

EXALTING CHRIST

Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World

Steve Fernandez

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In the 16th century, Nicolas Copernicus proposed the theory that the sun was at the center of the Solar System. It was an epic event that many regard as the beginning of the modern scientific age. The prevailing “earth-centered” theory had been set forth by Ptolemy about 150 A.D. The difference between the two theories cannot be overstated. The one centers everything around the sun and the other centers everything around the earth. It ignited a controversy that shook the foundations of the academic and religious world of that day.

A Copernican-like controversy is raging in the church today. It centers around a change that totally alters the life and ministry of the church. However, unlike Copernicus’ theory, it is a backward shift, a downward turn. It is a change that takes Christ out of the center and puts man in His place.

I am speaking of the controversy over biblical preaching. It’s a matter of monumental significance. Here is why: True biblical preaching proclaims and exalts Christ. And in

doing so, it rightly places Christ at the center of the church’s life and ministry. Nevertheless, there are many who minimize or outright reject biblical preaching. One writer states:

I am writing with the assumption that most of you who are reading this book have concluded what I have: preaching doesn’t work ... if you know how to listen, you can hear the rumblings that confirm that preaching, as we know it, is a tragically broken endeavor.¹

Statements such as this indicate a shallow understanding of true biblical preaching. They reveal an absence of any conception of the relationship between the role of preaching and the supremacy of Christ in the church.

The Primacy Of Christ-Exalting Preaching

There are many passages of Scripture which declare the primacy of Christ-exalting preaching. Here are just a few. I will bold the Christ-centered emphasis.

¹ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, pp. 18-19

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of **the message preached** to save those who believe (1 Corinthians 1:21).

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 4:5).

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and **the preaching of Jesus Christ** (Romans 16:25a).

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, **proclaiming to you** the testimony of God. For I determined to know **nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified**. ... and my message and my preaching were not in pervasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power (1 Corinthians 2:1-2, 4).

In these texts we see the Christ-centeredness of Paul's preaching. They show that true preaching exalts Christ in His glorious person and work. They emphasize that when Christ is set forth, there is a "demonstration of the Spirit and power" so that sinners are saved, believers are established, and the gospel is advanced in the world.

Underlying true, biblical preaching is the assumption that what people need is Christ. Spurgeon says it well,

Are there rebels present? Preach Christ: it will suit them. Are there pardoned sinners present? What is better, to melt their hearts than the blood of the Lord Jesus. Are there doubting Christians? What can cheer them better than the name of Christ. Are there strong believers? What is stronger meat than Jesus crucified? Are there learned, polite, intellectual hearers? If they are not satisfied with Christ, they ought to be. Are there poor, ignorant, unlettered men? Jesus Christ is just the thing to preach to them—a naked Christ to their simple ears. Jesus Christ is a topic that will keep in all climates. Land in New Zealand in the midst of uncivilized men, move off to another post, and stand in the midst of poetical Persia or fickle France, the cross is adapted to all. We need not inquire into the doctrinal opinion of our hearers. If they are high, I am sure Christ will suit them. If they are low, if they be true believers, I am sure Christ Jesus will suit them. No Christians will reject such meat as this; only prepare it, and with a hot heart serve it up on the table, and they will be satisfied and feed to the full.²

² Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Volume VII*, pp. 174-175

Christ is what believers and nonbelievers need. He is the deliverer, rescuer, and soul-healer. He is the physician and we are the sick. When He does His great saving and soul-healing work, He is exalted and glorified, as He alone deserves.

There is really only one alternative to Christ-centered, Christ-exalting preaching. When the main meetings of the church are not centered on Christ, they will be centered on man. I believe this is what is happening. It is not done intentionally, but in the end this is what takes place. There are sermons, but the focus subtly shifts to man: his success, his relationships, his needs or whatever else.

In many churches, biblical preaching has been replaced, and with it Christ. And when Christ is replaced, His glorious all-sufficiency, by which He delivers and liberates men, is replaced as well. The one is necessarily bound up with the other. The end result is people are not delivered or helped which means – and this is my whole concern – Christ is not glorified and exalted. The whole matter has to do with the glory and exaltation of Christ.

The Power Of Christ-Exalting Preaching

Paul declares the Christ-glorifying, soul-delivering, and life-transforming power of Christ-centered biblical preaching in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, 4:5.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit (3:17-18).

For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake (4:5).

