

A “Foolish Message” with “Foolish Methods”

1 Cor. 1:17-18 *“For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.”*

1 Cor. 2:1-5 *“And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.”*

The great apostle Paul faced a daunting task when he entered Corinth. How was he to reach the consciences and souls of the sophisticated Corinthians to bring conviction of their sin and make known to them a message that would appear to them as foolish, empty of any value and not to be compared with the wisdom of their philosophers? To them, he would appear as foolish (2 Cor. 11:16, 12:11), as he was even in the believers' eyes later. How could anyone expect to see any results in such an environment when he entertained the thought of preaching a “foolish message” using “foolish methods”? If he preached about a crucified Christ on a cross, the Jews would turn away if he declaimed that this was their Messiah; after all, their Messiah was coming to bring deliverance from all their foes and establish them in a superior position in the world. Preaching that the Man who died on a felon's cross to pagan Gentiles would be useless since their gods were supermen who couldn't be taken by human hands and so maltreated. But that was the message that he determined to preach (1 Cor. 2:2), and in doing so, he abstained from using any of the recognized methods that they were accustomed to using.

He made up his mind to avoid using “excellency of speech” when preaching. This means that he would not use high and lofty words delivered in an impressive way as did the Greek orators. Albert Barnes says, “The apostle here evidently alludes to that nice and studied choice of language; to those gracefully formed sentences, and to that skill of arrangement in discourse and argument which was so much an object of regard with the Greek rhetoricians.” He refused to use rhetorical arts, philosophical reasoning, or natural wisdom to express this message. His purpose wasn't to impress listeners with his ability. The Corinthian believers disdained his methods and speech to the point of calling it “rude” or “contemptible” (of no account)(2 Cor. 10:10, 11:6). Nor would he

try to reach them by using all the other methods that their world deemed most effective to reach an audience and produce a response. He determined (made up his mind) to preach a message that was distasteful to them, repugnant to their interests, by employing a means that was contrary to their expectations. He did so with one determination, and that was that the centrality of the cross and all that it involved would be kept in the forefront so that the Holy Spirit would have free course to produce lasting results. Personally, he didn't display a condition that would impress others; he was "weak", perhaps referring to some sickness or other malady. He was "in fear", evidently indicating that he was very concerned lest his labors might come to nothing. He felt much "trembling", which seems to indicate his spiritual state in which he was exercising complete dependence on God to work. There was nothing of pre-prepared methods, messages, or borrowed devices that he might have used in imitation of the worldly speakers that prevailed in Corinth. And the results are recorded in the faithful Word of God.

In very many ways, our world bears close resemblance to Corinth. Worldly wise, morally corrupt, commercially centered, and filled with devices (especially in our day) that are used by speakers and corporations to try to impress others with their message or product. We live in a postmodern society and the conclusion might be that we need to change our methods from what Paul used to accommodate the modern mindset. Some would say that we need to bring in a band, a chorus or musical performance, possibly a puppet show, or maybe movies. A few moments wasted watching a television ad will show that they use quick-changing clips or shots in a series in order to seek to create a favorable response to the message. Some say that listeners must be reached through the eye as well as the ear in order to stimulate a response. That may be true in many ways, but one should ask if this modern method of conveying the gospel can be reconciled with those first two chapters of 1 Corinthians. Paul had many Corinthian devices and methods at his disposal, but he rejected them all, choosing rather to depend completely on the power of the effective working of the Holy Spirit through a man and the message.

It is said that there is an inverse relationship between spirituality (dependence on God) and one's natural reliance on worldly devices. As there is a decline in one's spiritual condition, there is a normal tendency to introduce human devices along with man's organization. A. W. Bounds wrote these timeless words (in "Power through Prayer"), "God doesn't need new methods; He wants new men". The more that man depends on his own methods, abilities, or the devices of this godless world, the less he depends on the Spirit to work. It is true that in our day, fewer are being truly saved, and that is what the Scripture indicates will prevail in last days. New methods won't change that reality. Nothing outside of the simple, solid, searching proclamation of the Gospel of Scripture

using words set in a Scriptural setting and being expressed by Spirit-filled men depending on the power of the Holy Spirit will be effective in piercing the armor of indifference that prevails in our world today. The method and message that Paul preached in all its simplicity is still the God-honored means by which He is saving souls. May we seek to practice and cleave to it!

--

Joel

Joel Portman 319-210-1865

joel.portman@gmail.com