

The Spirit's Power

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Key Verse: 2:4

by Steve Stasinos

“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.”

Paul emphasized the message of the cross as the centerpiece of Christian faith, salvation and community. This was not the first time he had mentioned this to the Corinthians. Rather, this was the only message he knew. As one Pastor said, “He played a fiddle with only one string: the message of the cross.” Today we want to think about why he only spoke of the gospel of Jesus and why it was so powerful.

I. Paul resolved to preach only Jesus crucified (1-5).

Look at verse 1. “When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.” Paul reminds them of how they first met. He didn’t speak at all like his contemporaries. In those days, speaker’s words were expected to be eloquent, Like Mark Antony in William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar: “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!” Eloquent speeches produce intellectual and emotional responses, such as conviction or persuasion. Teachers of the time would also speak from a position of superior wisdom. But Paul spoke differently. Unlike philosophers and orators of the age, his message was simple and straight forward. He was proclaiming to them the testimony about God, the gospel message. But he did not do so with eloquence or wisdom.

If we know anything about Paul, we know he was well educated. He was the top student and a master of Jewish law under Gamaliel, which is like studying at MIT or Harvard in our day. He was a Roman citizen, born in Tarsus. Tarsus rivaled Athens and Alexandria as a center of Greek culture and knowledge, boasting a library of more than 200,000 books. After conversion, Paul returned to Tarsus, likely to study (Acts 9:30). He certainly had eloquence and superior wisdom. When we read his epistles, his wisdom shines. Why didn’t he use this when he was in Corinth?

Look at verse 2. “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” He could have appealed to them from their Greek culture and society, which he understood well. He could have used his oratory

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skills to persuade them with his wisdom. Instead, Paul forced himself to know nothing but Jesus Christ, and him crucified. Paul relied on the simple message of the gospel. In that immoral and philosophically oriented society, such a simple message as the gospel seemed unrelated to their situation. Perhaps some felt ashamed of the gospel, compared to the knowledge of the day. But Paul did not. In Romans 1:16 he put it this way, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." Paul believed the gospel, simple as it was, far surpassed the contemporary wisdom. All the philosophy, rhetoric and clever thoughts of men had no power to change anyone. But in the gospel, the message of the cross, we find the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. In our complex, rational and relativistic society today, we are sometimes ashamed of our simple gospel based Bible study ministry. Sometimes we envy big churches with all their talent, technology and productions. But Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. Paul decided to preach the gospel message of Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

I think Paul may have come to this conclusion through his personal experience. On his 2nd missionary journey, prior to this visit to Corinth, he had been in Athens. While there, he preached the gospel about Jesus and the resurrection. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers rejected the gospel, saying, "What is he babbling about?" But they invited him to speak before all the top intellectuals of the day, the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-21). What a human honor and once in a lifetime opportunity! Paul prepared an eloquent message, "Men of Athens!" He quoted Greek poets, introduced God the Creator, and expressed superior knowledge, stating that he was proclaiming to them the God they didn't know (Acts 17:22-31). It was a stirring speech. But he didn't mention Jesus. Only at the end did he mention the resurrection, almost as an aside (Acts 17:31). Some people liked his teaching, but no one was baptized (Acts 17:34). No church was established there. History tells us there was no permanent Christian presence in Athens until well into the 4th century. It was a failure. Greeks are already full of wisdom, philosophy, and thought provoking subjects. When the gospel was treated as just another theory among many, it had no power or impact. Then Paul entered Corinth.

Paul says, "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling (3)." Paul's ministry in Corinth was in weakness and fear. He started by talking about Jesus on the Sabbath among the Jews, but it only made the Jews oppose him and become abusive (Acts 18:1-6). Paul was discouraged. But Paul did not give up on Corinth. He decided to go back to the gospel. He entered the house of a Roman worshiper of God, and began to preach the gospel (Acts 18:7). His message was

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that we are sinners, who need the blood of Jesus. If he could not address them from their cultural expectation, would they listen to him? If he could not compete with the orators, philosophy and entertainment of the age, would it be effective?

