

The Crucified Gospel

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 December 2, 2012



If you want people to follow you, believe you, rise up with you – this is the world's tried and true method.

Be a man of power, persuasion and passion.

A man who has a vision that he can convey to the very souls of others.

That is a man who can turn the minds of others and change the world.

But, here brethren, is the great danger of this method of changing the world. It is overly dependent on the man and his personal charisma – and does not necessarily rest on the truth and validity of his message.

Hitler inspired a nation – but not through truth.

This week I did a Google search regarding who most people thought were the ten most influential people of the 20th century.

For what it is worth here is *Time Magazine's* top ten influential people of the 20th century:

1. Albert Einstein
2. Mahatma Gandhi
3. Franklin D. Roosevelt
4. Winston Churchill
5. Adolf Hitler
6. The Wright Brothers
7. Mao Tse-tung
8. Henry Ford
9. John Fitzgerald Kennedy
10. Nelson Mandela

1. Albert Einstein
2. Mahatma Gandhi
3. Franklin D. Roosevelt

4. Winston Churchill
5. Adolf Hitler
6. The Wright Brothers
7. Mao Tse-tung
8. Henry Ford
9. John Fitzgerald Kennedy
10. Nelson Mandela

The list was controversial. Every man and his dog responded in reply with their own top ten.

The vast majority did not like *Time's* list. Most said the Wright Brothers and Kennedy were a joke to be in the top ten and were only there because they were American.

Many thought Gandhi, Roosevelt, Ford and Mandela – while having claims – were stretches.

Most argued Stalin should have been there.

Other names thrown up a lot were:

Lenin, Teddy Roosevelt, Bill Gates, Gorbachev.

I went through the lists.

Hitler, Churchill and Einstein – seemed to make just about every list.

Mao Tse-tung and Stalin made most lists.

If that is the top five – you have three mass murderers, two possibly three of the greatest orators in history and probably the greatest mind of the 20th century.

Time also published their list of the top 100 most influential people of the century.

I went through the list. Power, money, oratory, sheer brilliance, talent. These were men and women who moved people through their influence, charisma and authority.

Some were able to convince men and women to believe in absurdities.

Hitler and his Third Reich, Aryan Supremacy, Holocaust.

And the pattern held true for lesser men. While not among the top 100 men like L. Ron Hubbard turned science fiction into a religion.

Men like Jim Jones convinced men and women to drink poison.

Oratory, power, pageantry, wealth – they can convince men and women of almost anything.

But, here is what I want you to notice.

When you look at these lists of great men and women – the men and women are the ones who are great – **not** what they were pointing others to. People will follow the man almost regardless of the message.

That will never do when we speak of God Almighty. He will not share His glory with another. He alone is great.

We saw in chapter 1 of 1 Corinthians that this has profound implications for the gospel.

God chose to save men through a method that the wise and powerful of the world call foolish, absurd, weak, nonsense – so that the entire glory for this work of salvation goes to God alone. Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

We looked at how foolish the cross is to the world.

The world unites around emblems of power – lions, eagles, swastikas, hammers, stars.

The world unites around men of power – Alexander, Caesar, Khan, Napoleon, Hitler.

But God specifically chooses to work through what the world considers weakness, powerlessness and foolishness.

We saw this in terms of:

Salvation – 1 Corinthians 1:18:

The cross is folly to those who are perishing but to us who are being *saved* it is the power of God.

God did not choose to come to this world as a King in power, wealth and authority. The One who created everything, humbled Himself to come through the womb of a poor, Palestinian, unwed maid. He grew up in obscurity far from the halls of power. He ministered – known in Palestine – unknown in Rome. He refused to display His power on command. He spoke in parables that seemed foolish to the lost.

His power was only shown in full by death on a cross of cursing – and even then most missed the implications of the greatest display of power in history.

Gospel – 1 Corinthians 1:18:

We *preach* Christ crucified.

