

1 CORINTHIANS

6) "Not with excellency of speech or of wisdom"

Read Chapter 2: 1-5

In our previous studies we have noted, more than once, that in the former part of the epistle (Chapters 1-6) Paul addresses two dangers which had arisen at Corinth.

The first danger lay with ***the cliques among them, chs.1-4***. "It hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren...that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ" (1: 11-12).

The second danger lay with ***the immorality among them, chs.5-6***. "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife" (5: 1). This is followed by a warning against involvement with the temple prostitutes (6: 13-20).

In dealing with the first of these, Paul highlights the sad spiritual results, "there is among you envying and strife, and divisions" (3: 3-4), and goes on to say "Therefore let no man glory in men..." (3: 21). Paul's object in Chapters 1-4 is to demonstrate that the believers at Corinth had no reason to "glory in men", and every reason to "glory in the Lord" (1: 31). Only then could they "all speak the same thing", and be "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1: 10). He deals with this in four ways:

1) He reminds them of the way in which they had been saved, 1: 18-31

The way which they had been saved, together with the type of people who are saved, gave no reason to glory in men. In this connection, we noted the following:

When referring to the ***way*** in which people are saved, Paul writes: "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? 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. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1: 20-25).

When referring to the **type** of people, generally speaking, who are saved, Paul observes: "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world, to confound the wise...that no flesh should glory in his presence. But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: that, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (1: 26-31).

We should notice that in these verses Paul discusses what the Corinthian believers were **not** by nature - so there was no reason for them to glory in themselves (vv.26-29), and what they **were** by grace - so there was every reason for them to glory in the Lord (vv.30-31).

2) He reminds them of the way in which he had preached, 2: 1-16

The way in which he had proclaimed the gospel at Corinth, and the way in which he taught them after they were saved, gave no reason to glory in men. The manner of Paul's preaching and the content of his preaching left no room for human glory, either on Paul's part or on the part of the Corinthians themselves.

3) He reminds them of the way in which the assembly had been established, 3: 1-11

The way in which the assembly had been planted at Corinth left no reason to glory in men. The men responsible for establishing the assembly were simply servants. They were directed by God. The assembly at Corinth was "God's husbandry" and "God's building" (v.9). How could they then say "I am of Paul...I am of Apollos?" (v.4).

4) He reminds them of the time when God's servants will be assessed, 4: 1-6

This will be at the judgment seat of Christ, and all assessment must be left until then. "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come" (v.5). Having said, "Let a man so account of us as of the ministers ('servants') of Christ" (v.1), Paul continues, "that ye may learn in us not to think of men above that which is written" (v.6). By 'glorying in men' ("I am of Paul...of Apollos...of Cephas..."), the believers at Corinth were proudly saying that they had the ability to assess servants of God, something only the Lord himself could rightly undertake.

Having noticed, in **Chapter 1**, how the believers at Corinth had been saved (human wisdom could never have visualised salvation through a Man on a cross), and invited them to take a good look at themselves (human wisdom would not have selected people like them), Paul now, in **Chapter 2**, goes further, and emphasises that the manner of his preaching and the content of his teaching left no reason for them to glory in him. In both cases, he did nothing and said nothing to foster their admiration. His ministry was devoid of worldly wisdom, but it was permeated by divine wisdom. His ministry was devoid of impressive oratory, but it was stamped by divine power. Whether preaching the Gospel or teaching the converts, Paul's ministry was in the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit (vv.4, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14).

The chapter clearly falls into two sections: **(1)** how Paul preached the gospel (vv.1-5); **(2)** how Paul taught the saints (vv.6-16).

In the first case, Paul says "For I determined not to know anything **among you**, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (v.2). These verses emphasise the wisdom Paul did **not** use: "I came **not** with excellency of speech or of wisdom" (v.1); "my speech and my preaching was **not** with enticing words of man's wisdom" (v.4); "that your faith should **not** stand in the wisdom of men" (v.5).

In the second case, he says "Howbeit we speak wisdom **among them** that are perfect" (v.6). These verses emphasise the wisdom that Paul **did** use: "Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect" (v.6); "but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery (v.7); "Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth" (v.13).

1) HOW PAUL PREACHED THE GOSPEL, vv. 1-5

We should notice five things here: **(a)** the method of Paul's preaching at Corinth (v.1); **(b)** the message Paul preached at Corinth (v.2); **(c)** the manner in which Paul preached at Corinth (v.3); **(d)** the might (or power) of Paul's preaching at Corinth (v.4); **(e)** the motive (or purpose) of Paul's preaching at Corinth (v.5). Paul refers in these verses to his declaration (v.1), his determination (v.2), and to the demonstration (v.4).

a) The method of Paul's preaching at Corinth, v.1

"And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God".

