

**The Average Preaching of Paul,
And the Lessons I learned from Pastor Steve Gaines
1 Cor. 2:1-5
Bellevue Baptist Church**

The message begins with a clip of Steve Gaines preaching: "Where Have All the Preachers Gone."

Once upon a time, there was a preacher who filled the pulpit for one of his friends. Sometimes it's fun to preach in other people's churches, especially when you can recycle last Sunday's sermon.

This particular preacher, we'll call him, "Sam," went to this church and delivered what he believed to be one of the finest expositions the church had ever heard. When the sermon was over, he went to the back of the church and shook the hands of congregants as they departed. The first few ladies fed his ego, saying, "We wish our preacher would be gone more." Sam felt just a little convicted for finding joy in that.

And then a little old man, with a cane, came next. He abruptly said, "Your sermon was too long." Then, he went and sat down.

Sam tried to let the comment roll off him. Everyone's entitled to their own opinion.

Next in line were a few teenagers. They shook his hand, and told him how cool he was for telling a story about their favorite sports hero, in the message. They gave Sam a fist bump and they moved on.

When he looked up, that little old man with the cane was back in line. "You chased a lot of rabbits in that sermon," he said. Sam was confused how the old man jumped the line twice.

And after a few more positive comments, that same man showed up a third time, "You blink your eyes a lot when you preach," he said.

At this point, Sam leaned over to the Associate Pastor and said, "Do you see that little old man with the cane over there? Who is that guy?"

And the Associate Pastor said, "Oh, don't worry about him. All he does is go around and repeat everything he hears."

Preaching is one of the most humbling tasks on planet Earth. To be a preacher is to live every Sunday afternoon, in a state of regret, wishing that you had said something better or made that point more clear.

When a preacher puts forth a sermon, he dreams of his people walking away saying, "Man that preacher can shuck the corn." Or "Wow, what a sermon today. What a

spiritual feast!” Preachers want to know that their work was not in vain and that people appreciate the messages.

In 1 Corinthians 2, the Apostle Paul is dealing with people who did not appreciate his preaching. In the eyes of some, Paul was a pretty good writer, but a pretty average preacher. These Corinthian people were quite familiar with Paul’s program.

In Acts 18, it says that Paul planted the church in Corinth and then remained there for a year and a half. Those people knew the way he preached: his style, his rhythm, his quirks, his favorite phrases and “classic” gestures.

But now Paul had spent considerable time away from Corinth. Other preachers stepped up and built on the foundation that he had laid. 1 Cor. 1 lists both Peter and Apollos as follow-up preachers. In the aftermath of Paul’s departure, it seems that Paul’s podcast was no longer downloaded. In fact, some were doubting whether Paul was even worth listening to any more. They discounted his ministry.

I want you to watch now, how Paul pipes up and defends his style of preaching. He makes it clear that he preached a particular way for a particular reason. I’d like to use this passage to describe the way the Bible elevates the role of preaching the church, and also take some moments to celebrate the incredible preaching ministry of Steve Gaines.

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. ² I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. ⁴ My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, ⁵ so that your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God’s power. 1 Co 2:1–5

In this text Paul is referring to preaching. What makes for powerful preaching? No doubt you have heard hundreds of sermons before? Like meals on the table, some are more tasty than others? What are the criteria for effective sermons?

Old Testament scholar Walt Kaiser once said to a group of graduating preacher boys. He admonished them in this way: “When you preach, always keep one finger on the text.”

If the preacher is gesturing with his right hand, he should tether his left hand to the text. If he reverses hands for gesturing, then he should hold his spot in the text. If he is a faithful preacher, He should *always* be pointing people to the Scriptures.

Kaiser wasn’t being completely literal, but his point was well made. It is the Word of God that changes peoples’ lives, and not a particular style. The Apostle Paul was

concerned that the church in Corinth had gotten caught up in style. They had come to believe that fine speeches and academic lectures were what the church really needed. Paul was concerned that the church had stumbled onto something that would swell the church faster than the message of Christ and him crucified.

