

Title: A Cross-Centered Ministry

Text: 1 Corinthians 2.1-5

Theme: The Cross governs the heart of our ministry.

Series: 1 Corinthians #7

Prop Stmt. Paul's ministry was an example of someone who lived in view of the cross.

When I was in Bible college, I was involved in a couple of preaching contests. Preaching contests make almost as much sense to me as a praying contest. To view preaching or praying through a competitive lens is really to miss the point entirely. But what happens when you do something in front of others? You are judged. What happens when what you do is what many people other people do? You are judged in comparison to them. Clearly you make yourself vulnerable to the criticisms of others who evaluate you in light of the performance of others. Is that fair? I guess it depends on whether or not there is a French judge on the panel. (just kidding) But hold the phone for a minute. When we judge the performance of people in the church, or when we judge the performance of a church as a whole, should we not back up and ask ourselves, on what basis are we doing the evaluating? If the people judging the church do not understand the message and the purpose of the church, then is their evaluation valid?

When Paul came to Corinth, he came to a city which hosted the famous Isthmian games. The only athletic competition that was larger was the Olympics. The most prominent position in the city of Corinth was to be in charge of the games. I did not take the time to bring this out last week when we were looking at v. 26, but one of the requirements for being the leader of the Isthmian games was that you had to have been born into one of the noble families. I read that during this time, there was a free man in Corinth who had become very wealthy, but because he was not born into a noble family, he was never permitted to have the coveted position of being the leader of the games. In spite of all of the privilege and power that his wealth brought him, he still did not fit in.

How many times have you been given the impression that you do not fit in? A friend of mine was the manager of resort on Sanibel Island near Ft. Myers, Fl. It was a nice place. He told me that if we came in the summer, he could give us a beachfront room for about \$25 a night. I could not pass up a deal like that. So, we went. I was checking in at the front desk, and the girl asked me for my license plate number. When I told her that it was a Michigan plate, she just looked at me in disbelief and said, "You drove? Our guests usually do not drive in from up north." Of course, now I am thinking, hey lady, here is one who did, and I even cleaned under my fingernails. But what impression was she giving me? You are probably not the level of clientele that we are used to. And where does that impression come from? It comes from people who you perceive to be sitting in judgment of you. It is so crazy, but in an effort to belong, people form groups that intentionally or unintentionally freeze others out, just so that they can get a temporary feeling of identity and belonging. In Corinth, the culture was full of competition. Part of the competition of the Isthmian games involved rhetoric. Public speakers who could wow the crowd were celebrated like rock stars. They were fawned over and told how great they were as they competed for the applause of the audience. We live in a city like that. Beneath our leather coats, behind our impressive homes, are people, most of whom

are running scared. The movers and shakers in our city, are like the ones in Corinth, who if you peeled back the sequin dresses, and the lengthy list of awards you would find people who are desperate to fit in. Fit in to what? Into this arena comes Paul. And he says in v.3, I came in here scared to death. I was intimidated, threatened, and wondering what on earth am I doing here? I do not belong here. But then again, even as Paul no doubt preached to himself, he writes and in effect he says, “I wasn’t in competition for the applause of the people. I wanted their hearts for Christ.”

How do we minister in a self-absorbed culture? How do you reach people who are in it for themselves? What kind of a ministry would attract people who are big on image and short on character? Who are full of impression, as a cover-up for an empty and desperate heart? Do you try to preach a message that impresses them? Do you try to do things that will give them a sense of sophistication? A self-serving ministry will produce self-centered people. That does not fit with the message of the church – does it? That is why we don’t offer people more of what they already are in an attempt to hook them into coming for a while when we have something that is infinitely better. We show them Christ! We preach Christ! We live Christ!

A cross-centered ministry is so full of Christ, that it does not have the time or the interest to be in competition with itself.

I hope that you understand this. You belong here! You really belong here! It is not because of the family that you were born into. It is not because of the awards that you earned in school, or the success you had with your job, or thousands of other things that people use to determine whether or not you fit in to a certain place. You belong here because of Christ. You belong in the body of Christ because of Christ. That is what the gospel is all about. We have the righteousness of Christ credited to our account. This is our home. This is our family. This is our place. These are our people because of Christ. Since the church is the body of Christ as Christ is, so the church should be. The more the church is like Christ, the more individual souls will become like Christ. The more that we are like Christ, the more we will see people the way Christ does, and not based on the artificial, surface divisions the way the world does. The church at Corinth had become an echo church instead of a lighthouse. It reflected the culture instead of shining Christ. The warning is very clear to us.

1. **What the Church should Not Do**

A. **Depend on status enhancers (2.1)**

1) Eloquence (these words will impress them)

This word translated “eloquence” has the idea of high-sounding rhetoric or lofty speech. You can intimidate people with the words that you use. You can attempt to impress people with your word selection so that based upon impression alone, they think, “This guy knows what he is talking about, because no one else does.”