A crucified Messiah *must* come with a crucified gospel. We do not call men to power but to suffering. We do not promise riches but persecution. We do not promise this world but the world to come. Our gospel offers salvation from sin – but it comes through Christ and His cross.

Disciples – 1 Corinthians 1:26–29:

For consider your calling, *brothers*: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Christ chose not the mighty of the world. He chose fishermen, lepers, prostitutes and tax gatherers. He called children and Gentiles. He spurned the disingenuous outreach of kings and those in power.

And yet, He used these outcasts to turn the world upside down. He still uses nobodies – like you and me – to change this world.

Yet many still ask – why do we need a crucified gospel?

Compare these three approaches to evangelism.

1. Come to King Jesus. Become a child of the King and He will give you riches and power. He will give you heaven. Just believe.

Many will respond – not out of love for God – but out of love for what they think God can do for them.

2. You should come to Jesus. Millions of others have – I have. It just makes sense. Creation, history, sin, heaven, right and wrong, souls – nothing else makes sense of these truths. I can explain every one of these.

Many will respond – because it seems logical – until some other logic persuades them.

3. Take up your cross and follow Jesus. The world will hate you. A sword may come in your family. You may die young. But, your sins though they are many – will be washed clean.

Few will respond. But those that do, do so by the power of God and not by any human wisdom.

Listen for a moment to these words of Jesus. Matthew 13:18–23:

“Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this

is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

One of the reasons for *false conversions* is a *false gospel*.

If you tell men – come to Jesus and you will be healthy and wealthy – what happens when you lose your job and develop a chronic disease? – they will say – this gospel is not true.

If you tell men – I can convince you of Jesus. Creation. Logic. History. Science. Philosophy – what happens when they meet someone smarter who has a more plausible explanation? – they will say – this gospel is not true. Don't get me wrong – we have to give a reason for the hope that is in us – but this is secondary and supportive – not foundational.

If you tell men – trust me. If they believe based on your passion and zeal and persuasiveness – what happens when your sin shows? – they will say – this gospel is not true.

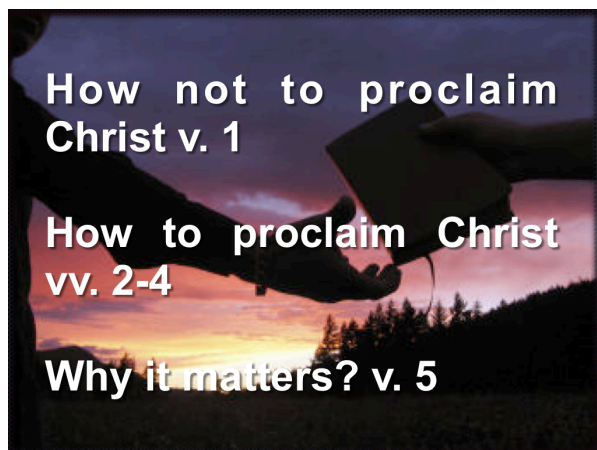
There is only one foundation on which to build a true conversion – **a crucified gospel**.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Paul outlined what that crucified gospel is.

Now in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5, he reminds the Corinthians that this was the gospel preached to them.

This is not merely historic. This has tremendous implications for churches and evangelism today.

What can we learn?



First, we learn:

How not to proclaim Christ v. 1

Look at 1 Corinthians 2:1:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.

The idea of public speakers rolling into town and speaking on a subject and if the crowd liked what they said – digging deep into their pockets – is foreign to us. But it was commonplace in the world of Paul.

Most often these speakers came to support one of the four major schools of philosophic thought. The Academy founded by Plato, the Lycaenum of Aristotle, the Garden of Epicurus and the painted porch of Zeno. Debate raged throughout Greece and the educated world between the devotees of these various schools and the other more minor schools of philosophy.

