

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.  
Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 2:1-10  
Sermon Title: "Gimmicks and Plain Talk"

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We turn on MSNBC, FoxNews, any radio talk show, what do we hear? People, usually men, arguing loudly about this political decision or that social issue, and the one who speaks the loudest wins the argument, presumably. We don't hear people articulating complete thoughts without being cut off. We don't hear even speech without raising the voice and getting frustrated. What we hear is one person speaking, and the other person interrupting, usually the interviewer who must have control over the person he or she has on the show. When somebody disagrees, they call the other person by names. They shout over them in the hope to drown out the other person's viewpoints, to discredit him or her for having such ideas. Sometimes the interview breaks down to something like a lover's quarrel. The loudest and most persistent person thinks he or she won the fight. We, the listeners, have to come to our own conclusions.

Paul says to the Corinthians in his very first letter that he didn't come with "excellence of speech or of wisdom." He didn't come to them with some elevated

way of talking, as though he had just taken classes on persuasive communication. He didn't come with the "latest philosophy" in order to impress them.<sup>1</sup> "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." That was his message, boiled down to its simplest element, and yet a message that was more powerful than any combustible element on earth.

You know, Paul could have come to them with arrogance filling his head and eloquent speech filling his lips. The guy was a former Pharisee, and he knew how to advance himself in life. He was persuasive enough to get people to hear about his arguments against Christianity. He once hated the Christians, and wanted to see them all jailed or killed. He used his sweet talk to get the high priest in Jerusalem to give him papers, permitting him to round up anybody who followed The Way, the name given to people who believed in Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Paul was ready to move his agenda forward, until God got a hold of him. God soon used his mouth and mind and hands to join The Way, and spread the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

It seems that Paul didn't intend to come in like

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, 1670.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Acts 9:1-2.

gangbusters to win people over to The Way, win them over to Christ, as he did when he was pushing his own agenda as a prominent Pharisee. “I didn’t come to win an argument by anything I can do,” Paul was saying to the Corinthian people. “My speech and preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom,” words that are carefully rehearsed so I coerce you into buying the thing I’m trying to sell. “I’m not here to show others up in order to make it look like I’m something important. Jesus Christ and him crucified – that is it in a nutshell, but a powerful nutshell that is.”

Today, our world is full of gimmicks. There are catchphrases and soundbites we hear every day to get us to buy something somebody is selling. “Life Takes Visa.” “I’m lovin’ it!” “Fair and balanced.” “Lean forward.” “Can you hear me now?” “The new 4G network.” “That was easy.” “What’s in your wallet?” “That’s the money you could be saving.”<sup>3</sup> We hear these catchphrases again and again and again, until they become a part of our DNA. We are so won over by them that we think we must have what they are selling, whether it is the latest electronic device, the latest computer game, or the latest idea. I’ve been watching the iPad commercials even since the thing

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.helium.com/items/330617-todays-most-annoying-popular-catch-phrases>.

came out, and I haven't really wanted one until today. Now I've got to have one. It's like a switch flipped on in my head. I watch the commercials, and I cannot wait to use the iPad for Internet access, reading books, playing games, and keeping track of my documents and schedules. For my birthday in April, I am buying myself an iPad, and then my life will be so happy and cheery. Not a cloud will form in the sky, and all my days will be smooth and perfect with that iPad by my side. Commercials make it sound as though all will be perfect, when we finally buy their products. Those people on TV, who have some new idea for us to catch, look so clean. Their teeth are extra white, their hair and faces are extra shiny, their clothes never have a spot or wrinkle on them, and their ideas are so simple and foolproof. We must be like them – show us where to sign up.

Paul was doing ministry in the heart of Greek culture, Greek politics, and Greek philosophy, which was king. The Greeks loved their philosophy, because thinking made you civilized, highly-aware, nearly perfect. The time of Paul was like today: there were always new fads, new ways of thinking, and new ways of living the perfect life. They might not have had Twitter or Facebook, but they had lots of people spouting out lots of ideas, with each person thinking

he was the smartest person around, and you should listen and follow him. Paul had many debates with the Greek. In fact, before coming to Corinth, he had come from Athens, the hotbed of everything Greek, and he met with philosophers on Mars' hill to argue and persuade.

His preaching had little effect. He was telling people as convincingly as possible about Jesus Christ and him crucified, but nobody seemed to care. Most people either mocked him or said, "We'll talk some more later." Paul wasn't going to touch up the word of God in such a way that everybody would come flocking to him. He wasn't going to use soundbites and catchphrases to get people on his bandwagon. The message of Jesus Christ is powerful enough on its own. It is the message of all messages we should hear and must hear in order to live forever with God.

