

## The Means Is Scripture

*“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God” (1 Corinthians 2:1).*

### **Fellow Ministers of Christ:**

Sometimes, the smallness can be humorous. Years ago, I conducted a midweek Lenten service in a member’s home. Only three people were in attendance. The first, our accompanist, sat with her back to me because of the location of the piano. The second sat attentively listening, except when checking the pie in the oven. The third sat contentedly sleeping in a La-Z-Boy recliner. On the drive home, I had to smile.

At other times, however, the smallness can be discouraging. Our small congregation in Cape Coral, Florida, has only nine members. Recently, we canvassed 1,500 homes and distributed 1,500 door hangers. Of the people we contacted, some expressed mild interest. A few said they would definitely be in church the following Sunday. And one woman even asked about membership.

Because Easter was approaching, we ran a color ad in the local newspaper. In part, the ad read: “Grace Lutheran Church is a small congregation with a big commitment to proclaiming the Bible in all of its fullness and truth. We are new to the Cape Coral area and would be delighted if you and your family joined us as we celebrate the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

I was excited and hopeful, not only because of the results of canvassing, but because visitors often attend church on Easter. I had visions of packed pews and placing folding chairs in the aisles to accommodate the overflow. When Easter came, the pews were as empty as always. Not one visitor attended—not even the woman who inquired about membership. Admittedly, I was discouraged.

Amid such discouragement—the empty pews, declining memberships, small budgets, and lack of visible results—the temptation, though we know better, is always to question the efficacy of simply proclaiming the Scriptures. *“Preach the Word,”* Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 4:2). “Yes, but I have preached the Word Sunday after Sunday with no increase in membership. Perhaps the Word alone is not enough. Perhaps I need something more appealing to the general public: bake sales, bingo games, live bands. Perhaps if I were a better speaker, if I had a better vocabulary, if I used better metaphors and better gestures.”

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom”*—more literally, “superiority of words or wisdom.” Paul’s reference was likely to the philosophers and orators of ancient Greece with whom the Corinthians were no doubt familiar.

As early as the fifth century B.C., traveling teachers known as Sophists taught a discipline they called rhetoric—from the Greek word, ῥῆμα, meaning “words” or “that which is spoken.” The goal of this early rhetoric was to persuade and even to

manipulate listeners through powerful speeches, practiced gestures, eloquent vocabularies, flowery metaphors, appeals to emotion, dramatic pauses—and all of this was often at the expense of the truth. All presentation. No substance.

Similar rhetoric is still used in the speeches of silk-tongued politicians who dance around the truth, or in TV commercials where the true cost of a product is buried in the illegible print at the bottom of the screen. Sadly, the same can be said of some churches today who hide or twist the truth of Scripture because they are more interested in membership than in ministry. For good reason, in Romans 16:17-18 Paul warned against self-serving false teachers, who *“by smooth talk and flattery . . . deceive the minds of naïve people.”*

What then did Paul mean by saying, *“I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom”*? He meant, “I did not come to trick, but to teach. I did not come to conceal the truth, but to reveal the truth. I did not come to impress you with my words, but to proclaim to you God’s words—or as he put it, *“the testimony about God.”*

Does this mean that as ministers of Christ we should give no thought to our sermonizing, that we should not strive to improve our styles, vocabularies, gestures, and delivery? Of course not. Every sermon should be as good as it can be—not good for the sake of good, but good for the sake of glorifying God. Not as a testament to the skills of a preacher, but as a testimony to God’s grace and salvation in Jesus Christ.

Styles, vocabularies, compelling introductions, and powerful conclusions are only useful insofar as they serve the Word of God and do not supplant the Word of God. Our desire is not to have parishioners leave church saying, “My, what a beautiful sermon,” rather, to leave church saying, “My, what a beautiful Savior!” Such a belief and perspective can never come from purely human persuasion or purely human words, no matter how well-crafted or eloquent. Such a belief and perspective can only come from the Word of God.

Did the apostle feel overwhelmed at times? Did he experience disappointment and frustration? Undoubtedly. But this is what God told Paul: *“Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city”* (Acts 18:9-10). Does the same God not say the same words to us? “Keep on speaking. Do not be silent. I am with you.”

So, dear brothers in Christ, amid all the smallness, all the frustrations, all the disappointments, may the Spirit of God remind us that the means to ministry is always Scripture. For Scripture is the means through which the Spirit of God has chosen to work.

There are multitudes of other examples, though surely none are more comforting than the great *therefore* of 1 Corinthians 15:58, especially for ministers of Christ. This *therefore* is also grounded in divine fact—the glorious fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Before writing the word *therefore* in verse 58, Paul wrote the following words in verses 56-57: “*Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

On at least three occasions, Jesus forewarned His disciples of His impending suffering and death, and with each warning He gave the certain promise of His resurrection. “*The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life*” (Matthew 17:22-23).

Yet, on the first Easter, the disciples were not anticipating a living Lord but mourning a dead Savior. Women hurried to the tomb wondering who would roll away the stone. Mary Magdalene was so distraught she confused the risen Jesus with the cemetery caretaker. Peter and John equated the empty sepulcher with body theft not bodily resurrection. Thomas insisted on viewing forensic evidence. The two disciples shuffling sadly toward Emmaus lamented, “We thought He was the one.”

But then they all encountered the risen Jesus. The fact of His resurrection changed everything—their lives, their deaths, their ministries—and to such an extent that after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the same disciples who once huddled behind the locked doors of an upper room boldly proclaimed the resurrected Christ in the very city in which He was crucified. “*Therefore,*” said Peter, “*let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ*” (Acts 2:36).

Now, what of us? What of our work as ministers of Christ? I can’t speak for others, but I’ve come to realize that whenever I view “*labor in the Lord*” as futile, unproductive, a losing effort, or, to use Paul’s words, “*in vain,*” whenever I despair at empty pews or small budgets, or presume that I must somehow supplement the power of the gospel with power of my own, then and there I’m acting more as if Jesus Christ were still dead and buried than living and reigning.

But Jesus Christ *is* living and reigning. That is a divine fact. It is the fact of His resurrection that transforms these fieldhouse doors today from mere exits into *therefores*.

Whatever our personal or pastoral challenges, as we adjourn our conference and walk through these doors—into the sunshine, into our lives and futures, into things we expect and things we do not—let us do so in boldness and hope, rejoicing with the apostle Paul and saying: “*Thanks be to God! He give us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Corinthians 15:57).

**“Therefore,** my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”