Verse 4 reads, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.” The Spirit worked mightily through Paul’s message. Where did this power come from? Jesus helped him. Acts 18:9 tells us, “One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you...’” Paul was not alone; Jesus was with him. Paul’s preaching may not have been impressive or persuasive on a human level. It may not have been entertaining or thought-provoking. But on a spiritual level it had power that pierced the hearts of those who listened. The result was the changed lives of the Corinthians.

Let’s read verses 4-5 together, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom but on God’s power.” Many people today deliver messages with eloquence, trying to use beautiful and persuasive words, and large numbers gather to them. Some even talk about Jesus, wanting to learn techniques to be happy from him. But they do not share the gospel of Jesus’ cross. The idea that men are sinners in need of salvation is unpopular, so they just don’t bring it up. While such messages draw many people, they have no power, because the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. We must not be influenced by such bad examples. I have been giving messages at 6pm for almost four years. I don’t have any eloquence or wisdom like Paul, but still I want to say something else to interest people, instead of just the gospel. But through this message I want to resolve to go back to the gospel. While we serve our campuses, reaching out to young people lost in an immoral and relativistic society, may God help us not to be ashamed of the gospel. As we preach the gospel on campus, in weakness and humility, lives will be changed and transformed by the gospel.

II. Paul teaches about the Spirit’s wisdom (6-16).

While Paul did not rely on men’s wisdom, that did not mean his messages were without wisdom. When we come to Church, we shouldn’t check our brains at the door. Verse 6-7 reads, “We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that was hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.” The wisdom of this age has

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many good uses. We need it to pass physics, chemistry and math. We develop it as we apply intelligence and learn from experience, especially our mistakes. But while the wisdom of this age may be crucial as we fill out our 1040's, hopefully by next week, and pay our taxes, the wisdom of this age is totally useless in helping us to come closer to God, to know him, or his thoughts and heart. True wisdom – ultimate truth regarding God, man's destiny, and salvation—cannot be found through the wisdom of this age or its rulers.

God wants to be known by us. He wants to be with us. Likewise, we want to be known by him and know him. But the wisdom of this world, as advanced as it is, and growing daily, cannot breach the wall between us erected by our fallen nature. Instead, the wisdom of this age and the rulers of this age tend toward self-indulgence, and justifying it. It leads to rule over one another in position and influence (Mk 10:42). To give even a little is considered weak and foolish. Recently the president of Zimbabwe, after decades of running his country into the ground, lost the elections. Yet he doesn't want to give up his power even though he is 84 years old. Others think they are wise because they can live sinful lives while looking good on the outside. God's wisdom is not at all like that. James 3:17 says, "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." God's wisdom is that he gave his one and only Son as a ransom sacrifice for the sins of the world. God's wisdom is his love. God's wisdom is the gospel. No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has ever conceived the wisdom of the gospel, yet to those who love God, it is our glory (9).

How did God share his wisdom with us? Verses 10-11 read, "But God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God." I can know a lot of things about you by spending time with you, or learning about you. But I can't know your thoughts. I hope you are all listening to the message, but I don't know who is thinking about lunch, or something else. Even after years of marriage, there are things people never know about each other. How much less are we able to know the thoughts of God Almighty! Just as the spirit of a man is the best way to know the thoughts of a man, God's Spirit is the way to know the deep things about God. While we cannot receive another person's spirit, verse 12 tells us that we who believe have received the Spirit who is from God. God gives the Holy Spirit so we may understand the deep grace he has freely given us in the gospel. This was his goal, to build a relationship with us. When the Spirit

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is with us, we can understand the Bible and apply it to our lives. We have access to the gifts of God, starting from the gospel, and all the way to a living hope in God's kingdom, made certain by the testimony of God's Spirit on us (Eph 1:13-14).

In verses 13-16, Paul brings up two gifts we receive when we have the Spirit of God. Look at verses 13-14. "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would teach them all things (Jn 14:26). We all long to know spiritual truths, like where did I come from? Where am I going? Who am I really? What is life all about? Human wisdom gives no satisfying answer. But the Spirit teaches us the answer to these questions, through spiritual words in the Bible.

