



Commissional Preaching

1 Corinthians 1:17-2:16

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We are becoming a commissional community...

What is at the heart of preaching today?

Feel good about yourself preaching...

Bible-lite preaching trying to feed people with our weekly crumbs...

Motivational preaching aimed at psychological categories...

Moralistic preaching framing a good, spiritual or holy life...

Liberal preaching filled with social justice and human mercy concerns...

Emotional “spirit-filled” preaching creating a certain kind of experience...

Exegetical preaching fostering a seminary style student of the Bible...

How much do any of the modern approaches to preaching affect us as we grow in becoming a more Commissional church? Frankly, not much at all. We have been growing in our communication in preaching for a very long time. We have listened to counsel and yes, at times, to criticism. This is all a part of growing together in ministry. All of us are growing in our preaching. But we do not aspire to adopt the commonly accepted ways of preaching.

Now why is that? Why is it that much modern preaching isn't even preaching as the Bible understands it? Preaching, proclaiming or prophesying are the three words used by the Bible to refer to what we intend to do in our pulpits. All of them are largely one-way communication – the speaker declares the Word of God. This is our core commitment. This is what commissional preaching is.

It is the exposition of the Scriptures to all the people of God in a way that is accessible to them dependent on the Holy Spirit to illuminate the text and enlighten the heart.

As we then grow in our becoming a Commissional Church, how does this affect our thinking about preaching? What is our preaching here at the Chapel growing up into?

Paul writes to a church who was drifting into carnality and worldliness because it had become poured into the world's mold. The truths, warnings and solutions Paul puts forward will guide and guard us well. So open with me to 1 Corinthians 1:17.

The Dangers for Commissional Preaching (1:17-31)

We see from this text that God opposes the human wisdom of the world because it is rooted in human arrogance (1:18-29). Instead, God spotlights the Lord Jesus Christ as the center of all His wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption in order to draw out the admiration and acclaim of His people (1:30-31).

These two truths must radically shape our thinking and doing of ministry in every aspect. They will have profound effect on our preaching. While we love to elevate the supremacy of God, God has chosen to display His supremacy through preaching Christ and His work on the cross. Here are the dangers we face if our preaching is not commissional.

That we obscure the cross and gut the gospel of its power (v.17)

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

In a play on words, Paul says that the oratory of Greek sophistry and wisdom is rejected (v.17) while the “word”, the preaching of the cross is enlisted to serve God’s sovereign purposes (v.18). Paul understands the primary thrust of his ministry – while baptism is an important church ordinance, we do not preach baptism. We preach the gospel which is the word of the cross (v.18), that is, Christ crucified (v.23). So we must recognize what may be important, but is still subordinate and secondary. The gospel is primarily about Jesus, who He is and what He has done.

What happens when we are no longer gospel centered? We obscure the cross, hiding and making it less clear and important. Rather than it taking its place up front as the central thing it is, something else is made central. What usually takes its place is our felt needs or religious agendas.

Further, we gut the gospel of its power. Paul is clear. The gospel is preached because the gospel is powerful when it is about Christ and the cross. This is why the gospel has little real life changing power in today. If we are preaching any other gospel – health, wealth, fulfillment, psychological well-being, relational healing, purpose finding and so on, people may flock to us but the power of God to actually save is not present.

So, we will put the cross front and center and depend on its power to save.

That we diminish God’s sovereignty and misunderstand human rejection (v.18-21)

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

These verses are clear that the gospel cuts two ways, has two effects. It is folly to those who are perishing and God's power to those who are being saved. While the gospel is God's means to save, it is not simply automatic. Just because the gospel is preached doesn't mean they will be saved. It is in those whom God is saving that it is powerful to save. Here is the inscrutable wisdom of God (v.20-22). Through the foolishness of the gospel about the God-man who was executed as a criminal for other's sins, God saves those who believe.

If we are not centered on the gospel, then we will focus on man's rejection and acceptance as the center. We will be more concerned about decisions and responses than we will about being clear and accurate, no matter how idiotic it sounds to people. When we are gospel centered, we will be able to exalt the supremacy of God while preaching salvation to the lost. The glory of gospel centric preaching is that we know that to those whom God is calling, this message we preach will be seen as the wisdom of God and experienced as the saving power of God.

So, we will savor the supremacy of God and rely on the gospel regardless of the response.

That we devalue the gospel and remove Christ from its center (v.22-25)

²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

We are in danger of minimizing the gospel and diminishing Christ because it is not attractive to our world. To say that the gospel is the only way to be saved sounds arrogant and narrow. Paul saw that the Jews tripped up over the fact that the Messiah, the Christ, had already come and had died and rose again. The Gentiles scorned the message of a God-in-flesh being executed as a criminal. In spite of this, the apostolic band preached and proclaimed the gospel. They did so because they treasured it and wanted more than anything for Christ to be magnified in their message and by men.

