

February 9, 2014
Epiphany

"We Preach Christ Crucified"

1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

This past week the comedian Jay Leno held his last Tonight Show for NBC. It is amazing how talented and gifted some people are at entertaining others and making them laugh. At the time of the Apostle Paul important Greek cities such as Athens and Corinth were always on the look out for new forms of entertainment whether it be in the Greek plays or the philosophers who held forth and honed their speaking skills in the marketplace. The Book of Acts tells us, "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas."

The Apostle Paul stood up in the Greek marketplaces and spoke to the people about Jesus. He spoke to people who were ready to laugh down a speaker if they did not perform to their standards for entertainment. Did Paul alter his message about Jesus to appeal to the crowds? No, he says, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." He was not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ even if it meant being laughed off the stage. In Romans 1 Paul wrote, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."

As we gather for worship we do not come to entertain each other or put on a good show. You came into a building that was designed to draw your attention to a cross. We are here to draw each other closer to Jesus and his death and his resurrection. We want the pastor of this congregation to follow in the footsteps of Paul and preach Christ crucified.

Christ crucified is not what people wanted to hear

It is totally natural for people to prefer entertainment over hearing about Jesus giving his life for us at the cross. Paul knew that. That is why he says to the Christians in Corinth, "When I came to you brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God." He also says that his message and his preaching were not with the wise and persuasive words that the Greeks loved to hear. Paul knew what it was like to be laughed off the stage by people who preferred to be entertained rather than hear about Jesus. The philosophers in Athens said of him, "What is this babbling trying to say?" They laughed and sneered when he spoke of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Modern marketing experts would tell Paul to change his message, especially after he was

laughed off the stage in Athens. That's something Paul would not do when he came to Corinth. He says, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Paul was willing to adjust his style to build bridges to people and get their attention, but he was not willing to change the substance of his message. Today we hear advertisers say, "It is the medium not the message that counts." We contend the medium or method is important but the message is what is most important.

When Paul preached to the people on the streets of Athens, he connected with the people. He started his message by talking about how religious the people were and how many idols were found throughout their streets. There was even an idol to the UNKNOWN GOD. Paul related his message to where the people were in their spiritual life as he said, "Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you." He went on to talk about the true God who created the world and everyone in it. He warned of the judgment to come and spoke boldly and fearlessly about Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Please understand, dear friends, there is nothing wrong with enjoying entertainment. It is OK to laugh at jokes as long as they are clean jokes and jokes that do not hurt other people. It is OK for a tear to come to your eyes during the Super Bowl commercials when the nose of large Clydesdale horse touches the nose of a little puppy. In most of our marriages we need to work harder at making life fun for each other, yes, entertaining each other if you will. Entertainment and intellectual stimulation is limited in what it can do for us. It may provide us with more laughter here on this earth, but it can never draw us closer to our God. That is possible only through the message of the cross.

I would like to share with you a story about entertainment being used as a substitute for the true worship of God. Moses had gone up to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from the Lord. After Moses was gone for a long time, the people gathered around his brother Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Aaron instructed the people to bring some of the gold the Egyptians had given to them. He melted down the gold and made a golden calf. The next day they gathered around the golden calf, sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, and then they ate and drank and got up to indulge in revelry. Oh, how they danced. Oh, how they sang. Oh, how they entertained themselves before the golden calf. I saw a church bulletin once and the sermon was on this account about the golden calf. The theme for sermon was "The Golden Calf, an Attempt to Beef Up Religion."

There is dancing that is pleasing to the Lord and there is dancing that is not pleasing to the Lord. There is preaching that is pleasing to the Lord and there is preaching that is not pleasing to the Lord. Paul could have had the Greeks in Athens and Corinth eating out of his hands by entertaining them with stories about how wonderful and clever and smart they were. Instead he was resolved to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

In the 1950's a young pastor came to Garden Grove, California to start a new church. He went from door to door in the new suburbs of Orange County asking people what kind of church they wanted. From what the people wanted he developed a whole new way of preaching and teaching that avoided talking about Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. Instead he emphasized what he called "Possibility Thinking." He wrote popular books with

titles such as "When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Get Going." Thousands filled the famous Crystal Cathedral and millions heard his messages on "The Hour of Power." The church was not built on preaching Christ crucified. In fact, he sent me and other pastors in California a book with the title, "Self Esteem, the New Reformation." He had the audacity to ask California pastors to give up preaching about sin and the cross in favor of messages that entertain people, make them feel good and build up their self esteem. Last year the church went bankrupt. The Crystal Cathedral is now home to the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Orange County.

I am hard wired by Adam's fall into sin to think that there must be something more that needs to be added to Jesus' death on the cross to save me from my sin. So are you. "The heart is deceitful about all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Peter says in his second letter, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his glory." Imagine how Peter and Paul and the others who saw Jesus could have embellished their eye witness accounts of Jesus death and resurrection with such glitz and glamour that even skeptic Greeks would say, "Wow did you hear this guy named Paul! He has quite a story to tell and he speaks with such feelings and emotions." I am sure that Paul spoke with great feelings and emotions but never at the expense of taking the eyes of people off of Jesus. People don't want to hear this message of the cross, but that is the only way for them to be saved.

Christ crucified is what people need to hear

Paul may not have been the most dynamic preacher but he was a dynamite preacher. When he preached about Jesus Christ he unleashed the power of the Holy Spirit that changed the lives of people. "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but the demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." The Greek word used here for power is the word "dunamis" from which we get our word dynamite. Paul was a dynamite preacher. He preached Christ crucified and that unleashed the power of the Holy Spirit to change the lives of people and bring them to believe.

Jesus was also dynamite preacher. He preached with power and conviction as he turned the hearts of people away from trusting in themselves for their salvation and turned their attention toward himself. Jesus was not afraid to tell people about their need for believing in him. He told Nicodemus, "You must be born again to enter into the kingdom of God." He then told him these powerful words that pointed to his death on the cross. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." Then Jesus spoke these simple and powerful words about God's love that have changed the lives of people all over the world. "God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have every lasting life."

I wonder what it would have been like to hear Paul preach and teach about Jesus. It says at the end of the book of Acts that he spent his last years as a prisoner in Rome, "Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." If you were listening to Paul you would immediately sense a deep need for salvation such as you experience when you read the first three chapters of Romans with the familiar words, "All of sinned and come short of the glory of God." You are deeply moved

when he takes you back into the Old Testament as he often did and directs your eyes to see on the cross in such words as Isaiah 53, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." No story of love is more moving than the vivid descriptions of Jesus suffering on the cross for the sins I have committed. His eyes sparkle, his face lightens up as he speaks about Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the hope of our resurrection. Week after week we come together to follow in the footsteps of Paul and hear about Christ crucified. Amen.