

1 Corinthians 2:3-5

PREFACE

Question: In any gathering of believers, where is the power of God manifested or evidenced? That is, where does the *effect* of the power of God occur?

Answer: In the hearts of individual believers.

We should keep this in mind as we study the passage before us. On the surface our text could be interpreted to mean that the power of God was visibly manifested in Paul. But in everything Paul is saying here, he describes a process of getting *himself* out of the way for the “power of God” to go to work in the hearts of those in the Corinthian church.

Perhaps one of the more challenging concepts of life in Christ to apprehend, is that it is, at root, a mystical, supernatural process. The triune Godhead—works *through* people—invisibly, yet powerfully—for the good of others. There is a literal *transfer* of power from, say, the preacher to the parishioner, the teacher to the student. It isn't the speaker's power, but the power of God working *through* him—very much like what happens when the Spirit sends a bolt of lightning from the pages of familiar Scripture into the heart of the believing reader.

David Garland: Faith is based not on how entertaining, informative, or compelling the speaker is but on the power of God transforming the hearts of believers.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:3-5.

v3

We looked at v3 in our previous session, but just to refresh our memories,

1. in Corinth, Paul had just emerged—one might even say escaped—from a period of intense physical and spiritual persecution, as well as a period without the companionship and support of fellow believers;
2. he is also saying that neither his rhetoric or physical appearance expressed the strong confidence of the polished orator.

v4

Listen to how Paul describes the members of the church at the beginning of this letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

How did this happen? Clearly a truly remarkable change took place in that group of men and women, something quite powerful. But how? Clues are woven throughout the paragraph:

I thank my God always concerning you for **the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus**, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as **the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you**, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. **God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son**, Jesus Christ our Lord. (emphasis added)

Does one find anything of Paul in that paragraph? Save for his thanksgiving over what has taken place in the Corinth church, not one syllable that I can find. Verse 4 of our text explains how it happened.

and my message and my preaching...

These two words—*logos* and *kerygma* (kay' roog-mah)—can be virtually synonymous in their meaning, referring to either the *content* of the speech or the *manner* of the speech. But I would point you to what Lothar Coenen writes in the *Brown Dictionary of New Testament Theology*:

Coenen: kerygma is the phenomenon of a call which goes out and makes a claim upon the hearers; it corresponds to the life and activity of the [OT] prophets.

I believe Paul's choice of this word, which means proclamation (translated, "preaching") is one more reminder of his removal of self from his message. The most important aspect of the OT prophets was not the outward quality of their presentation or their glowing rhetoric, but the word they delivered to the people direct from Yahweh. And that word was delivered with the purpose of changing behavior, changing lives. Once a true prophet finished his message, the people did not stand around commenting on his dress, his behavior, his impressive manner of delivery; they stood in stunned silence, cut to the quick by the message from God.

...were not in persuasive words of wisdom

John MacArthur writes, "[Paul] saw no place for calculated theatrics and techniques to manipulate response."

MacArthur: I remember a pastor's saying to me one day after the morning service, "Do you see that man over there? He is one of my converts." He then explained, "Not the Lord's, but mine." The man had become a disciple of the pastor, but not a disciple of Christ.

This is not a simple, black and white issue. As is so often the case, the critical component determining the propriety of a speaker's technique is less his visible, audible delivery than the condition of his *invisible* heart. The Lord may have gifted an individual for public speaking—a gift that attracts people to hear the word of God—and it would be a misuse of that gift to restrict his delivery to a flat, dull monotone that repels more than it attracts.

The important factor is the speaker's motivation, and this is not limited to preachers: pastor, teacher, neighborhood friend, male, female—anyone who speaks to others in the name of Christ. Powerful, dynamic, even eloquent speakers have faithfully presented the gospel, pointing people to Christ, while dull, uninteresting speakers lacking charisma have promoted only themselves with false piety. What makes the difference is the condition of the heart.

but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power

The Corinthians were becoming dangerously impressed by the eloquence and wisdom of this temporal world. Paul offers an alternative: the "demonstration of the [Holy] Spirit and of power."

