

Commentary

This passage continues the themes of 1:18-25, and gives the second and third sections of a triplet. The gospel disappoints the expectations of all: Jews wanted 'signs' (but the gospel sounded 'weak' by comparison), Greeks worldly 'wisdom' (but heard something 'foolish'). But because the gospel is the power of God (in that everyone who is saved is saved this powerful way), it shows up this world's search for God to be desperately foolish. Paul continues: not only does our gospel seem unimpressive, but also:

An unimpressive church (1:26-31)

26 **what the church is not**

Paul does not say 'not any' but 'not many' (- the Countess of Huntingdon, an C18th friend of Wesley, used to say she was saved by an 'm!'). There was some wealth in the church (cf 11:22; 16:2; 2 Cor 8-9 ... and also Rom 16:23 [written from Corinth] includes greetings from one wealthy enough to give hospitality to a whole church, and from a senior civil servant). But Paul's point is that the make-up of the church supports his point about the message of the cross: being clever, wealthy or socially prominent cannot be the basis for being a Christian. Generally, the church is a low-class operation with a few sophisticated exceptions.

27-28 **what the church is**

The emphasis here is God's selection. The reason why there are not more 'big shots' in the church is that God has preferentially chosen those Paul describes as 'the nothings': the uneducated, insignificant, poor and socially despised (indeed, many Christians in Corinth were slaves cf 7:21). This begs the question: why?

29-31 **why God has done this**

God has gone out of his way to overturn the crass assumptions of this world's social climbing. And he has done this to shatter all the world's categories by which we might hope to gain his favour: on the Last Day, the Day of God's Great Reversal, no-one can 'pull' God, or claim that 'he owes me one'. All such boasting puts me at the centre, and on that day, all will see how wrong that is.

God has so organised things in the gospel that he is at the centre, and everything listed in 30 is to be found in the Christ he appointed. The people in this world who currently boast have no reason to; it's Christians who should be boasting ... 'in the Lord'.

Don't we need to hear this message in our contemporary church, seduced as we are by Christian celebrities, and worldly standards of what is impressive?

An unimpressive preacher (2:1-5)

The background is significant here: public speakers of the day were 'rhetorical showmen'. If a new speaker came to town, a crowd would gather, waiting to be impressed. A persuasive speaker could expect to be adopted by a wealthy patron, stepping up the social ladder and into political power. And then as time went by, public speaking became an end in itself, merely trying to please the crowd, but without serious content or intent. The goal was applause, the motive vanity and the casualty truth.

1a, 3-4a **Paul was not an impressive speaker**

Because Paul has had such influence in the world for 2,000 years, we find it difficult to believe he was not regarded as impressive by his contemporaries. But judged by what was revered in his day, he came across as 'nervous and rather shaky'. In 2 Corinthians, where Paul is dealing with a group regarded as 'super-apostles' (!), he refers to their criticism of him - nothing much to look at, nothing much to listen to (2 Cor 10:10). It was neither 'plausible' (4 ie 'persuasive' [cf note above]) nor 'word of wisdom' (3 ie 'matching contemporary rhetorical expectations' [cf 1:17]).

1-2a, 4b **Paul had renounced 'impressiveness' deliberately**

'Decided' (2) implies a deliberate turning aside from the methods of the rhetoricians. Instead, his single focus and passion was the gospel of the crucified Messiah, and that is because (cf 1:18) in that gospel is the power of God. What Paul is looking for is not the 'proof' which comes from the crowd's applause, but what is seen as the Spirit powerfully saves individuals, and changes human lives

Some have suggested that Paul is talking of how he renounced the intellectual debate of Athens in Acts 17 in favour of 'the simple gospel' in Corinth in Acts 18 ... and that what vindicated that switch were the 'signs and wonders' that accompanied him there. However this view (a) sets up a false distinction between arguing/persuading and preaching (where Acts can use all these words interchangeably, and without criticising the first), and (b) reads 'signs' into the word 'power' in this passage when Paul's emphasis is on the weak-seeming cross (which is where power truly resides). At root, what Paul gave up was self-reliance.

