

Plain Preaching: Demonstrating the Spirit and His Power

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And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

—1 Corinthians 2:1–5 (KJV)

Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; but have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

—2 Corinthians 4:1–2 (KJV)

T rue preaching is God's brush with which He paints a vivid picture of His Son before the eyes of the soul. By the supernatural grace of the Holy Spirit Christ is not only pictured in the preached word, but also present in the preached word. Spirit-filled, Bible-saturated proclamation brings the hearers into an encounter with Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

The apostle Paul rebuked the Galatian churches, “before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you,” for turning from the truth (Gal. 3:1). The word translated “evidently set forth” (*prographō*) here means to “write or draw something before the eyes of the public.”¹ William Perkins said that in this text we “observe the properties of the ministry of the word”: “The first, that it must be plain, perspicuous, and evident, as if the doctrine were pictured and painted before the eyes of men.... The second property of the ministry of the word is that it must be powerful and lively in operation.”²

Not all preaching is plain and powerful, and Paul knew that well. The apostle set his own preaching in direct contrast to the oratory that commonly entertains this world. On the one hand, the preaching of the apostles exhibited characteristics distinctly fitting to Christ and His ways; on the other, there is preaching that suits this world and its ways. Though the difference is

¹ Cf. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary 41 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 100.

² William Perkins, *A Commentary, or, Exposition upon the Five First Chapters of the Epistle to the Galatians.... Continued with a Supplement upon the Sixth Chapter, by Ralph Cudworth*, in *The Works of William Perkins, Volume 2*, ed. Paul M. Smalley (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015), 148. The only explicit reference in the Holy Scriptures to “plain” preaching is “plainness of speech” (2 Cor. 3:12), which may be more precisely translated as “boldness” (*parrēsia*), as will be discussed later in this message. However, the concept of plain preaching resonates through 1 Cor. 2:1–5; 2 Cor. 4:1–2; and 1 Thess. 2:1–6.

stark, lack of discernment in this matter can quickly open the church to the wrong kind of preaching. We see this in Paul's words that we read from 1 Corinthians 2 and 2 Corinthians 4, words that should be studied by every preacher and aspirant to the ministry.

Notice the different phrases used of these two kinds of preaching. Apostolic preaching is characterized as: "the testimony of God" (1 Cor. 2:1), concerning "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (v. 2), the "demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (v. 4), "the power of God" (v. 5), and the "manifestation of the truth" by which the preacher commends himself "to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). Worldly preaching is noted by these marks: "excellency of speech or of wisdom" (1 Cor. 2:1), "enticing words of man's wisdom" (v. 4), "the wisdom of men" (v. 5), "hidden things of dishonesty," "craftiness," and "handling the word of God deceitfully" (2 Cor. 4:2).

The difference between these two approaches to preaching is nearly as great as that between Christ and the devil. Yet, by nature, we crave worldly preaching. Only the grace of the Holy Spirit makes us love spiritual preaching. How can we be sure to follow the right kind of preaching? How can the preacher make sure that he is faithful to his Lord not only in the message but also in his method and manner of delivery? How can a church discern between Christ-honoring, Spirit-empowered preaching, and preaching in the carnal wisdom and power of man? To answer these questions, let us give more specific consideration to the character of plain and powerful Spirit-anointed preaching.

The Renunciation Required by Plain Preaching

Plain preaching is not about a style of preaching, but the spirituality of the preacher. It grows out of biblical convictions strengthening the heart, the fear of God animating the soul, and faith in Jesus Christ working by love. It is crucified preaching by a crucified preacher—one who has died with Christ to this world, and the world to him (Gal. 6:14). Plain preaching is Christian self-denial applied to the ministry of the Word performed under the direction of the Word. Plain preaching requires the preacher to renounce man's wisdom and carnal ambition.

Renounce Man's Wisdom

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom" (1 Cor. 2:1). The word translated "excellency" (*huperochē*) means superiority,³ and refers to outstanding eloquence or rhetorical skill in speaking.⁴ Today we would say, the ability to wow an audience. But there was no wow factor in Paul's person or speech (2 Cor. 10:10): he had to work within his own limitations. But more importantly, in the matter of content and method, Paul intentionally chose to preach in such a manner "that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men" (1 Cor. 2:5).

