**Dear Church Emerson Kennedy 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 July 10, 2022**

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power. (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

I believe it the year was 1974 when Lesslie Newbigin was on his way back home to Britain from India after serving as a missionary. He hadn’t been back to England in 38 years. As he and his wife road along in a bus on the long journey from India to England with only two suitcases to their name, they found themselves wondering what kind of world they’d return to.

Some commentaters on Newbigin point out that when he and his wife left, the year was 1936. This was pre-WWII. This was pre-Beatles and Sex Pistols, pre-1960s anti-establishment counter-culture that ended up taking the West by storm. As time went on, views were changing. Once firmly-held beliefs centered around sexuality, women’s “rights”, traditional modes of authority, and race were being upended. (View the online sermon for photos related to several of these items.) Post-modernity, with its meta-narrative skepticism, its disregard for objective truth, its moral relativism, and its anti-authoritarianism, was in full swing. On top of this, the world was globalizing. Instead of insularity, the world that Newbigin had once known had opened itself in new and exciting ways to other cultures. Pluralism, the affirmation of diverse cultures, religions, ideas, beliefs, races, and lifestyles, had become more than an ideal to aspire to—it had become reality. On top of ALL this, the landscape of Christianity’s place in the West had changed. When Newbigin left, countries like England and America were “Christianized” cultures, meaning they had been shaped by a Christian value system. Values like human rights, the sanctity of life, and equality of man and woman were assumed Christian values in the world he left. Most people went to church, prayed, believed in the supernatural, thought that Christians were a net positive to society, and thought that society and politics should be bent towards the Christian vision of the Kingdom of God.

When Newbigin finally arrived in 1974 in England, everything he had once known had changed. England and the West had secularized, meaning, essentially, that God had been taken out of the picture. His home had become what sociologists call a “post-Christian culture,” which doesn’t mean that the “Christian culture” was left behind entirely, but means rather that this new culture Newbigin found himself in was deconstructing—it wanted to tear down some of the things built by a Christian culture while at the same time carrying with it so many of the values of that Christian culture (human rights, sanctity of life, and more). The new culture wasn’t so much one that had moved past Christianity, rather it was one that had taken the bits of Christianity it liked, and found itself positioning itself *against* the parts that it didn’t like.

And so, after spending 38 years in one mission field, he realized that he had taken a long bus ride only to re-enter a brand new mission field. In reflecting on this new mission field, he said this:

Our society in Europe has moved, in the years since the war…During the years when I was sitting in discussion with the Hindu friends, Britain was still nominally a Christian country. Apart from the small Jewish community there was no significant non-Christian presence. Preaching the gospel was calling people back to their spiritual roots. There was little distinction between evangelism and revival. Today the situation is different…What, then, is the meaning of evangelism in this kind of society?

I love that question: “What is the meaning of evangelism in this kind of society?”

We could ask the same question regarding our culture. Like the 1970s England that Newbigin returned to, when we look at our world today, we’re a bit perplexed. Culturally, we know things have changed even if we don’t know the exact reasons for it. Today, we face all kinds of opposition, don’t we? Ger Jones, a church planter, puts this so well, he said TODAY…

We face **spiritual opposition** to sharing the gospel. We know that there’s an Enemy and that he’s doing all he can to thwart the advance of the Kingdom of God.

We face **cultural opposition** to sharing the gospel, wrestling with questions like:

What is the meaning of evangelism when you live in a world that trades **objective truth** **for** **personal truth**? We live in a culture that is like “Bro, you be you. You do you. Whatever you think is your truth is your truth—and don’t try and put your truth objectively onto others.”

What is the meaning of evangelism when you live in a society that has moved from **authority** **to** **autonomy**? Like, “Don’t tell me what to believe, the days of listening to someone else imposing their truth on me are over. I want to find out for myself.”

What is the meaning of evangelism when you live in a culture that has replaced **evidence** **with** **experience**? People want to experience what works for them. Their truth is what works for them, regardless of whether it has any sort of philosophical or scientific evidentiary foundation. Additionally, we know that culture has shifted. The “Christian culture” of the past has gone away. Once, when Christians were seen as (for the most part) a good for society. Now, Christians are seen by and large as what’s wrong with it!

