

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. 18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. 20 Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. –I Corinthians 1:17-21

The Apostle Paul is describing what is the true nature of the faith of Jesus Christ, which does not consist in externals, but in the condition of the heart before God.

“Wisdom of Words” does not mean empty show, but true eloquence and art. The Corinthians thought that the power of the Gospel was in the way it was presented, that its power resided in the person who presented the Gospel, rather than in the Gospel itself. There are two or three mistakes that we can make when we consider the power of the Gospel: we can think that that power is in the manner in which it is presented—in the art and eloquence; or we can think that the power of the gospel consists in the power of the individual who is presenting it. Both of these are essentially the same error. Or we can think that the power of the Gospel lies in ceremonies associated with the Gospel, such as baptism.

I. The Power is not in the Art: “Why go hear Paul?” the false teachers said. “He has no eloquence. He is a bad speaker. He writes powerful words, but he is contemptible in person. Why would God commit His Gospel to such a man. If you are going to be a teacher you should have the gifts of art and eloquence. Paul has none of these.” Paul is meeting this objection head on. He has deliberately refused to use “the wisdom of words” or the arts of eloquence, which Calvin describes as “skilful contrivance of subjects, ingenious arrangement, elegance of expression.” This kind of preaching would draw people to the preacher, not to Christ.

Paul is not saying that the gifts of eloquence or the art of the orator are to be despised and deliberately ignored. No, for all gifts are from God. But Paul is speaking of the kind of art that would draw men to the “manner” rather than to the subject. There is a very important principle here. The art, whether it be of eloquence or music, or anything else, is to be subject to Christ and have Christ as its focus. The power of music in worship is not in the music itself or the skill with which it is performed, but in the measure in which it points men to Christ. It should not draw attention to itself. If you preach, and men say, “What a great preacher,” then you have failed. Men should say, “What a great God, or what a great Savior is our Lord Jesus.” If you sing, if men say, “What a great singer,” then you have failed. They should say, “What a great Christ; how wonderful is God.”

This is not to say that you should be lazy in the cultivation of your skills. No, but the skills must never be in the forefront. The star is Christ; not you. The star of the play is Christ, not the play itself. The art must be used to exalt Christ, not obscure Him. Therefore the art is to be downplayed, subordinate, and God has chosen that the Gospel be displayed in simplicity and plainness.

How serious is this? Paul says that the Cross of Christ is made of none effect, if Christ is obscured by the art. The art is not the power of God unto salvation but the message itself. It is the foolishness of preaching—or of that which is preached. Calvin makes two points concerning this:

- a. The gospel in plainness and simplicity shines forth in its own majesty and does not need to be clothed with Saul’s Armor. It does not need to be adorned with the peacock feathers of vanity and show. The message is good enough by itself.

- b. Christ would bring us to himself as little children, and train us to the simplicity of obedience. We ought not to need philosophical reasons and beautiful expressions and flowery sentiments to persuade us to obey Christ. His word should be enough.

There is so much here: All the programs that the church invents; all the persuasive ploys that we use; all the pageantry and ceremony; all the arts and inventions—all of these things reveal a secret suspicion at the back of our minds: the gospel is not quite enough. It is not enough to preach the Cross of Christ—we have to make it palatable—we have to make it exciting—we have to dress it up with the garments of entertainment or the world—it really cannot stand on its own two feet.

And so we use entertainment, lest people get bored—admitting that we think the Gospel is boring. We dress it up to hide certain things—admitting that we think that some of Christ is offensive and needs to be hidden. We play upon emotions and stir up feeling, thinking that men will not love Christ without external helps. We add moralistic precepts, revealing that we really do not think that Christ will lead men to true Godliness and holiness. Somehow Christ is not enough. How wicked all of this is—for it obscures the beauty of Jesus Christ Himself and fills the churches full of people who do not love Christ, but they love other things and really worship them rather than Jesus Christ Himself.