The first two chapters of 1 Corinthians sharply contrast man's "wisdom" with God's "wisdom."⁵ For example, Paul says, "Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect" (1 Cor. 1:17). God has

³ *Huperochē* can be used for human authority (1 Tim. 2:2). Cf. *huperechō* in Rom. 13:1. A *huperoche* is literally a mountain peak or a high place. The rhetoric or eloquence is "outstanding" or "all-surpassing." The man whose eloquence can wow an audience, or can sway a jury, or win a case is a mountain peak among the little hills with regard to his colleagues or fellow rhetoricians.

⁴ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 113.

⁵ 1 Cor. 1:17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 30; 2:1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 13.

intentionally designed His plan of salvation to overthrow “the wisdom of the wise” in this world (vv. 19–20; cf. 3:18–20).

What did Paul mean by “wisdom of men” and “wisdom of words”? Let us not twist these phrases into a rejection of all human intelligence and rational argument. Christians have true wisdom. Paul had one of the finest minds of his day. His writings are not rambling streams of consciousness; they are but thoughtful arguments and moving rhetoric grounded on Old Testament revelation. Paul did not reject wisdom in itself, but he refused to rely upon human wisdom because fallen man cannot find God by the use of human reason: “the world by wisdom knew not God” (1 Cor. 1:21). Paul sought instead to declare God’s gospel with what the old divines called perspicuity, which means clarity in thought and meaning. As Henry Smith (1560–1591) said, “To preach simply, is not to preach unlearnedly, nor confusedly, but plainly and perspicuously [clearly], that the simplest which doth hear, may understand what is taught, as if he did hear his name.”⁶

What kind of wisdom does Paul then reject? He rejects the so-called wisdom that flatters human pride. In the Hellenistic culture that prevailed in Corinth and throughout the Roman Empire, many Greek-speaking people considered themselves to be “wise” in contrast to the “barbarians” of other nations (Rom. 1:14). The Corinthians had become ensnared by “the speech of them which are puffed up” (1 Cor. 4:19). Paul would have none of it, nor would he embrace the pride of his own Jewish culture. He said, “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world?” (1:20; cf. Isa. 33:18). The Greeks had “the wise [man],” that is, the philosopher who by intellectual power was able to reason his way to the truth. In Jewish culture, there was “the scribe,” the scholar who claimed to teach God’s Word but actually based his doctrine on “the tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:5; cf. Gal. 1:14). There was also “the disputer” (*suzētētēs*), which translates an unusual Greek word and probably refer to someone who engages in witty debates about philosophical topics.⁷

The plain preacher renounces these forms of proclamation, not because reasoning, tradition, and wit are inherently wrong, but because God’s Word must be the sole basis of Christian proclamation. Unlike the Greek philosopher, the plain preacher will make no claim on people’s belief or behavior based merely on human logic. Logic must be the servant of God’s Word, not a usurper that seeks to steal the throne. As opposed to the scribes of Judaism, the plain preacher grounds his doctrine on God’s Word alone, not what a famous teacher said. Tradition and quotations from past theologians are valuable only insofar as they are faithful to what God says and help make His Word plain to the hearers.

In contrast to the disputer, the plain preacher does not aim to impress and please his hearers with how clever or ingenious he is in his communication. Sadly, many preachers today fail at the very outset of their sermons by reaching for the cleverest or funniest way to contrive a “hook” in their introduction. Rhetorical skill and illustrations may be enlisted to press the truth of God home to men’s hearts, but they must not betray their commission by taking on a life of their own. Preaching must never be an empty show of oratorical ability. John Flavel (1628–1691) said, “A crucified style best suits the preachers of a crucified Christ.... Words are but servants to the

⁶ Henry Smith, *Works of Henry Smith* (Stoke-on-Trent, England: Tentmaker Publications, 2002), 1:337.

