



Preaching from the Cross. A Study of Paul's Preaching

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Abstract

This essay addresses three questions: Why did Paul preach? What did Paul preach? How did Paul preach? It argues that Paul preached because he was commissioned to do so at his call/conversion when the risen Christ was revealed to him. To preach the gospel was not Paul's decision. He was commissioned and sent to preach, and so the content of his proclamation was not his own. Like a "herald" of the ancient world, he proclaimed the message of the gospel, the announcement of Christ's death and resurrection, that was entrusted to him. Because he was a herald of the gospel, Paul did not preach with rhetorical eloquence lest he conceal the scandal of the crucified Christ. Rather, he proclaimed the gospel in a way that those who heard it had to choose whether to believe or reject the message of the cross he proclaimed. Thus, there is an intimate connection between *why* Paul preached, *what* he preached, and *how* he preached, which has implications for preaching today.

Keywords: cross, gospel, Paul, preaching, word

Preaching the gospel was at the heart of Paul's ministry. Nothing was more important. Paul affirms this when he writes: "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with the wisdom of human eloquence, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning" (1 Cor 1:17).¹ Paul did not say this to denigrate the importance of baptism but to respond to some at Corinth who were threatening the unity of the church by aligning themselves with the one who baptized them (see, 1 Cor 1:11-16).² But in doing so, he shows that the purpose of his ministry was to preach the gospel.

¹ Scriptural quotations are taken from the *New American Bible: Revised Edition*.

² Some members of the Corinthian community claimed they received a superior wisdom from the one who baptized them, thereby forgetting that they were baptized into the name of Christ rather than into the name of the one who baptized them. For a study of this passage, see, Maria Pascuzzi, "Baptism-based Allegiance and Divisions in Corinth: A Re-examination of 1 Corinthians 1:13-17," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009) 813-29.

In Romans 10, Paul also speaks of the importance of preaching.³ He begins by highlighting the centrality of faith for salvation: “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). Then he poses four questions: (i) How can people call on Christ if they have not believed in him? (ii) How can they believe in Christ if they have not heard of him? (iii) How can they hear of Christ unless someone preaches Christ to them? (iv) How can someone preach to them if they have not been *sent* to preach? (Rom 10:14-15). These questions reveal why preaching was so central to Paul’s ministry: *faith* in Christ, which leads to *salvation*, originates from *hearing* the word *preached* from someone who has been *sent* to proclaim the gospel.⁴ As important as baptism is (see Romans 6), therefore, Paul views preaching as the reason for his ministry.

Given the centrality of preaching for Paul’s ministry, this essay examines three questions: Why did Paul preach? What did Paul preach? How did Paul preach?⁵

Why Did Paul Preach?

Paul frequently refers to his commission to preach the gospel. For example, he says that he was called and set apart for the gospel of God (Rom 1:1). He is under an obligation to preach the gospel (Rom 1:14; 1 Cor 9:16). He has been qualified as the minister of a new covenant (2 Cor 3:6). He has been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised (Gal 2:7). He was given the grace to preach the riches of Christ to the Gentiles (Eph 3:8).⁶ He has been appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher (κῆρυξ καὶ ἀπόστολος καὶ διδάσκαλος; 2 Tim 1:11).⁷ In these and other texts, Paul recalls the event of his call and conversion, that moment when he was entrusted with and commissioned to preach the gospel so that others might *hear* and *believe* and *call* on the name of the Lord and be *saved*.

³ The occasion for what Paul says about preaching is his discussion about why Israel has failed to believe in the gospel. In the light of Israel’s failure to believe, Paul asks if the gospel has been preached to Israel.

⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer (*Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [The Anchor Bible 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993] 596) gets to the heart of the matter when he notes: “The message of God’s gospel must come to human beings from outside of them; it cannot rise spontaneously in their hearts or minds. They have to be accosted by it as announced by a commissioned herald.”

⁵ For an introduction to Paul’s preaching, see “Preaching, Kerygma” by R. H. Mounce, pp. 735-37 in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993). For a comprehensive study of Paul’s preaching with a focus on 1 Corinthians 1–4, see Duane Litfin, *Paul’s Theology of Preaching: The Apostle’s Challenge to the Art of Persuasion in Ancient Corinth* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015).

⁶ Throughout this essay I draw from *all* the Pauline letters, even those whose Pauline authorship is disputed (2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus), since these letters preserve important Pauline traditions about his preaching, even if they may not have been written by him.

⁷ Behind the translation “preacher” is the Greek κῆρυξ, which refers to a “herald.” In the ancient world, the herald was designated by an authority to proclaim, in a loud voice, some item of news. The κῆρυξ did not announce his own message but a message given to him by another. Although the noun κῆρυξ occurs only in 1 Tim 2:7 and 2 Tim 1:11, letters whose Pauline authorship is disputed, it is presumed in Paul’s frequent use of the verb κηρύσσειν.

The Central Event: The central event in Paul's life that determined all that followed was his encounter with the risen Christ. Whereas Luke narrates that event three times in vivid detail (Acts 9, 22, 26), Paul does not. Throughout his letters, however, he appeals to his call/conversion⁸ to establish his right to preach to the Gentiles and to assure his converts of the reliability of the gospel he proclaimed to them. In what follows, I will deal with some representative texts that highlight the relationship Paul draws between his call and his preaching. These texts will show that Paul's preaching was not the result of a personal decision on his part but the outcome of an obligation imposed upon him when God revealed to him that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the Son of God.⁹

The most important statement about Paul's call/conversion occurs in Gal 1:13-24 as his response to those who called into question his apostleship and the gospel he preached to the Galatians, a gospel that did not require his Gentile converts to be circumcised and do the works of the law in addition to believing in Christ.¹⁰

Paul begins by reminding the Galatians of his former way of life as a zealot for his ancestral traditions, thereby recalling his impeccable Jewish credentials (1:13-14). He then describes how God, who had set him apart from his mother's womb and called him through grace (see Isa 49:1 and Jer 1:4), revealed his Son to him so that he might proclaim the Son of God to the Gentiles (vv. 15-17). Once he was called by God, Paul immediately went to Arabia where, perhaps, he preached the gospel that had been entrusted to him. Unlike Luke, who presents Paul's call as coming from Christ in a Christophany, Paul describes his call as a revelation from God who revealed that the crucified Jesus is his Son (v. 16).¹¹ God reveals his Son to Paul because, while Paul was still in his mother's womb, God had chosen and set him apart to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (1:15). The upshot of what Paul narrates is twofold. First, his apostleship comes directly from God and Jesus Christ (1:1). Second, the gospel he preaches is not of human origin (1:11). Consequently, his converts can be confident of (i) his right to preach and (ii) the content of the gospel he proclaimed to them.

A Sense of Obligation: Because of his call/conversion Paul lived with a deep sense of obligation and responsibility, especially since he had persecuted and tried to destroy the church. The experience he had of the risen Christ was so

⁸ I use the expression "call/conversion" because Paul's Damascus Road experience was both a prophetic call (see Isa 49:1 and Jer 1:4) and a conversion. His conversion, however, was not from one religion to another but from total dedication to Torah to total dedication to Christ.

⁹ For a discussion of Paul's call/conversion, see Jürgen Becker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles* (Louisville: Westminster, 1993), pp. 57-81; Frank J. Matera, *God's Saving Grace: A Pauline Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 16-35.

¹⁰ Paul must contend with missionaries who have come to Galatia, after he established several congregations there, and questioned his apostleship and gospel, which did not require Gentiles to be circumcised and do the works of the Mosaic Law. For a helpful introduction to the background and theology of Galatians, see James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (New Testament Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139166201>

¹¹ Paul also describes his encounter with Christ as a Christophany (1 Cor 9:1), which suggests his call may be described as a revelation *from* God that Christ is God's Son as well as a revelation *of* Christ to Paul.

powerful and overwhelming that he was compelled to preach what had been revealed to him. Paul alludes to this sense of obligation in his letter to the Romans: "To Greeks and non-Greeks alike, to the wise and the ignorant, *I am under obligation* (ὀφειλέτης εἰμί); that is why I am eager to preach the gospel also to you in Rome" (1:14). Paul is under obligation to preach because he was "called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God" (Rom 1:1). The gospel is not something he chose to proclaim but a message he was *sent* to proclaim.¹²

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul discusses his obligation to preach the gospel.¹³ He begins by reminding the Corinthians that he is an apostle: "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (9:1). After reminding the Corinthians that he has a right as an apostle to be supported by them, he affirms that he has not made use of this right "so as not to place an obstacle to the gospel of Christ" (9:12). He then explains why he has chosen not to be supported by the community: "If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me (ἀνάγκη γάρ μοι ἐπίκειται), and woe to me if I do not preach it!" (9:16). The obligation to which Paul refers derives from his call/conversion. Although he had previously persecuted the church, he was graciously treated and set aside to be an apostle. From Paul's point of view, then, he is under an obligation to proclaim Christ. But he has a choice. If he preaches willingly (ἐκὼν), he will have a recompense. But if he does not preach willingly (ἄκων), he will merely be exercising a stewardship that has been imposed upon him. (9:17). Faced with this choice, Paul elects to preach willingly, that is, "free of charge" (ἀδάπανον), without requiring the support of the community (9:18). His recompense for preaching the gospel, then, is his boast that even though he is under obligation and even though he has a right to the community's support, he preaches freely and without cost.

Servant and Steward: As a preacher of the gospel, Paul understands that he is a servant of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God. As a steward of the gospel his first responsibility is to be trustworthy (1 Cor 4:1-2). In 2 Corinthians, Paul is overwhelmed by the ministry with which he has been entrusted, a ministry that has the power to bring life to those who believe in the gospel and death to those who reject it (2 Cor 2:15-16). And so, he asks "Who is qualified for this" (2 Cor 2:16)? Who is qualified to preach with such power? Although no one is qualified for such a ministry, Paul affirms that God has qualified him to be the minister of a new covenant, "not of letter but of spirit" (2 Cor 3:6). On the one hand, then, Paul acknowledges that he is not self-qualified to preach the word of God. On the other, he affirms that he has been qualified to be the minister of a new covenant by the powerful Spirit of God at work in him.

¹² On Paul's sense of obligation or indebtedness, Arland J. Hultgren (*Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 66) writes: "Being indebted or obligated to these [Jews and Gentiles] is due to his being an apostle commissioned to reach the Gentiles (Rom 1:5-6; 11:13). It is as though he 'owes' them something, and that is the gospel. Although his primary indebtedness is to God for God's saving work through Christ, Paul is 'under obligation' to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles, to whom God had sent him."

¹³ This discussion of Paul's preaching occurs in a section (chapter 8–10) in which Paul must mediate between believers with a strong conscience and those with a weak conscience by asking them to accommodate themselves to each other just as he has accommodated himself to them for the sake of the gospel.

The answer to our first question (Why did Paul preach?) can be summarized as follows. Paul preached because he was called and sent to do so when God revealed his Son to him. Because of this revelation, Paul felt himself under an obligation to preach the gospel. Although under obligation, he chose to preach willingly and without charge. Called and qualified as the minister of a new covenant, he exercises what he calls "the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering up of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the holy Spirit" (Rom 15:16).¹⁴ Paul was deeply aware that his preaching ministry was a gift. He became a minister of the gospel, "by the gift of God's grace that was granted me in accord with the exercise of his power" (Eph 3:7). He was given the grace "to preach to the Gentiles the inscrutable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8). He was entrusted with "the glorious gospel of the blessed God" (1 Tim 1:11), appointed a preacher, apostle, teacher (1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11).

What Did Paul Preach?

The content of Paul's preaching is intimately related to his call/conversion as he testifies in his letter to the Galatians: "the gospel preached by me is not of human origin. For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:11-12). Here, Paul affirms that the gospel is not something he received from others, nor did others teach it to him. Rather, it came δι' ἀποκαλύψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ("through a revelation of Jesus Christ"), by which he means a revelation *about* Jesus Christ that God granted to him when God called Paul to be an apostle (1:15-16).¹⁵ At that moment, Paul understood that the crucified Jesus whose followers he had been persecuting was God's Son. Thus, Paul draws a relationship between his call to be an apostle and the gospel he preaches. He preaches what was revealed to him when he was called to be an apostle; namely, that the crucified Jesus is God's Son. Because Jesus Christ is the content of his preaching, Paul writes: "For we do not preach ourselves (Οὐ γὰρ ἑαυτοὺς κηρύσσομεν) but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for the sake of Jesus" (2 Cor 4:5). This does not mean that Paul did not grow in his understanding of Christ and the gospel, but it does suggest that his proclamation of the gospel grew out of what God revealed to him. Accordingly, while Paul received and used traditions about Jesus that had been handed on to him (see, 1 Cor 15:3), and while he grew in his knowledge of what God had done in Christ, the *origin and content* of his preaching was grounded in the revelation about Jesus Christ that God disclosed to him at his call/conversion.

The Gospel: The word "gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον) summarizes what Paul preached (εὐαγγελίζω).¹⁶ In most instances, Paul simply speaks of "the gospel." For exam-

¹⁴ Fitzmyer (*Romans*, 711) notes: "If all Christian life is to be regarded as a worship paid to God (12:1), the spreading of the Christ's gospel is easily compared to the role of a sacred minister in worship. Paul implies that the preaching of the word of God is a liturgical act in itself."

¹⁵ The Greek can be construed as a revelation *from* Jesus Christ or a revelation *about* Jesus Christ. But since Paul says that God revealed his Son to him (Gal 1:16), it is best taken in the latter sense as a revelation about Jesus Christ.

¹⁶ For a summary of what Paul's means by "the gospel," see James, D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 163-81, Matera (*God's Saving Grace*), pp. 35-41; Michael Wolter, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015), pp.

ple, he writes that he is not ashamed of the gospel because it is God's power, which brings people to salvation (Rom 1:16). But he employs other expressions as well. Some of these relate the gospel to God: "the gospel of God" (Rom 1:1; 15:16; 1 Thess 2:2, 8, 9), "the glorious gospel of the blessed God" (1 Tim 1:11). Others relate the gospel to the Son, to Christ, or to the Lord Jesus: "the gospel of his Son" (Rom 1:9), "the gospel of Christ" (Rom 15:19; 1 Cor 9:12; 2 Cor 2:12; 9:13; 1 Thess 3:2), "the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4), "the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thess 1:8). Still others relate the gospel to Paul: "my gospel" (Rom 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim 2:8), "our gospel" (2 Cor 4:3), by which he means the gospel he preached about Christ, not his personal version of the gospel. Others describe those to whom the gospel is directed or the gift the gospel brings: "the gospel for the circumcised" and "the gospel for the uncircumcised" (Gal 2:7), "the gospel of your salvation" (Eph 1:13), "the gospel of peace" (Eph 6:15). Despite the many ways he refers to the gospel, its content is always focused on Jesus Christ. When Paul employs the noun "gospel" then, he is referring to the substance of his preaching, namely, what God did in Jesus Christ.

The Content of the Gospel: At certain points in his letters, Paul provides us with a fuller description of what he means by the gospel. Four texts are noteworthy: Rom 1:1-8, Rom 1:16-17, 1 Cor 1:18-25, and 1 Cor 15:1-11.

Romans 1:1-8. In his greeting to the Romans (1:1-8), Paul draws a relationship between his call and the gospel. He is an apostle who has been set apart for the "gospel of God." His preaching, as I have noted, has its origin in his call. He goes on to say that this gospel of God (God's own good news) had been promised in Israel's scriptures through God's prophets. In v. 3 he outlines its essential content. First it is "the gospel about his Son" who, according to human descendant, was David's son but established as "Son of God in power" through the resurrection from the dead.¹⁷ It is from the Son of God that Paul has received this grace of apostleship to bring the Gentiles to the obedience of faith. There are two points here. First, the gospel is deeply rooted in Israel's scriptures; it is the fulfillment of prophetic promise. Accordingly, in his preaching, Paul shows how the gospel is related to the scriptures.¹⁸ Second, the gospel proclaims Jesus' human descent from David as well as his divine sonship that was manifested in power through his resurrection from the dead.

Romans 1:16-17. After this greeting, Paul announces the theme he will develop in the body of the letter. In doing so, he provides a summary of the gospel he will preach through this letter that he is sending to the Christians at Rome. The gospel, he affirms, is a manifestation of the power of God that brings salvation to all

51-69.

¹⁷ The does not mean that Jesus became the Son of God at the resurrection. Rather, at the resurrection he was manifested in power as the Son of God that he always was.

¹⁸ This is apparent in Paul's discussion of Israel in Romans 9–11 where he makes extensive use of scripture to support his argument that God has not rejected Israel. For a summary of Paul's use of scripture in Romans 9–11, see Ronald D. Witherup, *Scripture and Tradition in the Letters of Paul*; Biblical Studies from the Catholic Biblical Association of America 4 (New York: Paulist Press, 2021) pp. 46-79.

who believe it: first to the Jews because of their priority in God's plan of salvation, then to the Gentiles who have been admitted to this economy of grace through the death and resurrection of Christ. The gospel is the power of God (δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ) because when it is proclaimed the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη γὰρ θεοῦ) is revealed from faith to faith. This righteousness is God's uprightness, justice, covenant faithfulness, God's integrity, the appropriation of which begins and ends with faith.¹⁹

In these two descriptions of the gospel, Paul anticipates what he will "preach" to his audience through this letter: (i) the gospel is deeply rooted in Israel's scriptures; (ii) its subject is the Son of God, a descendant of David as regards human descent and the Son of God in power as was revealed at his resurrection from the dead; (iii) it manifests the power and righteousness of God leading to salvation for all who believe it. Consequently, if we want a concrete example of how Paul preached, we need look no further than his letter to the Romans, through which he preached to the Roman Christians *before he arrived at Rome*. To hear Paul's letter read in the worshipping assembly was to hear Paul preach.²⁰

In 1 Corinthians, there are two passages in which Paul expands on his understanding of the gospel. In the first the scandal of the cross plays the central role, which could give the impression that Paul is neglecting the resurrection. But in the second text, the resurrection takes center stage, thereby revealing that these two passages complement each other.²¹

1 Corinthians 1:18-26. Paul must remind his Corinthian converts of the message of the gospel because their divisions and factions reveal they have not fully comprehended the implications of the gospel he preached to them. They are seeking the status that comes from wisdom and power even though the gospel Paul preaches is rooted in the weakness and folly of the cross. Accordingly, Paul begins by noting that the word of the cross (ὁ λόγος ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ) is foolishness to those who are on the way to perdition, whereas for those who are on the way to salvation it is the power of God (cf. Rom 1:16). To support this statement, he draws on Isa 29:14 to show that God intended to destroy the wisdom of the wise and to set aside the learning of the learned. He then explains how God did this in Christ. Since the world did not know God from its wisdom, God willed to save those who believe through the foolishness of the kerygma (ὁ θεὸς διὰ τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος σῶσαι τοὺς

¹⁹ The righteousness of God can be construed as God's own righteousness or as the righteousness that comes *from* God, which God gives to those who believe in Jesus Christ. Ultimately, it has both senses since God's own righteousness leads to humanity's righteousness and justification. The emphasis in 1:17 and throughout Romans, however, is on God's activity, which results in justification for humanity. On this question, see Fitzmyer (*Romans*), pp. 253-68.

²⁰ Ann L. Jervis (*The Purpose of Romans: A Comparative Letter Structure Investigation*; Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series 55 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991] 164) makes this point when she writes: "The function of Romans is to preach the gospel by letter to the Christian converts at Rome."

²¹ For an exposition of 1 Cor 1:18-26, see Litfin (*Paul's Theology of Preaching*), pp. 182-221. For 1 Corinthians 15, see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), pp. 312-61.

πιστεύοντα; 1:21). Then, in a powerfully rhetorical statement, Paul describes how Jews and Gentiles were taken aback by the proclamation of the crucified Christ.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,
but we proclaim Christ crucified,
 a stumbling block to Jews
 and foolishness to Gentiles,
 but to those who are called,
 Jews and Gentiles alike,
Christ the power of God
and the wisdom of God
 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom
 and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.
 (1:22-25)

Although the word “gospel” does not occur in 1:18-25, it is apparent from what Paul writes in the preceding verse that he is describing the content of the gospel he preaches: “For Christ did not send me to baptize but *to preach the gospel*, and not with the wisdom of human eloquence, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning” (1:17). The gospel Paul preaches is the word of the cross, which proclaims how God’s power and wisdom are revealed in the weakness and folly of the cross.

