

The Foolishness of Preaching

John R Gavazzoni

June, 2001

Thousand Oaks, CA

I've chosen that phrase, "*the foolishness of preaching*," taken from the King James translation of **1Cor1:21**, as the title for this message, and as a sort of springboard into what is on my heart without addressing what was on Paul's heart when he penned those words, or whether that translation even accurately conveys his thought, though after talking to my friend, Ed Browne, I'm more inclined to prefer his suggestion of "*the silliness of the proclamation*."

What is on my heart at present, was, years ago, the subject of a very memorable dialogue with an old friend, who was, and may still be---we've lost contact with one another--- an Eastern Orthodox priest and one-time bishop of a small, western branch of that ancient tradition. Following an evening's Bible study he had led ([yes, there are Orthodox priests who study and teach the Bible](#)), and after everyone else except he, I, and the owner of the house had departed, we commenced a discussion at a much deeper level than we had been at earlier in the evening.

Because he had, years before, given me reason to believe that he shared, with me, the conviction of the restoration of all things, I began to steer our conversation in the direction of that truth, and was delighted, but not surprised, that he picked up on "[the flow](#)" and really "[went with it](#)" exuberantly. It became such a rich time of fellowship that we went on till after 2:00 in the morning.

About mid-point, our conversation turned to considering just how God was going to finally communicate the gospel with such force, and purity---adding no corrupting elements to the message---so as to reconcile all men to Himself, seeing that scripture spoke of a better day of good news universal penetration, and that, to any spiritually sensitive person, the present mode was, so to speak, an oxcart, when what was needed was a supersonic jet, if you'll allow me that analogy. We were agreed, I hasten to say, that this, as all things, would be under God's sovereign control?

He said something that really rang a bell with me. He said that we needed a spiritual language. He was a man of tremendous experience in the ministry, including evangelism coupled with healing meetings and pastoring an Syro-Chaldean Eastern Rite Orthodox Church, so he knew the difficulties, as I did, as a former evangelist and pastor, of getting people to really know the depths of God's love in Christ.

Over the years, the Spirit has embellished my understanding of that with great patience. I began to see how anthropomorphic even the best preaching is. That is, it attempts to explain God in human terms. As such, given the fact that words, in and of themselves, are only symbols, and only convey the reality in the measure that they are infused with Spirit, there

is a great loss of force from the time that love leaves God's heart and comes to our hearts.

For now, we have to say with all honesty that our present quality of proclamation, simultaneously unveils and veils, clarifies and confuses, imparts both spiritual nutrition and the spiritual equivalent of sawdust covered in catsup, leaving the heart finally saying, "Is this all there is?".

Much of our teaching and prophesying amounts to little more than spiritual junk food.

That's why Paul pointed us to a day when that which is perfect will come, and that day, he said, would be a day when communication as we know it--- represented by tongues, prophecy and knowledge----would be displaced by "a more excellent way," the love-way. There seems to be two dimensions; the one has a little love coming in on the coattails of words and actions; the other has words and actions conceived in, and birthed from the womb of love.

We might also describe the difference as, with one, a little love getting through via words, words and more words, and much wheel-spinning, wasteful enterprises; and with the other, torrents of divine love with little being said, and unpretentious, but miraculously efficient service.

Over the years, I've seen people, as they say, "get saved" under the worst kind of preaching and, by comparison, the best kind of preaching, but when all was said and done, in both cases, they still hadn't received the full brunt of the transforming, passionate love of God. Our doctrines of salvation, our conceptualizing of God's relationship with us puts a coating over the kernel of the gospel that makes it only partially digestible.

We are on the threshold of communicating the love of God in Christ through a pure communion on the horizontal plane (man to man) equal to the vertical plane (God to man) that will transcend the use of language as we know it.

We simply will love people into the kingdom.

We will "speak" life to men and they will live.

We will "speak" forgiveness to men and they will be forgiven.

We will "speak" immortality to men and they will never die.

