

A Gospel Church in an Age of Gimmicks

Romans 1:16

Studies in Romans #4

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I thought by now I would have preached one sermon on verses 16–17. Then came the Supreme Court ruling. And so last time we were together we focused on the opening phrase here: **For I am not ashamed of the gospel.** Then when I went away I thought I'd come back and wrap up the end of verse 16 and all of 17 in a nice tidy sermon. Then I was reminded in Brazil and Costa Rica of the need for gospel preaching churches in our time and place and throughout our world. In Brazil, Pentecostal churches can be purchased through ads in the newspaper that tell you how many are in attendance and how much money they bring in every week. In Brazil's one million-member Presbyterian denomination, the miniscule percentage of those who actual know what that means and try to worship and live accordingly, are actually persecuted within their own denomination and churches. In Costa Rica we actually had to walk out of a church mid-sermon. There was absolutely no proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Savior from sin; all we heard was how if you want something you just need to speak it and God has to give it to you, as long as you have enough faith. And this was the supposed evangelical, non-denominational church in this city. There was a Roman church, an Apostolic/Pentecostal church, and then this.

Brothers and sisters, I don't need to tell you the sad state of Christianity in our own cities and region here in coastal North County. I don't need to tell you that on any given Sunday you can walk into big successful churches and hardly hear God's voice in his

Word but hear plenty of self-help words from man, watch plenty of videos on a screen, and hear plenty of uplifting, soothing words that make you feel good. And so I thought I was going to finish verses 16–17 today, but then God showed me again in my travels that what the world needs is *a gospel church in an age of gimmicks*. The modern mega-churches and wannabe mega-churches around us are ashamed of the gospel! But Paul says—and I pray you say—I **am not ashamed of the gospel**. Why? Paul explains why: **for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek** (v. 16). This is a gospel for our souls! This is a gospel for our time! This is a gospel the world does not want but actually needs! Amen? And so I want to proclaim to you today that God is calling us to be *a gospel church in an age of gimmicks*.

1. ***A Gospel Church is a Preaching Church***
2. ***A Gospel Church is a Confident Church***
3. ***A Gospel Church is a Welcoming Church***

A Gospel Church is a Preaching Church

God is calling us to be *a gospel church in an age of gimmicks*. And the first thing this means for us is that *a gospel church is a preaching church*. “Where’s that in the text,” you may be asking. Go back to the opening of the letter and ask again, “What is the gospel?” Paul was “set apart for the gospel” (1:1); this gospel was promised by the prophets in the Old Testament (1:2). So what is it? It is Jesus Christ. Verses 3–4 define what the gospel is: it is Jesus and his work for us before and after his resurrection from the dead.

“Okay, that sounds great, but it says nothing about preaching.” Paul is “set apart for the gospel” (1:1) to do what? As verses 5–6 his goal was to “bring about the obedience

of faith...among all the nations.” But how? Look at verses 11–15. Paul longs to go to Rome to “impart...some spiritual gift” (1:11), which he explains in verse 15 as preaching the gospel to them! And so when he says in our text in verse 16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel,” he is refereeing to the gospel of Jesus Christ he longs to preach to them in Rome.

“That’s great and all, but ancient Rome was an audible culture; ours is a visual culture. Therefore preaching is outdated and if we are going to reach our neighbors we need to use visible means.” I received an email a few weeks ago from a website called “sermonscenes.com,” which promised to take all the best Hollywood movies, put together relevant clips for churches, and even to send you sermon outline based on the clips! That’s an interesting theory, but nowhere does God promise to save through visible media; nowhere does God promise to save apart from *hearing* the Word of God preached! Look with me at what Paul says later in this same epistle in 10:13–17:

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

God has worked for thousands of years to save sinners and he culminated all that work two thousand years ago by sending Jesus Christ to the world. Here’s the question: how does all that God has done in Christ so long ago, so far away, come to us? The answer is simple: preaching the living and active Word of God! The English theologian, Elnathan Parr (d. 1632), said it like this: “Without the preaching of the gospel, there is no salvation. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation, not written in leaves [meaning, in

creation], but preached.”

This is a huge responsibility on me as a preacher, isn't it? Absolutely. But this also applies to you, brothers and sisters. There is the authorized, official, and public preaching that I do and this is to equip you to lead you out into the world to be witnesses of Jesus Christ in word and deed. We are all “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

A Gospel Church is a Confident Church

God is calling us to be *a gospel church in an age of gimmicks*. This also means *a gospel church is a confident church*. Again, we are to stand up in the sight of the world and say, “I am not ashamed of the gospel,” and when they ask us why we are to say, **for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes**. Preaching is the means God uses to display his power, his *dunamis*.

But this doesn't sound right to us. You see, all throughout Scripture we see God's power displayed in such things as creation, the Flood, the parting of the Red Sea, the destruction of whole armies of the ungodly, the miracles of Jesus and the apostles, and the triumphant resurrection of our Lord. *That's* power. Words can't do all *that*. And so churches use gimmicks. I watched a couple of Youtube videos in Brazil of a Presbyterian church that used a bunch of showbiz techniques to turn water into wine and to knock down the wall of Jericho to get people excited. Is it any different today when to draw a

crowd we bring in an NFL celebrity or see churches passing out door prizes for the first several hundred who show up?

Paul says the gospel he preached is **the power of God** and this is in contradistinction to the power of man. We as human beings are so creative and we can mimic what looks like powerful works of God; but only God actual can perform the power. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 1:18–25:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

In our human wisdom and in our desire to see wonderful works of God, what do we most often turn to as the best method of evangelism in our culture and time? Music. But nowhere in all of Scripture does God promise to work through music as he does through preaching. Nowhere! Martin Luther said this of gospel preaching: “the Gospel is the power of the Spirit, or the riches, weapons, adornments, and every good thing of the Spirit, from whom it has all its power, and this from God.”¹

Are you this confident today? Look around and you see our small church dwarfed by the large churches. But are you confident in God’s power to save through the means of preaching?

¹ Luther, 150.

A Gospel Church is a Welcoming Church

God is calling us to be *a gospel church in an age of gimmicks*. Let me conclude with an application of the final phrase in verse 16: **to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**² This means that *a gospel church is a welcoming church*. I think I've mentioned before but when I first was planning this church plant I was asked by someone, "What's your target demographic?" White, black, or something in between? Retirees, empty-nesters, young families, or college aged and singles? Stable suburbia or low income? And the list went on. How would you answer that question if someone asked you, "Who does your church target in its mission?" I know my answer: Sinners!

We are called by God to welcome any and all sinners into God's presence to hear his Word. Why? Because the gospel does not discriminate. It is for **everyone who believes** whether **to the Jew first**, since God's plan of salvation comes to the world through the Jews or whether **to the Greek**, meaning, everyone else.

Let me make one more application of this. Don't forget as we are seeking to be welcoming to the world to be welcoming to one another. As a church we need to grow in our love for one another. That starts with each of us individually. Pray about how you can show more love so that we are actually a church family for the world to join.

So what do you want in your church? Do you want gimmicks or do you want the gospel? It's one or the other. You can't serve two masters. Amen.

² On the gospel being offered to all, see Calvin, 27.