

The Tongue-Tied Evangelist

In his first pastoral letter to the church he established in Corinth, Paul moves to tackle divisions that have occurred over who baptised whom, and says this:

For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel – not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. (1 Corinthians 1:17)

Devoid of wisdom and eloquence, does this sound like Paul? However, we must believe the self-assessment of his own oratory for he makes this statement:

When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power. (ibid 2:1-5)

Paul the apostle to the Gentiles, arguably the greatest evangelist of the early church, was diminished by God to proclaim in weakness; moreover, the man who could dismiss as 'light and momentary troubles' (2 Corinthians 4:17) eight severe beatings, a stoning and being thrice ship-wrecked, shook with fear and trembling. Such is God's will on the matter; foremost He will be glorified; the comfort of the evangelist is subordinate.

Also, we should note, the message was simple, 'Jesus Christ and him crucified'. Paul did not bring the complex doctrine - and there is good reason for this, as Peter comments:

... our dear brother Paul (also) wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Later in the epistle to Corinth (15:3-8) Paul outlines exactly what that simple message contained. The Gospel of Christ is the *essential* Truth, because no explanation can make it palatable for the Gospel humbles a man and sets God over him.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (ibid 1:18)

From the earthly and temporal perspective then, the cross is an offense as Billy Graham once remarked; hence, for every rational man or woman only God can bring about the repentance that reverses this view. There is no humanly power, whether that of oratory, argument or persuasion, let alone intimidation or threat that can bring people to faith. It is God that reveals the truth of the Gospel through his Spirit; therefore, the Gospel is not only sufficient, it is the only message the evangelist should bring lest arguments or confusion ensues.

To feel weak, tongue-tied, awkward, embarrassed and foolish when speaking of God is common experience of His prophets. Should we refrain, then? Or are we to provoke our God to 'burn with anger' by arguing with him like Moses did? I suspect the LORD's answer will be much the same:

Moses said to the Lord, 'Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.'

The Lord said to him, 'Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.' (Exodus 4:10-12)

The Great Commission commands that all proclaim the Gospel – and it is a commandment precisely because it is not easy; but if we speak of 'Christ and him crucified' we may trust God that the words He places in our mouths and not the skill of our delivery will be sufficient to achieve His purpose – He wills it so. It should also be noted that the way we measure success is not God's way, so with faltering tongues we may 'gain' few, if any hearts for Christ and yet be faithful. Such a salesman would not last long in earthly employment but may enjoy eternal reward.

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