

Turning the Corner

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

~ I Corinthians 2:1-5

A few years ago while on vacation in another part of the country, my family worshiped in a sister reformed church. The sermon was on the eighth commandment and the preacher's main theme was that we should not be "takers" but "givers." Fair enough, and well in accord with both the commandment not to steal and Paul's reiteration of it in Ephesians 4:28.

However, on the way home, I asked my girls what they thought of the sermon. My oldest daughter, around 14 years old at the time, said to me, "Well, he was a good speaker and it was OK.... except that he never turned the corner." Turned the corner? What did she mean? She told me: "The minister did not tell us that we can never be good enough givers; that in the end, we *have to be takers* of God's grace. He told us to be more generous, but he never mentioned Jesus as the one who was the ultimate Giver for us. Dad, he never turned the corner." I have to tell you, both as a preacher and as a father, I have rarely been more gratified. At least someone got what I try to do each Sunday! By God's grace, every sermon every Lord's Day, I try to turn this corner.

Now, I know there is a place for preaching the third use of the Law. But is it to be the primary focus of our preaching? And isn't that also why we have Sunday School classes and home groups? I also know that not all sermons are to be alike week to week. But are we really preaching the Gospel if we are not in some part of our sermon preaching "Jesus Christ and Him crucified?" And even when we do preach on specifics of the Christian life, what should be our focus?

The Westminster Confession of Faith actually has something to say to this. In the chapter on Saving Faith, we read: "By this faith, a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. *But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life*, by virtue of the covenant of grace" (WCF 14.2, emphasis added). So here we see balance. The Word of God is to instruct us how to live for Christ, acting differently and yielding obedience. But nevertheless, the principal acts of saving faith are always accepting, receiving and resting upon Christ alone. This is what our Confession teaches. It is also an accurate summary of what the Scriptures teach about the Christian life, what it is that makes us Protestant.

So, what does that mean? I would say that if we make principal what the Confession pointedly says is not principal, then our ministries – however unwittingly – are out of accord with our

Confession and the Scripture's emphasis upon the Gospel. In other words, if the general tenor of our ministries and preaching emphasizes our good works over against resting in Christ alone, then at that point, we are out of accord with our Confession. It does not matter what those good works are – whether missions, or Sabbath observance, or mercy; if they become principal, we should then ask ourselves if we indeed still “know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified,” among our people.

In the latest edition of Covenant Theological Seminary's magazine, Bryan Chapell gave an excellent report on the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Cape Town, South Africa. Although he was generally encouraged he also had this to say about the preaching: “Sadly, much of the Bible teaching was short, perfunctory, and, with notable exceptions, *devoid of clear messages of Christ's atoning sacrifice*. The evangelical community is clearly struggling with how to communicate ‘the whole gospel for the whole world.’ While many presentations focused on the need to make our witness credible through social concern, there was *also intense pressure to keep that witness from citing historic truths about justification by faith in the blood of Christ (and) propitiation from wrath by the sacrifice of Christ...*”(emphasis added). Chapell gives us a frightening warning of what is happening across world-wide evangelicalism; and a temptation to which we in the PCA should not feel ourselves immune.

That sermon my family heard many years ago was well delivered, well organized, and polished. But it gave us not Christ. It gave us a goal to achieve – to be more generous with our time and money – and yet the minister never told us that we could never be as generous as God requires. That we need the Cross.

In a talk on this passage in I Corinthians 2, D.A. Carson presents a balanced approach to Paul's preaching. He tells us that it does not mean that Paul was either a poor speaker or that he refused to contextualize his message. Rather, Paul is telling the Corinthians what it was he chose to emphasize in his preaching, in both its style and content. He did not want to try to impress people or become known for his great preaching. Instead, he simply wanted to bring people the message of a Savior – a Savior who died in weakness that we might live by His power – and His power alone. Carson writes, “These verses do not prohibit diligent preparation, passion, clear articulation, and persuasive presentation. Rather, they warn against any method that leads people to say, ‘What a marvelous preacher!’ rather than ‘What a marvelous Savior!’” (*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, p. 35).

Carson goes on to describe what Paul meant by focusing on the Cross, to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and Him crucified: “This does not mean that this was a new departure for Paul, still less that Paul was devoted to blissful ignorance of anything and everything other than the cross. No, what he means is that all he does and teaches is tied to the cross. He cannot long talk about Christian joy, or Christian ethics, or Christian fellowship, or the Christian doctrine of God, or anything else, without finally tying it to the cross. Paul is gospel-centered; he is cross-centered” (*ibid.*, pp. 37-8). Elsewhere, Carson writes, “I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight” (*ibid.*, p. 26).

Brothers, do you turn the corner in your preaching and in your ministry? Do you give people Jesus Christ in all that you do? And I don't think we can just assume it. I think we need to articulate it clearly each week. Why? Because we need to hear it ourselves. We need to remember that we are justified – not by our ministries or holiness, but by Christ's. And if we need to hear it, then so do our people. It may not impress anyone – as do fancy illustrations, humorous stories or complicated applications. But it will save, because it is the Gospel.

I agree with what C.J. Mahaney wrote to pastors: “Regardless of the text or topic at hand, there must be some view of Calvary in every sermon. Your congregation should experience the amazing and comforting sight of the crucified Savior each and every time you preach. We should exalt Christ's finished work in our sermons so as to comfort the converted and convict the unbeliever” (*The Pastor's Priorities: Watch your Life and Doctrine*).

But articulating the Gospel from each passage does not always come easily. Paul himself asked for people to pray that he would “declare the mystery of Christ... clearly, as I should” (Colossians 4:3-4). Let us pray for one another, that we each might turn the corner in our ministries, give people the Cross, and do so clearly. Amen.