

Protagonist Corner

Paul's Weak Preaching

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A reasonable case can be made that the apostle Paul was a weak preacher. Some of his cultured contemporaries within the church gave his speaking skills low marks. They conceded that he wrote weighty and strong letters, but claimed that “his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible” (2 Corinthians 10:10). Paul did not disagree with this assessment and admitted that he was “untrained in speech” (2 Corinthians 11:6).

In a predominantly oral culture that insisted upon a strong presence and oratory excellence for speakers who wished to be taken seriously, Paul was apparently at a disadvantage. We do not know what his physical or verbal defects may have been. Perhaps he was unattractive or had a physical deformity or disability. Perhaps he spoke with a lisp and his voice cracked. Perhaps he lacked quotations from the classical poets and mangled rhetorical rules. Perhaps, as in his letters, he had a tendency to speak in convoluted sentences and make contradictory statements. Even a source sympathetic to Paul allowed that he sometimes didn't know when to stop talking. On one occasion his preaching put a young man to sleep—who subsequently fell out a third story window (Acts 20:7-9). Whatever Paul's particular preaching limitations were, they appear to have been an obstacle in his ministry.

Paul turned the tables on his critics by reframing his own preaching limitations as an advantage: “[Christ sent me] to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (1 Corinthians 1:17). Ironically, if he were to speak with eloquent wisdom, he would be undermining the power of the good news. Paul claims that eloquent wisdom is antithetical to the message God has given him. To use eloquent wisdom would be to use a medium that conflicts with the message because the message itself is contrary to human wisdom and skill.

What is that message? That the Messiah, God's savior of humanity, was stripped and crucified by humanity—but it is through this weakness that God's power saves us. This scandalous and absurd message cannot be conveyed through conventional wisdom, nor can this good news of God working through weakness be proclaimed with tools of strength. Instead, Paul's own weak presence and contemptible speech embodies the very news he is preaching. Whatever his critics found offensive or laughable about his speaking abilities is what made Paul uniquely suited for his message: an absurd message from an absurd speaker; a message of apparent weakness delivered by a weak man. He is the proper medium for this message.

As a pastor who takes a keen interest in skillful preaching, I find Paul's dissing of eloquent wisdom distressing. I cringe when he rails against the wise, the scribes, and the debaters of his age, claiming that God has made them into fools (1 Corinthians 1:20), since I am among that educated elite. But I also find his perspective clarifying, because we who preach Christ may be in danger of losing our way as we pursue effective preaching.

For instance, have we, for the sake of our own egos, dressed ourselves in symbols of power and education before mounting the pulpit? Have we, for the sake of popular entertainment, relied on skits, movie snippets, and creative PowerPoint presentations? Have we, for the sake of comfort and success, made the Christian message reasonable and respectable? If so, we have emptied the cross of its power. The news that God overcomes the powers and principalities of the world through an ultimate act of humiliation and sacrifice runs counter to our slick sermons. Today's eloquent wisdom of being cute, funny, conventional, and sentimental turns the ugly cross of Christ into a pretty necklace. We do not need to be handsome, well-dressed, or smart. We need to embody in our lives and in our message the audaciousness that God's power is made perfect in weakness.

I wonder what Paul would think of the homiletics courses taught in our seminaries today. Students are often graded by the quality of their exegesis, illustrations, voice projection, and eye contact (and whether they came to class on time and helped out the professor). Awards are sometimes given to the students who exhibit the most verbal panache. I think Paul would say we missed the point. He would demand just two things from preaching students: be in Christ, and preach Christ crucified. Whether one has training in rhetoric is irrelevant if the preacher isn't living in the Spirit and conforming to our self-emptying Lord. Indeed, skillful rhetoric and cutting-edge technology undermine the authentic good news if we are confusing ear-tickling and eye-candy with God's upside-down way of overcoming human rebellion.

Cannot eloquence and skillful rhetoric serve the message of God's powerful weakness and wise foolishness revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ? Yes. When Paul rejects eloquent wisdom, he is exaggerating a bit for (paradoxically) rhetorical effect. Paul may claim he is "untrained in speech," but the evidence of his letters proves that he was capable of putting words together in ways that will ring throughout history. How many preachers can equal the rhetorical power of Philippians 4, Romans 8, or 1 Corinthians 13? No one has ever claimed that the soaring eloquence of these passages emptied the cross of its power. Paul is not against being eloquent; he is against prideful presentations of human skill and wisdom that run counter to God's foolishness revealed in the cross. The crucified Christ is served by oral eloquence if it articulates the spiritual eloquence of God's humility and subversive ways.

So the preacher cannot use Paul as an excuse for being ill-prepared, sloppy, or lazy. We must choose our words, images, and rhetorical structures carefully. We want to maximize the listener's involvement in Christ's good news, not our world's vision of power and success. Even so, the preacher's honesty counts more than eloquence, and humility counts more than knowledge. Our very imperfections may be the cracks through which the good news is made most real.

Barnabas, Paul's missionary partner, was once mistaken for Zeus. Almost certainly he was more powerful and distinguished looking than Paul, yet Paul did all of the talking (Acts 14:12). This may have been because Paul's testimony of how he went from being a church-destroyer to a church-builder was more dramatic. Or it may have been because Paul could speak with the authority of having received astonishing visions. Or it may have been simply because Paul liked preaching more than Barnabas did. Whatever the reason Paul did most of the talking, it is probably fortunate that he did, because through his weak presence and contemptible speech, something profound about the good news was conveyed. God chose what is weak

and lowly to shame the strong and proud. If, in our own preaching of the crucified Christ, we are accused of being weak preachers, we may have received our most valuable encouragement.