To help their men get their point across and sway the masses the great schools of rhetoric were developed. Rhetoric was the art of persuasive public speaking. The development of oratorical skills that could move men to tears and shift them to your way of thinking. If you wanted an audience for your thoughts you had to play the game.

Often it was the eloquence of your speech rather than the force of your logic that carried the day. In Acts 17:21, Luke tells us that, “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” This was the game.

And a public speaker’s initial visit to a city was crucial in establishing their reputation. The Corinthians would have heard the greatest orators of the day.

Men would compete for applause and financial gain. They would often be hired as entertainment between courses at the best banquets.

The words Paul uses in these five verses – testimony, lofty speech, wisdom, plausible words, demonstration – these are all terms associated with the art of oration in the first century.

Even today we often judge a man or woman’s greatness on their oratorical gifts.

Perhaps the key moments of the US Presidential challenge are the debates. Man against man. Who will you trust? Who looks Presidential? Whose argument sounds right?

Our Westminster system pits Prime Minister against Opposition Leader across the floor of the chamber.

Unfortunately, as in so many other areas – the practices and wisdom of the world are assailing the church.

We are constantly told – if you want to reach the world – you have to play the game.

I went through some of the more popular church growth books. How to reach the world. How to grow your church. Let me give you a few examples straight out of these best selling books. Here is what they tell pastors to do:

- Dress well.
- Polish your presentation.
- Add drama, modern music and make sure the service runs like a finely oiled machine.
- Never force a potential convert to have to choose between Christianity and family, Christianity and culture or Christianity and any other barrier that is important to them.
- Don't insist that new converts leave the cultural environment they feel comfortable in. The church should accommodate to them rather than them accommodating to the church.
- The Bible is too difficult to understand. Use a simple version. We recommend the 'Kwik-scan' version which is a collection of the highlights of the whole Bible and only takes 30 half hour sessions to read from Genesis to Revelation.
- Aim at the groups most likely to respond. For example first generation immigrants are easier to reach than third generation immigrants.
- Teach them that Christians never have to say they are sorry, they just have to recognize that in the past they made mistakes.
- Spiritual leaders are no different than the ordinary laymen except they have the top-level leadership gifts such as motivating others, providing vision and forward planning.
- Treat the Sunday service like a major sporting or entertainment event. Innovation is the key.
- A pastor should not be judged on his ability to preach or shepherd, but, on his capacity to make a church run smoothly, efficiently and grow.
- You must take every opportunity to advertise your church.
- Remember the main competition for churches is not other religions BUT with T.V., major advertisers and retail chains.

We are told not to speak of sin or offend anyone.

If this is not advocating persuasive words of wisdom in the church context I don't know what is. If that is not encouraging ear tickling I don't know what is.

But that runs counter to what our passage tells us to do.

Paul did not come to Corinth that way. He came with the gospel – the testimony of God. But he did not come with lofty speech or wisdom.

This is not because Paul couldn't. Without doubt Paul knew this game and could play it with the best of them. Paul was a citizen of Tarsus. Tarsus was not an insignificant or obscure city. It was the leading city of Cilicia and famed for its own learning. While not as famous as Athens, its own schools of rhetoric and philosophy were known throughout the ancient world. Zeno of Tarsus, Antipater of Tarsus, Heraclides of Tarsus, Athnodorus the Stoic and Nestor the Academic were philosophers of renown.

But, not only this, Paul was educated by the famous Gamaliel in Jerusalem where he excelled as a student. The Talmud tells us that Gamaliel's instruction included critical courses in Greek culture and philosophy as well as rhetoric.

Paul knew how to play the game all right. He could play it with the best. He could have come into Corinth with a gospel presentation that would have made them weep.

If ever a man was equipped to impress an audience it was Paul. In Acts 14:12 we find that the crowds at Lystra began calling Paul – Hermes, the spokesman of the very gods – because he was the chief speaker.

Paul and Barnabas tore their garments at this. I think this was one of the events that convinced Paul to come in weakness preaching nothing but Christ crucified.

