

How Now Shall We Teach?

The 7 Key Ideas for Effective Teaching from Paul's Response to the Corinthian Church



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The essential question being raised in this article, "How Now Shall We Teach", is inspired by the works of two well-known Christian authors. In 1976, Frances Schaeffer wrote the book *How Should We Then Live-The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*. In 1999, Chuck Colson and others wrote a book *How Now Shall we Live*. In confronting the world's cultural and moral declines, they both presented their respective solutions from a biblical perspective.

In the 21st Century, Christian leaders and teachers face unique challenges. First, evangelical theologians have forewarned of the obstacles in reaching the "postmodernist" generation, which displays these traits: low regard for objective truth, rational reasoning, and absolute moral values; operating on one's personal intuition; being savvy with the digital media and therefore valuing images; equating subjective perception as objective reality; and disrespect for authorities, and so on.

Second, while appreciating the efficiency and novelty of the latest digital gadgets, the society also reaps their adverse effects. For instance, the masses' overindulgence in technology likely takes time away from worship, services, family life and personal interactions. At the personal level, the excessive, multi-sensory electronic stimulations might produce obsession with instant gratification, reduction in physical activities, avoidance of personal responsibilities like study and work, avoidance of and distortion of truth and reality.

Third, the Church is internally under pressure to gear their worship and presentation styles to appease the populace, in order to attract audiences. They might be tempted

to indiscriminately imitate the "success formula" of famous personalities in quest of results measured by size and attendance.

Faced with such external and internal challenges, how can pastors, Christian teachers and leaders prepare and present the Christian message effectively? Based on I Corinthians 2:1-5 (NIV) there are seven key ideas that we can learn from the Apostle Paul who had to respond to the many problems of the Corinthian Church.

¹When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Resist the Temptation of Personal Popularity

Paul intentionally avoided the temptation of personal popularity by using eloquent words, even though he had all the training and skills to do so. As a matter of fact, he had engaged in debates at different times, in Athens (Acts 16), and when he first arrived in Corinth (Acts 17), in his attempt to win some Greeks and Jews for Christ. A few years earlier, before writing I Corinthians, Paul had founded the church there during his second missionary journey. He ministered there for 18 months alongside a Christian couple Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18). After he had left the church, and later in Ephesus, he heard of factions, disunity, pride, human competitiveness, immoralities, disorders in church, confusion over spiritual gifts etc.

In the first century, the elitist Greeks who

dominated Corinth had a strong appetite in listening to eloquent debates and philosophical discussions (Acts 17:18-21). Church members were undoubtedly influenced. Rather than conforming to cultural fads, the Apostle Paul avoided stooping down to the popular styles and admired forms of the times. Faithful to his calling as a pastor-teacher, Paul refused to employ worldly ways to prove himself, in order to establish his teaching creditably. He focused on the message that God had been given him.

As Christian leaders and teachers, we need to recognize our place in God's master plan. We are mere messengers. We do God's work and give Him the glory. Our preaching, teaching and other ministries are to be part of the Great Commission. We should not succumb to the temptation of personal popularity in our preaching, teaching, worship, or other forms of public ministries, or attempt to impress our audiences or to feed our egos.

Avoid the Trap for Superficial Message

Paul realized that non-believers could not naturally understand the depth of the wisdom embedded in the message of the cross without the Holy Spirit's revelation (I Corinthians 2: 10, 14). He decried the fact that Jews had requested signs and Greeks sought after wisdom (I Corinthians 1:22). Jews would not accept the fact that their Messiah would suffer the cruel and shameful death on the cross under the Romans, preferring a military-political leader and liberator. Greeks were obsessed with humanistic philosophy and worldly wisdom. Encountering the cultural and religious superficialities, Paul did not

water down his message. He single-mindedly and boldly proclaimed the word of God. He also warned in *II Timothy 4:3* — "the time will come, when men will not accept sound doctrine. To suit their desire, they will gather around them teachers who will say what their itching ears want to hear." Today, prosperity gospel preachers are more popular than ever. Their quasi-religious message, which tend to frame God's blessings in terms of wealth and health, are extremely appealing to audiences seeking after the physical and materialistic, especially those in economically deprived communities. But such messages misrepresent the balanced biblical view on sufferings and blessings, and give a false sense of hope and a distorted view of the loving God.