- II. The power is not in the person who is preaching the Gospel. This is the mistake of the charismatic and the revivalists. You need “the power.” How do you get the power? You get the power by long prayers and the infusion of power from the Holy Ghost. Paul makes explicit denial of this idea in II Corinthians 4:5-8

5 For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. 7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. 8 *We are* troubled on every side, yet not distressed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair;

The truth is this: God prepares you by persecutions and troubles, so that you might know that the power is not of you, of your eloquence, of your learning, or your persuasiveness, but of Himself. He will not give His glory to another. Do you desire to be used of God—then submit to His program for your life; and be prepared for humiliation and shame—for God will prepare you for His own use, according to His own purpose and plan.

- III. The Power is not in the sacraments—in the ceremonies: “God sent me not to baptize...” How could Paul be an effective minister if he did not baptize? Paul is not downgrading the sacraments—never. He is showing that the Gospel does not consist in outward things but in the work of the Spirit in the heart. There is a little irony here, as Calvin says. There were some who thought to gain a little of the credit by the sprinkling of water, as if they could bask in a little of Paul's glory. And Paul is ironically saying, “God did not send me to baptize...” “You will not get there from here.” You do not understand my calling, or you would not be doing this. Baptism is a sign and seal, but the thing signed and sealed is far more important than the sign and the seal. The sign and the seal may be emphasized to the point that the thing itself is concealed. What is the thing itself: the Gospel of Jesus Christ—the Cross of Christ.
- IV. The Power is in the Cross of Christ. The simple message of the Gospel ought to be esteemed most of all among us, for it is the power of God unto salvation. This is what is meant by the phrase “the cross of Christ.” He does not mean the symbol of the cross, a crucifix, the wood of the true cross, or any

such thing, but the message of the cross. The power is in the message. How is the Gospel of Christ the power of God:

- A. In it is the righteousness of God revealed, as Paul says in Romans 1. Paul says that the Gospel of Christ reveals the righteousness of God. If a man desires what God desires; if he wants righteousness, then here is where he will find it, and he will find it no other place.
- B. Do you want goodness that is acceptable to God, and not just to tickle the ears and fancy of men? Do you want real righteousness and not just the appearance of righteousness? You will find that only in the Gospel of Christ.
- C. This does not mean that high forms of morality and ethics cannot be found in other religions and in men’s philosophies. They can, although they borrow from the true God whose law is written in the very nature of man. Paul is not talking about high forms of morality and ethics. The Greek and Roman philosophy knew that the love of God and the love of man was the highest calling of men. But they had no power to lay hold on their ethics and morality. Seneca, for example, was the great ethicist and moralist, ultimately die disgraced because he had so compromised himself with his promotion of Nero and complicity in the murders that Nero committed.
- D. You see, the Gospel sets forth righteousness that is acceptable to God, and the Cross of Christ reveals that righteousness. And the sons of Adam do not come off appearing very good in the light of the Cross. “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” was what the mob said to Pilate concerning Christ, but they were just echoing the verdict of God upon the desert of every son of Adam. If you and I stand in our own goodness before the judgment seat of God, that will be the verdict, the verdict of death, for we have not really loved the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind, or our neighbor as ourselves, but continually come short of the glory of God.
- E. No, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Cross of Christ, reveals the righteousness which is acceptable to God: the righteousness of Jesus Christ. For He was made perfect through the things that He suffered, and fully kept all the will of God.
 1. He loved God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and willing took upon Himself the curses of the law, so that the perfect honor, righteousness, justice, and love of God might be fulfilled, and not a single stain rest upon the justice of God in the saving of sinners.
 2. He loved His people, for He took their sins upon Him, and suffered in body and soul the punishment of the damned. This He did because He loved us until the end. Glory be to God.
- F. This is the wonder of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which throws down all the wisdom of the wise, and brings to nothing all the vanity of man’s mind. For this is what Paul says in II Cor. 5:20, 21: “Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech *you* by us: we pray *you* in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God. 21 For he hath made him *to be* sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”
- G. This wonder, though it is preached to all men, is effective only in those who believe, as Paul says in Romans 1: “I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth....” It is the Gospel received and believed that is effective. The world loves to speculate about ideas—to roll words around on the tongue, to speculate about nuances and distinctives—but it is the Gospel received, believed, and obeyed which is the power of God to those who are saved. The congregation of the saved are those who feed upon the Gospel of Christ, upon His broken and body and shed blood, for they know where the power is; it is not in themselves, but in the Cross of Christ.

May God bless you.