By a hug, a touch, a look of delight that speaks worth and divine destiny to the soul, men and women, and little children, will feel God's hug, God's touch, and find their worth, identity and destiny in the eyes of God.

Jeremiah spoke of the day when "*Brother shall not say to brother and neighbor shall not say to neighbor, 'know the Lord', for all shall know Him from the least to the greatest*" (Jer. 31:34). I'm convinced that God is not going to limit Himself to the laborious and severely limited process that is the present dispensational norm.

Frankly, I go through periods of being excited about having something to say to men on God's behalf, but clear to the other end of the pendulum, I get tired of hearing my own voice, typing my thoughts, and hearing and reading the same from others. In the groaning that I share with all creation, that is a big part of it.

Isn't it interesting that so many, who have had encounters with the glorified Christ through,

so called, near-death experiences, or through simply being caught up in the Spirit, have spoken of understanding God's love for them as they had never known it before, just by looking into the face of Christ.

It seems quite clear to me that when Paul spoke of "*that which is in part*," he was referring to the whole complex of relationship, communication and understanding in the penultimate norm that existed in the church in his day and continues into our day. That penultimate norm was to be displaced by "*that which is perfect*" bringing in the ultimate norm which clearly is the perfect love of God in Christ as the very constituent of the life of the church and through the church to all of creation. In the penultimate norm, preaching is a central feature, and so you have the statements in the New Testament about the necessity of one being sent (commissioned) to preach in order for people to hear the declaration of Christ.

The theory that the completion of the canon of scripture constituted the arrival of "*that which is perfect*," I believe---and here I am trying to be as gracious as possible and yet uncompromising in regard to what I see as an essential truth-- is utter nonsense! Very clearly, in the larger context, Paul is pointing toward the love that "*never fails*" contrasted with that complex of communication through spiritual gift-enablement--- represented by tongues, prophecy and knowledge--- which will be done away with and cease because they are partial and merely preparatory in regard to that which is perfect.

There has been a great delusion foisted on the modern, institutional, evangelical church especially since the mid 19th century that turns the attention of the believer to a fixation on the biblical text as opposed to Christ Himself who dwells in and among us in the full glory of His Father. Does God use scripture to point us toward His Son? Of course. But the tendency in the proliferation of "Bible teaching" is to claim to be concerned with Christ-centeredness while subtly addicting us to everything the Bible has to say ABOUT Christ so as to give us a seemingly godly form of avoiding intimacy with Christ Himself.

If you've read much of Jan Antonsson's and my writings, you are aware of how often we've mentioned the impact Harry Robert Fox, our friend and brother in Christ, has had in our lives. Harry has labeled the syndrome that I've described above as, "The Fear and Milk and Honey." In short, the following is a condensed explanation of what Harry means by that, and I'm including my own overtones of understanding as we've shared thoughts together on it:

We have a gargantuan need for intimacy, the intimacy of a relationship of perfect love; a need rooted in our God-given capacity for communion with God, who is love. For wherever there is a capacity, there will be the awareness of need until the capacity is satisfied. We seek that satisfaction in a multitude of ultimately disappointing gods; money, power, sex, fame, the perfect man or woman and on and on.

There lurks a fear within us that when all is said and done we will be disqualified from ever having that need satisfied. That fear keeps us from taking the leap of faith into the arms of Christ, for that irrational fear whispers in our subconscious, "What if you make such a commitment, such a total abandonment of yourself to that unspeakable expectation and then find that it is not enough, or, if after experiencing true satisfaction, it will be taken from you or it simply will not be lasting.

Better to stay where you are rather than opening yourself to such excruciating vulnerability. Don't risk it. You're hurting now; imagine how much you'll hurt if you get a taste and then wake up some morning hungry again and find that the pantry is empty. Deep within our subconscious, the voice of spiritual cynicism whispers, "FACE IT; YOU'LL NEVER TO ABLE TO FULFILL YOUR PART OF A RELATIONSHIP LIKE THAT?" That last sentence, I believe, is at the heart of the matter. Our law-mentality still has us convinced, that in the final analysis, we must, by our faithfulness, maintain the relationship that our hearts cry out for.