I want you to notice that Paul recognizes that the gospel is being preached to two completely different people groups and cultures – one dominated by the desire for authenticating miracles and the other dominated by the love for elaborate systems of philosophy. In the face of these utterly different cultures, he simply preaches the gospel. What an encouragement to us today. While we need to be sure that the way and the words of our preaching are intelligible to our audience, we do not have to change the message to suit their perceived needs or passing interests. Preach the gospel – those who are being called and being saved will respond as God has purposed and planned.

So, we will treasure the gospel and strive to keep Christ central to our preaching.

That we misread the purpose of God and steal from His glory

(v.26-31)

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Paul calls us to observe carefully and us to think deeply about the unfolding of salvation. What do you see? You see that God has not chosen primarily to save who we think would further His cause the most. He has saved the weak, the poor, the outcasts. The emphasis then is on the purposes of God – notice the "God chose" all through this paragraph. And He works this way so that **NO ONE CAN BOAST**. God has chosen to save whom He does the way He does through the gospel as He does **SO THAT HE ALONE WILL RECEIVE GLORY**.

Therefore, our great danger is that we will not delight in God's supremacy and sovereignty and thus will elevate man, boast in man and steal God's glory for ourselves. If we change the gospel so that it depends on man, rather than God, then man can boast. When man's place in salvation is exalted, then God's place in it is diminished.

So, we will prize the gospel so that Christ will be praised.

The Distinctives of Commissional Preaching

(2:1-5)

What set apart Paul's ministry from others and thus set an example for us as well? I was helped immensely two years ago in hearing C.J. Mahany preach on this – so I am using his outline. Some of this will be familiar to you who have taken the Counseling Training Course over the last two years.

In What is Rejected

(v.1)

¹ And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.

Based on the principles above, Paul rejects a particular technique of human wisdom in his culture. In spite of the prevailing use of empty rhetoric merely as a means of persuasion, Paul embraces speech in public and in private – proclamation and conversation – that is full of content. So he rejects what was common in the marketplace as an effective means of ministry. He rejects mere conventions of speech over against real content and clarity of speech. A cross centered ministry cannot be all embracing of everything. It must deny some things and reject other things. If there are no contours and no boundaries, then we have no way to distinguish ourselves from error and from the world.

In What is Resolved

(v.2)

² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

What Paul rejected is governed by what Paul has resolved. A Biblically fundamental commitment orients his faith and practice. He is not just committed to content instead of verbal manipulation. He is committed to Christ crucified, the Messiah and His execution. The tendency of human wisdom is to rely on methods, techniques and practices as perspective giving and problem solving. All of Word ministry relies on a Person, His perfections, promises and power.

There are two fundamental commitments for a Christian who is going to think deeply about ministry and interact Biblically with the culture.

- God has determined to undermine reliance on human wisdom by magnifying Himself as worthy of fear and respect. (1 Corinthians 1:19; Isaiah 29:13-14)
- God magnifies Himself by elevating Jesus, His cross and crown, as the sum and substance of all God's truth and wisdom.

In What are its Reasons

(v.3-5)

³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

The evidence that we are rejecting mere human technique and relying on our sufficient Redeemer emerges in these two verses. In personal frailty and difficulty, preaching not relying on human technique becomes preaching demonstrating God's power. Real gospel preaching usually does not evidence the power of God as measured by the world. Rather, an authentic ministry recognizes that our weaknesses and our frailties are the very places where the power of God is most visible, most clearly seen. Thus, the cross is the pattern – Jesus dies in shameful disgrace but there, the penalty for sin is paid, the power of Satan is destroyed and wrath of God is satisfied. O, the wonder of the cross.

Biblically authentic, cross centered preaching rests on and relies in God's power, not the wisdom of men. How much of religious preaching, religious psychology and religious counseling put its faith in the power of human wisdom rather than the power of God, His Son and Spirit? Rather, we will rest in the saving power of God so that your confidence and assurance is not in technique but rather in a Person. It is not that you said the right prayer, felt the right way, really meant the decision you made, it is that you are resting in and trusting the Lord Jesus Christ. You believe in Him and you bow to Him.

The Depths in Commissioned Preaching

(v. 6-16)

Its Hidden Wisdom

(v.6-8)

⁶ Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. ⁷ But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

There is a Biblical preaching that seeks to impart wisdom. It does not rely on nor convey human wisdom. It is communicating the secret wisdom of God. This wisdom is cross-centric and Christ-exalting. It is the amazing purposes, plans and power of God to actually bring about the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Biblically commissional preaching then will not only expose and explain the gospel to unbelievers and to those who have just come to believe, but also will teach a gospel-centered wisdom to those who are growing in maturity.

This is one of the great challenges of preaching. How do we explain the gospel simply to those who have not believed, to those who are new in faith, to the untaught, ignorant and unchurched while still preaching a great, redemptive-historical, gospel wisdom of the glory of God? This has been a struggle at times in my own preaching. It has challenged us here at the Chapel.