⁷ The word *suzētētēs* is unknown in Greek literature apart from this passage. The related noun *suzētēsis* means “dispute” or “quarrel,” but was used by Cicero for delightful conversation with a philosophical friend. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–), 7:748. See Cicero, *Epistolae ad Familiares*, 16.21.4, in *Cicero: The Letters to His Friends, Volume 3, The Letters to Brutus*, trans. W. Glynn Williams and M. Cary, rev. ed., Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), 366–67.

matter. An iron key, fitted to... the lock, is more useful than a golden one, which will not open the door to the treasure.”⁸

Renounce Carnal Ambitions

Gospel preachers must repent of the corrupt motives that may lead them to preach man’s wisdom. Paul says that he and his comrades in ministry “have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty” (2 Cor. 4:2). The word translated “dishonesty” (*aischunē*) is not about telling lies; rather, it means “dishonor” or “shame.” The idea is that a hidden agenda stands behind that kind of preaching, which, if exposed, would bring public disgrace to the preacher. Paul’s words call us to examine ourselves. If your church could see your motives for preaching, would you slink away in shame, or could you stand before them with a good conscience?

What shameful hidden agenda might a preacher have? Paul said, “For our exhortation was not of deceit, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile” (1 Thess. 2:3). “Uncleanness” refers to using preaching as a way to win people’s affections for the purpose of seducing them into sexual immorality (4:7). Another shameful motive is to win honor from men, or make a name for oneself. Paul says that he speaks “not as pleasing men, but God” (2:4), “nor of men sought we glory” (v. 6). Yet another is greed or covetousness, for Paul said that his words were not “a cloke of covetousness” (v. 5). Sex, fame, and money—these three snares catch and destroy far too many preachers.

Public speaking can be terrifying, but it can also be a thrill to the worldly soul. All eyes are upon the preacher in his pulpit, and he drinks up their attention like wine. Afterward, he modestly gives glory to God, but he secretly treasures their compliments like medals of honor. Behind his pious prayers for the advancement of Christ’s kingdom are longings for a bigger congregation and the wealth it will bring to him. How despicable are such motives in the soul of the preacher! How we need to watch and pray against temptation! Let us put to death the first motions of these sins by the power of the cross of Jesus Christ. “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Let us aspire to be plain preachers, knowing that this calling requires us to deny ourselves.

The Resolution Required by Plain Preaching

Though plain preaching demands that we say no to the wisdom and lusts of this world, the primary thrust of our calling is positive. The man who fulfills this work must be a man of courage and holy resolve. He has turned his back to the world and lifted his eyes to heaven. Plain preaching requires that the preacher resolve to declare God’s Word to inform the mind concerning Jesus Christ and convince the conscience before God.

Resolve to Declare God’s Word

Instead of preaching with “excellence of speech or of wisdom,” Paul commends declaring “the testimony of God” (1 Cor. 2:1). The word translated “testimony” (*martyrion*) suggests that the word preached by the apostle possessed the solemn authority of a legal or covenantal document (Deut. 6:17; Ps. 25:10 LXX), such as the Ten Commandments (Ex. 32:15; 34:29 LXX). The Word of God bears inherent authority infinitely greater than that of man. John says, “If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater (1 John 5:9). David declares that “the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7b).

⁸ John Flavel, “The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor, Drawn by Christ,” in *The Works of John Flavel*, 6 vols. (1820; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), 6:572. The original reads “stile.”

Christian preachers are commissioned “before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ” only to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:1–2). Indeed, as God’s covenant messengers, faithful preachers dare not add or subtract from God’s Word but proclaim and apply only what the Lord has said. Plain preaching is fundamentally the exposition of the meaning of the Holy Scriptures, the faithful drawing out of their sound doctrines, and the experiential and practical application of those doctrines to daily life.

The problem with preaching man’s wisdom is not just what we say, but what we neglect to say. Paul says, “We speak the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 2:7). Though men often despise God’s Word as foolishness, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (1:18, 23, 25). God’s wisdom is the gold, silver, and gemstones fit to build a temple of eternal glory; man’s wisdom is wood, hay, and stubble that will burn up and be lost forever (3:12–15). Which would you rather use to build the church? Shall we pass by what is solid, durable, and precious in order to seek to grasp what will ultimately prove to be a mere vapor of smoke?

