

To Preach As Paul Preached

Frank J. Matera

The author explores the centrality of the Damascus Road experience for why, what, and how Paul preached, and suggests implications for those who would preach the gospel today.

A few years ago I wrote a small volume entitled *Strategies for Preaching Paul* (Liturgical Press, 2001) in which I suggested that pastors could renew their ministry of the Word by preaching more frequently from Pauline texts. In this article, I would like to approach preaching from a slightly different vantage point; namely, what must we do to preach as Paul preached? My reflections will consider four questions: (1) Who empowered Paul to preach? (2) Why did Paul preach? (3) What did Paul preach? (4) How did Paul preach?

Who Empowered Paul to Preach?

Paul was not plagued by self-doubt, and he certainly did not doubt the gospel that he preached! He could express deep feelings of anguish and dismay when others misunderstood his gospel or when his converts were not always as loyal to him as he was to them, but he never doubted the truth of the gospel that he preached. The reason for his confidence is not difficult to determine, and anyone who would preach as Paul preached must understand the reason for the Apostle's confidence in the gospel he preached.

Frank J. Matera is professor of New Testament at the Catholic University of America, Washington D. C. Among his publications are Galatians (Sacra Pagina); New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul; Strategies for Preaching Paul; and New Testament Christology.

Called to preach

Paul was firmly convinced that he received his gospel from “a revelation of Jesus Christ” when God revealed his Son to him in the Damascus road experience that we commonly call Paul’s conversion. Therefore, at the beginning of Galatians, when he must defend his Torah-free gospel to Gentile converts at Galatia, Paul writes, “Now I want you to know, brothers, that 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” (Gal 1:11-12; all Scriptural quotations are taken from *The New American Bible*).

Paul makes three points in this statement. *First*, his gospel did not originate with human beings. It was not something that he or others devised, but something that God accomplished in Jesus Christ. *Second*, Paul did not receive this gospel from those who were apostles before him or from any other human being. Rather, he received it through a revelation whereby God disclosed that the crucified one was his Son. *Finally*, since Paul did not receive his gospel from another human being, it follows that no one taught him the gospel that he preached. Rather, when God revealed his Son to him, Paul immediately understood that Christ was the fulfillment of the Law, the new human being in whom God justified, sanctified, redeemed, and reconciled humanity to himself. Because of this revelation, Paul never doubted the truth of the gospel that he preached.

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Thanks to this Damascus Road experience, Paul knew that God had called and set him aside to preach the gospel. And so he begins his letter to the Romans, “Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, *called* to be an apostle and *set apart* for the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1). His preaching, then, was rooted in a “call,” and that call dedicated and set him apart for service to the gospel he would preach. Because of that call, Paul viewed himself as a prophet like Jeremiah or Isaiah, both of whom had been called and set apart to preach God’s Word. To those who did not understand his commission—or who refused to believe what happened on the Damascus road—Paul must have appeared stubborn, arrogant, and self-willed. But in light of his call and conversion, it was apparent to Paul that he had been commissioned to preach a gospel that was not his own. Exactly what that gospel was, we will discuss in a few moments. But before doing so we must turn to another indication of Paul’s Damascus Road experience.

The consequences of Paul's preaching

In 2 Corinthians Paul makes use of a rather remarkable metaphor to describe his apostolic ministry. The metaphor arises because Paul must defend himself from intruding missionaries who have come to Corinth and boasted of their power and strength. Fully convinced that there is no authentic ministry apart from carrying “the dying of Jesus” (2 Cor 4:11) in one’s body, Paul presents his ministry to the Corinthians in terms of his apostolic suffering and the hardships that he has endured for the sake of the gospel. And so he compares himself to a prisoner who is being led in a triumphal procession that will end in his death. As Paul is being led in this triumphal procession, the onlookers can smell the sweet aroma of the incense that is being offered up, and they view Paul with scorn and derision. But Paul knows that the conquering general leading this procession is none other than God, and that, as God’s prisoner, he has become the sweet-smelling aroma of the incense that is being offered to God through his ministry. And so he writes:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ and manifests through us the odor of the knowledge of him in every place. For we are the aroma of Christ for God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to the latter an odor of death that leads to death, to the former an odor of life that leads to life. Who is qualified for this? For we are not like the many who trade on the word of God; but as out of sincerity, indeed, as from God and in the presence of God, we speak in Christ (2 Cor 2:14-17).