Notice Paul's point; It is when people behold Christ in the mirror of the Word, that the Spirit liberates and transforms. Paul says, "but where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. ... we all ... beholding ... the glory of the Lord ... are being transformed."

Also notice that all those who behold Him, by the Spirit in the Word, are liberated and transformed. The reverse is also true. If Christ is not beheld in the Word, then none are

delivered and transformed. This explains why Paul later declares, “We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord.” Knowing the power of Christ through the preached Word, Paul could not be diverted from preaching Christ.

The introductory quote on preaching makes the bold assertion, “most of you ... have concluded what I have: preaching doesn't work ... you can hear the rumblings that confirm that preaching, as we know it, is a tragically broken endeavor.”

Is that true? Is it true preaching doesn't work? It all depends on what we mean by preaching. Passionless, cold-hearted, sterile sermons, even if they contain biblical information, is a false representation of true biblical preaching.

By preaching, I mean an exposition of the Scriptures, centered in Christ, empowered by the Spirit, and proclaimed with an inflamed heart. This is the biblical preaching which is modeled and mandated in Scripture (as in Acts 2:14-39, 14:1-3; and 2 Timothy 4:1-2), and it is the preaching which is advocated and defended here.

So with that in mind we ask the question: Is true biblical preaching ineffective in today's postmodern world? I am convinced it is not.

The Scriptures (and church history as well, I might add) declare that Christ, proclaimed and exalted in the preached Word, is the primary means of God's culture-impacting power. They affirm that God has ordained that Christ-centered, Christ-exalting, biblical preaching is the primary way that the Spirit's power is released for the spread of the gospel in the world. Two key passages demonstrate this;

God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:21b-24).

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit. ... for they themselves report about us what kind of reception we have with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:5-6, 9).

Paul says, in 1 Thessalonians 1:5, that his preaching was, “in power and in the Holy Spirit.” And he says in verses 6 and 9 that as a result they “received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,” so they “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.” God works mightily through Christ-exalting preaching.

In the Corinthian passage, in verse 21 Paul declares that it is by preaching that God was well-pleased, “to save those who believe.” He then states in verse 24 that, “Christ the power and the wisdom of God” is manifested in Spirit-empowered preaching.

Christ-exalting preaching is non-negotiable. It puts Christ at the center of the church’s life, where He rightly belongs. He then becomes the catalyst for the growth of the church and of all the other ministries of the church as well. Did He not say He would build His church? (Matthew 16:18). The church then impacts the world and the gospel is advanced. Biblical Christ-exalting preaching is the fuel by which Christ sustains the church and spreads the gospel in the world.

My aim is to briefly set forth from 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and 2:1-5, the case for Christ-exalting, Spirit-empowered expository preaching. In turn, I will attempt to show that

Christ-exalting preaching is God’s timeless culture-impacting strategy – even for an anti-church, anti-Christian, postmodern world like ours. It is, and always has been, the main element of a Christ-driven, world-impacting church. To Christ alone be all the glory.

The Case For Christ-Exalting, Spirit-Empowered Preaching

God is passionate about the exaltation of His Son. God the Father says to Christ in Isaiah 49:6,

It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

The Father is impassioned to see His Son glorified among all the peoples of the earth. He will not rest until His Son is “a light of the nations” and Christ’s “salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

This must be our passion as well. Anything else is “too small a thing.” This Christ-exalting passion is what gripped and drove Paul. In the

face of severe opposition Paul says in Acts 13:46-48,

It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the end of the earth.' When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

Paul was driven by the reality that God's purpose was to glorify His Son "to the end of the earth." But Paul also knew it all starts with strong local churches. The church is Christ's primary agency in the world. It is to be salt and light in its own community and beyond. And it all begins with Spirit-empowered, Christ-exalting preaching.

There is, of course, much more to the ministry of a local church than preaching. But preaching – and therefore Christ in and through the preaching – is what fuels and sustains all these other ministries of a church.

In 1 Corinthians chapters 1 and 2, Paul sets forth the case for Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered preaching. He declares that Christ

– unveiled, unobscured and placarded before men in the preached Word – has a drawing, attracting, and converting power beyond anything man can, or ever will, come up with to impact a culture.

He labors to drive home only one point: The power and wisdom of God for the advance of the gospel is centered around the exaltation of Christ in preaching. What men may think of preaching Christ, in the end, does not mean a thing. They may scorn it as foolishness or a stumbling block (offensive to the culture?). The fact remains that it is how God's power and wisdom are released in the world. Paul writes,

But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

The Jews considered preaching a "stumbling block" and the Gentiles "foolishness" but Paul still preached, why? Because it is "the power of God!" Notice, it is not preaching per se that is the power and wisdom of God. It is Christ in the preaching. In verse 24, Paul asserts; "Christ the power of God." Earlier in verse 21, Paul stated,

For since in the wisdom of the God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

It is by preaching Christ that “God was well-pleased to save those who believe.” In other words, preaching Christ is how God moves with power in the world “to save.” What he calls “The message preached” in verse 21 is, “the gospel” in verse 17, “the Word of the cross” in verse 18, and “Christ crucified” in verse 23. Then he simply says it is “Christ” in verse 24. Finally it is the “testimony of God” and “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” in 2:1-2.

All the way through the passage he emphasizes that proclaiming Christ is the primary way God releases His converting, culture-impacting power. As we saw in verse 21, God was “well-pleased ... to save,” in effect, to impact the world this way. Could Paul be any clearer?

There is simply no substitute for preaching Christ. Christ possesses, in His person and work an infinite beauty and glory. He possesses a glory that the Spirit of God is impassioned to exalt and magnify. Jesus said of the Spirit,

He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father

has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you (John 16:14-15).

The Spirit’s passion is to exalt and glorify Christ. There is not a more Christ-centered, Christ-exalting person in the universe than the Spirit. The Spirit came into the world for this very purpose.

This is why Paul, later in chapter 2, states that when Christ is preached we can pray for, and expect there to be a “demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:4-5).

2 Corinthians 2:14 through 4:7, is another passage that emphasizes the power of Christ in the gospel. It speaks of how Christ is able to “triumph” (2:14) over darkness and sin. It says that Christ, through the Spirit, renews hearts of stone; so that a person becomes a “letter of Christ ... written ... with the Spirit of the living God” (3:3). It says that wherever Christ works in power there is “liberty” (3:17) so that men are freed from the power and bondage of sin. Finally it says, that when Christ is preached God gives sight to the spiritually blind, so men are stunned and gripped by the sight and glory of Christ (4:4-6). Paul declares all of this in the following verses,

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in **triumph** in Christ (2:14a).

Being manifested **that you are a letter of Christ**, cared for by us, **written** not with ink but **with the Spirit of the living God**, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (3:3).

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit is, **there is liberty** (3:17).

In whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not **see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ**, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord ... For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who **has shone in our hearts** to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (4:4-6).

In these verses, we see the apostolic conviction that turned the world upside down. We see first that when Christ is preached there is “triumph” so that sinners bow their knees and receive the gospel (2:14). Second, that Christ works through the Spirit so that enslaved sinners are delivered and find “liberty” (3:17). Third, that these same formerly sin-enslaved people are more and more “transformed” (3:18). In short, sin-enslaved people are saved, renewed, liberated, and transformed.

Paul says that because this is true, “we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord” (4:5). He preaches Christ because that is how, by the Spirit’s power, sinners are brought to exclaim that God has “shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (4:6). Paul preaches Christ because he knows “the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves”(2 Corinthians 4:7).

The Corinthians – like many today – were not convinced of this. Therefore Paul carefully lays out his case that preaching Christ is where the power of the Spirit of God lies. Notice his emphasis on preaching and power throughout the passage,

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to **preach the gospel**, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would **not be made void** (1:17).

For **the word of the cross** is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is **the power of God** (1:18).

But we **preach Christ** crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, **Christ the power of God** and the wisdom of God (1:23-24).

Because the foolishness of God is **wiser than men**, and the weakness of God is **stronger than men** (1:25).

And my message and **my preaching** were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in **demonstration of the Spirit and of power**, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the **power of God** (2:4-5).

First notice the repetition of preach and preaching. Then note also the repeated references to “power” (4x) and related terms such as “not made void,” “save,” “wiser,” and “stronger.” It should make one thing clear: Paul was concerned about power and impact. He was concerned about reaching people for the glory of Christ and the spread of the gospel. Furthermore, it should be obvious by now that the primary source of this power is found in Christ-centered, Christ-exalting, Spirit-empowered preaching.

Exalting Christ In A Postmodern World

Why did Paul place so much emphasis on preaching Christ? Why did he devote so much time and effort to this? As said earlier, it was

because the Corinthians, influenced and intimidated by their culture, no longer believed that biblical preaching worked. They had lost the confidence that preaching Christ was the Spirit’s main offensive weapon in the world. It simply wasn’t effective – or so they thought.

Something else was needed, and this something else was a dramatic display of oratory, superiority of speech, and human wisdom. Oratorical skill and human wisdom, in short, the impressiveness of the man himself, was the key. In their minds the charisma of the man is what attracts people to the gospel. That this is what they believed can be seen in 1:17 and 2:4.

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void (1:17).

And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the spirit and of power (2:4).

Notice, “cleverness of speech” and “words of wisdom” are what mattered. Style was more important than substance. The whole point was to impress with eloquence and the skillful use of words, all done in a dramatic display. The

message of Christ was secondary at best.

How did this shift happen at Corinth? Without over simplifying the matter, the shift came about because the Corinthians were over-impressed with their cutting-edge Greek culture. The Roman world, and in particular the Greek culture of which Corinth was a part, was, in many ways, what today is called “postmodern.” It was relativistic, pluralistic, hedonistic, egocentric, and arrogant. The Greek culture was permeated and dominated by philosophers and the “wisdom of men.” It was this “wisdom of men” and the cultural mystique that went with it, that had mesmerized the Corinthians.

Corinth was only 45 miles from Athens. It breathed the air of the culture and philosophy of Athens. This is why Paul makes repeated references to “the wisdom of men” and why he contrasts it with Christ and the gospel which he calls “the wisdom of God.” Paul refers to “wisdom,” “wise,” or “wiser” 13 times in 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5 alone.

The Corinthians lived in a culture and atmosphere which today would be seen in a university or college town. Therefore, influenced by their culture, the Corinthians were convinced that Paul needed to make fundamental shifts in how he ministered. In

particular, he needed to change in regard to his preaching. Preaching the “Word of the cross” (1:18), and “Christ crucified” (1:23, 2:2), would not work in the upscale Greek culture. It is “foolishness” (1:18)! To the Corinthians Paul’s preaching was crass and uncultured; almost an embarrassment. Furthermore, they didn’t hesitate to say so. Paul, in fact, mentions their criticism of his preaching in his second letter to the Corinthians. He writes,

His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible (2 Corinthians 10:10).

We see here again what we mentioned above, that personal impressiveness was everything to the Corinthians. Paul was “unimpressive” and his speech was “contemptible,” apparently he wasn’t ‘cool.’ How, then, did God work so mightily through such an unimpressive man as Paul? It was because the power is in Christ and the gospel, not in the man!

How did Paul respond to this? He did not give an inch. He knew the Corinthians were immature (1 Corinthians 3:1-3), confused, worldly, and misguided (3:18). He tells them that they did not understand something basic to ministry: What unregenerate men think is foolishness or culturally impractical, is in fact,

the power of God. It is by the “foolishness of the message preached” that God saves and impacts (1:21) a culture – any culture. It is the place where the Spirit works in “demonstration and power.” He says,

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:2-5).

Paul was concerned that the so-called preaching that the Corinthians demanded would lead to false conversions. It would lead to people who think they are saved when in fact they are not. People whose faith would “rest on the wisdom of men” which is a false non-saving faith, not on “the power of God.” Therefore, in spite of pressure from the Corinthians, Paul would not be diverted from the simplicity of straightforward Christ-centered, Christ-exalting biblical preaching.

Paul’s controversy with the Corinthians is remarkable in its application to today’s church. In fact, the parallel between today’s church, and its preoccupation with the “postmodern”

culture, and the Corinthians is striking. Truly, there is nothing new under the sun! Just as the Corinthians were overimpressed and over-intimidated by their “hip” culture, so are many today. And, just like the Corinthians, many today want to shelve straightforward preaching in favor of a more culturally acceptable approach. And just like in Corinth, what seems so right actually fills churches with false converts. The bottom line is that all of this is the result of a lack of faith and confidence in Christ, who is, “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24).

The Call To Christ-Exalting Preaching

In light of 1 Corinthians 1 and 2, what should our response be to our so-called postmodern culture? First, we do not need to be indirect about Christ and the gospel. We don’t need to worry about being out of step with our culture. We are out of step! Does it matter? True preaching has never been in step with godless culture. Was not apostolic preaching out of step with the Roman culture? Didn’t the gospel triumph anyway?

Second, with Paul, we must determine to

center ministry around Christ, and to do this we must preach and exalt Christ, straight and direct, right into the culture.

At this point I will summarize how Paul unfolds his defense of Christ-exalting preaching in 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5. He begins in chapter one by establishing the fact that preaching Christ is nonnegotiable, because “Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24). Exalting Christ in preaching is where God’s power and wisdom lie. Consequently, because it is the power and wisdom of God, it goes beyond anything the gurus of modern ministry and their so-called “wisdom” can invent to reach the world. Preaching Christ, Paul declares, is “wiser than men and stronger than men” (1:25).

Then, in chapter two he declares his determination to exalt Christ in his preaching. He says in 1 Corinthians 2:1-2,

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

Paul is single-minded and focused. He could not be diverted. Paul pleads (as it were) for Christ-centered preaching. Paul was convinced

that Christ is supremely glorious, and infinite in power. That in Christ, there is a beauty, a majestic glory that stuns and captivates.

He knew that Christ is, in the words of Spurgeon, “His own attraction.” That Christ possesses a self-vindicating glory. He attracts and converts! Exalt Christ in your preaching, and if God chooses, the Spirit will work mightily. Spurgeon, who exalted Christ in his biblical preaching and whose ministry under God was greatly blessed, said it this way,

Christ draws [men] as a trumpet. Men...sound a trumpet to attract an audience to the reading of a proclamation. The people come from their houses at the well-known sound, to listen to what they are desired to know. Now, my brethren, part of the attractive power of the gospel lies in the attracting people to hear it. You cannot expect people to be blessed by the preaching of the gospel if they do not hear it. One part of the battle is to get them to listen to its sound. Now, the question is asked in these times, “How are we to get the working-class to listen to the word?” The answer is, Christ is His own attraction, Christ’s is the only trumpet that you want to trumpet.³

³ C.H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Vol III, Christ Lifted Up* #139, p. 261

It is often said that people today are programmed to visual presentations such as, dvd's and t.v.; that they can't maintain non-visual attention very long. I would counter by saying that they can and will if they are awed and gripped by what they are hearing. People already do so. They tweet and text nonvisual messages for hours! People stare at the Yosemite Valley for hours when they first see it. It has its own self-attracting power. Christ has an even greater self-attracting power.

This means that the preacher must take his preaching seriously.⁴ He must not allow other things to distract him so that his preaching has no substance and moves no one. It also means the preacher must truly be a called and gifted man. Spurgeon again says it well,

I believe it is the business of a great many people who do preach to hold their tongues. I think that if they had waited until God had sent them they would have been at home now; and there be some men who are not fit to edify a doorpost, who yet think that if they could but once enter the pulpit they would attract a multitude. ... there are hundreds of men in the

⁴ Peter makes it clear that preachers must not be distracted from giving attention to preaching and prayer. Setting the standard for all future preachers, he says in Acts 6:4, *But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.*

ministry starving for want of bread and entirely unsuccessful, and I believe in regard to some of them that the best thing they could do would be to open a grocer's shop. They would be doing more to serve God and to serve the church if they would take up a business, and preach now and then as they had time to study, or else give it up altogether, and let somebody come and preach to the people who had something to tell them. For alas, alas a preacher who has nothing to say will not only not do good, but will do a great deal of harm. The people who hear him get disgusted at the very name of a place of worship; and they only look at it as a kind of stocks, where they are to sit for an hour with their feet fast, quiet and still, listening to a man who is saying nothing, because he has nothing to say. ... I thank God for them for anyone who is able to preach. But I will thank God to stop those who cannot preach, because if they go about to preach and have not the ability, and God has not sent them, they will just make fools of themselves, though that you should not be greatly surprised at, because they may not be far off already; but they will make the very Gospel itself come unto contempt. If they profess to preach who have not the call from God's Spirit, when they begin to talk they will just bring more scandal upon the cross by a rash defense of it than would have come if they had left it alone.⁵

⁵ C.H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Vol III, The Sound in the Mulberry Trees #147*, pp. 318, 320

This is the sad fact. There are many men who bore people with their preaching because they are not gifted and called. There are others who don't study and therefore have really nothing to say. Still others don't pray for their preaching and go on and on in an annoying drone. These same men often blame their congregations with the excuse that people have no interest in truth and the Word of God. They truly do more harm than good. They are one reason people are "disgusted" at churches.