The inestimable privilege of the Christian preacher is to declare God’s Word. Preachers, resolve with all your heart to be like Ezra, who set his heart to study God’s Word, to put it into practice, and to teach it to God’s people (Ezra. 7:10). Like the faithful priests of ancient Israel, may your lips guard knowledge, and may people seek God’s Word from your mouth, for you are the messenger of the Lord of hosts (Mal. 2:7).

Resolve to Inform the Mind Concerning Jesus Christ

Paul goes on to say, “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Note the simplicity of Paul’s resolution: his sermons all brought his hearers to the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul says, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal. 6:14). To proclaim that a man killed as a criminal is the Lord and Savior is offensive to the world (1 Cor. 1:17), yet it is the heart of the Christian gospel (15:3).

Let us not confuse simplicity in preaching Christ with oversimplification. Paul did not preach the same sermon over and over again. Paul preached “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” because he understood that all the many streams of divine grace meet in Christ and flow to us through Christ, whom God has made to us “wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). At times he preached Christ as our Prophet, “in whom are hid all the treasure of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:2). Never did our Prophet reveal the will of God for our salvation more clearly and powerfully than when He suffered the shame of the cross. At other times Paul’s preaching focused upon Christ the Priest, who offered Himself “a propitiation through faith in his blood,” to glorify God’s righteousness “that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom. 3:25–26). On the basis of His atoning death, that same Priest intercedes at God’s right hand for His people—which fueled Paul’s assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God (8:33–35). Paul sometimes preached Christ as our King, who “spoiled principalities and powers,” triumphing over Satan’s forces by the cross (Col. 2:15). Having won the victory once and for all at Calvary, the Lord Christ is now risen from the dead to share His power and victory with the church that lives in union with Him (Eph. 1:19–23). Paul did not preach a bland, formulaic, repetitive message, but rather, “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (3:8).

We also should not conclude that Paul always preached the doctrine of Christ explicitly. He preached the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). If Paul preached the doctrine of God, he proclaimed the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:3). If Paul preached the doctrine of sin, it was in order to show that we need the righteousness of God in Christ (Rom. 3:10–26). If Paul preached obedience to God’s law, he did so in the context of the new man created in Christ Jesus (Eph. 4:22–24). Everything brought him back to Christ, for it is God’s

will that Christ be everything to the believer. Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner comment, “For Paul, *Christ crucified* is more than just the means of forgiveness and salvation; rather, it informs his total vision of the Christian life and ministry.”⁹

The preaching of Christ and Him crucified shows us that plain preaching is not sentimental, but doctrinal (2 Tim. 4:2). Our aim is not merely to generate emotion, but to inform the mind with the clear light of the truth. Paul called his preaching the “manifestation of the truth” (2 Cor. 4:2), where “manifestation” (*phanerōsis*) means “clear and open display.”¹⁰ He compared it to the shining of light, “the light of the glorious gospel of Christ,” which is so plain to see that only those “blinded” by Satan can fail to apprehend it (vv. 3–4).

Plain preaching aims to set forth in clearest and simplest terms the doctrinal truths of the Holy Scriptures so that ordinary men, women, and children can see Jesus Christ, their need of Him, and what it means to trust in Him and to follow Him. The preacher must indeed dig into the deep mines of exegesis and theology as he prepares for his sermon. But he does not bring to the congregation raw ore out of those mines; he brings refined gold and silver, and gemstones already cut and polished—ready to adorn God’s living temple. He considers whether or not to discuss the meaning of a Hebrew or Greek word, or to present a theological term and its definition, or to quote some theologian of the past, and weighs it not in the worldly scale of whether it will impress his hearers with his scholarship, but in the balance of the sanctuary as to whether it will make the message of God’s Word plain and clear to them. Cotton Mather said of John Eliot, a Puritan missionary to the Native Americans, that his “way of preaching was very plain; so that the very *lambs* might wade into his discourses on those texts and themes, wherein *elephants* might swim.”¹¹

Resolve to Convince the Conscience before God

Plain preaching not only teaches doctrine, but also calls for the response of “faith” (1 Cor. 2:5). Therefore, Paul says, faithful preachers are always “commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). When Paul speak of “commending ourselves,” he is not seeking men’s praises, but persuading men’s hearts that he is a faithful messenger of God and that his message has divine authority.