5 **why Paul did this**

Just as the church should boast of nothing in themselves but only of the God of the gospel (29-31), so the goal of the true gospel preacher is that his hearers trust that same God, alone and completely. How easy it would have been for the Corinthians to put their trust in the latest impressive speaker; but God's power isn't found in any preacher, but only in his gospel (1:18).

Launching question

Try to think of ways that we are seduced by 'impressiveness' in church life. What's wrong with trying to be more 'impressive' to the man on the street?

The story so far ...

What is main thing that Paul has been teaching about the gospel?
Remind everyone that this is in response to worldliness in the church, showing itself as Christians exalted certain leaders at the expense of others.

The unimpressive church

READ 1:26-31

What is Paul saying here is also unimpressive?

In what way is the church unimpressive?

Are you content to be labelled 'foolish, weak, lowly people' / 'the nothings'?!
Why is it like this? Why don't more celebrities become Christians?
What does this say about those who are clever / wealthy / socially prominent?

What is dangerous in exalting the famous Christian/the impressive testimony?
What does it mean in this context to boast only in the Lord?
In what ways can glory more in our ordinariness as a church?!

The unimpressive preacher

READ 2:1-5

What is Paul saying here is also unimpressive?

If we could meet him, do you think this is how he would strike us?

In what ways was Paul an unimpressive preacher?

What would the Corinthians have made of a preacher like this?

Why didn't Paul try harder to be more impressive?

What lessons are there for the preachers of today?

There's a lot of 'Christian celebrity preachers' today: is this OK?

Do you think this only applies to 'the professional' Christian speaker?

What does Paul mean when he talks about only preaching Christ crucified?

What was the demonstration of the Spirit's power that he valued?

Thinking it through

In what ways has it struck you this evening that we value what is outwardly impressive, and wish (as Christians) that we were more so?

What should we value more ... and why?

How might this apply locally, for us at Emmanuel?

What things do we need to be careful about?

Summary

Corinth was New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas all rolled into one. It was the Roman Empire's second city, and a centre for commerce, popular culture, mishmash-religion and pleasure. Paul's trip there in Acts 18:1-17 grew a church in the midst of hostility and inter-community tension. Within 2-3 years, Paul writes this letter responding to news brought by Chloe (1:11) and to issues raised in a letter they'd written to him (7:1).

In ch 1-4, as Paul confronts divisions in the church, look out for themes of ...

- worldly ways of thinking (eg exalting individual leaders, or their polished public speaking, stressing form over content);
 - over-realised eschatology (ie bringing into the present some of the blessings God promises us for heaven), producing a triumphalism where individuals have an inflated view of their own maturity;
 - what is authentic Christian ministry (and defending Paul's own ministry).
- Ch 1-4 is really a pastoral sermon on the theme of **true wisdom and false**.

The story so far ...

There's lots of worldly thinking in the Corinthian church dividing behind leaders' personalities and seduced by what seems powerful. Paul emphasises that it is God's church and everything they have and are is a gift from him. And he explains why the gospel will always appear foolish to the wise in the world, and weak to those who seek power. It is God's gospel and to be preached in God's way, relying on God's power ... for Christians know that true wisdom and true power reside in that 'word of the cross'.

Theme Sentence

Both church and preacher are no less unimpressive in the eyes of the world.

Ideas for application

- in church life, we ought not to exalt the famous Christian or the impressive testimony: are their experiences of grace of any greater significance? Instead, we should glory in our very ordinariness as a church. How wonderful is God's kindness to choose 'the nothings'!
- we should beware of valuing the 'good Christian speaker' as if the 'gift of the gab' (!) somehow demonstrates greater spiritual power. What we should value is true evidence of the Spirit's work as he takes the gospel and turns a human life around.
- anyone bringing the message of the cross (even the so-called 'ordinary Christian'!) has the opportunity to glory in God and in his power.