The word translated "excellency" (a noun, *huperoche*), is rendered "authority" in 1 Timothy 2: 2 ("all that are in *authority*"). It occurs as a verb in Philipians 3: 8 ("the *excellency* of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord"), and means, literally, "the act of overhanging...or the thing which overhangs, hence, superiority, pre-eminence" (W.E. Vine). The word "speech" (*logos*) refers to the **conveying** of the message, and the word "wisdom" to the **content** of the message.

We learn from this that Paul did not resort to impressive speech or impressive argument in his preaching. He made no deliberate appeal to human wisdom in this way. Here is a weighty piece from Ian Steele (*Assembly Testimony*, March/April 2011): "The late Jack Hunter said in his analysis of this passage, 'Let us learn the lesson that we can never make Christ or the gospel popular to men'. We must therefore be extremely cautious not to be governed by what unbelievers think, neither in our preaching nor assembly practice! There is a tendency that says, 'Give them what they want and they will listen to what we have to say'. Make it more attractive and appealing and talk to them in their own terms and they will understand! This is human logic and not Divine instruction". Ian Steele continues: "Let us be clear that they did not understand the preaching even of the Lord Jesus, as John chapter 8 would illustrate. The Lord asked the Jews, 'Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word' (v.43). This had nothing to do with the message or the words He used. It was because of a basic inability in them and indeed in all unbelievers, 'ye **cannot** hear'. In v.47 He further amplifies this fact, 'He that is of God heareth God's words; ye therefore hear them not because ye are not of God'. Our preaching then is not to be determined by the **understanding** of the unbeliever. Neither is it to be governed by the

acceptance of the unbeliever. Again in John chapter 8 it is evident that the preaching of the Lord Jesus was not acceptable to them for they took up stones to stone him (v.9)".

The words, "declaring (proclaiming) unto you the testimony of God" reminds us that in preaching the Gospel we are "bearing witness to given facts...Preaching the gospel is not delivering edifying discourses, beautifully put together. It is bearing witness to what God has done in Christ for man's salvation" (Leon Morris). We must never forget that the gospel is "the gospel of God" (Rom. 1: 1). It is equally "the gospel of Christ" (Rom. 1: 16). It is "the gospel of the glory of the blessed God" (1 Tim. 1: 11, RV), and "the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4: 4, RV).

Paul has already used the word *marturion* in saying, "even as the *testimony* of Christ was confirmed in you" (1: 6). It was "the witness sourced and characterised in God Himself. Note well these two principles - sourced from God, and characterised by God. It is from Him we receive our words, matter and message and what we say must bear witness to and be in character with His holy and divine attributes and Presence!" (Ian Steele).

In some manuscripts the word *musterion* is used instead of *marturion*, and this reading is adopted by the Revised Version: "proclaiming to you the **mystery** of God". W.E.Vine, who espouses this view, states that "it denotes the mystery of the gospel as embodied in and proclaiming and revealing Christ". He suggests that this is "agreeable with the teaching in vv.7-16, particularly v.7. Speaking generally, the word "mystery" refers to something outside natural apprehension and made known by divine revelation. Hence it is the antithesis of human wisdom. If this is the case here, then the 'mystery of God' may refer, bearing in mind the context, to the death of Christ - Christ crucified. See 1: 22-24. His death cannot be understood by human wisdom: its truth is divinely-revealed.

b) The message Paul preached at Corinth, v.2

"For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified". Paul did not proclaim Christ as a teacher and example, or as a perfect man, but "**crucified**".

That is, Paul deliberately refused to broaden his preaching in order to accommodate his audiences: "But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness..." (1: 23).

In saying "For I determined (resolved) not to know...", Paul makes clear that he had weighed the issues, and made his decision: he would not divert attention from "Jesus Christ and him crucified". He would not court popularity by making the Gospel attractive to men. "Jesus Christ and him crucified" is offensive to the **Jewish** mind (their Messiah crucified - away with the thought!) and illogical to the **Greek** mind (a Saviour on a cross? - not sensible!). Paul did not cater for the wishes or aspirations of his audience. It should be said that he "determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified", for the simple reason that there was no other way in which men and women could be saved!.

The lesson for us is clear: however unpopular, we must continue to preach God's word, and only God's word: nothing more and nothing less. In Paul's words elsewhere, "Preach the word; be instant ('constantly ready') in season, out of season..." (2 Tim. 4: 2). As far as unsaved people are concerned, there is hardly ever a 'convenient time' to proclaim the Gospel!

c) The manner in which Paul preached at Corinth, v.3

"And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling". Paul could well be referring here to discouragement *en route* to Corinth. "At Philippi he had had a promising beginning smashed by opposition from fanatical Jews. The same thing had happened at Thessalonica and Berea. In Athens he had little success" (Leon Morris). However, it seems more likely that he is referring to his experiences at Corinth itself. See Acts 18: 6-10, "And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed...Then spake the Lord to Paul in the night by a vision, Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee..." However, it is worth noting John Heading's suggestion that Paul "was in fear and trembling lest his inborn natural ability should tend to displace the spiritual power of God working through him". This finds support in the following verse: "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (v.4).