To appeal to men’s consciences, the preacher must be absolutely convinced concerning the truth of what he preaches and earnestly moved by its reality. Such conviction and earnestness come from the fear of God and an awareness of preaching in the presence of God. Paul says, “Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are made manifest unto God; and I trust also are made manifest in your consciences” (2 Cor. 5:11).

Nothing is so tragic as a preacher whose mode of preaching breathes an air of unreality. It is said that in the seventeenth century, Archbishop William Sancroft (1617–1693) asked the actor Thomas Betterton (c. 1635–1710) why actors can move their audiences with imaginary things when preachers declare real things but people in church treat them as imaginary. Betterton replied, “I don’t know, except it is that we actors speak of things imaginary as if they were real,

⁹ Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 114.

¹⁰ The noun *phanerōsis* appears in the NT only in 2 Cor. 4:2 and 1 Cor. 12:7. The cognate verb *phaneroō* means to visibly “appear” (Mark 16:12, 14) or metaphorically to “become plain” (Rom. 3:21; Eph. 5:13), and is the opposite of to “hide” (Mark 4:22; 1 Cor. 4:5). Compare *phanerōs* in Mark 1:45; John 7:10. Ralph Martin renders *phanerōsis* as “open declaration.” Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary 40 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 78.

¹¹ Cotton Mather, *The Great Works of Christ in America: Magnalia Christi Americana*, Book 3 (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 1:547–48.

while you in the pulpit speak of things real as if they were imaginary.”¹² May this never be said of us!

Convinced in his own conscience, the preacher aims to convince the conscience of his hearers. He reminds them that they too are in the presence of God and presses upon them their sins against God and their duties to God. As Paul says, he preaches “to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2). He proclaims the truth as a true messenger of God, addressing those who shortly must appear before God’s judgment seat. Increase Mather (1639–1723) said of his father, Richard Mather (1596–1669), “His way of preaching was plain, aiming to shoot his arrows not over his people’s heads, but into their hearts and consciences.”¹³

The faithful preacher must invest significant thought in the application of the text to his own life and the lives of his hearers. The Westminster *Directory for the Public Worship of God* says, “He is not to rest in general doctrine, although never so much cleared and confirmed, but to bring it home to special use, by application to his hearers.” The directory acknowledges that this may be “a work of great difficulty to himself, requiring much prudence, zeal, and meditation, and to the natural and corrupt man will be very unpleasant,” but says he must do it so that “his auditors may feel the word of God to be quick and powerful, and a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” In the Directory, the Westminster divines identified six kinds of application: (1) instruction in doctrinal implications for the Christian worldview; (2) refutation of errors presently threatening the people; (3) exhortation to obey God’s commands and make use of the means God provides to flourish spiritually; (4) “dehortations,” or warnings against particular sins and their consequences; (5) comfort for believers to strengthen them to keep fighting the good fight; and (6) help in self-examination by giving marks from God’s Word to determine one’s spiritual condition.¹⁴

Applied preaching is possible only by the fear of God. This was the case for the faithful Levitical priest, of whom the Lord said, “He feared me, and was afraid before my name. The law of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips: he walked with me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity” (Mal. 2:5–6). Such was the great principle behind the book of Ecclesiastes, summed up in its final words: “Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Eccl. 12:13–14).

Such holy resolutions are essential to plain preaching, but they are not natural to our souls. They require us to crucify the flesh by the death of Christ and to live unto God by His resurrection life. Plain preaching requires that the preacher resolve to declare God’s Word to inform the mind concerning Jesus Christ and convince the conscience before God.