But the point is this – if he wanted to – Paul could speak in such a way that the crowds would shout that the gods themselves had sent their spokesman. And as an Apostle – he could throw in a miracle or two – a healing.

BUT he didn't.

At the outskirts of Corinth, Paul chose to lay down all his weapons – rhetoric, philosophy – anything that might impress and persuade. Now, stripped of every human resource that might highlight him and not Christ – he was ready to spend eighteen months in Corinth.

Instead he tells us how he came in verses 2-4. And from this we learn:

How to proclaim Christ vv. 2-4

1 Corinthians 2:2:

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Don't mistake this. Paul was in Corinth for eighteen months.

From the questions in this letter and in 2 Corinthians he taught widely on many subjects.

We are not to understand that Jesus and the cross are the only subjects he every spoke on.

What this means is that the foundation of Paul's argument – the truth that led to salvation – was a crucified Saviour.

When you preach a crucified Saviour you preach the gospel.

You proclaim Jesus Christ – you proclaim the truth of a holy God and a loving God. A God who so loved this world that he sent His Son – God the Son – to come to this world as a man.

He was perfect and sinless and He died accursed on a cross. He became a curse for us. He bore our sins – we received His righteousness.

Our greatest need is righteousness for we are sinners doomed by the holiness of God.

Preaching Jesus Christ and him crucified is to preach the whole gospel.

Paul was not going to persuade men by worldly promises, human arguments, logic or rhetoric.

He knew that men were saved by embracing Christ and His cross not by seeking a better life or a miracle.

He knew that it would be a miracle of true salvation if the Corinthians turned from their idols to embrace a crucified Christ.

So He preached Christ and Him crucified.

What does this mean for us?

Brothers and sisters it should not be a radical thought for us that it is God who saves – not us.

Yet, I speak to Christians who don't share their faith in case someone asks them to defend creation or to explain why children die. It is almost as if they believe that the fate of the lost depends on them.

Not that having an answer is unimportant. The point is we are to tell them about Jesus the Son of God who came and lived and died on Calvary to wash away our sins and pray for the Spirit of God turns what the world deems foolish into the power for salvation.

The gospel doesn't make sense. It is not how we would do it. It speaks of weakness not power. But God has chosen to use this gospel of weakness to work an act of power – to save men and women.

Whatever else you tell them – make Christ and His cross the centre of your evangelism.

Verses 3 and 4:

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

Paul came in weakness – a helpless man. No money, no army, no great promises of earthly wealth.

His only weapon was the gospel of a man who died on a cross as a criminal.

I tried in vain to come up with some analogy that might resonate with us.

Imagine me telling you that if you trust in Ned Kelly your sins will be washed clean. Trust in him even if it costs you family, friends, wealth your life.

But that isn't even close to giving you the sense of the human weakness of the gospel Paul knew he was armed with.

Fear and trembling is a term used repeatedly for the response a proper view of God engenders in us.

It seems Paul was concerned to make sure he conveyed the gospel correctly and accurately so the Spirit of God could work in the hearts of men.

I have been in churches and evangelistic meetings where the gospel was butchered.

At times I felt like the gospel was a product to be sold. At other times sin, repentance, the cross were never mentioned.

True, the Spirit can use even inadequate gospel presentations – but far better we proclaim the truth well. When we have the fear of God before us – we will strive to accurately tell of Christ and Him crucified.

A messenger is not held accountable for the content of the message – just whether he conveyed the message accurately. Paul wanted to make sure he proclaimed a crucified Saviour and a crucified gospel – and so must we.

That is why he didn't come in plausible words of wisdom but in demonstration of Spirit and of power.

Some say – this means we need signs and wonders to get the truth across.

I keep being told - use miracles.

I want to say – look here – hundreds of miracles.

How much of a miracle is it that anyone ever believes the gospel of Christ?