Human weakness does not spell disaster for the servant of God. We must listen to Paul again: "For this thing (the 'thorn in the flesh') I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for *my strength is made perfect in weakness*. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I

take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for *when I am weak, then am I strong*" (2 Cor. 12: 8-10). Our weakness serves only to make us rely more completely on the Lord. Service for God ought always to be undertaken with a deep sense of our own limitations and frailty. As Wm.McDonald observes, Paul himself "was an example of how God uses weak things to confound the mighty".

Perhaps Paul is emphasising this fact for the benefit of the faction at Corinth which said, "I am of Paul". They had no reason to glory in him. He was not a kind of superman, but subject to the weaknesses and fears of men generally. He did not visit Corinth brimming over with self-confidence. There were, however, at least some alleged believers in Corinth who were not at all impressed with him: "For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible" (2 Cor. 10: 10). Perhaps they said that because he did not come "with excellency of speech or wisdom" (1 Cor. 2: 1), or "with enticing words of man's wisdom" (1 Cor. 2: 4).

d) The power of Paul's preaching at Corinth, v.4

"And my speech (*logos*, word) and my preaching (*kerugma*) was not with enticing words (*peithos*, 'persuasive words') of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power (*dunamis*)". The words "speech" (or 'word') and "preaching" refer respectively to the **conveying** of the message, and the **content** of the message. The word "preaching" (*kerugma*) denotes "a proclamation by a herald...a message, a preaching (the substance of what is preached as distinct from the act of preaching)" (W.E.Vine).

Paul's reference to 'persuasive words' emphasises that he did not rely on his own skill in argument or persuasion, or, in the words of W.E.Vine, on "the attempted methods of proof by rhetorical arts and philosophical arguments". There are two types of persuasion: one is human, as here: the other is divine as, for example, in Acts 13: 43 (Paul and Barnabas "persuaded (*peitho*) them to continue in the grace of God"; Acts 19: 8 (Paul "spoke boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading (*peitho*) the things concerning the kingdom of God"). "Paul is certainly not rejecting preaching, even persuasive preaching (his sermon before Agrippa in Acts ch. 26 is a remarkable example of persuasive preaching): rather he is rejecting any reliance on the preacher's ability to persuade with human wisdom" (supplied by Justin Waldron).

The word "demonstration" means 'a showing forth', in this case 'a showing forth of the Spirit and of power'. Paul's preaching was "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power", not in the sense that Paul was a powerful preacher, but in the *results* of his preaching. While it could certainly be said that Paul preached out of conviction wrought within him by the Spirit of God, and that the power of his preaching was that of the Holy Spirit, the particular emphasis here is on the *proof* that his ministry was in the power of the Holy Spirit. For this we have only to read Luke's record of Paul's visit to Corinth: "Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his house; and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized" (Acts 18: 8). W.E.Vine points out that the word rendered "demonstration" (*apodeixis*), only found here in the New Testament, "literally signifies 'a showing forth': it has the force of a proof". Leon Morris makes the point that "it is possible for arguments to be logically irrefutable, yet totally unconvincing", but "Paul's preaching carried conviction because of the power of the Holy Spirit". It has been nicely said that "Paul knew that it is the preacher's job to preach, and that it is the Holy Spirit's job to demonstrate" (supplied by Justin Waldron).

In this connection we should notice that the article ("the") is absent in the Greek text, which reads, literally, 'in demonstration of Spirit and of power', leading W.E.Vine to point out that this stresses "the character of the power (i.e., the Holy Spirit's power in operation)".

All this reminds us that "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Pet. 4: 11). The Gospel preacher will not attempt to persuade his hearers by human reasoning, but wait upon God to apply the word by the Spirit to heart and conscience. Hence we read, "For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost" (1 Thess. 1: 5).

e) The purpose of Paul's preaching at Corinth, v.5

"That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God". As J.Hunter so rightly points out, "If the preaching had been marked by clever arguments and secular wisdom and powerful eloquence, then the 'converts' would have been at the mercy of a more clever man with a superior show of logic and oratory, and thus would have had no settled peace. But Paul, in his simple, direct approach in the power of the Spirit, had grounded their faith in the

power of God which guaranteed permanence, and rendered them independent of human wisdom".

The word "in" ("**in** the power of God") indicates where faith has its roots. While the "wisdom of men" can be overthrown by a better argument, the "power of God", that is, what has been wrought by the Spirit of God, cannot be overthrown.

In conclusion, we should notice the involvement of the Godhead in Paul's gospel preaching:

- The source of Paul's preaching - "the testimony of **God**" (v.1).
- The content of Paul's preaching - "**Jesus Christ**" (v.2).
- The power of Paul's preaching - "**the Spirit**" (v.4)

Having noticed the way in which Paul preached the gospel (vv.1-5), we must next consider how Paul taught the saints (vv.6-16).

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