In this striking metaphor, Paul views himself as God’s prisoner, captured on the Damascus Road for the sake of the gospel. Ever since that moment, his preaching has had eschatological consequences for others, either for life or for death. For those who do not believe in the crucified Christ, Paul’s preaching is the stench of death that leads to death. But for those who believe in the crucified Christ that he preaches, his preaching is the sweet-smelling aroma of life that leads to life.

Aware that his preaching has such eschatological consequences, Paul asks, “Who is qualified for this?” (2 Cor 2:16). Indeed, who is qualified to bring some people to death and others to life? Aware that no one can qualify himself for such a ministry, Paul responds that his qualification comes from God who has qualified him to be the minister of a new covenant empowered by the Spirit of the Living God (2 Cor 3:4-6).

Once more, then, we find that Paul’s commission to preach is rooted in that moment when God revealed his Son to him. This is why Paul writes, “For we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for the sake of Jesus. For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:5-6). Aware that the God who created light at the dawn of

creation is the God who enlightened his heart with the glorious light of Christ, Paul knows that the purpose of his preaching is to allow others to see the glory of God on the face of the crucified Christ. And so—somewhat paradoxically—when people *hear* the gospel that Paul preaches, they *see* the glory of God.

Preaching like Paul

Paul's experience was unique, of course, and none can or should claim the same kind of apostolic authority to preach the gospel that he did. Paul's experience, however, reminds those who wish to preach as Paul preached that they are ambassadors for Christ, and so they represent someone else. The gospel is not their own but has been entrusted to them. It is not their word but God's Word. Preaching like Paul, then, means having a profound sense that one has been sent with a message that one dare not compromise lest, as Paul writes, one preach "a different gospel" (Gal 1:6) or "another Jesus" (2 Cor 11:4).

Why Paul Preached

There is a sense in which preaching has lost its importance today. On the one hand, people are assaulted by such a barrage of words from books and the electronic media that words have become cheap and unimportant. On the other hand, some preachers take their task so lightly and irresponsibly that their congregations no longer take them or their preaching seriously.

Preaching that leads to faith

For Paul, however, words were significant, and preaching was of paramount importance. Apart from sending a delegate or letter, there was no other way for him to communicate the gospel except by preaching. Hearing the gospel and listening to its message confronted people with a stark choice: either they hear the word with faith and obey it, or, they reject the word and refuse to submit to God's will. This is why Paul writes, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18). In Paul's view the gospel confronts people with a decision that has life and death consequences.

In Romans 10:13-15 Paul explains the importance that his preaching has for the salvation of others when he writes:

For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

And so God sends preachers to proclaim the good news. People hear this good news, and then, on the basis of what they hear, they believe, and because they believe they are saved. But, if God does not send someone to preach, or if the preacher does not preach the good news, *then* the gospel will not be heard, and if the gospel is not heard, *then* people will not believe, and if they do not believe, *then* they will not be saved.

For Paul the preached word is vital to salvation, for, as noted earlier, preaching has eschatological consequences since the salvation of those who have not heard the gospel depends upon it.

Preaching that sustains faith

In 2 Timothy Paul writes a kind of last will and testament in which he reminds his associate Timothy of the importance of doing the work of an evangelist:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient, convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths. But you, be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry (2 Tim 4:1-5).

There is a difference between this text and Romans 10:13-15. Whereas in Romans, Paul is concerned with the initial proclamation of the gospel, here he is concerned about preaching to those who have already heard the gospel and now believe in the good news. Aware that believers can fall away from the truth of the gospel, Paul reminds Timothy to be persistent in performing the work of an evangelist. Accordingly, those who preach the gospel must fulfill their ministry by continuing to preach the word, whether or not it is convenient for them.