That faith in a crucified peasant, executed 2000 years ago as a common criminal – causes men to forsake this world, sacrifice their lives and live for an eternity they have not seen.

This is a demonstration of the Spirit and of power. That anyone believed the gospel and turned to Christ is the power of the Spirit.

This gospel of foolishness and weakness has done what nothing else has done. It has changed the course of nations and individuals. It has turned the world upside down. It has gone to the outermost parts of the world.

And it has done it with ordinary men and women.

It has done it without the sword.

It has done it simply by preaching Christ and Him crucified.

In one sense Christians struggle with what Paul is saying.

Is the only pattern weakness – and simple speech? Don't we want our best speakers and brightest minds presenting the gospel? Don't we want someone articulate and passionate preaching Christ?

Yes and no.

Read Acts 17 – Paul in Athens – right before he came to Corinth. That is one passionate, articulate piece of rhetoric.

Yes, we do need gifted men to preach Christ. We need evangelists and apologists.

But here is the point. Ultimately – their passionate, articulate words don't win someone. It is the simple gospel – telling them of Christ and Him crucified.

And you know what. That is not the usual way God works. He does this so the glory belongs to Him.

I know most of your testimonies. We hear them in baptisms. Occasionally someone does say I was at a powerful evangelistic message and God pierced my heart.

Far more often we hear – I heard the gospel from my mum. A friend lived differently and he hold me about Jesus. A co-worker shared with me about the cross.

God chooses the nobodies to win other nobodies and some somebodies – so that He gets the glory. This is the power of the Spirit.

Finally,

Why it matters?

Verse 5:

So that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.
If conversions rely on our arguments, our persuasion, our passion – they are not true.
If God does it – then they will persevere to the end.

Human wisdom can lead to seeming conversions.

James McConnell a psychologist wrote this:

The time has come when if you give me any normal human being and a couple of weeks ... I can change his behaviour from what it is now to whatever you want it to be, if it is physically possible. I can't make him fly by flapping his wings, BUT I can turn him from a Christian into a Communist and vice versa.

The psychologists tell us that faith is merely a function of the mind.

Get a child while he is young, find a person at a vulnerable time of their life and you can create a Christian.

Take a Christian and show them a better way of seeing the world and they will move on from their folly.

Faith they say, flows from worldly power and worldly wisdom.

Islam was spread by the sword. Their faith rests in man's power.

Confucianism came from man's wisdom. Their faith rests in the wisdom of men.

Unfortunately there are Christian professions that do seem to have rested on the power and wisdom of men – and they don't last.

People can be attracted to churches and Christians rather than Christ.

Listen to Francis Chan:

Even our church growth can happen without [the Holy Spirit]. Let's be honest: If you combine a charismatic speaker, a talented worship band, and some hip, creative events, people will attend your church. Yet this does not mean that the Holy Spirit of God is actively working and moving in the lives of the people who are coming. It simply means that you have created a space that is appealing enough to draw people in for an hour or two on Sunday.

It certainly does not mean that people walk out the doors moved to worship and in awe of God.¹

¹ Chan, F. (2009). *Forgotten God*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook.

I have sat with too many men and women who were drawn to profess Christ for the wrong reasons.

I remember a charismatic friend weeping in my car. He had been promised healing and wealth – he had neither. He wanted to turn from Christ.

I have met men and women struggling with their faith. I asked them about their conversion. They had walked the aisle at an altar call.

Emotional music. A hyped crowd. A powerful speaker. And they walked the aisle.

But the next day in the light of reality – the emotion of the gospel tent seemed so far away. Their marriage was still a mess. Bills still piled up. Christ seemed so foreign and so inadequate.

I have also known men seemingly argued into the kingdom.

Creation, good and evil, history, logic – until they met someone smarter who had seemingly wiser way to view the world.

False gospels lead to false conversions.

A true conversion springs from the Spirit of God showing a man His sin and the only way to deal with his sin – a crucified Saviour.

Anything else is a conversion that is not true.