Before we go any further into this important and illuminating phrase I need to point out that linguistically the Greek may be translated as in most of our versions: “the Spirit and of power”—that is, referencing two things: the Holy Spirit and power. But most modern commentators agree that it can also be translated, as in the NIV: “the Spirit’s power”—that is, referencing *one* thing: the power of the Holy Spirit. Gordon Fee reminds us that Paul very often combines the two.

Read Romans 15:13.

Read Romans 15:18-19.

I learned a new word this week—a word which describes how Paul may be using this phrase if he is combining the two words into one:

hendiadys (hen-deye'-uh-dis) = a figure of speech in which two nouns joined by “and” are used instead of a noun and a modifier (*Webster’s*).

Example: “deceit and words” instead of “deceitful words.” Or “the use of two words to express the same reality” (Fee).

This may be what Paul is doing here—which the NIV reflects: “the Spirit’s power.”

Why is this important? Because the point here is that *in any room in which a speaker is expounding the word of God, any effective power present, belongs to the Spirit of God*. And the effective result of that power is manifested in those hearing the words of the speaker.

Some would say that the reference here is to the various spiritual (or *charismatic*) gifts evidenced in the church, such as speaking in tongues, which Paul addresses later in this letter. But I believe the context calls for a more general reference to their conversion. That is, when Paul refers to “demonstration,” he is not speaking specifically of the external “proofs” of the indwelling Spirit (such as tongues, interpretation, prophecy, etc.) but of the Corinthians themselves, their faith, the evident changes to their lives.

And here we can once again contrast the “weakness” Paul speaks of to the “wisdom” of the unregenerate world—specifically, the Hellenistic culture and its mystical wisdom philosophies and cults. Those who, even as believers, tried to weave this into the Christian faith, saw the “Spirit” as the gift of tongues; to them it meant “to have entered into a new existence that raised them above merely earthly existence.” Paul’s concept of the Spirit, however, “included inspired utterances—as long as they edified—but for him the emphasis lay on the Spirit’s *power*, power to transform lives, to reveal God’s secret wisdom, to minister in weakness, and to effect holiness in the believing community” (Fee). And Gordon Fee concludes with this—in which I am convinced he had in mind one Dave Lampel in Winterset, Iowa.

Fee: In other words, the purpose of the Spirit’s coming was not to transport one above the present age, but to empower one to live with it. (ouch!)

And v5 gives us the all-important “why” for this.

so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

I think that verse could and should close every study of God’s word, no matter the chapter and verse.

In vv1-4 Paul itemizes the steps he took, when arriving in Corinth for the first time, to insure this.

v1: I did not come with **superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.**

v2: For I determined to know **nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.**

v3: 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,**

Why all this? Verse 5:

so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

...so that your faith—your conviction, your creed, what you consider religious truth—would not be in the *sofia* of *anthropos*—men, women, mankind—but in the *dynamis* of *Theos*—the miraculous force of very God.

More often than not today, for believers the “wisdom of men” will consist less of pagan worship or bizarre philosophies than of error-filled teachings about God and His Christ.

We often forget how instrumental and vital are the Spirit and power of God—or, “the Spirit’s power.”

Without the Spirit there would be no Scripture, no authoritative word of God;

without the Spirit no one could understand God’s word if it *had* been written;

without the Spirit no one would be called to Christ Jesus;

without the Spirit there would be no effective preaching or teaching;

without the Spirit we would not have effective interpreters and commentators of Scripture; and

without the Spirit we would not be equipped to know if their interpretation of Scripture was right or wrong.

Without the Spirit and power of God *nothing* would work. The entirety of God’s economy for man is fitted together with precision finer than a Swiss watch. It is all necessary, and it is all there, in place, giving each of us a firm, dependable foundation on which to rest our faith.