

**THE CENTRALITY OF PREACHING**  
**1 Corinthians 1:10-17**  
**August 21, 2005 – Grace Covenant Baptist, Birmingham**

On a school outing a few years ago with Kirby I overheard a conversation between two other parents about church. The discussion was initiated by one of the parents asking the other about his church. I listened intently as this man described where he attended church and every part of the worship service from the prior Sunday. My particular interest in listening was my knowledge that this particular church was one of the fastest growing churches in the Memphis metropolitan area and was also known as a “seeker-friendly church.” It was obvious to me that this man loved his church and was excited about his worship experience from the prior week. He remembered every song they sang (he did not use the word “hymn” and I know that they do not sing “hymns” at this particular church), he remembered the special music and the name of the performer, he recalled the skit and the message it related and even remembered the jest of just about all of the announcements. When he finished, I graciously let him know that I was a minister and was naturally interested in his discussion and was encouraged that he was so excited about his church. I also told him that I noticed he had mentioned just about every aspect of the worship service except the sermon, and so I asked, “What was the sermon about?” His answer let me know that he really had no idea as to the content of the message that week. “What about the title?” No answer. I felt it would be prying to ask what text was preached. But I could not let him off the hook without asking, “How long was the sermon?” His answer: 15 or 20 minutes!

I realize that this man might be the exception rather than the rule in this particular church. While the pastor has the responsibility to present the message in a way that does not exasperate the listener, he is not responsible to make him listen. I also want to be careful that I do not indicate that 15-20 minutes is inadequate for the length of a sermon. If the text is dealt with in an adequate manner in that timeframe, so be it. However, there is a great danger today in what I see to be the norm in many churches that would describe themselves as “seeker sensitive” like the church this man attended. Does this type of church provide a Scriptural model for the work that is to take place in the ministry of the gospel? We see in our text that Paul speaks to any Church that does not place a premium on the preaching of the Word, both in its proclamation and its reception. It is my intention this morning to show from our text *that the preaching of the gospel must be central in the overall work of the ministry of the local church*. Or, as Martyn Lloyd-Jones taught, “The primary task of the Church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God.” [D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, p. 19]

There are two things we see in this text: **(1) Paul’s exhortation to the church and (2) Paul’s emphasis for ministry.**

### **I. The Exhortation to the Church**

After his brief greeting (vv. 1-9), Paul wastes no time in dealing with the dominant problem in the church at Corinth. Paul wrote that he had received word that **“there are quarrels among you”** (v. 11) and this quarrelling had led to disagreement and disunity in the church (v. 10). These **“quarrels”** were rooted in and sprung forth from two areas of spiritual immaturity that Paul reveals that we will look at in a moment. But before he strongly **“exhorts”** them, we notice his pastoral heart. Paul twice calls them **“brethren”** (vv. 10, 11) to remind them of his close familial affection with them and for them. This is a pattern with Paul not only in this letter but in

other letters where he respectfully yet forcefully rebuked his readers (see also Rom. 10:1; Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 4:1).

Notice also that Paul exhorts them **“by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (v. 10). This is also a pattern we notice in Paul’s pastoral ministry. In coming to them in this way, Paul reminded them that the authority of Jesus Christ himself stood behind his rebuke. If these at Corinth disagreed with him, then so be it. But they must recognize that, in the end, their argument was with God and Christ, not Paul. This is a good lesson for us who enter into spiritual discussions with those that have doctrinal differences. We must try to convince them from Scripture so that their argument is with the Scripture, and ultimately God, not us.

Paul furthers the accuracy of this retort by naming **“Chloe’s people”** (Chloe’s household) as the source of the report of the quarrellings in the church. There is debate among scholars as to the identity of Chloe. However, what is implied here is that Chloe was known both to Paul and to the church at Corinth. And Paul calls her out as the source of the report. Can you imagine how Chloe might have felt when this letter was read in front of the entire church? There are times, for the sake of the body, that we should go to the leaders of the church and “rat someone out.” While this is never easy it serves the sake of the body much more than thinking the problem “will just go away” or simply saying, “That’s just the way they are.” Of course in doing this we must examine our hearts and our motives. This is not an occasion to gossip! The context indicates that Chloe did this discreetly, perhaps sending her slaves to give Paul the report. Chloe saw a problem that she felt that Paul alone could address as the spiritual father of the church and so she relayed the problem to him. Not in a gossipy way, but for the sake of unity.

Having received this report from Chloe, Paul exhorted these at Corinth in two areas that led to the disagreement and disunity in the body.

### **1. Danger of choosing favorites – Politics/sports/teachers, etc. BUT close relationships (family/church)**

The first area of spiritual immaturity that Paul addresses is the danger that lurks in choosing favorites in the church. Choosing favorites is an ordinary part of our daily life. We choose our favorite politicians, sports figures and teams, teachers in school, and so on. This is perfectly normal. We are more drawn to certain personality styles, teaching styles, regional sports teams, etc. There is nothing wrong with choosing favorites in these mostly *external* relationships.