The Results God Gives through Plain Preaching

We cannot produce results, but we do desire results for the glory of God and the good of our hearers. Therefore, we pray for and labor to bring forth spiritual children. We may do so in confidence. Plain preaching is God’s ordinary means to exercise spiritual power, not by human manipulation, but by the Holy Spirit who gives faith.

¹² *The Tatler: A Daily Paper of Literature, Fine Arts, Music, and the Stage*, no. 131 (February 3, 1831): 523.

¹³ Increase Mather, *The Life and Death of that Reverend Man of God, Mr. Richard Mather* (Cambridge, Mass.: S.G. and M.J., 1670), 31–32.

¹⁴ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 380.

God's Ordinary Means to Exercise Spiritual Power

The Word plainly preached is a powerful tool in the hands of God. Paul says he preaches Christ in this plain manner “that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:5). He heartily believed that the gospel was “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16). Yes, “the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,” and they scoff at it; but to those “who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).

Are we satisfied merely by the dissemination of information if the power of God is not present to change lives? May it never be so. We must not mistake Paul's emphasis upon teaching the truth for merely educating the mind. Paul says, “For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20), and we find him rejoicing that “our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power” (1 Thess. 1:5). The faithful preacher does not shrug and say, “Whether or not anyone is saved or sanctified through my preaching, it does not matter to me.” No, his heart's cry is for the power of God to come flaming from heaven and strike the altar so that the people turn back to God and declare, “The LORD, he is God!” (cf. 1 Kings 18:37–39).

Nor is the power of God divorced from the preacher and his manner of preaching. Consider carefully this point. The preacher does neither provide the power, nor that he merits God's blessing. All is of sovereign grace. However, when God sends power *through* the preacher, he generally sends power *to* the preacher. When Paul and Barnabas preached in Iconium, Luke reports that they “so spake, that a great multitude...believed” (Acts 14:1). The manner of their preaching impacted their hearers. How did they preach? Luke goes on to say that they were “speaking boldly” (*parrēsiazomai*). Paul likewise says, “We were bold in our God to speak unto the gospel of God with much contention” (2 Thess. 2:2). When Paul says of his ministry, “We use great plainness of speech” (2 Cor. 3:12), the Greek text may be literally translated, “We use boldness [*parrēsia*]” (cf. KJV mg., ESV). This is characteristic of Spirit-filled preaching - a supernatural boldness, freedom, and authority (Acts 4:8, 13, 31).

Powerful Christian preaching is not human boldness or proud self-confidence. It is boldness rooted in God and in His Word, and is entirely consistent with preaching “in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling,” as Paul says (1 Cor. 2:3). Spirit-empowered boldness humbles man and exalts God alone. Paul's “fear” and “trembling” have sometimes been explained as the consequence of his personal problems or the challenges of the ministry, but it may well be that he preached with fear and trembling precisely because he spoke as one who knows that he speaks in the presence of the living God.¹⁵ In other words, a sense of your own weakness and unworthiness mingled with the fear of God may be a sign not of poor preaching, but preaching in the fullness of the Spirit.

Not Power by Human Manipulation

This spiritual power is not the natural influence that a skillful speaker can exercise over a crowd. Paul says, “My speech and my preaching was not with enticing [*peithos*] words of man's wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:4). The word translated “enticing” (*peithos*) means “persuasive.”¹⁶ The idea here is that the faithful preacher does not rely upon techniques of persuasion to motivate people apart from their sincere belief and conviction of the truth. The plain preacher is “not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully” (2 Cor. 4:2). Instead he is relying upon the power of God while he faithfully preaches the truth to the minds and consciences of his hearers.

¹⁵ Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 115–16. See the use of “fear” (*phobos*) and “trembling” (*tromos*) in Ex. 15:16; Ps. 2:11; Isa. 19:16 LXX; Phil. 2:12.

¹⁶ *Peithos* is *hapax legomena* in the NT and not attested in other Greek literature. It is an adjective related to “persuade” (*peithō*).