1 *Corinthians 15:1-11*. A first reading of what Paul writes in 1 Cor 1:18-25 might lead one to suppose that the gospel is only about the word of the cross. But in 1 *Corinthians 15*, Paul turns his attention to the resurrection as he deals with another problem: the denial by some of his converts that there will be a bodily resurrection. Accordingly, Paul must remind the Corinthians of the gospel he preached to them, which they received, and through which they are being saved, if they hold fast to the word that he proclaimed (15:1-2). He summarizes the content of the gospel this way:

For I handed on to you of first importance what I also received:
 that Christ died for our sins
in accordance with the scriptures;
 that he was buried;
 that he was raised on the third day
in accordance with the scriptures;
 that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve (15:3-5)

The content of the gospel Paul preaches and which other apostolic witnesses preach as well (see 15:11) is summarized in this tradition that Paul received: the Lord’s death, burial, resurrection, and his appearance to witnesses who testify that he was raised from the dead.

There are other passages that summarize the content of the Pauline gospel, some of which may have been composed by others in his name (see Gal 2:15-21; Eph 1:3-14, 2:1-10; Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-20; 2 Tim 1:9-11; Titus 3:4-7). But the four I have

examined are sufficient to show there is a well-defined content to the kerygma that Paul summarizes by the word "gospel."

Hearing Paul's Preaching Today: While Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, provides us with examples of how he envisioned Paul's missionary preaching among Jews and Gentiles, the Pauline letters do not record Paul's preaching.²² However, I would like to propose that examples of Paul's preaching may be embedded in his letters. For example, Paul composed his letter to the Romans as a way of proclaiming the gospel to the Roman congregation *before* he arrived so that the Roman Christians could *hear* his gospel. Consequently, when the Roman Christians heard the letter read in their assembly, they were *hearing* Paul's preaching in the voice of the one reading the letter. Likewise, when Paul sent his letter to the Galatians, he was doing more than addressing a problem in the community; he was preaching the gospel to assure the Galatians that they were justified on the basis of faith in Christ rather than on the basis of circumcision and doing the works of the law. The same might be said of the letter to the Ephesians, which is generally viewed as a circular letter intended to be read in many churches.²³ Even if Ephesians was not written by Paul, as some maintain, it is a proclamation of the Pauline gospel, and those who hear it today are hearing Paul preach to them about God's economy of salvation in Christ and the implications of that economy for their salvation. Accordingly, while we do not possess a text of Paul's preaching, the Pauline letters provide us with the content of the gospel about Christ that he preached, and they show us the implications of that saving event for our lives.²⁴

How Did Paul Preach?

Just as there is an intimate connection between *why* Paul preached and *what* he preached, so there is a nexus between *what* he preached and *how* he preached. For, just as he did not preach what he wanted to preach but what he had been entrusted to proclaim, so he preached in a way that corresponded to the word of the cross he received. He preached in a manner that confronted his converts with the weakness and folly of the crucified Christ.

Not in Persuasive Words: As Paul tries to diffuse the factions threatening the unity of the church at Corinth, he reminds the Corinthians that Christ did not

²² In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke records examples of Paul's preaching to Jews (13:16-41), Gentiles (17:22-31), and Christian communities (20:18-35). While these are not verbatim speeches, they are examples of how Luke, a sometime companion of Paul, understood the content of Paul's preaching. For a study of how Luke presents Paul's preaching, see Wenxi Zhang, *Paul Among Jews: A Study of the Meaning and Significance of Paul's Inaugural Sermon in the Synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:16-41) for His Missionary Work among Jews* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011). For a study of all the speeches in Acts, see Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

²³ Ephesians is viewed as a circular letter because the words "in Ephesus" are not present in the opening salutation of the best manuscripts (Eph 1:1). This suggests that the names of other communities may have been inserted at this place in the letter greeting when it was read aloud to them.