D.L. Moody tells of a day when he was accosted on the streets of Chicago by a man who was obviously drunk. The man lurched up to him and said, “Aren’t you Mr. Moody? Why I’m one of your converts!”

Moody replied, “That must be true, for you surely aren’t one of the Lord’s.”

But for those who have trusted in a crucified Christ – their faith does not rest on worldly promises or power – nor on the wisdom of men – their faith rests on the power of God – to take what is foolish to the world and make it the power of God for salvation.

Brothers and sisters. The world says our gospel is foolish.

We know it is the power of God – not just for salvation – but for living in this world.

If you have trusted in anything other than a crucified Christ – it won’t sustain you in this life.

Doubts will arise. Is evolution right? Why did the tsunami hit?

The troubles of the day will surface. Why did I lose my job? Where is God?

Battles with the flesh will arise.

The prattling of men like Dawkins can sound reasonable.

And we struggle.

But a crucified gospel tells us – this is a fallen world. Even the Saviour suffered. We must join Him in suffering now. But the day is coming when the new creation will dawn and suffering will end.

Jesus Christ and Him crucified not only saves us – it sustains us.

I love what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Where do we see the glory of the Lord. Scripture tells us that the place we see the glory of God most clearly is in the cross.

In the cross this fallen world is explained, makes sense and we have hope for a new world.

In the cross we put to death the old man and are transformed day by day.

It is the cross that sustains us and transforms us.

Paul is writing to a church that is struggling.

Divisions. Sexual sin. Pride. Greed.

Every one of those dissolves before the cross.

Brothers and sisters – preach Christ and Him crucified to the world – but also preach Christ and Him crucified to your soul.

The Crucified Gospel

(1 Corinthians 2:1-5 November 30, 2012)

Main Point:

A crucified Messiah necessitates a crucified gospel. False gospels are one of the major reasons for false conversions.

- Who are the men and women the world considers great? Why are they considered great?
- What makes these men and women great?
- Why are evil men like Hitler and Stalin able to attract followers to their way of viewing the world?
- Why does the cross require what the world deems foolish and weak in terms of:

Salvation

Gospel

Disciples

- Read Matthew 13:18-23. Discuss this parable in terms of false conversions flowing from a false gospel.
- What false gospels are preached in churches? Why do they lead to false conversions?

Consider:

Prosperity preaching

Personality preaching

Logical argument based preaching

- What does 1 Corinthians 2:1 teach us about how not to proclaim Christ?
- Why do many church growth teachers seem to ignore the pattern of Paul?
- What happens if you base your gospel presentation on persuasive words of wisdom?
- Should we have gifted speakers as preachers and evangelists or not?
If so – how do they keep the balance right?
- Read vv. 2-4. What does this teach us about how to proclaim Christ?

- What does it mean to nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified?
- What is the place of answering objections about creation, sin, natural disasters etc? How does this mesh with what Paul says?
- What does it mean to share the gospel in fear and trembling?
- What is the place of ordinary men and women in sharing the gospel? Why is this the normal pattern of how God works?
- What is the demonstration of Spirit and of power Paul speaks of in v. 4?
- Is this still what happens today?
- Read v. 5. What are the dangers of someone's faith resting on the wisdom of man?

Discuss this quote from Francis Chan:

Even our church growth can happen without [the Holy Spirit]. Let's be honest: If you combine a charismatic speaker, a talented worship band, and some hip, creative events, people will attend your church. Yet this does not mean that the Holy Spirit of God is actively working and moving in the lives of the people who are coming. It simply means that you have created a space that is appealing enough to draw people in for an hour or two on Sunday.

It certainly does not mean that people walk out the doors moved to worship and in awe of God.²

- How do we make sure our faith and the faith of our kids and those we share with is based in the power of God?
- How does a focus on Christ and Him crucified help us live in this life?

² Chan, F. (2009). *Forgotten God*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook.