

BUILDING A CHURCH ON THE GLORY OF CHRIST AS HE IS REVEALED IN THE GOSPEL ALONE

2 Corinthians 4:1-6

INTRODUCTION

When I placed my faith in Christ back in 1975 I was at heart an activist, a person who wanted to help change the world. While I had a sincere faith in Christ I quickly adopted as the purpose of my life telling others about Christ. Fulfilling the Great Commission in our generation is what I gave my life to do. Now listen, God intends that Christians bear witness to Christ and he intends that the whole world hear the gospel through our witness to Christ but bearing witness to Christ is not the reason he makes a Christian. It is not the ultimate purpose of God in saving a sinner. You can see the purpose of salvation in the last half of v. 6 in our text this morning: God saves us “to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” It is God’s aim to manifest and display and reveal his glory and greatness to sinners in and through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The purpose for everything, especially of our salvation, is the glory of God. The gospel is the revelation that there is nothing and no one superior to or more satisfying than the great Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This God can only be seen in the face of Jesus.

It was in 1990, after 13 years of preaching the gospel and teaching the Bible that God enabled me to see that the aim of life was to be taken up with the glory of God as revealed in Christ, not to win the world to Christ. A second thing that God enabled me to see at that time is stated in the first half of v. 6. Look at what it says, “The God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’ has made his light to shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Paul refers to God’s act of creating light on the first day of creation. He spoke into the darkness and commanded that the darkness produce light. Here we see the irresistible power of God. When he commands, what he commands comes into existence. The creation of light out of darkness is a miracle of stupendous proportion. What Paul is saying in this verse is that the making of a Christian is a miracle of equal proportion. Everyone who sees the “glory of God in the face of Christ” does so as an act of God’s omnipotent power. Just think about that, if you are a Christian you have experienced a miracle as great as the miracle of creation, of God speaking into existence the universe out of nothing. This also means that a church is a display of God’s miraculous power because it is a collection of numerous individuals who have had this same miracle accomplished in their lives.

Why does it take an act of God’s omnipotent power to make a Christian? The answer, as Paul describes it in vv. 3-4 is because human beings are blind and they are blinded. Like blind people we cannot see “the brightness of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God.” Our hearts are dark because our spiritual eyes are willfully and willingly blind and they are blinded. It takes a miracle of God to enable the blind to see and to overcome the power of the devil who blinds us. Our condition is utterly hopeless apart from the grace of God. The ability to see the glory of Christ and to hold fast to him is entirely an act motivated and accomplished by God’s determination to show forth his mercy and grace by speaking light into the dark hearts of hardened sinners.

The third thing God enabled me to see and to embrace at that time was the means by which he accomplishes the miracle work of making a Christian. Let me make sure you understand what I mean when I say, “God uses means to perform the miracle of making a Christian.” The first house that Jane and I bought did not have a garage. So I built a garage. When I say that I built a garage you know that I used means to build it. Some of the means I used were a hammer and a square and nails and wood and a saw and the knowledge and strength of friends. So when we say that God makes a Christian we also need to understand that God uses means to make a Christian. According to v. 6 what was the “means” that God used to create light out of darkness? He spoke. He commanded. His word was the means by which he made the light to come forth from the darkness. Therefore, the means God uses to accomplish the miracle of conversion, to overcome the blindness of sinners is the proclamation of his gospel, empowered by his Spirit. Verses 1-2 and 5 are a description of those means.

In these verses Paul tells us how he conducts his ministry of planting churches in light of knowing that God miraculously gives sight to the blind, light to darkened hearts by means of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus. Paul is not simply describing how he does this work but he is setting forth God's description of how he wants every pastor and elder, every parent, every Bible study leader and every church to fulfill their ministry. These verses form the heart of how we began this church and by God's grace how we will continue to be a church until Christ returns for his church. I want to give you a brief overview of what these verses are saying about how we are to build this church, this community of seeing people.

MAIN POINT

God still speaks into the darkness and creates light, therefore...

I. We do not lose heart (v. 1)

Why would Paul or for that matter a pastor, or a parent, or a church or a missionary be tempted to lose heart when engaged in the task of preaching and teaching the gospel? According to vv. 3-4 what you are attempting to do when you preach the gospel is the same thing as trying to describe the beauty of a flower to a person who has been blind from birth. That is what sharing the gospel is like; you are trying to describe the beauty of Jesus to people who have been willingly blind to his beauty from birth. In addition you are telling people who are convinced they can see that they are actually blind. If someone keeps insisting that you are blind when you can see, how will you feel about that person? If someone keeps telling you that Jesus is infinitely better than your retirement account and your car and your family and sex and vacations and Islam and Hinduism and your political party and getting your way and living a life free from concern for others and you are convinced that your retirement account and your car and your family and sex and vacations and Islam and getting your way are better than Jesus, how will you react?

Paul and all who are engaged in the ministry of proclaiming the gospel are tempted to lose heart because it is frustrating work to describe beauty to blind people and people get mad at you for doing it. Indeed they may even become violent.

But Paul says that we do not lose heart. Why is that? It is because we have been the recipient of God's mercy. What Paul is referring to here is what he has described in chapter 3 and which he summarizes at the end of v. 6. God has spoken into our hearts and now we see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus. Therefore, we love Jesus and are rabid fans of Jesus. We know, by an act of God's free grace that the Triune God is the most glorious of all beings and so we must talk about him. We also know that it is not futile to describe beauty to blind people because God who had mercy on us will also have mercy on other blind people through us. We do not stop talking about this glorious Christ as he is revealed in the gospel no matter what happens to us or how people treat us because by God's mercy Jesus is glorious to us.

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- *And therefore...*

II. We do not use secret and shameful methods (vv. 2 & 5)

In v. 2 Paul tells us that there are methods of teaching the gospel that he refuses to use. The methods that he rejects are characterized as secret and shameful methods. This phrase is referring to his motivations. In his first letter to the Thessalonians he says, "We are not trying to please men, but God who tests our hearts." There are only two possible motives for preaching the gospel, for doing the work of ministry in the church: to gain the approval of people or to gain the approval of God. The temptation we always face is the same one that Paul faced. If each time you talk about the beauty of Christ to blind people they are indifferent to you or get mad at

you then you might be tempted to change your tactics, if your goal is to gain the approval of people. If you want people to accept you, if you want people to come to your church then you might do one of three things.

You might use deception. You might pull the old bait and switch. Now, few pastors or churches intentionally set out to deceive people. However, if gathering a crowd or building a church is your goal and nobody seems interested in Jesus then you might start by talking about marriage or managing your finances or family relationships or escaping bad habits or changing the world or whatever people are interested in and then later, after people like you because you like what they like, talk about Jesus. Paul says he doesn't do that. He doesn't pretend to be interested in what people are interested in for the purpose of getting them to listen to him talk about Jesus.

Another tactic you might try is to change the message. If people don't like being told they are blind to what is truly glorious, then you might stop telling them they are blind. You might tell them their problem is that they had a bad dad or they have a bad self image or they don't have enough faith. Or if telling them that only Jesus can save them from their sins makes people mad you might tell them that Jesus wants to help them feel better about themselves and help them not be so lonely and help them be a better husband and wife. You might say that Jesus came to save you from what you think is your greatest trouble. Paul is quite clear that he does not alter the message.

A third tactic you might adopt is to promote your credentials or your own story or the amazing programs you have to meet the needs of every possible segment of the population. You might be tempted, as Paul says in v. 5, to preach yourself. A church might be tempted to gain a hearing in the community by promoting all the ways it serves and helps the community. If our goal is to get people in the door to listen to us we might invest our time and money into marketing ourselves and seeking to appeal to people on the basis of their own interests or on the basis of the celebrities we have in our church or have speak at our church. Paul rejects all of these possible approaches because he knows that there is only one way that blind people become seeing people, that people with dark hearts get hearts full of light and that is through the preaching of the whole word of God.

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III. We do set forth the truth plainly (vv. 2 & 5)

What Paul does is to “set forth the truth plainly” as he says in v. 2 or as he says in v. 5, he preaches Jesus Christ as Lord. The reason that Paul is so committed to proclaiming this one message and appealing to people on the basis of it is because he knows that it is only this message that will actually create light and make the blind to see. Paul knows that what you win people with is what you win them to. If you get people to join with you because you promote strong marriages and families then you will get a church full of people who see and savor the glory of strong marriages and families but who are going to hell because they do not see the glory of God in the face of Christ. If you get people to join your church because you are engaged in fighting abortion and homosexual marriage and those evil liberals then you will have a church full of people who see the glory of a moral society but who will go to hell because they have not seen the glory of Christ. If you get people to come to your church because you have the best music in town and the sharpest video presentations and the most empathetic and charismatic preacher around you will have a church full of people who see the glory of your church but not the glory of Christ.

I am not saying that fighting abortion and having quality music and promoting healthy marriages are evil things. What I am saying is this: if the proclamation of the whole counsel of the word of God is not at the center of the whole life of your church, not just what happens on Sunday morning, then you are not going to build a church

that is full of people who see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. We want people to join with us because they have seen the glory of God in the gospel through our proclamation of that gospel. This is not just my job or the job of the elders but the task of every person who calls RHCC their church home. The gospel of Jesus is to be the most interesting and beautiful and exhilarating topic of conversation among us. This gospel is what consumes us in our homes and in our small groups and in our personal conversations as well as on Sunday mornings because we have discovered that Jesus is the most stunning of persons by the miraculous exercise of God's gracious power through the gospel.

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IV. We do make ourselves slaves to all for the honor of Christ (v. 5)

In v. 5 Paul says that he preaches himself as “your servant for Jesus' sake.” Those of us who have seen the glory of Jesus are not proud and condescending people. We do not proclaim this message of the gospel in a haughty or arrogant manner. We do not demand that others accommodate themselves to us but we accommodate ourselves to others. As a church we lay aside our own comfort and pleasure in order to bring the gospel to others because we are the slaves of others for the sake of Jesus. Do not miss the motive here. Paul tells others the gospel, not for their sake first but for the sake of Jesus. He is a slave to others so that Jesus will be glorified. What does it mean to be a slave of others for the sake of Jesus? Parents are slaves to their children for the sake of Christ in that they set aside their right to relax in front of the TV or to have the cleanest house or the newest cars or the best dressed children or the most well rounded children by fighting to make sure they take the time to daily teach the gospel to their children. Pastors and elders and small group leaders lay aside their right to watch TV every night, to have a perfectly manicured lawn, to not be troubled by the troubles of others in order to bring the gospel to others. We all are slaves of others by refusing to use our money to build our own kingdom. We gladly deny ourselves the pleasures that money can buy in order to give money to our church so we can hire another pastor to help equip us in the work of spiritual leadership and we can finish our building so we can have adequate space to preach the gospel in all the ways God is calling us to do.

All that we do is for the sake of Jesus. It has always been our dream and our passion that the thing that would mark us as a church is that Jesus would be first in our affections and this would be revealed in how we live our lives. It has been and I pray always will be our highest objective as a church and as members of it to be taken up with the greatness and the glory of our great Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We want to be a church that is together because of our common delight in and love for Jesus and not for any other reason. We want people to join with us because here they see, through the gospel, the glory of Jesus. To this end we will do everything in our power “to commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God by setting forth the truth plainly” and we will “preach Jesus as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.”

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