We feel **personal opposition** to sharing the gospel. There’s **shame** that we can feel (“I see how some Christians act and that’s not what I want to be!”) We don’t want to be seen as intolerant, disapproving, or unloving. I have a friend who does church planting in Boston, MA and had an encounter with a lady. They were serving hot cocoa at the T-Station. An older lady walked by and said, “No way. I’m not taking anything from a bunch of rapists.” So, there can be shame.

And then there’s **fear**. When we think about the meaning of evangelism today, we have to consider social rejection, a potential loss of reputation, the potential loss of relationships. I was talking with a friend this week who said he believes his business tangibly suffers because they don’t express affirmation of current cultural issues.

On top of shame and fear, we can feel **inadequate**. People come with deep, rich, hard and personal questions, and it can feel like you have to have a PhD in philosophy, theology, sociology, history, psychology, or biology simply to be able to do enough ground work to get people to even be receptive to the message of Jesus.

And lastly, we can feel **embarrassment** because of our methods.

When Paul came traveling from Athens to Corinth, I imagine that that question must have been on his mind. He knew the cultural dynamics of this city, the gods they worshiped, such as Apollo and Aphrodite. He knew that they preferred people who looked the part of someone important—powerful, influential, wealthy, strong, authoritative, solid jaw line, 2.5 kids, etc. Paul knew they loved when speakers came in from different towns offering new “Sophia” or wisdom and he knew that they loved listening to people who could razzle them with great, eloquent speech.

If you’ve been journeying along with us through this series, then you know that Paul didn’t quite meet the expectations when come into Corinth. He came preaching not “wisdom” in the traditional sense, but the so-called “folly” of the cross. He didn’t tell the Corinthians about a great and powerful God who would vanquish their enemies through war or violence. Paul preached a crucified Messiah and said that God has overcome his enemies by dying! This made no sense to the Corinthians. As 1 Corinthians 1:23 tells us: “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles….”

Secondly, we know that when he came to Corinth he didn’t come for the elite, the wise, the influential, or the noble-birthed; rather, he came to Corinth preaching the gospel to the foolish, the weak, and the lowly, so that, “So that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:29-31).

Paul didn’t meet expectations because when he came and shared the gospel with the Corinthians, he didn’t come with razzle-dazzle, but was markedly different in five specific ways. Let’s take a look.

1. Paul came with PRESENCE

In 2:1, Paul writes, “And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.” Paul didn’t come like the normal traveling speakers did. He didn’t deliver a rehearsed speech,collect money, and then take off to the next town. No, he was different. Paul spent 18 months with these people in Corinth. Eighteen months! That’s one of the longest stays he had in his entire ministry. This guy ate, slept, cried, laughed, taught, listened, answered, and helped these people day in and day out for a year and a half.

I have a confession to make. When I was in high school, I’m pretty sure I was the “religious guy.” The fact that I’m even questioning if I was probably means that I was. As much as I hate to admit it, I was the guy who always wanted to best my atheist friends in debate. I wanted to stick it to my high school Darwinist friends! Nothing satisfied me more than taking their Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris parroted arguments and demolishing them! To be honest, it was amazing.

And I won exactly ZERO souls to the Lord doing it.

Maybe it was because as a high schooler I had sucky arguments or whatever, but maybe it was also because I lacked presence. I didn’t care about my peers. All I cared about was being right and getting the pleasure of besting someone in argument. And even if I was right, that’s wrong.

When we think about sharing Jesus with people today, it HAS to be done with *presence*. People have to know they can trust you. This is why I love what author Rosaria Butterfield says. She says, “The gospel comes with a housekey.” What’s this mean?It means the gospel comes with a shared fishing pole, it means the gospel comes with a invite to golf, it means the gospel comes with a bought lunch, it means the gospel comes with invite to peruse plant stores, it means the gospel comes by showing up to the hospital, it means the gospel comes over charcuterie, it means the gospel comes over burgers and dogs, it means the gospel comes at Super Bowl parties, it means the gospel comes in the stands at baseball games, and so on.

So, that’s the first thing. Paul came with *presence*. Here’s the second.

1. Paul came with PROCLAMATION

We see this at the end of verse one and into verse two. He says, “When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

For Paul, sharing the gospel wasn’t about wowing the senses through great speech, but it did involve speech. He had to use his words. The word for “proclaim” here is the Greek “katangello,” which is an *intensified* version of the regular word meaning “to announce” or “to proclaim.” What’s this mean? The intensity of this word *doesn’t* mean that he came shouting at people about Jesus, rather it meant that, for Paul, when he came to Corinth, he actually talked about Jesus. It means he didn’t dance around the topic. He actually *brought Jesus up* in conversation.

We know this because Acts 18:4 says that when Paul was in Corinth, he spent time in the synagogue trying to persuade people of the gospel. It says, “He reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.” And we learn that while Paul was in Corinth God even told him to NOT be silent. Acts 18 tells us that the Lord visited Paul in a vision and told him, “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent.” So that’s what Paul did. And Acts 18:11 tells us, “Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.” There was no getting around *proclaiming* the gospel for Paul.

Specifically, for Paul, he talked a lot about the cross. That’s what we read in verse 2. He says, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Of all the things that Paul could have talked about, he hung his hat here: on the cross of Jesus Christ.

I don’t about you but for me this picture is hard to get around (view online sermon to see the picture). It’s indescribable. I was literally struggling to write words about Jesus here on the cross. How can you explain it? It’s grotesque and beautiful all at the same time. It’s wisdom and foolishness all at once. It’s where absolute innocence and totalizing guilt touch. It’s where profound evil and profound mercy meet. It’s the crossroads of injustice and God’s justice. It’s an intersection of profound scandal and unqualified grace. It’s the epitome of hate being usurped by love.

This is what we proclaim. We don’t proclaim a political agenda, we don’t proclaim a certain preacher, and we don’t proclaim ourselves—we resolve to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified.

So, that’s the second thing. Paul came with *proclamation*. Now, here’s the third:

1. Paul came WITHOUT PRETENSE

Notice what Paul says in verse 3: “I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.” Of all the ways that the Corinthians expected Paul to come and try to convince them of the reality of Jesus—with great oration, with profound eloquence, with smart rhetoric—he actually had nothing to do with any of that. Instead, Paul came with great humility.

I don’t want to disparage this kind of thing entirely because I know some very humble and genuine people who do it, but there is a kind of street evangelism that is wrongly judgmental, haughty in spirit, and pretentious. It’s this kind of thing (view online sermon to see photo).

To me, there is a Grand Canyon-sized difference between *that* and engaging in a gospel conversation with a friend or family member and saying, “Hey, look, this may be weird, I don’t know, but if you’d be up for it, I’d love to sit down sometime and just learn what you think about God and spirituality and faith and stuff. I’m not sure I really know where you land on all that so I’d be genuinely interested to hear.”

A cross-centered message must be accompanied by a cross-centered life. Not one of grandstanding, not one of pride, not one comprised of impressing others, but one of weakness, fear, and trembling.

So Paul came with *presence*, *proclamation*, *without pretense*, and number four…

1. Paul came with POWER

Consider verse 4. Paul writes, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.” What does this mean? Well, scholars have a bit of back and forth on this one. Some scholars think this is a reference to signs and wonders—miracles—that Paul and the Apostles used to validate their message. We know that the Apostles did do such things. We read about it throughout the book of Acts (Paul’s hanky, for example, in Acts 19). Other scholars think it wasn’t either of these things; rather, Paul came proclaiming the message of the crucified Messiah and how the Spirit used that and changed his life—so as to say that the demonstration of the Spirit’s power is a testimony, a changed life, a story! I think it probably means BOTH of these things. Signs and wonders as well as the Holy Spirit working in and through changed lives. Both are miraculous.

I don’t know if you can walk on water, turn water into wine, or heal people with a hanky, but at the very least I know you all have a story and that is working in your life.

Some of you have those classically grandiose stories: “At one time I was a cocaine-snorting, drug-dealing, porn-watching, adulterous affair-having, gossip-talking, pride-manifesting, money-stealing…(\*gasp for air\*)…envy-possessing, God’s-name-in-vain-taking, parent-disobeying, discord-sowing, alcohol-overconsuming, angry person.”

