

Title: A Cross-Centered Method

Text: 1 Corinthians 1.18-25

Theme: The Centrality of the cross to the methods of ministry

Series: 1 Corinthians pt.5 (The Centrality of the Cross – pt.2)

Prop Stmt. The Cross is central to all that we do. The methods that you follow reveal the message that you really believe.

In 1990, the political walls around the U.S.S.R. came crashing down and the Soviet empire began to break into pieces as nations began to declare their independence and organize themselves as their own country. While that change was shocking, no less traumatic was the economic walls that crumbled. For years the Russian citizens had been told that they made the best products in the world. When the Russian ruble was permitted to float against the world's currencies, inflation began to spiral out of control because the ruble was almost worthless. What did Russia have that the world wanted to buy? Their computers were worthless, their cars were junk, their technology was inadequate because, in short, the world had almost completely passed them by. Communism was not a success, it was a complete and total failure. The great experiment was a disaster of colossal proportions and the transition to economic reality was going to be extremely painful, which it has been, though in the last 2 years that transition has been softened by the spike in oil prices. 15 years later, once empty stores are full of goods.

Now, let's say that you are taking some business classes at Walsh college, Wayne State or Oakland University, and the school offers a course on the "Fundamentals of Marxism Economics." Around campus you see all these posters promoting the benefits of this class. When you look at the school's web page, you read testimonials from Leonid Brezhnev, Nikita Kruchev, Joseph Stalin, John Lennon, ( I mean Lenin) on how meaningful and helpful this class is. There are pictures of students smiling as they give away everything they own to the state and they are saying what an emotional experience that was.

As you look at all of the hype and promise of the advertisements, you are aware of the reality and wonder, "why would I pay good money, and invest my educational time on being taught a system that has been revealed as a complete failure? Why would I follow a method that is full of the seeds of decay? That is exactly the question that Paul is posing to the church at Corinth. What are you guys doing? You are following a model or a method in your church that comes from how the world thinks. The message of the true church is different than the message of the world. The message of the world is bound for failure and the methods of the world are driven by their message. So, if the church adopts the methods of the world (which are driven by a flawed and doomed message), what will that eventually do to the message of the church? The methods that you follow reveal the message that you really believe.

I have returned to this text this week because I liked the sermon so much from last week, I wanted a chance to preach it again – not really. In fact, last week was more of the exposition, (part 1) but this week is more of the application, (part 2) because I want you to see that there are two related things going on here that are very important for you to

grasp. Please understand that this message this morning is going to make more sense to those of you who are followers of Christ and therefore part of the church. If you have not come to faith in Christ yet, I am so glad you are here, but please keep in mind, that this message is not really designed as a critique of our world, but is actually a critique of what we call the church. Many times, we have to set our own house in order. That is what the book of 1 Corinthians is about, and since what I preach is governed by the text, that is what I am dealing with today. Let's go back to the reason why Paul is writing this book.

Where is Paul? Ephesus.

What happened? He received a report from Chloe's people that there were some serious problems in the church at Corinth.

What did he do? He started to write a letter in response to these problems.

Then what? He received some more reports of problems along with a letter from the church at Corinth asking him all sorts of questions about the problems they were facing.

But as we found out, the major problem was that this church was a disunified mess!

They had divided themselves up on the basis of different personalities and the different groups within the church were loudly proclaiming their loyalty to these men, one of whom was Paul. They were doing what their world did. The Corinthian world was full of people who were proclaiming their allegiance to different philosophical leaders. These disciples or followers of these various leaders loved to get together and argue over which teacher or system was the best. This divisive, argumentative spirit that prevailed in the Corinthian culture had been brought right into the church. Those who said that they were followers of Paul, were not really following him, but were in fact using him and apparently some of his teaching as an excuse to act sinful and arrogant towards others. So, Paul is writing this letter in an attempt to straighten out the mess that existed at the church.

How does Paul attempt to address the problem of disunity? He goes back to the cross!

He points out that the message of the cross (known as the gospel) does not make sense to people who are not genuine followers of Christ because the message of the cross is such a humbling message. The gospel reveals that we are sinners and that we cannot rescue ourselves from the mess that we have created. We need a Savior! The world system as a whole does not embrace that message. Our world preaches a message that we are all basically good. Given enough time we can solve our own problems because, after all, we have been evolving, improving ourselves for millions of years. They say that there really is no God, except for the god that you create in your own mind. The very concept of God is an evolutionary thought that will eventually go away, but for those who have not intellectually evolved at the same level as others, they hold on to these notions because of their own personal weakness. The official thinking of our world is folly to God and useless to change people. That is why, in spite of the fact that the message of the cross is not embraced by this world on an official level every person in this world needs to hear the message of the cross and believe that message. If you are not certain that you understand that message, please talk with me after the service and I will make arrangements for you to have an opportunity to get this clarified, because it is the most critical issue that you could ever deal with in all of life!