I want you to notice in the text how Paul distinguished good preaching from bad. Look in the text. V.1. *When I came to you brothers, I did not come with eloquence...*

Ineffective Preachers...

1. Are too concerned with sounding smooth. (v.1)

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom.

That phrase brilliant speech—Paul uses the word *hyperochen* (*hu-pair-o-cain*). The NIV translates that “eloquence.” The ESV says “lofty” speech. Another translation reads, “high sounding words.” Paul says, “I did not wow you with my word choices.” I wasn’t trying to come across as slick or polished. I know what you Greeks are used to...and I made no attempt to go there.

In 1st century Greek culture, public speaking was a high form of entertainment. It was a pastime to line up pontificators. People didn’t have streaming apps and social media to entertain them. Instead they had high sounding public speakers, who could move them to tears with a string of well-woven stories. Winston Churchill was that kind of speaker. When he delivered his political speeches, he could hold those people in the palm of his hand. It was not that he was a natural, either. He practiced. He was disciplined. He stood in front of a mirror rehearsing his facial expressions and thinking through his body language. The margins of his manuscripts have little notes scrawled on them anticipating cheers and standing ovations. He was a well-polished orator, and people would line up to hear his larger than life speeches.

The Apostle Paul understood the culture of Corinth craved remarkable rhetoric. And here, 1 Cor. 2, Paul confesses that he purposely played down his delivery. It wasn’t that wanted to be boring and monotone. It wasn’t that he refused to prepare and to think through his thoughts. He just avoided any kind of showmanship that might lead people to put him on their poster.

Later in 2 Cor 10:10, Paul seems to confess that his preaching has not been popular. He gives voice to the critics. He writes:

For some say, “[Paul’s] letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.” 2 Cor. 10:10

Man, that hurts! Can you just imagine the conversation Sunday afternoon at the grocery store? “How was church today? Ok. The preacher was unimpressive and his

sermon amounted to nothing. But Sunday School was good.”

Surely these comments had to sting when they reached Paul. Perhaps Paul is being too hard on himself in 2 Cor. 10. Maybe he is trying to be humble and to recognize what the critics say? Maybe? I don't know. It seems to me that Paul is confessing in 1 Cor 2—not a lack of ability—but a lack of “polish in this messages.

Years ago, I sat in a doctoral seminar, and listened to a well-known preacher lecture on the subject of preaching. I'll never forget one thing he said. He said: “Many preachers today are more concerned in how they are coming across than they are helping the people they preach to.”

The preachers of Bellevue's past were expository preachers, which meant they were committed to simply exposing the meaning of the text. An expository preacher confesses that he is not the cook, just the waiter. An expository preacher must be committed to unoriginality. The Word does the Work. And Steve Gaines was a man who kept his life and his preaching close to the Word.

Insert story about Steve and little prayer cards.

Paul wanted to get that church off the ground and to ground them in the Gospel. He was concerned that the Corinthians would put him up on a pedestal and lose their focus on the Lord. Apparently, his fears were justified because that's exactly what was happening. He exegeted his audience well. The people were not mindful of the one preached, they were mindful of the preacher.

Paul knew this: Human pride and the Holy Spirit will never mix. He preferred to turn his volume down and the Gospel volume up. It sounds a little bit like John the Baptist who said, “He must increase; I must decrease.”

So Paul wasn't so concerned with how he was coming across. He shunned any show of eloquence but that wasn't all. He also shunned a display of brilliance.

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom.

The learned people of Paul's day were not only fascinated with silver tongued speakers, but also thought-provoking philosophers. And here Paul makes his second point:

Ineffective preachers...