However, when we consider the more *intimate* relationships we have with others, choosing favorites can be disastrous. Consider our familial relationships. If I as a father chose which of my two daughters was my favorite and treated her that way at the expense of a loving relationship with the other, the result would be an unsettled household. The same would be true if one of my daughters chose between which parent would be their favorite. The same danger exists in the church, which should be and intimate fellowship, when we show favoritism towards one person and neglect other relationships. Paul addresses this head-on in two ways.

#### **a. Causes disunity in the body**

Paul wrote that one of the sources for the quarreling at Corinth was **“that each one of you is saying, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I of Apollos,’ and ‘I of Cephas,’ and ‘I of Christ.’”** There were those in leadership at Corinth that were dividing the church into cliques according to their favorite preachers and teachers. There was the Paul sect, the Apollos cult, the Cephas group, and even those that just followed Jesus. The problem was not Paul or Apollos or Cephas themselves, and certainly not Christ, but those in leadership that were causing disunity by assuming

leadership over these little cliques that had crept in and were devastating the fellowship of the body. There were those that held Paul, the father of the church at Corinth, in high regard. Others preferred the dynamic rhetorical skills of Apollos. Some elevated the teaching of Peter. And still others proclaimed that they did not need these earthly teachers, they simply would follow Jesus. Paul rebukes the “Jesus sect” right alongside the others. This reminds us of modern day liberals whose mantra is, “Don’t give me doctrine, just give me Jesus.” Which leads us to the second danger in choosing favorites.

**b. Fosters an unteachable spirit**

Those that choose favorites like this often become unteachable by others. They will listen intently (and usually not discerningly) to their favorite leader when he ascends the pulpit, and will not listen at all to others that might also be proclaiming truth that they need to hear. As we will see later in this letter that is exactly what was happening in this church. They were neglecting the gifted teachers and leaders that God had given to them because of their blind following of one over the other. This too was a source of the quarreling at Corinth.

Paul shows the insanity of favoritism in the Body with rhetorical questions in v. 13, “**Has Christ been divided?**” Of course not! Paul returns to this thought as he demonstrates the Church as the Body of Christ. “**Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?**” You see what Paul is trying to do here? He is trying to get them to get their eyes back on Christ and Christ alone as the center of the ministry there. They must hold up Christ, not man. He reinforces this thought throughout these opening chapters.

**2. Danger of wrong emphases (14-16)**

The second area of spiritual immaturity that Paul addresses is that of emphasizing one aspect of ministry at the expense of another.

**Baptism, evangelism, music (classic service), Reformed theology... Idolatrous!**

**II. The Emphasis for Ministry (v. 17)**

**1. Mission – Preach – What is preaching?**

Why would John Stott write that “Preaching is indispensable to Christianity.” [John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, p. 15]

“Preaching is a transaction between the preacher and the listener. It does something for the soul of man, for the whole of the person, the entire man; it deals with him in a vital and radical manner.” [D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, p. 53]

I believe that the only type of preaching that meets these criteria is expository preaching. Expository preaching mines the depths of God’s Word. It digs deeper to expose the great spiritual truths that are in a text.

**Expository preaching:**

“*The technical definition of an expository sermon* requires that it expound Scripture by deriving from a specific text main points and subpoints that disclose the thought of the author,

cover the scope of the passage, and are applied to the lives of the listeners.” [Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 129]

Real expository preaching involves three things:

- a. Engages the intellect / stretches the mind**
- b. Stirs the emotions / speaks to the heart**
- c. Affects the will / demands a response**

## **2. Message – the gospel – What is the gospel?**

### **a. God**

Any proclamation of the gospel must include God as He is presented in the Scripture. It is not uncommon today for many well-meaning proclaimers of the gospel to begin with what I call “God out-of-context” which places an undue emphasis on the love of God. While it is true that Scripture plainly teaches the love of God (1 John 4) it is never at the expense of the rest of God’s character. The Scriptures teach just as plainly the wrath of God, but the sinner often never hears this or any other of God’s attributes, such as His righteousness, His holiness, His majesty, His glory, His judgment or His justice. However, a gospel that emphasizes one of God’s attributes to the exclusion or contradiction of other of His divine character traits is a faulty gospel.

“People are starving for the greatness of God. But most of them would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives. The majesty of God is an unknown cure. There are far more popular prescriptions on the market, but the benefit of any other remedy is brief and shallow. Preaching that does not have the aroma of God’s greatness may entertain for a season, but it will not touch the hidden cry of the soul, ‘Show me thy glory!’ . . . The greatness and glory of God are relevant. It does not matter if surveys turn up a list of perceived needs that does not include the supreme greatness of the sovereign God of grace. That is the deepest need. Our people are starving for God. . . So I am persuaded that the vision of a great God is the linchpin in the life of the church, both in pastoral care and missionary outreach. Our people need to hear God-entranced preaching. They need someone, at least once a week, to lift up his voice and magnify the supremacy of God. *They need to behold the whole panorama of his excellencies.*” [John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, pp. 9, 10-11, emphasis mine]

“The kind of God we believe in determines the kinds of sermons we preach.” [John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, p. 93]

### **b. Sin/law/grace**

Our gospel message must also consist of man’s lost estate because of sin. A person must understand how sin separates them from a God who is holy and right and just. This requires that we preach both Law and grace as it relates to salvation – the Law which shows one his sinfulness and the grace of God which saves one from this sinfulness. Law and grace must both be proclaimed in balance. Many gospel presentations today contain no mention of the Law and speak of God’s grace as if grace requires that God not even deal with sin. To preach one to the exclusion of the other cheapens the gospel and God’s wonderful saving grace in saving men

who, by their very nature, are Lawbreakers. Men must understand that they will be judged by the almighty Creator, Sustainer and Judge of all because of their sin.

Perhaps an illustration of one of my past counseling efforts might help show us the danger here. As a youth pastor who brought a group to a particular youth conference, I was asked to be a counselor at the end of the evening service as they were expecting many young people to respond to “the call of the gospel.” As is common at these types of meetings, they were correct that many young people came forward. Row upon row came to the front to rededicate their lives or “give their lives to Christ.” The young lady I was given to counsel had just been “saved” and wanted to know more about what it meant to be a Christian (this is what they were told at the front to ask us). I, however, went a bit against the framework and backed up and asked her why she thought that she needed a Savior. Her response – “because the preacher said that Jesus could fix her parents marriage.” She had heard a “therapeutic Jesus” set forth in the message and wanted follow Jesus for the good of her family. There was no mention of sin or her need to be delivered from the wrath of God. This is where a lawless gospel leads.

### c. Jesus Christ (Person/work)

Of course, the gospel message must proclaim Jesus Christ in both His person and His work. His person requires that we speak of both His deity and His humanity. His work requires that we set forth His perfect obedient sinless life on this earth in His humanity, obedience even to His death on the Cross. His work testifies of His sacrificial, substitutionary atonement on behalf of those who would call upon Him for salvation.

My dear friend Tom Ascol recently addressed the importance of Christ being the heart of the gospel message this way:

**The gospel is Jesus Christ—who He is; what He has done; why it matters. Our goal in preaching is constantly to set Him before our hearers in His person and work.**

ILL: Spurgeon admonished his fellow pastors, “Give the people Christ, and nothing but Christ. Sate them, even though some of them should say that you also nauseate them with the gospel” (*An All-Round Ministry*, 117).

#### **What does this mean? →**

Not merely to mention His Name every 10 minutes in our sermons but to get to know Him as He is revealed in Scripture, and then out of that knowledge to make Him known to our hearers. This requires proclaiming His deity and humanity; His majesty and His mercy; His eternality, meekness, holiness, patience, lordship, covenant headship, atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension and heavenly session, His return—everything that is revealed to us about Him. This requires showing how all of life is from Him, for Him and related to Him. Because He is the Way, the Truth and the Life, nothing is rightly appreciated until it is seen in relationship to Christ. [Mid-South Founders Conference—Memphis, TN, *Christ in the Epistles: Our Message*, October 8, 2004]

### d. Faith/repentance

While time does not allow for us to go into detail this morning, our gospel message must include a call to faith and repentance. We will look more fully at faith and repentance as we work our way through this letter. But as we mentioned earlier, good preaching demands a response. And the same can be said of our gospel message. We are to be as convincing as we can

possibly be in pressing for a response without being manipulative. Eternity is at stake! We are to present the gospel, plead for one to come to Christ, and trust that the Holy Spirit is powerful enough to make deaf ears to hear and blind eyes to see.

**3. Manner – Without cleverness**

*Hear the message rather than see the messenger*

How does one use “cleverness of speech” in the pulpit? By:

- a. Veiling the truth / don’t use certain words**
- b. Adorning the gospel / it is not powerful enough on its own**

Notice again Tom Ascol’s comment on this passage:

All the current philosophical parties used the “wisdom of words” to get their message out; no doubt Paul in some sense was tempted to follow suit. But he knew that to accommodate the cultural demands for clever, catchy rhetoric would have been to abdicate his responsibility as a herald of the cross—indeed, had he done so, “the cross of Christ would have been made of no effect.” [MSFC, *Christ in the Epistles: Our Message*]

**Conclusion/application:**

Why must preaching, expository gospel preaching, be central in the life and ministry of the local church?

- 1. Promotes unity – Preaching of the Word is the body’s rallying point.  
Agree/disagree in non-essentials**
- 2. Fosters humility / Pride is destroyed and one remains teachable**
- 3. Demands simplicity**
- 4. Ensures totality / whole counsel of God**
- 5. Proclaims salvation**