They are the exact opposite of Paul. He asked for prayer for his preaching. He requested specifically, "that proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak" (Ephesians 6:20-21). Luke reports that apostolic preaching was "in such a manner that a large number believed" (Acts 14:1). In other words, it wasn't the content only that God used mightily in apostolic preaching. It was the way they preached. It was "in such a manner." The problem isn't preaching, it is bad preaching! It is dead, lifeless, contentless, vapid preaching.

Christ is glorious and He awes those who truly see Him. He is glorious in His eternal infinite person, and in His infinite love, mercy and soul-delivering power towards sinners. So, the problem isn't preaching, it is bad preaching.

When Christ is set forth in the glory of His

eternal majesty and His infinite love and mercy, He commands attention. This is why Paul said he placarded Christ when he preached. He said to the Galatians,

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed [placarded] as crucified? (3:1).

Finally, Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:3-5, declares that when Christ is set forth, this is when the Spirit, Who was sent to glorify Christ (John 16:14), comes with power. After saying that he was "determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified", he goes on to say,

And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power (2:4).

Paul says, "My message and my preaching ... were in demonstration of the Spirit and power." Notice the connection between the message, and the Spirit's power. If the message does not center on and exalt Christ, then we cannot expect the Spirit's presence or power. It is that simple. The Spirit's presence and power are inseparable from Christ. Where Christ is exalted there the Spirit will be! The connection

between Christ and the Spirit is repeatedly emphasized in Scripture. Here are two passages that show this connection,

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:8-12).

For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or death (Philippians 1:19-20).

In the Acts passage we are told that Peter was “filled with the Spirit.” The Spirit filled Peter in response to the fact that he was exalting Christ as the one “God raised from the dead”

and as the one who God made “the chief corner stone” and also as the one in whom “there is no other name under heaven ... by which we must be saved.”

In the Philippians passage Paul says that “through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit ... with all boldness, Christ ... will be exalted in my body.” There is an inseparable relation between Christ-centered, Christ-exalting preaching and the power of the Spirit.

It should be evident, but I will point it out one last time, that when I speak of preaching I do not mean a cold, dispassionate cerebral preaching that often does more harm than good. I do not mean preaching that drones on in a dead heartless recital of half-believed truths – even if the truths are orthodox.

Nor do I mean prayerless preaching, preaching that isn’t bathed in earnest prayer. God does not honor preaching unless it is done, in Paul’s words, “In weakness and in fear and in much trembling” (1 Corinthians 2:3). I mean a prayer-saturated, earnest, biblical, soul-gripping, Spirit-empowered, proclamation of Christ and His matchless glories. I mean Christ-exalting, Spirit-inflamed preaching. In short, I mean preaching where Christ is exalted in the glory of His person and work.

This is true whether the preaching is to non-

believers or to believers. Paul says that believers are established by the preaching of Christ. He writes,

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past (Romans 16:25).

Believers are established by “the preaching of Jesus Christ.” Christ set forth, “neoned” or “placarded” (Galatians 3:1) in soul-impassioned, Spirit-empowered biblical preaching is, “wiser than men and stronger than men” (1:25). As mentioned many times before men cannot, and will not, come up with anything that is wiser or has more power to reach a culture, nor anything more wise in producing genuine conversions and growth in the church.

Again, this does not mean that there is not much more to ministry. But it all starts with preaching. What it does mean is this; God has ordained that exalting Christ in the preached word is the central way that He works in the world. Does God need us to instruct Him? Are we wiser than God? Did not Paul say that, “We have this treasure [Christ] in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will

be of God and not from ourselves.” (4:7)

There is a lack of confidence in the power of Christ, which prefers to rest on self-conceived techniques and strategies. This lack of confidence has flooded the church. It has turned many churches into sideshows and mass therapy sessions. But, we must not be diverted from God’s ordained method for the spread of the gospel in the world. We must, in the Spirit’s power, learn to preach and exalt Christ straight and direct right into our postmodern world. It has been, and always will be, God’s method for impacting a culture for the advance of the gospel in the world. This is the main element, the foundation, and the starting point of a Christ-driven, culture-impacting church. To Christ alone be all the glory!