Bible study, among other "Christian things" to do and occupy our attention is a religiously safe haven from having to face our true need. Those things provide a quick fix; a false emotional and intellectual high. We've taken what God used in the Reformation, that is, the Bible--- opened up to the people of God for the purpose of restoring the truths of justification by faith and the priesthood of the believer---and we have taken this instrument of God and placed it on a pedestal to worship instead of God Himself.

The other interpretation of "*when that which is perfect is come*" says that Paul was speaking about the second coming of Christ. Now certainly the perfect love which "*never fails*" comes to us in Christ, but if we relegate that merely to a future eschatological event, again we conveniently hide from intimacy.

We are like the woman who goes to every wedding she can get herself invited to and listens with tears streaming down her face at the beautiful words of commitment being exchanged, but refuses to enter into a real relationship herself. When she's not attending weddings, she's reading paperback novels about passionate love affairs.

When Paul speaks of believers edifying one another in love (**I Thes. 5:11**), building up one another in the most holy faith (**Jude 1:20**), so as to mature into the measure of the fulness of the stature of Christ (**Eph. 4:13**), he presents that as a condition of spiritual growth that is to prevail among believers as they walk in the Spirit and relate to one another now and on the earth according to the love of God which is in Christ in them.

The prevailing notion today is that such a relationship can only exist some day in a heaven far, far away instead of the heaven of the transcendence found in our union with Christ within and among us now. I am not a biblically ignorant Christian. I dearly value the gift of Holy Writ, but I place it in its proper place as to relative worth. Christ is the all-encompassing gift to us who gives meaning and proper priority to all else that God has blessed us with.

When I fellowship with Christians who embrace the truth of final restoration conceptually but seem untouched by the passion of the love of God which is the content of that truth, I realize again, how much spiritual distance there can be between head and heart and how merely teaching about unconditional love and proving it with biblical texts is not the final answer.

Paul obviously included himself and his ministry when he said "*For now WE see through a glass darkly but then face to face*" (**I Cor. 13:12**). Although he gave us a peephole look at "that which is perfect," the church of his day generally lived in the "in part" realm. Yes, I

believe that tongues and prophecy, etc., are still genuinely extant today, I'm simply saying that we should not accept them as normative.

They point to the "more excellent way," love. Sure, there are many times when people operate in the gifts of the Spirit and there is a real quality of love in the ministry, but what I'm talking about is the pure, undiluted communication of love, by love.

It's interesting how we tend to associate "face to face" with a physical kind of encounter with Christ where He is external to us rather than "seeing" Him with the eyes of our hearts as Paul prayed. Paul prayed that our hearts would be flooded with light (**Eph. 1:18, Amp**). That's the essential kind of seeing that we need and without it, even an encounter with Christ where He would appear visibly to us would do us no good.

Lenny, Jan Antonsson's husband, has often in our fellowship together spoken of the problem we have with trying to translate eternal, spiritual reality into a time framework, so that when we hear something of the Lord that is beyond our present experience, we ask "when?" instead of "Who?" We are **experience-oriented** rather than **Christ oriented**. Having said that, I also say that we are in a transition period, standing on the threshold of a new day in the Lord.

The lesson we learn from the Pharisees is that they managed to reduce the law to matters of punctilious external observance that they were capable of carrying out and missed the very spirit of the law, which was to love the Lord with all our hearts and our neighbor as ourselves (**Luke 10:27**). No flesh is able to do that. Only the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, operating in us can fulfill the spirit of the law.

Any messing around with external codes of behavior throws a monkey wrench into the outworking of Christ's life within. But it is doomed to failure because it was intended to bring us to failure in ourselves. God has got everything working for Him and He's patient with us, knowing that He cannot fail.

Stay tuned for future serious, seminal samplings.

John Gavazzoni