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# A Gospel-Centered Hermeneutic: Foundations for a New Covenant Theology

*I Corinthians 2:1-5*

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Focus: Understanding "know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" as presenting the Bible and life to them through the lens of the gospel and not through human wisdom. The gospel (Christ and him *crucified*) is the organizing event of human history.

**Introduction** Over the last several weeks, the pulpit ministry at Clearcreek Chapel has focused on presenting texts and issues related to the concept know as New Covenant Theology. This morning we will look at a text and suggest that this idea under this label is exactly how the apostle Paul read and interpreted Scripture. In Adult Bible education, the class has spent several months looking at issues that affect how we read the Bible in an attempt to read the Scriptures more accurately and correctly. Being able to see various details embedded in the text help us follow the human and divine authors' meaning and intention in the various passages we may be reading. But the class's organization also asserted that having an understanding of the big picture of the Bible, or having a grasp of the Bible's overall storyline is essential in properly reading any given passage. So a significant segment of the class was spent providing a summary of the redemptive-historical approach to the Bible and its center, the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

I was introduced at an early age to the idea that the Bible could be read from various "perspectives." I was exposed to various preconceptions that affect significantly how one reads and interprets the Bible. Let me illustrate with an easy example to keep you with me. If one comes to the Bible with the preconception that there is not a God, at least not one that communicates directly with human beings, then you will read the Bible as collection of religious stories and myths that describe one way a culture has interpreted the workings of the world and it will impact you in much the same way reading Homer or Plato might. But, if you read the Bible as though it is the very words of the God of the universe, the king of the cosmos, revealing himself and his will in the words of human beings, we should be awestruck as it were and listen intently and with all seriousness. These biases or preconceptions have been described variously as grids or patterns for interpretation much like a seamstress or tailor marking his or her material before cutting to ensure the proper lines and shape. Or perhaps we can refer to it as a template a woodworker has before him as his begins his project. One of the most common descriptions is that of a lens that we look through to focus our reading of a passage or text. It turns out that we frequently use several different lenses at any one time to correctly read what is front of us. Lenses of genre, history and situation all affect how we see and apply a particular section of Scripture. But recently you have heard it stressed that a principle lens that we should focus and hone is the lens of the gospel in our reading. This is exactly what New Covenant theology does, as an interpretive or hermeneutical lens, it keeps the gospel

forefront in our thinking and will significantly affect our understanding of the entire New Testament as well as any particular text or idea from the Bible.

The passage chosen for this morning's exposition demonstrates that this is the Apostle Paul's concern as well and then models how we should also follow in his example. One of the points made frequently in the recent Adult Bible Education class was that our interpretive strategies and plans were actually derived from the Bible's witness to itself. As we view this text from this perspective we too will see this hermeneutical principle proclaimed and again see the basis for a New Covenant Theology.

The passage for consideration is found in Paul's first epistle to the church at Corinth in the second chapter. Turn to I Corinthians 2:1-5 and read this text with me. We will begin at 1:1 and continue to our text of the morning.

We read Paul's purpose for writing this text in verse 10 of chapter 1, an appeal to be of the same mind. Much has been written regarding the situation in the church here in the Greek city of Corinth, and to simplify it here, they were engaged in the mother of all church squabbles. Paul deals with many particulars in this extended discourse but his bottom line was, as Christians, we should work hard for unity of thought. He based and defended his appeal not from the wisdom of the era but from the text of Scripture and the words of Christ. That is his point at our text this morning, let us look more closely there.

## **I. Paul's Desire (vs. 5)**

We are beginning at the end of the passage this morning. At verse 5 we see the word "that" which alerts us to see the reason for what was just said previously. Simply put, Paul does not want "disciples" merely in name, people who have claimed the "power of the gospel" because of coercive persuasion. Rather he sees the gospel itself as the power of God to change lives and make us "guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." Our faith is in the message of Christ crucified.

Paul is much aware, and it is no different in our day, that people can be persuaded of something merely because of the context in which it is presented. Especially in our time, many become Christians or join a particular fellowship for just that reason, fellowship. Indeed the gospel does create a new and lively community, but community is not the power of the gospel. We all know some who seem to make great professions of faith and change only to walk away later, in particular related to a relationship "problem." This often indicates the "relationship" was their primary focus to begin with and not the change in heart the gospel truly creates by grace in faith.

So Paul very intentionally ensures that his presentation of the gospel is such that the message of the cross is central and prominent. The cross is what one is confronted with and not the benefits of the cross, our faith only stands when it rests in God's power!