When I was studying at UIC, I had these same questions. I learned a little human wisdom, and decided like most people that the best life is spent trying to maximize pleasure while avoiding pain. But this only led me to slavery to drug addiction, immoral living and rebellious behavior. I had no meaning of life or direction. I had no reason to study or apply myself. But I accepted the gospel message about Jesus, repenting all my sins and receiving his forgiveness. As I studied the Bible, I found the way of life. Jesus is the way, truth and the life (Jn 14:6). Living for Jesus, and following his way has not been easy, but it has never been boring. I thank God everyday for this grace, the answers to the Spiritual truths of life. Not only so, I'm thankful to be able to share these truths with others, as a Bible teacher and messenger on the campus. These spiritual treasures are a gift.

Verse 15 reads, "The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment." The second gift is the discernment granted by the Holy Spirit. When we have the Holy Spirit, he helps us to think differently, and to come to the truth of a matter. How can we know what is the right thing to do or where to go? Human advice helps, but is limited. When the Spirit of God is with us, we have a higher counsel, that of God. As we live in fellowship with his Spirit, spending time in his word, we have the very mind of Christ and his understanding regarding all matters (15). It is a process to know God's will, and his mind. Those who do so find the discernment of God, his wisdom and direction. The Holy Spirit, as we listen, becomes like an entire university of teachers, helping us to understand, learn and find the right way (Isa

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30:21). Without the Holy Spirit's help, we are destined to make mistake after mistake.

Men of the world will not be able to judge the spiritual man, meaning, will not be able to understand the reasons why he does what he does, and this may lead them to oppose you. But we are not subject to their judgment. Verse 16 reads, “For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.” In the end, it is not our wisdom they are coming against, but the very wisdom of God, and who can tell God he is right or wrong? But we must have the mind of Christ.

Three weeks ago I left my career as an engineer in order to serve Jesus in preparation for the Purdue International Conference. This was after two years of prayer, and six months of intensive asking, seeking, and knocking for which way to go. As I put in my final notice, I trembled. I prayed one last time, and felt the calm assurance, “This is the way, walk in it.” Some cannot understand why I did this, and all I can answer is because I love Jesus. God is leading. I have many plans and ideas for the coming years. But instead of depending on my own discernment and wisdom, I want to pray and struggle to know the mind of Christ, and go his way.

We learn in this Bible study that to we can powerfully share the gospel, but we must receive the Holy Spirit (Mk 13:11; Acts 1:8). We know that the Holy Spirit is full of power for our salvation and the salvation of souls everywhere. But can I ask you a question? Does your life pulse with power and wisdom from God? Do we experience the demonstration of the Spirit's power in our messages, testimonies, decision making and so on? God wants to give us the Holy Spirit. The glaring question at the end of this study is: What must I do as a believer to receive the Holy Spirit?

The Bible is not mute on this subject. First, we must repent. Acts 2:38 tells us, “Repent and be baptized...And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” It is our sins that separate us from God and make us people of desperation. But God gave his one and only Son Jesus Christ as a ransom for our sins. For me, it is a matter of my pride. Once I overcome my pride and self-righteousness, I can repent my lustful thoughts, my laziness and selfishness, and my blunt words. When I do, God doesn't hold it against me. Instead, he forgives my sin, and purifies me from all unrighteousness (1Jn 1:9). Along with repentance is self denial; in other words, abstaining from natural desires, which war against our soul (1Pe 2:11; 1Co 6:19;

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Eph 4:30). Galatians 5:17 reads, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” If we yield to the sinful nature, which is contrary to the Spirit, how can he dwell in us? If I want his help to prepare the message, should I play video games the night before? Instead, as Galatians 5:25 says, “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” After repenting we may ask God for the Holy Spirit. Luke 11:13 tells us, “...how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Always remember that God is our Father in heaven, who loves us and wants to bless us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph 1:3). When we ask, he will answer.

In this passage we learned the Spirit's power, which is at work among us as we preach the gospel and grow in God's wisdom. May we resolve to share the gospel of Jesus, and not be influenced by worldly wisdom. May all our messages, testimonies, Bible studies, outreach meetings, and all things be accompanied by a demonstration of the Spirit's power. As we do so, God may make America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.