Even churches today have bought into using gimmicks to attract people to their sanctuaries. They study marketing strategies and formulate plans on how to get people to notice them, and then to join them in order to increase their already-ballooning membership numbers. One church in our area recently sent out a mailer to residents, telling them about a new marriage seminar they are holding. Nothing wrong with that, except the mailer itself is not something a church should send out. If it weren't for

the church's name printed at the top, you would think the mailer was an advertisement for Viagra or something of that sort. The images placed on the large postcard are alluring. The words they use, which I will not repeat here, are edgy and tantalizing. They seem to describe intimacy with one's spouse as the main goal for a marriage, and then there are other things that are important. I am sure the seminar will be beneficial for any Christian couple, but why use nearly R-rated words and images to bring people in? Will the gimmicks of churches do what they hope to do?

A church outside of Pittsburgh had a raffle once during Sunday worship. They announced that, one Sunday morning, in their nearly 2000-seat capacity sanctuary, they were going to attach three envelopes under three chairs (this church doesn't have pews), and those lucky enough to sit in those chairs would win \$1000. \$1000 in cash. Now, I don't know about you, but I would have gone just to get the chance to win a prize. If I had that Sunday off, I would have gone; and then I wouldn't come back until they organized another gimmick. By the way, this same church had an Easter egg hunt the Saturday before Easter, and you could find a plastic egg with a slip inside that would earn you a \$5000 plasma screen TV. Sorry I missed that.

Do the gimmicks of churches do what they hope to

do? The message of Jesus Christ and him crucified is already powerful enough. Jesus Christ and him crucified has already rocked the foundations of this planet. The gates of Hell are already torn down. The demons believe the power of God, and they tremble. The chains of our sin fall to the ground at the sight of Christ, and one day every person will fall on a knee and declare Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Isn't that powerful enough?

Bill Hybels, who is the pastor of Willow Creek, a multi-million dollar, multi-populated church outside of Chicago, discovered in the last years that the gimmicks their church was implementing weren't making mature Christians. Sure, people loved the gimmicks – they made them feel great about themselves, and they kept coming back – but most people weren't growing any closer to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They wanted more gimmicks: more programs using the latest 12-steps, more worship with better music and technology, more entertainment with the better pictures and movies just to keep people in church. Bill Hybels wrote in an article that he had to change things up: stop the gimmicks and just get back to preach Christ and him crucified.<sup>4</sup> The message doesn't need all the pizzazz

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<sup>4</sup> DC Talk, an early Christian band, once sang, "Is this one for the people? Is this one for the Lord? Or do I simply serenade for

surrounding it. The message itself is enough to rescue people from their pathetic, sinful lives.

Paul could have set up a booth in every city he visited. He could have yelled at passers-by, shouting, “Step right up, step right up! Come and hear this amazing new idea I’ve got for you. Or, instead of a booth, Paul could have practiced his speech again and again, concentrating on annunciating every word perfectly, rehearsing every catchphrase that would wow the crowd.

Paul tried it once, tried to match the philosophical arguments with the wise guys in Corinth. Only a hand full of people listened and accepted Christ. So Paul moved on. He met with people to talk to them about life. They ate meals together, learned about each other’s occupations and families and likes and dislikes. Along the way, Paul talked about Christ. He used simple words. He used plain stories to help get the point across. God constantly fed him the message, a message Paul believed deep within his heart. When the message of God runs that deep, you can easily talk about Christ, and the new life we can have with God the Father, and the fellowship we can have through the Holy Spirit.

It doesn't take "the right words" to speak about God. It doesn't take "the loudest voice" or "the best-polished lecture" to get people to understand. We are just the messengers: we aren't trying to win people over. We're just telling them a story that we once heard, and touched our lives, and we've never been the same. The Holy Spirit will win them over, using our plain talk to communicate the powerful, enduring message about Christ and him crucified.

So a kid on the bus can talk to his friend sitting beside him, talk about God when that friend isn't having a good day. So an employee can talk to another employee, who just entered her cubicle, talk about God when the other employee is complaining about stresses at work and at home. So a parent or grandparent can talk to a child or youth or grandchild, talk about God when that younger person is confused about life, when it becomes too large to comprehend.

We preach Christ and him crucified. We delve into a deep mystery that was established before time began, and yet this mystery affects our time: everything we do, everything we say, everything we think. We simply share the mystery with as much understanding as we have, hoping that we and the people we speak with might delve even deeper into that mystery, and see God, and feel his warm, and experience his love, and live forever.

## *The Assurance of Pardon:*

Hear the good news! Christ Jesus lives and reigns in heaven above, holding the keys to death and death's dominion. Christ reigns in power with God the Father as Lord of all creation, and he tells us to not be afraid. God our Father forgives all sin, large and small, secret and revealed. We are saved from death, and life is our reward. Believe this good news. You and I are forgiven through Christ our Lord. Amen.