2. Are too concerned with sounding smart. (v.2)

V.2, I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Paul refused to draw attention to himself by showcasing his smarts. The Apostle Paul was a mastermind. Don't you know he could have smoked Ken Jennings in Jeopardy? You remember that guy? In 2004, this man won 74 consecutive contests. Paul had that kind of mind.

Just read the book of Romans and you can quickly see that Paul had been endowed by God with an Einstein kind of brain. He had a keen mind and a big memory as we see in Acts 17, as he quotes the pagan philosophers in Athens. He could have used words while he was in Corinth that made those people's heads spin. But he deliberately didn't.

He kept his message plain and simple: Jesus Christ and him crucified, and he trusted the Holy Spirit to add power to his words.

I'm sure there are preachers who take this text as a license to show up sloppy on Sunday, to walk into the pulpit with a rough set of notes. After all, we wouldn't want to come across as too brilliant, would we?

Paul is not encouraging the preacher to "dumb" down the message, or to enter the pulpit with a half-baked message. He is simply saying that people will never be saved by human persuasion void of Spirit-power. Human preachers cannot cut through the heart as the Holy Spirit can.

And any preacher who sets out to show people how big his brain has become—that man spills words from a polluted heart and subconsciously competes for the glory of God.

Insert words by Steve Gaines about being a country boy from West Tennessee.

The Spirit of the Lord moved through the life of Steve Gaines. The Spirit of the Lord will not work through that man who sets his eyes on some greater platform. The Spirit flows through those "little men" who exalt the name of Jesus--the only name by which men can be saved.

Now, let's look at verse 3, where we learned that Ineffective preachers:

3. Are self-reliant. (v.3)

³*I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling.*

This is a peculiar confession as Paul slaps three labels on the way he felt when he stood up to preach. "Weak, timid, and terrified." What in the world does he mean when refers to himself as weak. How could Paul be look in the mirror and see a weakling? If Paul was wimpy, what does that make you and me? Surely this is false humility.

This is the guy that took on Peter and opposed him to his face. (Peter cut a guy's ear off once). Paul didn't care. Paul is the one who gladly monitored the cloaks as the mob killed Stephen with stones. He was not unfamiliar with violence. This is the guy who took lashings and beatings from the Jews and still he said, "Bring it on, I consider it joy to suffer for the name of Jesus." Paul would say to the Ephesian elders on the shore of Miletus, "This is the last time that you will see me for the Holy Spirit says that they will probably kill me in the next town." The fear of death had no hold on him.

Yet, he says to the Corinthians, when I showed up, I was shivering with fear. What does he mean? Some think this is a reference to the mysterious thorn Paul had in his flesh—some kind of physical malady that sapped him of his strength and took away his energy. Others think this was Paul confessing insecurity about his unimpressive presence. Perhaps he had some pre-game jitters when he came within city limits? Still others think Paul was weak because he was recovering from the persecutions and punishments that he had faced in previous cities. We don't really know what the weakness refers to.

The point is this: the Lord had stripped him of all self-reliance. When Paul preached, he preached from a spirit of desperation. If the Spirit didn't show up, this ship wasn't going down.

One of my favorite passages in the Old Testament is when Elijah takes on the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18. You remember the hard work that went into the construction of that altar. He took 12 stones, one for each tribe and made an altar. Then he took time to dig a sizeable trench all around that altar. Then he carefully arranged the wood, then cut the bull into pieces. Then he fetched 4 large jars of water and doused the wood till it was soaking wet. And then he did it again. And then he did it a third time till his feet were standing in soggy mud.

And then he cried out in desperation to His Saving God: "Lord, answer me! And tell these people that you are turning their hearts back again."

Then the fire of the LORD fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. 1 Kings 18:38

That ought to be the attitude of every preacher who prepares a sermon offering. Without the fire of God, it remains cold and damp.

And so Paul reminds the people of the power of the Spirit, in vv.4-5:

⁴ My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God's power. vv.4-5

I did not succeed when I sounded smooth or when I wowed you with smarts, I preached with great power.