Consequently, there are two reasons why preaching is important for Paul. *First*, preaching enables people to hear the gospel, which leads to faith which, in turn, leads to salvation. *Second*, the on-going work of preaching encourages those who have heard the word to remain within the truth of the gospel. For, unless the gospel is preached again and again, there is the ever-present danger that people will no longer listen to the truth of the gospel.

Preaching like Paul

Paul's situation was different from our own. Whereas he stood at the beginning of Christianity when the only way to hear the gospel was by the preached word, we live in a time and culture in which believers are bombarded with words.

Because we live in such a media-driven culture, it may seem that preaching is a relic of the past, something to be done for five or ten minutes on Sunday, but hardly important.

This may be the attitude of some who have long since determined that study of the Word and homiletic preparation are not as important as they used to be. If it is, it is little wonder that their preaching has become irrelevant, for it consists of little more than their own reflections. To preach as Paul preached, however, is to be convinced that preaching has eschatological consequences because it can bring people to faith and to life. To preach as Paul preached is to know that one has been sent so that others may hear, so that hearing they may believe, and believing they may be saved. To preach as Paul preached is to be convinced that if one does not take the work of an evangelist seriously, people will follow their own devices. Preaching like Paul means taking the Word seriously because when the congregation *hears* the gospel proclaimed effectively, then it *sees* the glory of God reflected on the face of the crucified Christ.

What Paul Preached

Thus far, we have focused our attention on Paul's commission to preach the gospel and the importance of preaching the gospel so that people can hear, and believe, and be saved. But we have not yet dealt with the crucial question: *what* is the gospel that Paul preached? This, of course, is the central issue; for unless we are clear about *what* Paul preached we will never be able to preach *as* Paul preached, even if we preach from his letters week after week.

The gospel Paul preached

Paul uses a number of expressions to define the content of what he preaches: "the gospel" (Rom 1:16), "the gospel of God" (Rom 1:1), "the gospel of his Son" (Rom 1:9), "the gospel of Christ" (2 Cor 2:12), "our gospel" (2 Cor 4:3), "the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4), "the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:5,14), "the glorious gospel of the blessed God" (1 Tim 1:11). By these many expressions, Paul means the good news, God's own good news of what God has done in and through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

At the beginning of Romans, Paul gives a brief description of this gospel for which God set him apart: "the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, but established as Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:3-4). Thus Paul's preaching always has Jesus Christ in view, Jesus Christ in his humanity, and Jesus Christ established in power through that creative act whereby God raised him from the dead.

Since God manifested such power in raising Jesus from the dead, the gospel is a manifestation of power, *God's power* that leads people to salvation. In the proclamation of the gospel, humanity learns how God deals with sin—not how humanity thinks God ought to deal with sin—but how God actually goes about justifying those who have sinned.

God's way of doing this is through the weakness of the crucified Christ, an act so utterly scandalous that Paul's contemporaries would hardly have thought of calling it good news. But through his call and conversion, Paul learned that this event is indeed good news, and so he writes, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: for Jew first, and then Greek. For in it is revealed the righteousness of God from faith to faith, as it is written, 'The one who is righteous by faith will live'" (Rom 1:16-17).

This righteousness of God of which Paul speaks is God's own righteousness, God's justice, God's way of bringing about salvation to those who have sinned. For Paul, the most striking aspect of this righteousness is the manner in which God displayed it: in and through the crucified Messiah, a concept against which Paul fought and struggled before he was called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles.

Preaching the whole gospel

The gospel that Paul proclaims announces the death and resurrection of Christ that, for Paul, are two aspects of a single event: the salvific work that God accomplished in Jesus Christ. When preachers proclaim only one aspect of this work to the detriment of the other, they preach "a different gospel," "another Jesus." Indeed, Paul encountered just such a problem at Corinth where intruding missionaries, whom he calls "super-apostles," downplayed the importance of Christ's suffering and death.

