preaching is not the proclamation or a preacher's private opinions; nor the public airing of his doubts, but rather the full authoritative proclamation of the Word of God.¹⁰

3. "And my speech and my preaching was in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." - verse 4.

Verse four presents a sharp contrast. The apostle would seem to be saying, 'I did not make it my work to demonstrate gospel propositions to you through near words and phrases, nor from principles of natural reason but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.' The words "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" could be either an objective or subjective genitive. If objective, then Paul means a demonstration which has for its object the presence or working of the Spirit and power. If subjective, he means the demonstration (of the truth) which springs from the Spirit and power of God. It would seem that the latter is preferable. It may be noted that Professor Bruce has taken it as a subjective genitive in his recent paraphrase of Paul's epistles. He renders it thus, "None the less, it was at-

9. Robertson and Plummer, *Op. cit.*, p. 31.

10. William Barclay, *More New Testament Words* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 100.

tended by the powerful conviction produced by the Spirit . . .”¹¹

The term “demonstration” (*αποδειξει*) speaks of the most rigorous form of proof. In the papyri it is used of official evidence or proof. “In *αποδειξίς* the premises are known to be true, and therefore the conclusion is not only logical, but certainly true St. Paul is not dealing with scientific certainty: but he claims that the certitude of religious truth to the believer in the Gospel is as complete and as ‘objective’ - equal in degree, though different in kind - as the certitude of scientific truth to the scientific mind. Mere human *δοξία* may dazzle and overwhelm and seem to be unanswerable . . . ; it does not penetrate to these depths of the soul which are the seat of the decisions of a lifetime.”¹²

Godet writes, “The word *αποδειξίς* indicates a clearness which is produced in the hearer’s mind, as by the sudden lifting of a veil. Paul was not ignorant that a faith founded on logical arguments could be shaken by other arguments of the same nature. To be solid, it must be the work of the power of God, and in order to be that, proceed from a conviction of sin and a personal appropriation of salvation, which the Spirit of God alone can produce in the human soul.”¹³

Matthew Poole very ably explains verse 4. By the words “the demonstration of the Spirit” is meant “the Holy Ghost’s powerful and inward persuasion of men’s minds, of the truth of what was preached by Paul. All minister’s preaching makes propositions of gospel truth appear no more than probable; the Spirit only demonstrates them, working in souls such a persuasion and confirmation of the truth of them, as the soul can no longer deny or dispute . . .” By the words, “and of power” is meant “that authority, which the word of God preached by Paul had, and preached by faithful ministers still hath, upon the souls and consciences of those that that hear it.” (Compare I Thess. 1:5; Heb. 4:12). “Nothing but the inward powerful impression of the Spirit of God, persuading the heart of the truth of gospel principles, can possibly amount to a *demonstration*, bringing the minds of men, though never so judicious and prepared, to a certainty of the thing revealed, and a rest, so as they can no longer deny, resist, dispute, or contradict it. With this Paul’s preaching was attended, not to every individual person to whom he preached, but to many, even as many as should be saved: he delivered the doctrine of the gospel freely, plainly, and boldly, not resting upon the force of his rhetoric and persuasive words, nor yet upon the natural force of his reasoning and argumentation, but leaving the demonstration and evidencing of the truth of what he said to the powerful

11. F. F. Bruce, *The Letters of Paul An Expanded Paraphrase* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1965), p. 71.

12. Robertson and Plummer, *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

13. Godet, *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

internal impression and persuasion of the holy and blessed Spirit of God, who worketh powerfully.¹⁴

Paul’s preaching was a clear authoritative proclamation of the simple Gospel. But precisely because it was so simple and unpretentious, its results convincingly demonstrated the power of God.

Verse 5 indicates either God’s purpose in so ordering the apostle’s preaching or, as is more likely, it expresses the purpose of the apostle himself. The preposition “in” (*νδ*) marks the sphere or realm in which faith has its root. “What depends upon a clever argument is at the mercy of a cleverer argument. Faith, which is at its root personal trust springs from the vital contact of human personality with divine. Its affirmations are no more abstract statements, but comprise the experience of personal deliverance.”¹⁵ “Paul in a word of personal testimony said, “I know *whom* I have believed . . .” (2 Tim. 1:12).

In conclusion let me share with you the practical implications of this Pauline concept as expressed so pungently by C. H. Spurgeon. If our object is so to bear our personal witness *that others may be convinced thereby* of the truth of what is so sure to (our) own souls, we must recognize that there are difficulties not a few. Our hearers are not anxious to believe the revelation of God; some of them are desirous not to do so. “Certain parts of the truth men will hear, but other portions are disagreeable to them, and their ears are dull of hearing. You know — for you believe in the original sin of men, (about the only thing original there is in many) — how Satan has most effectively blinded the minds of the ungodly, so that, speak we as wisely as we may, and as persuasively as we can, nothing but a miracle can convince men dead in sin of the truth of God. Nothing less than a miracle of grace can lead a man to receive what is so altogether opposite to his nature.

I shall not attempt to teach a tiger the virtues of vegetarianism; but I shall as hopefully attempt that task as I would try to convince an unregenerate man of the truths revealed by God concerning sin, and righteousness and judgment to come. These spiritual truths are repugnant to carnal men, and the carnal mind cannot receive the things of God. Gospel truth is diametrically opposed to fallen nature and if I have not a power much stronger than that which lies in moral suasion, or in my own explanations and arguments, I have undertaken a task in which I am sure of defeat. Well said the writer of one of our hymns, when he spake of the Holy Spirit —

14. Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, Vol. III, (London: The Banner of Truth Trust), p. 543f.

15. Robertson and Plummer, *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

'Tis Thine the passions to recall,
And upward bid them rise;
And make the scales of error fall
From reason's darkened eyes.

"Except the Lord endow us with power from on high, our labour must be in vain, and our hopes just end in disappointment."¹⁶

Our preaching and teaching will be effective to the degree to which it centers in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and relies upon the powerful demonstration of the Spirit of God.

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16. C. H. Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), pp. 321-322.