Now again, go back to what was happening in Corinth. The people in the church had divided themselves up over different personalities and were each claiming to be so much more intelligent and sophisticated than the others. So, Paul goes back to the message of the cross and is showing that their attitudes are in complete conflict with the message of the cross. The message of their lives was contradicting the message of Christ.

What would you think if someone put up a billboard on Gratiot Ave. that had an artist's rendering of Jesus Christ on it, along with the title, LORD JESUS CHRIST, but then put up obscenities, and other vulgar expressions in total mockery of our Savior? We would be sick to our stomachs! We would be angry, saddened, and fundamentally disturbed. Who would do such a thing? Why would they do that? But, that is in essence what the church at Corinth was doing. That is what churches do that claim to follow Christ and then split over non-essential issues. They mock the name of Christ and the unity of God. Behavior like that is in fundamental opposition to the name of Christ and to the essence of the church. You can sense the burden that Paul has for these people because of the damage that is being done to the reputation of the gospel. That is why he goes back to the message of the gospel and asks them – is what you are doing consistent with the message? This is the only message that saves people from sin. This message is what matters. But, when you look at the message of the cross, you see that there are some implications of this message.

Last week we looked at the message and saw that God's message does not always make sense to this world because according to God, Man's "Wisdom" is Folly and God's "Folly" is Wisdom. Therefore, if man's wisdom is folly, and mankind, in his folly and self-centeredness, creates a method by which he advances himself, is that a method that the church should necessarily follow? No! Is the message of the cross (the message of the apostles) the same as the message of the world? No! If the message of the apostles was like the message of the world, then we should treat the church leaders like we do the leaders of the world – which means that we praise them, make fan clubs, organize followings, etc., but it also means that the message of the apostles is bound to perish. But, if the message of the apostles is from God, then God is the One who is to be praised. So either way, the very thing that the church at Corinth was doing was wrong.

People develop methods of handling life or accomplishing things that are based upon their wisdom or their view of life. Therefore, the methods are not necessarily neutral, but are themselves a part of the message. What I want you to understand is that the message of the cross not only determines what we preach, it determines how we are to preach. If I really believe that the message of the cross is sufficient to change people's lives, then I am going to preach that message in a manner that is consistent with that message. If, however, I think that in order to reach people I need to help the message out a little bit, I need to jazz it up, I need to soften some of its rough edges, or round out its corners, then my method ends up altering the message.

See charts:

1. Your Belief affects Your Behavior. (which being translated here means...)
2. The Message drives the Methods.

What happens when you think that the methods need to drive the message? Listen carefully because I am describing the fundamental change that has been shifting the ground underneath the evangelical church for the past 20 years. It is so tempting to make decisions based on – what will work, what is hip, what is contemporary, what is cool, rather than on what is consistent with the message.

For example, I enjoy making plans. I read about organizations big and small, major corporations major and ma and pa businesses and I like to find out how they function, what makes them tick, why or why not they are successful. I watched with interest the merger between Hewlett Packard and Compaq and still wonder if it is going to work. Closer to home I have talked with many of you affected by the merger or takeover between Daimler Benz and Chrysler. Within companies there is a culture, there are values some of which are stated, but the real ones are those that are seen in the lives and the decisions of the people. But, here is the difference, the corporate culture of Microsoft is not the business model for the church. General Motors is in the business of making money by building cars and trucks. I might learn a thing or two about how they stay focused on their mission, but I don't adopt their priorities because our definition of success is not the same. The success of the church is determined by the level of faith-driven obedience that we have to the message and ministry of the church. The results do not determine success, faith-driven obedience does! We may or may not be successful as many gauge that, but the world's standard of success is not our definition. Therefore, it is not our goal to gain the world's admiration and applause.

Western Christianity is full of fads! Programs come and programs go. Books, conferences, seminars that promise plans for success, and unlocking your churches potential, and taking your ministry to the next level, are typical descriptions of the material that is out there. And while there can be some benefit derived by reading some of this and learning some things, my concern is that when leaders in the church consume this stuff in such massive dosage amounts, that in time, the repeated emphasis upon methods replaces the necessary emphasis upon the message. The message has to drive the method. The methods of ministry must be consistent with the message. The “wisdom” of strategic planning can never substitute for the “folly” of the gospel.