²⁴ It is not unreasonable to assume that portions of Paul's letters were set pieces drawn from his preaching, for example, the discussion of the Spirit in Romans 8 and the discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15.

send him to baptize but to preach the gospel, “and not with the wisdom of eloquence (οὐκ ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου), so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning” (1:17). Paul is keenly aware that if he proclaims the gospel in eloquent and persuasive words, he runs the risk of concealing the scandal of the cross. And if does, his converts will believe because of his persuasive speech rather than because of what God accomplished in the weakness of the crucified Christ. Consequently, Paul reminds the Corinthians that when he came to them to preach “the mystery of God” (τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ; 2:1), he did not come “with sublimity of words or of wisdom” (καθ’ ὑπεροχὴν λόγου ἢ σοφίας; 2:1). Rather, he determined to preach Christ crucified so that their faith would rest on what God had done in Christ rather than on the eloquence of his preaching.²⁵

Paul’s refusal to proclaim the gospel with the wisdom of human eloquence does not mean that he preached as if *how* he preached did not matter. The rhetorical structure of his letters, for example, the opening chapter of 1 Corinthians, testifies to the care with which he proclaimed the gospel. Rather, he did not engage in the kind of rhetoric and wisdom that removed the scandal of the crucified Messiah.

We see an example of how Paul preached from what he writes in his letter to the Galatians when he reprimands his Gentile converts who were tempted to adopt a way of life that would supplement faith in Christ with doing the works of the law, thereby suggesting that what God had done in Christ was not sufficient to justify them. But in fact, they are already justified on the basis of faith because they received the Spirit when they believed in the gospel of the crucified Christ that Paul preached to them. Thus, Paul writes: “O stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was *publicly portrayed as crucified*” (Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς προεγράφη ἐσταυρωμένος; 3:1)? This statement indicates that when Paul preached to the Galatians, the content of his proclamation was the crucified Christ, and it was on the basis of faith in what they heard in that proclamation that they received the Spirit rather than on the basis of doing the works of the law (3:2). Rather than hide the scandal of the cross behind eloquent words of wisdom to make the gospel acceptable to the Galatians, Paul preached Christ in such a vivid way that the Galatians could *see* the crucified one before them as the *heard* Paul, and so they had to choose whether or not to believe in what God had done in Christ on the cross. And when they did believe, they received the Spirit and were justified.

Paul’s refusal to preach the gospel with the wisdom of human eloquence led some of the Corinthian to question his apostleship and prose. In 2 Cor 10:10, for example, he quotes an accusation against him: “His letters are severe and forceful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible” (ὁ λόγος ἐξουθενημένος). The charge against Paul is that he writes a severe and forceful (βαρεῖαι καὶ ἰσχυραί) letter, but his weak physical presence and his preaching do

²⁵ The thesis of Litfin’s study (*Paul’s Theology of Preaching*) is that Paul viewed himself as a “herald” of the gospel: someone sent to proclaim a message entrusted to him. It was not his task to persuade others by his eloquence, as did the rhetoricians of his day, but to present the message entrusted to him and allow the Spirit to work in those who heard the word of the gospel.

not correspond to his powerful letters.²⁶ Rather than deny the charge, Paul admits he is “untrained in speaking” (ιδιώτης τῷ λόγῳ). But this does not mean that he is inferior to those whom he calls “superapostles,” evangelists who have come to Corinth and preached with great eloquence (11:5-6). In Paul’s view, these superapostles are “false apostles, deceitful workers, who masquerade as apostles of Christ” (11:13). For, as eloquent as their preaching is, they do not proclaim the scandal of the cross, the scandal of a crucified Messiah.

With Integrity and without Cost: In 2 Corinthians, Paul distinguishes himself from “many” who “trade on the word of God (καπηλεύοντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ” (2:17). The Greek word that he employs here refers to the activity of merchants or retailers and suggests that some of those who have come to Corinth are like petty merchants who preach for the sake of profit and gain. In contrast to them, Paul has not accepted remuneration for his proclamation of the word. Aware that this has caused some to question his apostolic credentials, he writes: “Did I make a mistake when I humbled myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel to you *without charge?*” (11:7). Having been graciously treated by God and aware of the grace God lavished upon him in Christ, Paul insists on preaching free of charge.

Paul’s refusal “to trade on the word of God” is an indication of his apostolic integrity, by which I mean the correspondence between what he says and who he is. He insists on this integrity at the outset of 2 Corinthians when he writes: “For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with the simplicity and sincerity of God, and not by human wisdom but by the grace of God” (1:12). Rather than trade on the word of God, he acts “as out of sincerity, indeed as from God and in the presence of God, we speak in Christ” (2:17). Preaching the gospel free of charge is a manifestation of Paul’s apostolic integrity, which is grounded in an awareness that, when he preaches, he is proclaiming Christ, in the presence of God (ὡς ἐκ θεοῦ κατέναντι θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ λαλοῦμεν).