Paul emphasizes different aspects of the gospel, but he never separates Christ's death from his resurrection, or Christ's resurrection from his death. In 1 Corinthians, for example, when he must combat enthusiasts who have forgotten the centrality of the cross, he writes: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 22-24). In that same letter, when he must deal with those who deny that there is a bodily resurrection of the dead, he reminds the Corinthians of the gospel that he preached to them: "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" (1 Cor 15:3-4). He then notes, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all" (1 Cor 15:17-19).

Preaching the many facets of the gospel

The essential content of the gospel, then, is Christ's death and resurrection, that mighty act whereby God manifested his saving righteousness. Paul expresses the saving effect of this mighty act in a variety of ways. In 1 Thessalonians he focuses on the parousia or second coming of Christ. Having raised Christ from the dead, God will send his Son at the end of the ages to save the elect from the coming wrath (1 Thess 1:10). In Galatians he deals with the theme of justification: namely, by Christ's death and resurrection God has justified sinful humanity. Consequently, Paul affirms that "a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal 2:16). God's way of justifying humanity, on the basis of faith rather than by the works of the law, is "the truth of the gospel" that Paul refuses to compromise at Galatia.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul introduces the concept of reconciliation, for he now understands that, through Christ, God was reconciling humanity to himself (2 Cor 5:18). To accomplish this work of reconciliation, God made the sinless Christ "sin" so that humanity might become the very righteousness of God (5:20). This paradoxical statement means that Christ took humanity's place so that humanity might stand before God with the same pleasing righteousness that Christ possesses. Thus Christ's saving death and resurrection effects a kind of divine interchange whereby we find ourselves in Christ's place before God because Christ has taken our place by assuming our human condition. Paul now understands himself as Christ's ambassador through whom God appeals to humanity, "be reconciled to God."

Preaching like Paul

Paul's gospel is multifaceted. It proclaims redemption, sanctification, reconciliation, and justification. But everything always focuses on Christ's death and resurrection, that paradoxical event whereby God manifests power in weakness, and wisdom in folly. Every judgment Paul makes, and everything he proclaims about Christ, is guided by this saving event.

To preach as Paul preached is to stay focused on the gospel: the gospel of Christ's death and resurrection, the gospel of justification and reconciliation, the gospel of grace and forgiveness, the gospel of a new covenant empowered by the Spirit of the Living God.

But preachers do not always stay on message, and instead of focusing on what is central, they often deal with what is peripheral. Although one can forgive an occasional lapse, there is no excuse for a steady diet of preaching that focuses on the preacher's pet themes rather than on the gospel, on the messenger rather than on the message. To preach as Paul preached is to proclaim Jesus Christ crucified, the one whom God raised from the dead for our justification so that God might reconcile us to himself. Pauline preaching does not preach oneself or one's ideology, be it to the left, or to the right, or the dead center.

How Paul Preached

Anyone who reads Paul's letters cannot but notice their rhetorical power. Although he writes in the common Greek of his day, he is a powerful writer who knows how to persuade readers by the rhetoric he employs. This fact was not lost on Paul's critics who complained, "His letters are severe and forceful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible" (2 Cor 10:10).

The nature of Paul's rhetoric

This accusation, that Paul could write a powerful letter but that his speech was "contemptible," raises an important question about what kind of preacher Paul was. Was he a good writer but a poor orator? Did he take care in writing letters but not in preaching the gospel? Is this the scriptural proof some preachers have so desperately sought to excuse themselves from homiletic preparation?

Paul acknowledges that he was not an eloquent preacher of the gospel when he writes:

When I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God (1 Cor 2:1-5).

But in 2 Corinthians, in response to the objection that his speech is contemptible, Paul replies, "For I think that I am not in any way inferior to these 'super-apostles.' Even if I am untrained in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; in every way we have made this plan to you in all things" (2 Cor 11:5-6).