In ancient times, the emperor's servant must deliver his master's message with absolute obedience, precision and expediency. Any misstep or delay in following command, or distortion of the message, could result in severe consequences, even death, for the messenger. As Christian teachers, we have been commissioned by the King of kings to communicate His message to the world. How dare we take this privilege and solemn task lightly? We must be confident of the sufficiency and power of the message. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we conduct diligent study, and then impart the message faithfully. We need to constantly remind ourselves that we are the messenger, and not operate on our own authority, or for our own purpose and glory. Consequently, the pulpit and the classroom are not forums for us to speak whatever we want to say, not places to draw attention to ourselves. We may use appropriate humor and life illustrations to make the message practical. But our primary goal is not to entertain or to patronize the crowd. We do not compromise on the seriousness of our God-given message. In every teaching episode, we need to pray, examine our own hearts, and discern what the Lord wants to teach us and through us!

Be the Learner-Teacher of Every Lesson

The Christian teacher needs to approach every lesson as a learner before delivering the message. The most common description of the teaching process is that the

teacher imparts his/her knowledge and information to the students. The nature of transmitted knowledge is *cognitive* (head knowledge), and *transactional* (one-directional from the teacher to student). A good teacher is often viewed as "the sage on the stage."

When his own Apostolic authority and credibility were challenged, Paul did not say, "I am resolved to teach." Rather he stated with determination, "I am resolved to know." Paul humbly assumed the role of the "Learner-Teacher." He demonstrated the fundamental difference between secular and Christian teachings. First, the Christian teacher must assume the dual role of the learner-teacher. Not only is he/she the messenger, the teacher himself/herself must first become the recipient and learner of the message. Second, the purpose of Christian teaching is not for satisfaction of the intellectual curiosity. The messenger is the mouthpiece of the divine voice of God. The message is intended to change the spiritual life. As teachers, we should not be content with mere telling of biblical facts and doctrines. Biblical teaching begins with cognitive knowledge, but it must go deeper, leading to experiential learning and personal transformation. Firsthand learning by the teacher validates the credibility of the message, thus making it effective.

Focus on the Core Message of Christ and His Cross

In facing the problems at Corinth, Paul was unwavering in making his stance on the core message—"Jesus Christ and him crucified." Paul used the common teaching technique of "overstatement" and confronted the non-believers who had rejected the gospel. He sought to refocus the Corinthians on the centrality of Christ and the cross. In setting the preaching calendar or designing the Christian education curriculum, we tend to equate the lessons of Christ's life and teaching and His crucifixion with other topics. We typically schedule the lesson of Christ's crucifixion, seasonally around the Passion Week, or occasionally for an evangelistic event. In Paul's teaching and his personal experiences, he always embraced the message of Christ and His cross, and the believers' identification with His death and resurrection, and with

godly living (II Corinthians 5:14-15; Romans 6:6, 7:4; Galatians 2:20, 5:24, 6:14; Colossians 2:20). This requires much prayer, hard work and creativity. We can also establish close links between other practical topics to Christ and His cross.

Have the Right Attitude of Transparency and Vulnerability

We also need to approach our preparation with the right attitude. Paul did not attempt to put on a strong front or boost his own image in order to answer his critics at the Corinthian church. Instead, he admitted that he had come to them "in weakness, in fear and in trembling." Whatever the nature and causes of Paul's plight, when he first arrived in Corinth, the Lord appeared to him in a vision to assure him (Acts 18: 9-10). His humility was consistent in his relationship with the church. "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (II Corinthians 11:30). When we approach each teaching episode with a sense of intense godly fear, it leads to our total dependence upon the Holy Spirit. We should not be ashamed to admit that we are weak and cannot accomplish anything apart from God. The post-modernist world rejects hypocrisy, but appreciates authenticity and vulnerability. When Christian leaders and teachers are willing to shed their masks and identify with non-believers as mere humans, we have a better chance of gaining their respect. We show that we are just ordinary people saved and sustained by grace.

Depend on the Holy Spirit to Illuminate Learning

Paul is not against persuasion, debate and intellectual reasoning. He did that in Athens (Acts 17:16; 22), in Corinth (Acts 18: 4) and before Agrippa (Acts 26). But again

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