

From The Editor

Is Methodology Neutral?

by Art Azurdia



Contrary to the unspoken (and not so unspoken!) musings of some of my dearest friends, I am not an antiquated crank grown old before his time. While it is true that I prefer button-down collared shirts, dry-cleaned, cuffed trousers, and have an aversion for nearly all forms of technology, God's sovereign providence has placed me perfectly. This present moment is the best possible time for me. As such, I want to be a contemporary man engaged in contemporary ministry. The Gospel with all its implications will not allow for anything else.

But this leaves me in a quandary. As a man devoted to the Gospel first and foremost, how am I to respond to the steady barrage of novel methods for ministry being advocated today by various expressions of evangelicalism? Is it ethically responsible to disengage my evaluative faculties in the name of contemporaneity? Is it true that methods for ministry are of no real consequence to God insofar as our motivation is the salvation of human beings—that, in fact, our methods should be altogether determined by the unique mores of each cultural context? Is methodology neutral? Or are we dangerously close to sacrificing *Sola Scriptura* on the altar of *Sola Cultura*?

I cannot seem to escape the fact that the Apostle Paul appears far more defined than many in our day regarding ministry methodology. Perhaps our thinking at this point should be critiqued by observing his ministry emphases as embedded within the context of 1 Corinthians 1-2. Consider the salient texts and three unmistakable observations that emerge from them:

"For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with clever words, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect" (1:17)

"For to those who are perishing the message of the cross is foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is God's power" (1:18)

". . . we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. Yet to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is God's power and God's wisdom" (1:23-24)

"When I came to you, brothers, announcing the testimony of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (2:1-2)

"My speech and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and power, so that your faith might not be based on men's wisdom but on God's power" (2:4-5)

Observation #1: *The substance of Paul's ministry reflects an intentional preoccupation with the message of the cross.* Moreover, the content in Paul's apostolic approach was in no way unique to the Corinthian context. His typical methodology was to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. To be sure, some have suggested that prior to his coming to Corinth, Paul experimented with a novel

approach in Athens (cf. Acts 17-18). Since his preaching was met with little success, they assert, he returned to his former resolution to preach Christ with simplicity and clarity before coming to Corinth. But such an interpretation is untenable for three obvious reasons:

- 1) it ignores the broad emphasis of the book of Acts, which seeks to display Paul's pattern of preaching Christ in all circumstances;
- 2) it reveals a blind sightedness to the immediate context of Acts 17, which explicitly records Paul's preaching of Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17:18); and,
- 3) it fails to acknowledge that people were saved under the preaching of Paul at Mars Hill (Acts 17:34).

When Paul declared "I determined to know nothing among you . . ." he was not referring to a radical breach with a novel ministry methodology tampered with in Athens. If any contrast is to be discerned it is with reference to the Greek philosophers and orators, so prominently prized in Corinth, who were continuously advancing their own speculations. Paul's message, the message from which he never deviated, originated with God (2:1) and centered on Jesus Christ (2:2).

Observation #2: The methodology of Paul's ministry reflects an intentional correspondence to the message of the cross. It is plain that Paul was surrendered to the lordship of the gospel message. It is also plain that the gospel was so deeply incarnated into his life that not only did it permeate everything he said, its very scent was evident in his manner of communicating it: "not with clever words" (1:17), nor with "brilliance of speech or wisdom" (2:1), "not with persuasive words of wisdom" (2:4). Paul's apparent conviction was that methodology is not irrelevant when the cross is the content of the message being communicated. To the contrary, the cross not only determined the substance of his ministry, it dictated the style in which he communicated it.

Observation #3: The rationale for Paul's methodology reflects an intentional concern to not invalidate the message of the cross. Paul did not intentionally eschew the methods of communication highly prized in Corinth because he was a traditionalist with a fear for things contemporary. Rather, he was convinced that a lack of obvious correspondence between message and method of communication would inevitably compromise the integrity of the message itself: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with clever words, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect" (1:17). Moreover, as a careful pastoral practitioner he was concerned to not risk any possible confusion with regard to the source of a person's faith in Jesus Christ: "My speech and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom . . . so that your faith might not be drawn out by men's wisdom but by God's power" (2:4-5).

While I readily admit that these three observations may not serve to supply comprehensive answers to the ministry complexities facing well-intentioned pastors, they do stimulate evaluative questions that can be posed to the methodologies many seem to pander after with little or no discretion: Is the evangelical priority (the gospel) at the heart of this novel approach to ministry? Is this methodology for ministry in keeping with the essence of the gospel itself? Is it a cross-kind of methodology? To what or to whom will the attention of people be drawn? Is it a methodology that requires the power of God for efficacy, or does it produce results solely on the basis of human ingenuity and effort?

Consider the nature of your calling, my brothers. The preacher brings to a fallen humanity the testimony of God centered on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, a work that by nature shatters all human self-sufficiency. To employ methods, in turn, that reflect the wizardry of men is to eviscerate the gospel of its own content. If God has supremely disclosed Himself in the cross, and if following Jesus Christ means dying daily, then to adopt a style of ministry that is triumphalistic, designed to impress, and calculated to win acclaim is a serious contradiction of the gospel; perhaps, even, anti-Christian.

My prayer is that this issue of *The Spurgeon Fellowship Journal* will contribute positively to your discernment on this serious matter. Fads, schemes, and gimmicks for ministry will never go away. They will forever reinvent themselves in fresh displays that reflect our cultural values. Your job as a pastoral theologian is to evaluate them with criteria that push beyond numerical success and cultural approval.

Even now, ringing in my ears are the timeless words of the Puritan John Flavel: “. . . a crucified style best suits the preachers of a crucified Christ.” May our ministries—and their methods—always assume the form of the cross.