In addition to these texts, Paul describes his preaching to the Thessalonians in this way:

Our exhortation was not from delusion or impure motives, nor did we work through deception. But as we were judged worthy by God to be entrusted with the gospel, that is how we speak, not as trying to please human beings, but rather God, who judges our hearts. Nor, indeed, did we ever appear with flattering speech, as you know, or with a pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek praise from human beings, either from you or from others (1 Thess 2:3-6).

In these texts, Paul acknowledges that he was not a professional orator, as were some of his critics who accepted, and perhaps demanded, financial remuneration for their preaching. Nor was he the kind of orator who could convince

people by the eloquence of his speech. Rather, because he was Christ's ambassador, he understood that the message he preached was more important than the one who proclaimed it, and he was convinced that people must be persuaded by the power of the message rather than by the rhetorical eloquence of the speaker. Consequently, Paul presents himself as coming to Corinth "in weakness and fear and much trembling" with a demonstration of "spirit and power" so that the faith of the Corinthians might rest on the power of God rather than on human wisdom (1 Cor 2:3, 4).

Rhetoric and the word of the cross.

If Paul's message was contemptible to some, it was not because it was poorly delivered but because Paul focused on the message of the cross, the scandalous and foolish proclamation of a crucified savior. For example, in describing the way in which he preached to the Galatians, he writes, "O stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" (Gal 3:1). Here Paul refers to his own preaching in which he vividly portrayed Christ as the crucified Messiah so that the Galatians would put their faith in Christ rather than in the works of the Law. Here there was no eloquent speech, no flattery, no attempt to please human beings because the message itself was such a stumbling block. Here Paul could only proclaim the truth of the gospel.

If we ask why Paul preached in this way, we find an answer when he writes, "But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us" (2 Cor 4:7). This treasure is his glorious new covenant ministry that allows him "to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ" (4:6) through the gospel he preaches. Paul is profoundly aware that he is little more than a fragile earthen vessel filled with cracks and liable to break at any moment. And so he finds himself in a paradoxical situation. Although he is a fragile earthen vessel, the treasure he holds is the glorious gospel of the new covenant. He is afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, and he is forever carrying in his body the dying of Jesus. But he is never constrained, never driven to despair, never abandoned or destroyed because this paradoxical situation has taught him that his weakness makes the surpassing power of God all the more apparent. Through his hardships it becomes more and more apparent that the success of his preaching is due to the power of God. This is why Paul can write, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints . . . for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10).

Conclusion

What kind of preachers ought we to be if we are to preach as Paul preached? *First*, those who preach like Paul must have a deep sense of mission and

commission—which is not to be confused with a sense of self-importance—of having been sent to preach a message that is not their own. Preachers are ambassadors of someone else, bearing a message which they dare not compromise.

Second, those who preach like Paul understand the importance of the message they proclaim—that their preaching has eschatological consequences—not because it is their preaching but because they proclaim the gospel of God. For unless someone proclaims this word, the gospel will not be heard, and if the gospel is not heard, then people will not believe, and if they do not believe, then they will not be saved.

Third, those who preach like Paul must preach the gospel of God that proclaims the saving death and resurrection of God's Son, whereby the God who raises the dead reconciles the world to himself. Each generation of preachers must learn to actualize this message for its own generation, and the effectiveness of preaching will, in large measure, depend upon the ability to do this. But no matter how relevant preachers are, if they do not preach the gospel, they will not make the power of God's Spirit present to their contemporaries. And if the gospel is not heard, then the glory of God will not be seen.

Finally, preaching like Paul focuses on the content of the message rather than on the style of its presentation. This, of course, is not a warrant for poor preaching or a lack of preparation. Preaching requires study, prayer, and preparation. Rather, it is a reminder that preaching is not about the preacher but about the gospel. It is not about style but about the content of the gospel. Its purpose is not to flatter or to receive accolades from others but to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

Preaching as Paul preached is the project of a lifetime. It comes from an intimate familiarity with the Apostle's writings and the gospel he preached. It takes time to preach as Paul preached, but ultimately it is of great value—not to us—but to those who will hear, and believe, and be saved.

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