Speechwriters understand that there are certain methods that often succeed in getting people on your side and motivated to do what you want them to do. For example, a speaker might talk in a way that moves people to say, “He’s one of us. I like him. He’s a really impressive person. He can help us get what we want.” However, Paul says, “We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5).

Another method of human manipulation is the emotional appeal. Even if the truth is not on a speaker’s side, he can often stir people up with appeals and stories that keep them laughing, or play on their fears, or incite their anger. Demetrius the silversmith caused a riot in Ephesus with a speech like that, and the angry mob was ready to attack Christians though they hardly understood why (Acts 19:24–41). In contrast, Paul appealed to the emotions of his hearers only as he “reasoned with them out of the scriptures” (Acts 17:2). Affections must stand on truth. If we cannot move people with the truth of God, we have no alternative.

God made people to be motivated by hope (cf. Prov. 13:12), but a preacher can manipulate his hearers by giving them false hope of salvation without repenting of their sin. In Jeremiah’s day, people in Jerusalem assured one another that they were safe because “the temple of the LORD” was with them—while neglecting to turn from injustice and oppression and bloodshed to keeping God’s commandments (Jer. 7:1–15). Paul refused to use “flattering words” that stroked the pride of his hearers and boosted their self-confidence instead of calling them to faith in Christ (1 Thess. 2:5). Paul also warned Timothy that people “will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears” (2 Tim. 4:3). The faithful preacher will not scratch people where they itch or stoop to gratify their pride and sinful desires.

Spiritual power flows from Christ and Him crucified, and thus bears the character of the cross. It is power to embrace the truth that offends us and humbles us. It is power to love what is good and hate what is evil, even though what is evil resides in our own hearts. It is power to hope in the glory that we cannot see and to have no regard for what we can see. Such power is not an effect produced by human manipulation. It is the power of God, speaking in His Word, and speaking through His faithful servant.

Power by the Holy Spirit Who Gives Faith

Paul says, “My speech and my preaching was...in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4–5). The power of plain preaching is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, using the preaching of the gospel to create and nurture faith in Jesus Christ. There is no substitute for the work of the Spirit. There is no safety net or fallback position for the preacher if the Holy Spirit does not do His work. All depends upon His gracious influence. Such preaching is a fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy that God’s temple will be built “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6).

The word translated “demonstration” (*apodeixis*) means an exhibition or proof.¹⁷ Among the ancient Greeks, the word could be used of logical proofs or arguments, such as in the philosophy of Aristotle.¹⁸ Paul uses the word in direct contrast to the persuasive words of human wisdom. The “demonstration of the Spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit’s powerful work to convince the hearts of men that God’s preached Word is true so that they trust in Him.

¹⁷ *Apodeixis* is *hapax legomenon* in the NT. The cognate verb *apodeiknumi* means to display, exhibit, or prove to be genuine (Acts 2:22; 25:7; 1 Cor. 4:9; 2 Thess. 2:4).

¹⁸ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, comp., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 196.

How does the Holy Spirit work this “demonstration”? It cannot refer to miracles, signs, and wonders worked by the Holy Spirit, for Paul has just said that “the Jews require a sign” and consequently reject the message of “Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:22–23).¹⁹ His point here is that God’s saving message is not one of outward power, but apparent weakness (v. 25). The “demonstration of the Spirit” is the inward, secret work of effectual calling by which God makes people into believers (v. 24). Paul tells us in the second chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians that the Spirit gave the words of God to the apostles (1 Cor. 2:9–13). Now the Spirit enables us to receive the apostolic words as true wisdom. The person who does not have the Holy Spirit “receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (v. 16). So there are two powers at work: the power of God’s Spirit-inspired Word, and the power of the Spirit working with and using that Word as it is proclaimed to sinners of mankind.

