

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
February 5, 2017
1 Corinthians 2:1-5
The Identifying Marks of True Christian Preaching
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Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

Early in my ministry I set up my study/office differently than I do now. Then, I put my college and seminary diplomas on the wall behind me when sitting at my desk. Anyone sitting or standing in front of the desk looking at me would see those “sheepskins.”

One day, one of my members came in and sat down for a talk. One of the first things she said was, “Pastor, you should take down those diplomas and put a cross there instead. That would be better for people to see.” This was wise advice I have tried to follow since that day.

Her point, of course, was that it is Jesus Christ and him crucified that is the unwavering and unmovable pedestal for faith. She and others did not come for my eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed the testimony of God. We may safely conclude from the apostle’s words that Paul would not have made the same mistake I made.

Paul mentions in these verses **The Identifying Marks of True Christian Preaching**. It is centered on Christ crucified not the promotion of self. It is in demonstration of the Spirit’s power, not the wisdom of man.

Paul addresses two matters here. The first is about the person, the second is about the power. It is about the message and about sharing that message. The message of true Christian preaching is not a message about the person speaking. It is the message of Jesus Christ who died on the cross as a curse for us so that we might be redeemed from that curse and its eternal consequences of death and hell. True Christian preaching does not look inwardly.

Looking inwardly means sharing one’s eloquence and human wisdom. There is nothing wrong in having a good education. We thank God for the professors who teach our public ministers to preach and teach and counsel. The apostle Paul was a brilliant and well-spoken man. He was not the message, however. He was not out to impress the Corinthians with his gifts. When Paul came to them, he shared with them the testimony about God. He did not, so to speak, hold up his diplomas to impress them.

Paul had “resolved” to approach his ministry that way. The word emphasizes a deliberate decision of the will. Paul would not point people to his gifts. He would point them only to their Savior; the Savior not only of the Jews but also them, Gentiles. The only time he did point to his personal gifts and abilities, to the Philippians, he said that he considered them all a loss for the sake of knowing of Christ.

Here is how you recognize true Christian preaching by a true Christian preacher. The message is not about self and one’s great gifts. It is not about preaching human ideas and opinion contrary to God’s Word. It is not about having an impressive fancy prefix in the front of your name or lots of letters behind it. Both Martin Luther and CFW Walther said that it is the man who can properly divide law and gospel who is a theologian.

The message is the testimony about God and that Christ has redeemed the world, and that the Holy Spirit called us to faith. This is your confidence as you witness to others to share that testimony about God, and preach Christ crucified. It is not about you and your excellence of speech. It is not about your worldly cleverness to turn a phrase or win a debate. It is not about education or having to say exactly the right thing.

Resolve to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified in your testimony. People will see that as an identifying mark of true Christian preaching. A simple example of that in a broader sense is when someone asks you about the WELS, tell them that can wait and point them instead to Jesus and his cross including his victory we know as our forgiveness of sins, and our resurrection from the dead. That message is the demonstration of the Spirit's power, not the wisdom of man.

Nothing seems to natural man more foolish than God dying on the cross under the sinner's curse and punishment. Yet Jesus Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" as the apostle wrote earlier to the Corinthians in this letter. We spoke last week that the blessedness we have is in demonstration of the Spirit's power. It is the demonstration of the Spirit's power that we have faith in the first place. Human wisdom has no power to convert. Our faith does not rest on some unstable fault line like Los Angeles rests on the San Andreas Fault.

I am so thankful I do not have to use the things I used to get my diplomas as tools to bring people to faith and keep you in saving faith in Christ. True Christian preachers rely instead on the Spirit's power working in the testimony about God and preaching Christ crucified. Be assured God has graciously blessed our and other churches with such faithful preachers, and people like you who rely on the Spirit to build the solid rock pedestal on which you rest your trust in Christ for forgiveness, and for his temporal and eternal care for your bodies and souls.

The identifying mark of true Christian preaching is a demonstration of the Spirit's power. With that as the tool in hand, you and I may go to others "in weakness and with great fear and trembling." That means like Paul we go about our work with a deep sense of our insufficiency and the importance of our work.

This anxiety and appreciation for the message enables us rightly to shy away from our own self-importance and knowledge. It enable us to stay away from sharing human wisdom and earthly argument as our wisdom and power. Instead, we rely only on Christ crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God. Such healthy fear enables us to put our diplomas off the side and place Christ's cross in first and full view. Amen. <SDG>