And Paul also describes strong preaching. What it is and what it looks like. Two things...

Strong Preachers...

1. Lead people to the Lord.

Paul says in v.1 that he came to announce the mystery of God to them—the wild story that God in heaven loves sinners on Earth. He so loves them that He sent his only son to die for them.

Paul wanted, above all things, to see people saved. He did not go to Corinth to tickle ears, to share his opinions on politics, or to string some heartfelt stories together to sway an audience. He was there to win people to the Lord.

Later in 3:5...

⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants through whom you believed, and each has the role the Lord has given. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 1 Co 3:5–6.

Now let's talk for a moment about Apollos. Apollos was the perfect preacher for the intellectual audience. He was a skilled orator and he was a talented man. Notice that Paul never criticizes Apollos for the way he preached. There was nothing necessarily wrong with a sermon that flowed nicely and was filled with deep thought, so long as it came from a pure heart.

Paul is filing his charges here—NOT against the preacher—but against the church who wanted to lift up a man more than a Messiah. They were singing the old song of Israel who said to Samuel, “We don't want a theocracy, we want a monarchy.” Give us a man of our choosing, to hold up and to esteem.

Effective preachers will work hard to deflect praise. They will point their people to the one who is worthy.

As I began this message, I mentioned the old man who came forward with nothing positive to say to preacher Sam. I wonder, who is more lethal to Sam—the man who humbles him or the ones who puffed him up? Have you ever thought about that? Discouragers are dangerous, but fans can be lethal.

And so we must all say, with the Psalmist,

Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness. Psalm 115:1

The best preachers do it to the glory of God. The best preachers will lead people to the Lord.

And second, the best preachers:

2. Are led by the Holy Spirit.

As Paul said in v.4-5...

⁴ My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵ so that your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God's power.

There is much mystery here. What does Paul mean when he says that his preaching produced something powerful? He is making the point that the proof was in the pudding. "My preaching may have lacked sophistication and superior wisdom, but it did not lack the Spirit's power." You, who say that my preaching amounted to nothing, just look what happened when I preached!

And so, he calls the court to examine the evidence. Did the Spirit's power supercede and supplant the preacher's weakness? Paul says yes.

What evidence was he alluding to? Did Paul perform some miracles? Did supernatural things take place? Perhaps. The context seems to give us clues to something different, though. When Paul says in 1:18

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

...and then also in 1:26...

Brothers and sisters, consider your calling: Not many were wise from a human perspective, not many powerful, not many of noble birth. 1 Co 1:26.

What was Paul saying? You can say what you want about my preaching, but lives were changed. The sign of successful preaching is the testimony of lives transformed. The Corinthians had come to faith by focusing on the cross of Christ and it was high time that they return to it.

Powerful preaching points people to Jesus, and it draws upon the power of the Spirit. The result is changed lives.

With my time remaining, I'd like to express thanks to the Lord for a few ways that God used his servant, Steve Gaines, my life. I have three things I'd like to say.

How God Used Steve Gaines in My Life

Steve Gaines told me I had what it takes to preach..

Paul told Timothy, “Fan into flame the gift of God that is in you.” We all need older people to tell us that we can do it.

–the story of preaching at i2. His call on the drive home to Jackson. He wanted me to be the permanent preacher.

–he asked me to be on staff, then got mad at me for saying no, and then called me back a few days later to tell me he was proud of me.

Steve Gaines always challenged me to pray more often.

In all things, by prayer and petition, offer your requests to God....

–the story of Steve at the SBC, **sorting through those prayer cards.**

–the **picture of the prayer card** of praying for his successor.

Steve Gaines challenged me to never lose my passion to preach.

Preach the Word in season and out of season, with great patience and careful instruction.

–The moment I heard him say, “Get some guys that can preach!” at the SBC conference.

–The way he never stopped preaching all the way to the end.