2) Superior Wisdom (this style will impress them)

Superior wisdom is the idea of being clever. In other words, this is referring to the person who depends upon a certain style of delivery to gain the approval of the audience. Paul had a style of delivery. Peter, John, Apollos and Jesus all had a style of delivery. The issue is, what is the purpose of the style? The style is supposed to serve the message. Paul is appealing to his own example and says, I did not come to you in a manner that attempted to make me appear to be lofty or clever in your eyes. I did not depend on what the world does in my ministry to you. Neither did Paul depend on manipulation.

B. Depend on manipulation (2.4)

1) Wise and Persuasive Words (this 'll get 'em)

Paul did not use enticing stories to manipulate his audience. He did not make things appear better than what they really were. The message of the gospel is so true and sound because it is built on the testimony of God himself, that we do not have to dress it up. When Paul preached, he set the truth out there for what it is. He let the truth speak for itself. We understand that if people do not respond to the gospel, it is not because the gospel is in any way deficient and in need of some kind of extreme makeover to make it more appealing. So, while we want to communicate with clarity, passion and excellence, we do not want our pursuit of excellence to be driven by the hope that our commitment to excellence will impress people, but that what we do is consistent with the excellence of God and the importance of His message. But Paul does more than just tell us what he did not do.

2. What the Church should Do

A. Depend on the Message (mystery?) of God. (2.1)

Paul preached (proclaimed) the testimony about God. It would be wrong to conclude that Paul was reacting against the culture of rhetoric in his day because he was a lousy speaker. Do not forget that when Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra, the crowds were so moved by Paul's speaking, that they identified him as Hermes, the Greek god of communication (who was also known as the Roman god – Mercury). Paul is not saying that preaching style should lack polish. He is saying that it is easy to be enamored with the style and lose sight of the message. Therefore, the preacher should be diligent in his preparation and in his presentation so that what he presents and the manner in which he presents emphasizes the message and does not intentionally draw attention to the messenger. The church needs preachers who are not inflated when people say, "What a gifted speaker." But instead are blessed when people are drawn to Christ and say, "What an incredible Savior."

Paul was fully aware of the various styles and nuances of his day. But he did not depend on the style because he was so confident in the message. So, here is what we have to keep in mind. Be careful that you are not moved and impressed by style. Listen

carefully to the message. Is the speaker more impressed with himself or with Christ? Is the speaker the hero of every story and the focus of every illustration? You see, the message of the Cross is that Christ is the Savior, not the preacher. The other thing to keep in mind is that some of you are not as open as you should be about the gospel. You may think, "I am not that good of a speaker. I can't explain things real well." Your style of explanation does not do the saving anyway. God does through the gospel. The gospel can stand up all by itself. You do not have to develop a witty presentation in order to attract and hold an audience. When God opens the door, you need to be ready, armed with the gospel and ready to speak it.

B. Declare the Message of Christ. (2.2)

This does not mean that Paul only preached on John 3.16. What it means is that everything that Paul preached, he kept bringing it all back to the cross, because a right understanding of the cross affects everything in the life of the Christian and in the life of the church. The message that Christ lived a perfectly righteous life and then died on the cross as the full and complete payment for our sins is the message of Christ and him crucified.

C. Demonstrate the Ministry of the Spirit. (2.4)

When we think of a person filled with the Spirit's power, we often think of a confident, determined, leading the charge type individual. But, that really is not the picture that Paul is presenting here – is it? This is incredibly personal. He is telling these people that he was flat scared out of his wits! He knew that if anyone was going to be saved, it was not because he was so powerful in his presence and delivery, it was going to be because of the power of God.

The Spirit's power was set on display because there was no artificial means of securing someone's decision for Christ.

3. What the Church should Produce

A. An Emphasis on Substance vs. Style (2.3)

Because God is an excellent God of order and consistency, it is my belief that our worship services and our entire ministry should reflect that. Our goal is not to be known as people who do things with excellence, but a church that focuses upon God. If microphones consistently do not work, or if lights are burned out, or words misspelled then those types of things end up distracting from the message. But, if we are impressed with the fact that everything works, then we are far too easily impressed. Our emphasis is to be upon the substance of the message, and the style should service the substance.

We are blessed with Elders, Pastors and Leaders who understand this. For example, one of the things that I appreciate about Jeff, is this: When we pray, we all pray. Prayer is not a time to move singers around, talk to the choir, change props, or sets. Prayer is when

we talk to God. If we treat that as an opportunity to move some things around, then obviously we care more about the appearance of what is going on, than on what is really going on!

Let's say that we have the greatest Trombone player in the state who is part of our orchestra. Every Sunday morning he performs a solo and people just love it. In fact, some people think, I have not been to church unless I have heard that Trombone. But, let's say that the player has a gambling debt that is so large, he is losing his house. All these years, he has played songs about his love of God, when in his private life his god has been a one-armed bandit. Should he keep playing because everyone loves it and the show must go on? Or should he step out of that and address the problems in his life and when he is showing maturity and growth, then assume a public role of ministry. If we really believe the message, then we will not feel the pressure to make sure that the show must go on.

B. A People with a God-powered Faith (2.5)