The greatest demonstration or proof of God’s Word, and the only proof sufficient for saving faith, is the inner demonstration when the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see the truth of God. When the Holy Spirit exercises his power through the preached Word, then the message comes with “much assurance,” a strong inward conviction of the reality of unseen spiritual things (1 Thess. 1:5). John Calvin (1509–1564) says, “If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences... we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit.”²⁰ He explains, “For truth is cleared of all doubt when, not sustained by external props, it serves as its own support.”²¹

This, then, is the power of the Holy Spirit: not a visible or outward display of power, but an inward demonstration or proof by which the Spirit convinces the heart of the gospel’s truth so that the person intelligently and willingly cannot but trust in Christ. Faith may not seem like an impressive result in the eyes of this world. However, saving faith in Christ is the effect of “the exceeding greatness” of God’s power, power no less than that which raised Christ from the dead and exalted him to the right hand of God (Eph. 1:19–20). Faith unites a poor sinner to a rich Christ so that all the benefits purchased by Christ’s death on the cross are now his (John 1:12). Such faith conquers this evil world (1 John 5:4). By faith, God saves us and will bring us to eternal glory. Truly, the gift of faith is a work of sovereign power, and its preservation and growth a cause for glorifying God forever.

Though God could exercise His power to create faith through whatever means He chooses, it is very fitting that faith in Christ is worked through plain preaching. Plain preaching requires the preacher to renounce man’s wisdom and carnal ambitions. Faith likewise is turning from our own understanding to trust in the Lord with all our hearts (Prov. 3:5). Faith in Christ trusts Jesus to save us from our sins, and therefore is incompatible with the reign of sinful ambitions and desires in the heart. Plain preaching requires that the preacher resolve faithfully to declare God’s Word, and faith rests entirely upon the testimony of God as true and trustworthy. Plain preaching aims to inform the mind concerning Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and that is precisely the great object of saving faith and the only confidence of the believer. Plain preaching aims to convince the conscience before God, and faith arises from a wounded conscience seeking healing by the blood of Christ, so that the sinner finds peace in the presence of a righteous God whose justice is satisfied once and for all by the finished work of Christ. How wise it was for our God to choose plain preaching as His primary means to exercise spiritual power unto faith!

¹⁹ Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 118. They comment, “Power here is about moral conviction, not miraculous display.”

²⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.7.4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.8.1.

Conclusion

Ministers of God, will you be a plain preacher? Members of churches, will you pray that your ministers would be plain preachers? If you or your pastor will persevere in plain preaching, it will require more than an understanding of what it is. Plain preaching is only sustainable by faith in Christ and the fear of the Lord.

It takes faith to preach with plainness and boldness, especially when crowds of people are not flocking to hear you but are swarming about popular, worldly preachers. It requires faith to believe that plain preaching is God's method to bring many sons and daughters to glory. Even as the preacher calls his hearers to faith in Christ, he too must exercise faith in Christ that the Word preached is the power of God for salvation.

The pressure to employ worldly methods to bolster your ministry will be intense at times. Who among us is not tempted to please people? However, the fear of the Lord can deliver us from this snare. Let us remember that we are messengers of the King. Both we and our hearers will stand before His judgment seat one day. Let the preacher preach as a dying man to dying men with the world behind his back and the glory of God before his eyes.

Plain preaching is contrary to the nature of fallen mankind. It is ignored, derided, and scorned. Yet the plain preaching of God's Word is exceedingly precious. This is the box in which God brings the wedding ring of faith to His bride. Far from being boring, plain preaching in the power of the Holy Spirit is a beam of heavenly glory touching this sin-darkened earth.

Therefore, let us devote ourselves to prayer for the ministry of the Word, that it may be plain and powerful. Let the preacher make his study into his prayer closet, and read and write with continual petition and praise. Robert Traill (1642–1716) said, "Many good sermons are lost for lack of much prayer in study."²² May it never be said of our preaching, "Ye have not, because ye ask not" (James 4:2). Rather, may our preaching be a continual testimony to the promise, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matt. 7:7). And as we pray, let us labor to conform our preaching as much as possible to the gospel-pattern exemplified by the apostle Paul, who preached "not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4).

²² Robert Traill, "By What Means May Ministers Best Win Souls?," in *The Works of the Late Reverend Robert Traill*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: J. Ogle et al., 1810), 1:246.