This challenge raises for us a serious question? Do we plan to do ministry (preach, teach, fellowship, serve, etc) to the immature Christian or are we going to primarily cater to the mature Christian? Since preaching is necessary for growth and maturity (we do believe that, right?) how do we care for those who are young in faith or immature and feed those who are strong in faith and mature? This has been one of the driving factors in thinking about becoming a Commissional Church. We are preaching so as to bring people to believe and confess Christ publicly. We are also preaching so as to bring people to maturity, “observe all that Jesus taught”. Now Paul understands this as preaching the whole counsel of God, that is the whole Bible. But he also understands that there is preaching to believers that is inaccessible to unbelievers. In fact, if the unbelievers of Jesus’ day had actually understood what he taught, they would not have crucified Him.

Its Divine Source

(v.9-13)

⁹ But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”— ¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

Just because this wisdom is secret doesn’t mean that it is unknown. God has revealed it. He has revealed it through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has given it to us in the Word of God. Through human authors, the Holy Spirit caused the Word of God to be spoken and written. It has come to us as the Scriptures.

In a startling statement, Paul compares the Spirit’s knowledge of God as being like our own spirit, our inner person. God’s most inner, most intimate thoughts are known by the Spirit of God. This means that when the Spirit gives the Word, He is communicating the very thoughts, the very mind of God. But then, we are given the Spirit so that we can understand the Word of God.

This understanding however, does not come by some inward, direct revelation, but as we read the Word, comparing the words, thoughts and truths within it. So

preaching then relies on the language and vocabulary of the Scriptures to convey the truths of the Word of God. When we use the vocabulary of the world, we may well be undermining the Spirit's work of opening up the mind of God in the Word of God to the people of God.

Its Spiritual Perception

(v.14-16)

¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ¹⁶ "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

But, just understanding the Scriptures does not guarantee that obedience, maturity and radical transformation and communion. We do not expect to see people trusting the gospel and transformed by the gospel through mere human words and by mere human logic and reasoning. The "O, I see" is something that the Spirit does in people. A person who is "persuaded" by mere human means, can then be persuaded otherwise by the same means.

Reflect and Respond

So what does this mean for us as we grow and change as a church? How has this influenced and shaped what we are becoming and the changes we are implementing?

Sustaining our unchanging commitments to Biblical preaching:

We are committed to hard study, careful writing and in-depth understanding of the texts we preach.

We are committed to regular, systematic exposition of the Scripture in all our gatherings.

We are committed to total reliance on the Word of God and the Spirit of God to do the spiritual work in people that serves the purposes and plans of God.

Seeking to preach in way that is both Scripture and people wise...

We recognize that as students of Word we are vulnerable to preaching that is primarily academic and sterile, a data dump.

We strive to preach in a way that is both true to the text and helpful and useful to people.

We will preach so as to bring the message of the text to you applying it today.

Sharing some practical effects and changes:

Desire to preach to...

The immature and untaught believer needing to grow in faith...

The mature and well-taught believer needing to strengthen mature faith...

Mindful of our children who need to learn to listen to preaching...

Mindful of the lost whom the Spirit may regenerate through the Word preached...

In the AM Service...

Expositional messages usually through books just in shorter periods of time. I will be preaching through Philippians until Advent. January we will be preaching on handling conflict culminating in our Family Enrichment Retreat with Dr. Robert Jones.

Children from the beginners and up with us to begin to see, hear, observe their parents and other adults worship God, learning to participate. This means that we will have no Learning Lambs beginning in September. If we find that new families struggle with this, we may reintroduce Learning Lambs for the Beginners.

In the PM Service...

Much of the same in-depth preaching covering more difficult topics. We will have 45 minutes for our sermons. I will be spending the next year completing the Eschatology series including 2 Peter, Jude and Revelation.

Scripture Sowers will continue and Summer Evening Enrichment for Kids will begin next June with the children being dismissed just before the sermon.

For all of us...

Prefer and minister to others as we gather in our preaching. Learn to have an outward facing mindset while having a heart changing expectation.

Benefit from having truths you already know confirmed so that your faith and obedience are strengthened.

Seek to learn the Word of God better without a craving for newness or novelty. "I've never seen that before" is not the standard for good preaching.

Pray for us who are preaching that God will grant us the grace of being shorter, more concise, more clear in their preaching.

Be more alert to disturbances that distract people from hearing the Word. Please do not get up or allow your children to go out during the preaching unless it is really necessary. The Café will be closed.

Be very aware of guests who may need a seat, need a Bible, should be greeted warmly and encouraged to stay for fellowship and return another service.

Grow in the wisdom God gives as we, through the preaching of God's Word, exalt Christ, extol the cross and exemplify the love of God.

May God forbid that we should glory except in the cross of Christ.

for

It [has] pleased God through the folly of what we preach
to save those who believe.