## **II. Paul's Denial (vs. 1, 3, 4)**

So with that desire; that the Corinthian believers' faith would not rest in human wisdom, Paul alludes to his ministry and presentation "philosophy." He first denies that he relied upon a style of presentation. The content of his message, the "testimony of God" was not presented to them with emphasis on flair and flash. I am sure he spoke

to them coherently and wisely, but the package was not what was important but the message itself. In verses 3 and 4 he relates that at the time he indeed felt weak and somewhat fearful. His presentation may have been even a bit less confident than at other times because of the particular circumstances. But even at that he affirms that his presentation of the gospel of Christ was empowered by the Spirit of God whom he rested in for his enablement.

### **III. Paul's Decidedness (vs. 2)**

This brings us to the statement in verse 2; where Paul says, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. Do not take this to mean that Paul has changed his evangelistic strategy. Any study of Paul and his message will demonstrate the consistency of his proclamation and yet the fluidity of his style for the particular circumstance. Also do not take this to mean that Paul does not think "philosophically." That is that he does not think orderly and consistently. Indeed Paul is contending throughout his ministry that his understanding of the work of God in Christ is the most rational of all worldviews. And do not think that Paul did not organize his thoughts and writings "rhetorically." It is clear that he wrote and preached in an organized and effective manner, in way to clearly present and convince.

It does mean this however and this is our main assertion, that he recognized that "Jesus Christ and him crucified" is the organizing principle for all of life and history. Consider the phrase "Jesus Christ and him crucified" as a shorthand expression for another term that he uses in a summary fashion as well, the gospel. For Paul, "the gospel" is what life is about. It is what God has done. It is what God is doing. In the particular case of evangelizing the Corinthians, a thoroughly Greek city with Greek expectations and weaknesses, Paul clearly came decidedly to present the centrality of the Gospel for all of life.

Now for us, do not forget to connect this to what he said in verse 1, his concern was in the "how" that he proclaimed the "testimony of God." Then in verse 2, don't shift gears and think content but rather keep in mind he is still referring to "how." The "how" of his presentation involved the centrality and importance of "Jesus Christ and him crucified." This is how to understand and read and hear the testimony of God. This is the "hermeneutic" for understanding God's Word. It must have as its center, its foundation the gospel or else it will collapse into a morass of "human wisdom" and explanations.

Paul very clearly here models for us the lens, the perspective we are to have in order to properly understand and apply the "testimony of God," his word. The old Heart of the Chapel class, Perfect Planning and the recent class examining the book God's Big Picture all stressed this gospel hermeneutic. But yet this hermeneutic, the lens is indeed foundational to establishing a New Covenant way of thinking, because it establishes the gospel as "what God is doing." The gospel is what the Old Testament is about in some way and to not read it in this fashion is to miss its main function and meaning. So let's bring this to a conclusion this morning with these closing thoughts.

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## Conclusion

In a very real sense, this short series had its start with the book of Ezekiel, continued through Daniel and will not end until Pastor Russ completes his exposition of the book of the Revelation of John. In some sense this series represents theologically who we are at Clearcreek Chapel. This thinking permeates all that Pastor Russ preaching and impacts all that Pastor Chad tries to do as he organizes Adult Bible Education. The short Ephesians series had this material at its heart and Hebrews explains how it all works together to impact us in the here and now.

In our text this morning we saw that Paul's use of the gospel shows that he sees it as the central idea of God's purposes. His desire to "know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" is presenting the Bible and life to them through the lens of the gospel and not through human wisdom. The gospel (Christ and him *crucified*) is the organizing event of human history. So what?

1. Ensure you are embracing the cross.

There are many in Christian circles who are embracing the effects of the Gospel and not the Gospel itself. They are desirous of "love and relationship", they enjoy the mediation and reflection on big ideas and thinking, they love music...singing in choirs, playing in bands and orchestras, they love leading groups, teaching children, performing on stage, organizing activities and events, there is a host of things to do in a church setting all of which are proper and encouraged. But they are NOT the gospel. Those activities; even with the best of content and intentions, if left to themselves, will still lead you to ultimate destruction and condemnation. Are you, this morning, trusting in the gospel for your life now and in the future?

2. Do not trust in your abilities in the proclamation of the gospel.

Even those who are embracing the gospel, there is still a real danger to find oneself in trusting in human ability and wisdom to accomplish the ministry of the gospel. The desire for excellence in ministry can become an idol in and of itself so that the concerns no longer become clearly presenting the "testimony of God," but rather is this "good." Beware!

3. Revel in the knowledge of the cross as the purpose of God in history.

And lastly, read and live in the light of the gospel. Be aggressive in your gospel application of your Bible reading. Think carefully about your life and indeed the history of the world and our current culture as to how you fit into God's plan and purpose. Even though it has been misused there is real encouragement and comfort in knowing and purposing your life and being "purpose-driven." Be driven by the Gospel!