What if Pastor Fred came up with the idea of taking the Sunday morning sermon and creating a Gameboy game with it? All kids were encouraged to bring their Gameboys to church and when they came into the Worship Center, the ushers handed bulletins to the adults and gameboy cartridges to the kids. As soon as the sermon began, all of the kids pulled out their gameboy games and as soon as the prayer was over, they all began to game their way through the sermon. Wouldn't that be great? Kids would love church and would not have to sit through a boring sermon. Parents would not have to parent their kids because the kids would be distracted (unless of course their batteries went dead), and everyone would be happy – right? Think about it. Kids wouldn't have to go

to the bathroom anymore in the middle of the sermon, because kids never have to go to the bathroom when they are playing video games. They only have to go when they are in school, church, or in the car on vacation. So, this idea would make everyone happy. Happy maybe, changed? No! Learning? Oh yes – but learning what? Learning that church is a game. Learning that at church you need to be entertained, not to think. Learning that it is the job of the adults to keep me from being bored. Methods matter, because methods are communicating a message and if the method is in conflict with the message, the message of the method wins. What is the message that we would be communicating? We would be saying that we do not believe that the message of the preaching is powerful enough to reach the hearts of kids and change them, therefore we have to enhance it. But, in our attempts to enhance it, we actually give them another message even though we did not intend to do that.

Right now, unfortunately one of the TV's hottest shows is ABC's Desperate Housewives. Now, let's say that we are going to do a series on marriage and the family. And we want to show our community that we are in touch with what is going on in the culture. We are a contemporary, fashion-aware, American-Idol sensitive church. (American Idol – now that is a theologically loaded statement – huh?) So, we call our series – Desperate Housewives, thinking that this will raise awareness, create a little buzz, generate some talk and excitement, and perhaps get more people to come – I mean after all – isn't that the goal – to get people to come? What happens? People may come. You may get a chance to say some things but at what cost? The method has cost you part of your message. You can say that you do not endorse the contents of the show, but by aligning yourself with it, you have made a huge statement about what you consider to be right, wrong or morally neutral.

The message drives the method.

Did Jesus use the methods of his world? Yes! Did Jesus use all of them? No. Did Paul use the methods of his world? Yes! Did Paul use all of them? No! Jesus only used methods that were consistent with His message. For example, did Jesus use signs, wonders and miracles? Yes! Did He use them all of the time? No! He used miracles to authenticate His message! But, he did not use miracles to wow the crowd or dazzle the disciples, or fire up the faithful. In fact, there were times in which He was asked to do a miracle and he didn't because the people were all geeked about the miracle and were ignoring the message. Christ only chose methods that were consistent with the message that he was preaching. The same thing was true with Paul.

What happened in Corinth? The people adopted the world's method of success. Their society was full of philosophers and teachers who each had their own little followers and schools. They were used to this. Therefore, it seemed perfectly natural for them to divide themselves over Paul, Apollos, and Peter and debate over who was the best. But, the message does not permit us to do that. There are some methods that work against the message. The methods of the world, that are based upon the message of the world, reveal the foolishness of the world. Why, would we ever embrace that? The message of the world does not save people. The gospel does.

So, when we look at what we should be doing as a church, we have to start with what is the message of our church? Then we have to pick methods that are consistent with that message. That is why we do not come to celebrate ourselves, or applaud ourselves. We do not invite people to come so that we can show off our talents and skills by putting on a good show. A talented church may gain the admiration of people, but talent does not change a person's heart – the gospel does that. The cross is where we die to the idea of human exaltation, and where we embrace Christ. We gather to exalt Christ. Whatever talents or skills He has apportioned to us, are all to be used to direct attention back to Him. Therefore, if we applaud in a service, it is not to say that we approve of the performance, but that we are in agreement with the message. We have to be friendly people – why? Because if we are friendly, people will come back? Is that the real reason? NO! The message of the cross is the basis of our relationship. Because of the gospel we are bound together in Christ – we are a family, an army, a team. We are to be involved in each other's lives. Your family matters, and this is your family. God has called you to live a life like Him. He placed the needs of others ahead of his own comforts – so, that is exactly how we are to live. We are to place the needs of others ahead of what we perceive to be our own comforts. Paul exalts the cross because it is central to our message, to our methods, to our very identity and therefore, to our entire ministry. If we ever lose that, we have lost it all. But, if you have that – you really have it all!