Some of you maybe have “smaller” stories that you could share with others, about how God gives you purpose, or about how much God’s forgiveness means to you, or about how God came through for that one thing that one time.

You never know what people need when you’re talking to them. Here’s the thing though: God’s the farmer. He knows what they need. Like the little boy who brought his five loaves and two fish for Jesus to feed the 5000, all we have to do is take our stories, big or small, and let Jesus use them.

Whatever it was specifically (miracles or testimony), here’s what we know: it *wasn’t* about Paul and it’s not about us. It was about what the Holy Spirit was up to in, through, and around Paul. And it’s about what the Holy Spirit up to in, through, and around us.

So, Paul came with *power*. And finally,

1. Paul came with PURPOSE

Look at what Paul writes in verse 5: “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.” The key here is that one’s faith not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power. Paul’s not in this to develop followers of himself, to have people think he’s so smart or to have their faith’s foundation be HIM. Instead, Paul wants people to have faith in Jesus because they experienced the power of God—aka, the message of the cross.

I had a fresh encounter with the message of the cross a couple weeks ago. If you weren’t here, you missed out. Two weeks ago, Dan preached a phenomenal message on 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. I was in the Denver airport coming home from vacation when I listened to the sermon. I was sitting there, waiting to board my plane, eating a bag of whatever, and I kid you not, when Dan got to the moment in his sermon where he played the clip from the movie *The Passion of the Christ* and he started reading all those verses about Christ’s sacrifice, I had tears streaming down my face. I probably looking like a weirdo to everyone else.

This is where the power is. I’m not sure how it works. I’m not sure why it works. But there’s something about Christ and him crucified. Better than any program or persona, better than any method or means, the message of the cross is where our power lies.

So Paul came with *presence*, with *proclamation*, *without pretense*, with *power*, and with *purpose*. The result? Corinth was changed. A church was started. And after its start, it blossomed. It grew and welcomed in the lowly, the poor, the weak, and the foolish—as well as the wealthy, the influential, the powerful, and the intellectual. People were learning to love God. Discipleship was taking place. Baptisms were occurring. People were renouncing the ways of the world. People were finding life in Christ.

And when you think about it, this is how Christ came to us.

* When Jesus came, he came with *presence*. As Eugene Peterson says, with Christ’s coming, “God moved into the neighborhood.”
* When Jesus came, he came with *proclamation*. As Mark the Evangelist writes in his biography of Jesus in 1:14-15, “Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’”
* When Jesus came, he came *without pretense*. He could have come as a conqueror, as a king with his royal army; he could have come smiting those needing to be smitten, but he didn’t. Instead Christ made himself nothing, took on the form of a servant, and humbled himself by becoming obedient to death——even death on a cross!
* When Jesus came, he came in *power*. As he went around preaching and teaching, he was also healing the sick, exorcising the demon, conjuring the miraculous. The natural was invaded by the supernatural!
* When Jesus came, he came with *purpose*. Rabbi Jesus came not just with philosophy, although he was a teacher. The Son of Man came not just with miracles, although he was a healer. The Son of God came, died a godless death, and was resurrected so that the Father would be glorified, so that the Son might have his glory restored, and so that we might receive glorification of our own.

That was Jesus’ disposition towards *you*. And me. And us.

What about us? That’s how Paul brought the gospel to Corinth. That’s how Christ came to us. As we think about bringing the gospel to bear on our city, on our daughters, on our sons, on our friends, on our co-workers, when we think about the meaning of evangelism in this kind of society, that’s how we ought to come, too.

Presence, proclamation, without pretense, power, and purpose. Those are all things to which each of us can latch on. You may not be an expert or an extrovert, but you can give people your time. You may not have a PhD in philosophy but you can share with others what you love about Jesus. You may feel fearful of any social or relational repercussions that may come your way from sharing the gospel, but if you come without pretense I’m not sure you can lose. You may not feel like you have a crazy testimony to share, but you can share how Jesus has met you in a dark season. You may feel like if you share the gospel, you’re going to encounter spiritual opposition and that that’s the last thing you need in your life, but you can know that will only point people that much more to God instead of yourself.