

Praying Christians Needed
February 8, 2015

This past week I was talking to the pastor of another church. They are doing well overall, but he is feeling that they have reached a plateau. He is considering hiring a church consultant to come in, look them over, and make some recommendations.

This morning WE'RE going to get some feedback from a church expert. It couldn't hurt. I mean we want to faithfully and fully serve Jesus Christ together. We are committed to worshipping God and leading others to know Him. We want to serve others, primarily by teaching and preaching the Bible, showing its applications to our daily lives. It would be helpful if someone like..., say, Paul, the missionary of the Bible, would write a letter to our church.

Much of the New Testament portion of the Bible is made up of letters that Paul wrote to a few of the churches he started. As Paul traveled to new areas, he continued to stay in touch with the churches he had started in other cities. Paul wrote letters to some of these churches, maybe to all of them. But we only have some of those letters.

Wouldn't it be great if Paul had written a letter to our church, to Emmanuel Baptist Church? Well, he kind of did. Look with me this morning at the letter called First Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 1:1-2 (NIV) Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...

"All those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" includes us. Paul had us in mind when he wrote this letter. No, he did not know what our name would be or what city our church would be in. He did not know our precise condition or circumstances. He did not know we would have our own building and land. He did not know that we would have an LED sign. He did not know that we have used dozens of different outreach events and programs over the years. He did not know the culture in which we live.

But he did know people. He did know churches. He knew the kinds of sins that crop up in churches, and what caused those sins. So he knew that what he was writing to the church at Corinth would apply to other churches as well.

For example, many of the problems in the church at Corinth came about because of pride, sinful pride. The people of that church had not yet gelled together as a fellowship of believers. Instead of thinking of themselves as a church family, accountable to each other, accountable for each other, they were in competition with each other. They kept trying to one-up each other. The attitudes were not of Christian love but conceit. We can read between the lines and practically hear them saying to each other things like, "I'm more spiritual than you are. I'm more of a Christian than you are. I follow the best leader and you follow a lesser leader."

One of the ways this showed up in this church concerned baptism. Evidently some people were bragging about the person who baptized them. They were saying things like, "I'm better than you because Paul baptized me." Paul addresses this problem.

1 Corinthians 1:13-16 (NIV) Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?

I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name.

(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.)

The implied answer to the first three questions is no.

He is hoping they hear this letter and are embarrassed. He reminds them that Paul did not pay for their sins. Being baptized by Paul did nothing for their relationship with God. It did not up their status in the church. Jesus is the focus of salvation. Jesus alone died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. There is nothing to add to that. They were baptized in the name of Jesus. They follow Jesus. There is no cause to say we are better than any other Christian because of who baptized us.

Then he reminds them of where the power of salvation lies. The power of salvation does not lie in your baptism. The power of salvation does not lie in who baptized you. The power of salvation does not lie in what church you were baptized in. The power of salvation does not lie in who told you about salvation. Here is what he reminded them...

1 Corinthians 1:17 (NIV) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel (good news)--not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Did you know that the good news was powerful? Did you know that the cross of Christ had power? It has the power to save those who believe in Jesus. But to others it has no power. In fact, to unbelievers, the good news of Jesus is nonsense. It is ridiculous. He says as much in the next sentence.

1 Corinthians 1:18 (NIV) 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.

How does a message that sounds ridiculous become powerful? The world hears the good news and thinks it ridiculous news. They say, "Let me get this straight. No one on the planet is good enough to go to heaven? Everyone deserves hell? I could see Hitler deserving hell. But me? I'm not that bad. God became a man and died on a cross for us? That is ludicrous."

So, if the message of the cross appears foolish, how did these Christians become convinced of its truth?

Maybe you are thinking it was because of the preacher of the message of the cross. Maybe you are thinking that Paul must have been a charismatic public speaker, one who commanded attention with his looks, his voice, and his passion, if not the message itself. Listen to what he writes a bit further on in this letter.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 (NIV) When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior 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 and fear, and with much 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 men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Paul was no one's model for a preacher. If we were to draw up qualifications for an effective speaker, we'd probably start with looks. It would need to be someone with hair. We'd want someone with a good baritone voice. We'd want someone who is taller than average. I got one out of three. We might also mention that the person be of good character, sincere, and well-dressed.

We might think Paul must have been a dynamic preacher. But the evidence is otherwise. In one of his other letters to this church he hears that some of them have been saying the following.

2 Corinthians 10:10 (NIV) ..."His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing."

Paul did not look or sound the part of a great public speaker. And yet, many in this city became Christians through the preaching of Paul. How did that happen? If he wasn't a dynamic, charismatic type of person or preacher, and his message sounded like foolishness to most people, how did ANYONE in this town become followers of Jesus Christ?

We might ask the same question today. There are several pastors I like to watch preach on the internet. I like two in particular, though they have very different preaching styles from each other, and from me. And yet, both of them were used of God to build great churches. By a great church, I mean not just a large church, but both built churches that have greatly influenced many other people and churches in America.

But these are the exceptions, not the rule. There are plenty of other pastors I sample online who are not great preachers. The reason I go looking for these preachers is that I hear others speak of them. They pastor churches that are growing significantly in numbers. Yet, most of these guys are not great preachers. They may be good administrators or good at leadership, but when it comes to preaching, they are just average. Like Paul, people are getting saved through their preaching. This adds to our question.

If the message of the cross appears foolish, and the preacher wasn't much good at preaching, how did these Christians become convinced of its truth?

The answer Paul gives in his letter.

1 Corinthians 2:4-10 (NIV) 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 men's wisdom, but on God's power.

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.

None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"-- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

The answer to the question is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God empowers the preaching of the good news. And once you are saved, the Holy Spirit empowers the teaching and preaching of the Bible for the maturing of Christians. He goes on to write of this too in the rest of chapter two.

1 Corinthians 2:13 (NIV) This (spiritual truth) is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

Now, **What does all of this mean for our church?**

We have teachers and preachers serving in our church. They have training. They have experience. They have a heart for the work. But the power for communicating spiritual truth comes from the Holy Spirit.

The teachers and preachers of our church do not have enough training, enough experience, enough eloquence, enough wisdom to do the job on our own. We need the power of the Holy Spirit. We need the Holy Spirit to do HIS work through our teaching and preaching. We are simply tools in His hands.

We want to be effective tools. But the task is every week, every Sunday. It requires reading, praying, planning, and preparing. So we get tempted to take it lightly, to do it routinely. We are tempted to do it half-heartedly. We are tempted to just present something because we are responsible for doing so. So we need your prayers.

And when we stop to think about what we are doing, we are reminded of what a heavy responsibility this is, not because of the work, but because of its importance. Like Paul we teach and preach "in weakness, fear, and with much trembling." It is an awesomely scary prospect of teaching or preaching God's truth.

If our church is to have an effective teaching and preaching ministry... **You, all the members of the church, must pray for the teachers and preachers in our church, but most of all for the Holy Spirit to empower the message.**

If you want more out of your Bible study group this year, then pray for your teachers. If, as parents, you want the teachers here to help you in your work of teaching the faith to your kids, then pray for their teachers. If you want the preaching ministry of our church to be more effective, then pray for the preachers. The power to change lives for the kingdom of God is God's power. He chooses to work through our feeble efforts. Let us be praying that our feeble efforts, while not powerful in themselves, will be EMpowered by the Holy Spirit to the glory of God.