

Grace to You :: esp *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Raising the Error-Alert

Scripture: Acts 20:27; 1 Corinthians 2:1–5; 1 Corinthians 9:20–22

Code: A234

Why do so many evangelicals act as if false teachers in the church could never be a serious problem in this generation? Vast numbers seem convinced that they are "rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing—and do not know that [they] are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17).

In reality, the church today is quite possibly *more* susceptible to false teachers, doctrinal saboteurs, and spiritual terrorism than any other generation in church history. Biblical ignorance within the church may well be deeper and more widespread than at any other time since the Protestant Reformation. If you doubt that, compare the typical sermon of today with a randomly chosen published sermon from any leading evangelical preacher prior to 1850. Also compare today's Christian literature with almost anything published by evangelical publishing houses a hundred years or more ago.

Bible teaching, even in the best of venues today, has been deliberately dumbed-down, made as broad and as shallow as possible, oversimplified, adapted to the lowest common denominator— and then tailored to appeal to people with short attention spans.

Sermons are almost always brief, simplistic, overlaid with as many references to pop culture as possible, and laden with anecdotes and illustrations. (Jokes and funny stories drawn from personal experience are favored over cross-references and analogies borrowed from Scripture itself.) Typical sermon topics are heavily weighted in favor of man-centered issues (such as personal relationships, successful living, self-esteem, how-to lists, and so on)—to the exclusion of the many Christ-exalting doctrinal themes of Scripture. In other words, what most contemporary preachers do is virtually the opposite of what Paul was describing when he said he sought "to declare . . . the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

Not only that, but here's how Paul explained his own approach to gospel ministry, even among unchurched pagans in the most debauched Roman culture:

I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

Notice that Paul deliberately refused to customize his message or adjust his delivery to suit the Corinthians' philosophical bent or their cultural tastes. When he says later in the epistle, "To the Jews I became as a Jew . . . to those who are without law, as without law . . . to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save

some" (1 Corinthians 9:20-22), he was describing how he made himself a *servant* to all (1 Corinthians 9:19) and the fellow of those whom he was trying to reach. In other words, he avoided making *himself* a stumbling block. He was not saying he adapted the gospel message (which he plainly said *is* a stumbling block—1 Corinthians 1:23). He did not adopt methods to suit the tastes of a worldly culture.

Paul had no thought of catering to a particular generation's preferences, and he used no gimmicks as attention-getters. Whatever antonym you can think of for the word *showmanship* would probably be a good description of Paul's style of public ministry. He wanted to make it clear to everyone (including the Corinthian converts themselves) that lives and hearts are renewed by means of the Word of God and nothing else. That way they would begin to understand and appreciate the power of the gospel message.

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