In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12, Paul provides an extended description of how he did and did not preach the word among the Thessalonians.²⁷ He did not preach with ulterior motives so as to deceive them. Rather, deeply aware that God had judged him worthy to be entrusted with the gospel, he did not preach to please human beings but to please God. Accordingly, he did not come to them with flattering speech, or seeking money. And even though he could have insisted on his apostolic authority, he chose to be as gentle “as a nursing mother cares for her children”

²⁶ Victor Paul Furnish (*11 Corinthians: Translated with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* [The Anchor Bible 32A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1984], 468 <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261677>) notes that the charge against Paul has to do more with the style of his preaching than with its content. Paul’s opponents at Corinth view him as an amateur who falls short of the oratorical standards they expect from an apostle.

²⁷ For the full presentation of how Paul portrays his preaching to the Thessalonians, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*; The Anchor Bible 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 133-63. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261684>

(v. 7). He was determined to share not only the gospel of God but his very self with them. This is why he supported himself so that he could preach the gospel without being a burden to them. His behavior toward them was blameless, for he treated them as a father treats his children (v. 11). In turn, the Thessalonians did not receive his word as a merely human word but as the word of God that was powerfully at work in them (2:13).

Preaching from the Cross: The title of this essay (“Preaching from the Cross”) was chosen to suggest *how* Paul preached. This title could mean that Paul preached *from the perspective of the cross*, or it could mean that he preached *from the cross*, *as if he himself had been crucified on the cross with Christ*. I intend both meanings. First, inasmuch as Paul preached Christ crucified, the cross is always in view in his preaching as we have seen, even when he speaks of the resurrection. Second, inasmuch as Paul had been conformed to the crucified Christ so that he no longer lives but Christ lives in him (Gal 2:19-20), he preached *from* the cross on which he has been crucified to the world with Christ (Gal 6:14). Thus, crucified with Christ, he preached from the weakness and folly of the cross in order to proclaim the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ and the power of this gospel (2 Cor 12:9-10). Any other way of preaching would have been a betrayal of the gospel he proclaimed.

To summarize, Paul preached the gospel with integrity, free of charge, because he was deeply aware that what he preached was not his word but the word of the gospel that had been entrusted to him. Consequently, it is not a word to “trade on” for profit, nor is it a word that can be preached by one who is not a person of integrity. To preach the word of God in truth requires integrity and humility since it is not the preacher’s word but God’s word.

Conclusion

I have sought to determine *why* Paul preached, *what* he preached, and *how* he preached. My reading of his letters suggests that the driving force of his preaching was the commission to preach he received at his call/conversation, which placed him under an obligation to proclaim the gospel. The content of the gospel that he received was the crucified Jesus who is the risen Lord, the Son of God, by whose death God reconciled the world to himself. Because this gospel is intimately related to the weakness and folly of the cross, Paul preaches “from the cross,” that is to say, he does not rely on the power and wisdom of his rhetoric to bring his hearers to faith but on the power and wisdom of God revealed in the weakness and folly of the cross. Thus, there is an intimate connection between *why* Paul preached, *what* he preached, and *how* he preached that suggests some important lessons for preaching today.

First, ecclesial preaching (preaching in and for the Church) is rooted in a commission to preach from the Church. Ministers of the word have been commissioned and entrusted with a stewardship to preach what has been handed on to them by others rather than what they want to preach.²⁸ Second, the content

²⁸ In Paul’s words, they are “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:20) who, like all ambassadors,

of their preaching, when all else is stripped away, is the gospel: the proclamation of the saving event of Christ's death and resurrection, with all this implies for the Christian life. Third, since ministers of the word have been sent to preach the "scandal" of the cross, they must trust the power of the word of the cross, rather than their own power, to bring about faith so that others may *believe* and *call* on the name of the Lord and be *saved*, even as they make every effort to preach in a way that will be effective for the age in which they live.²⁹

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deliver the message of the one who sent them rather than their own message.

²⁹ For a significant theological analysis of preaching, see Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI, *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2005).

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