Not in Lofty Speech or Media: A Reflection on Pentecostal Preaching in Light of 1 Cor 2:1–5

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Abstract

Pentecostalism is perhaps best known for its charismatic worship and preaching, which are part of the reason for its continued growth and influence. Sunday services are often an experience of lights, music, multimedia, and inspiring preaching. Such a service is not out of place in a culture that has the highest expectation when it comes to entertainment and media. However, in this pursuit of excellence, we also create the potential for divisions akin to these seen in the Corinthian Christian community. This paper explores modern Pentecostal liturgy, and especially preaching, in light of Paul's mini testimony in 1 Cor. 2:1–5.

Keywords

preaching – Pentecostal liturgy – first-century oratory – declamation – 1 Corinthians – Paul

Introduction

As an ordained minister and pastor in the Australian Christian Churches as well as a Lecturer in New Testament at our denomination's national college, I am continually challenged by the disparity between what takes place in the Pentecostal pulpit and the college lecture room. What I mean is it is often the case that a Pentecostal sermon is scripturally or theologically anaemic and

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more notable for its charisma than its content; while the college lecture is the polar opposite. On numerous occasions I have had a first year student from a Pentecostal church (and not necessarily a young one) come up to me and say: ‘I have never heard anything like this!’ Now to be fair, it would be irrational to expect that the two should be exactly the same; however, surely there could be some more similarity? As one of my PhD supervisors described what he saw in certain Pentecostal preachers, it is ‘hip-hop lollypop preaching’; that is, you will walk away from a sermon feeling excited, but it has no long lasting effects. This is perhaps an overly cynical evaluation; nevertheless, there is a grain of truth.

To suggest that Pentecostal preaching suffers from a lack of ‘depth’ is not an original observation, not by any stretch of the imagination. It is the constant frustration of not only my academic colleagues, but many of the church members that I have met over the years. In fact, it is probably what many ‘mainline’ Christians think of when they think of us. Yet for many Pentecostals, it is what they are accustomed to, and it is part and parcel of the overall worship experience on a Sunday. With the lights, band, and multimedia, it is only fitting that the preaching should be vibrant and charismatic, more entertaining and motivating than informing and transforming. But, as this paper sets out to demonstrate, our concern for style over content places us at risk of divisions akin to what we see in 1 Cor. 1.12.

In what follows we will (1) briefly look at Pentecostal liturgy, paying particular attention to recent scholarly discussion. We will then (2) discuss Paul’s account of his preaching in Corinth in light of first-century oratory. From this we will (3) reflect briefly on the implications for Pentecostal liturgy, particularly preaching.

**Pentecostal Liturgy**

Before we begin, I must offer one caveat to the proceeding argument. In speaking of ‘Pentecostal preaching/ers’ I am referring to an incredibly diversified group or phenomenon. In my own context of Australia, Pentecostal churches are autonomous congregations, meaning that from church to church one can find a range of differing beliefs on any number of topics. In the same way, one can find a diversity of preaching styles and emphases on quality of content and style. This is often due to the lack of seminary training amongst most Pentecostal pastors, meaning that their theology and preaching ability is the product of personal study (or lack thereof) and experience, with varying results. It is therefore impossible to reduce ‘Pentecostal preaching’ to a nice, neat category even in my own local context, much less in an international context. This task
is made even more difficult given the lack of scholarly attention paid to the issue of Pentecostal Preaching.¹

However, as recent scholarship has noted, one general observation can be made. It would be reasonable to suggest that a ‘typical’ Sunday message in a Pentecostal church is less of an exercise in rigorous biblical exposition and much more of an oratorical display aimed at motivating the church members to whatever course of action is being encouraged. Naturally there are exceptions to this rule, but as John Enyinnaya has noted, ‘Pentecostal preachers tend to have good packaging or delivery and less hermeneutics … Pentecostal preachers tend to be entertaining. Many times, this quality of being entertaining overshadows the need for spiritual enrichment. Preaching that appeals only to the emotions can be hardly expected to also produce the depth required for a concomitant change of life and attitude.’²

To be fair, it must be noted that Pentecostal preaching is traditionally characterised by its dependence on the ‘anointing’. Gordy notes that traditional Pentecostal preaching was ‘characterised by its spontaneity and fervour. Men, women, and even children would speak with conviction as God moved upon them. Messages came straight from God and penetrated the hearts of listeners.’³ But even this ‘anointing’ is not always as it seems. Josh P.S. Samuel has recently noted,

There are some Pentecostal preachers who not only mishandle Scripture in their sermons, but also rely on hype to generate responses that appear to be supernatural; regrettably, these same preachers often claim that it is the Spirit who leads to do what they do.⁴

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He comments further that Pentecostals who feel that preaching is only ‘Pentecostal’ when they experience supernatural results ‘may be tempted to manipulate the context of preaching in order to gain some sort of response to the preached word’. He believes that many Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals ‘have been turned off by Pentecostal preaching due to the need of some preachers to manipulate meetings in order to bring about some response, whether through “hype”, emotionalism, pushing people at alter calls so they are “slain in the Spirit”, and over-promising the results of an altar call’.5

The ‘hype’ or ‘showmanship’ of this kind of preaching is not, however, anomalous within Pentecostal liturgy. Johnathan Alvarado has recently discussed the tenets of Pentecostal worship; these, he suggests, are, in part: Spirit movement, passionate praise, emotional release, and spiritual gifts in operation. These, according to him, make its expression a transformative, vibrant, and moving encounter with the divine.6 He says further that ‘In Pentecostal worship, the prayers prayed, the words read, the sermon preached, the songs sung are all interactive and engaging acts which connect the worshiping community to each other and to God’.7 This vibrancy and dynamism of Pentecostal worship is commonly expressed in the aesthetics of the service, whereby a Sunday meeting is as much a concert as it is a worship service. Brilliant light shows, extravagant multimedia displays, and professional quality music either define in the case of larger churches or are often the benchmark in the case of smaller churches.

But this is not altogether a negative. Such ‘excellence’, it has been argued, can have spiritual benefits. Rybarczyk draws attention to the recent practice of church leaders who are turning to aesthetic to fashion the atmosphere for the postmodern worshippers.

These leaders know that people are hungry to experience God’s intimate presence and so they spend enormous time and loads of money on lighting, well-placed candles, abstractly shaped objects d’art, sound systems, and media projection equipment. These churches are less driven by intentional theological constructs than they are driven to be alluring and

7 Alvarado, ‘Worship in the Spirit: Pentecostal Perspectives on Liturgical Theology and Praxis’, p. 143. ‘It is interesting to note that many other Christian traditions have begun to adopt this “playful” style as their own in order to enliven and energize their worship offerings and to facilitate a more meaningful encounter between the worshiping community and God’.
cutting edge. Nevertheless, they are purposefully using physical space, symmetry, beauty, and mood lighting to both attract people and play upon their physical sensibilities.8

He notes the value of this kind of beauty and aesthetic in the church service in that it reflects God's own aims as he works both within and for his creation. That is, 'beauty itself reflects something of God's horizonless transcendence'. Again he notes that, as 'enfleshed' beings, 'we live in a physical and aesthetic world. Hence, I believe beauty – by the very nature of reality – hits us in the heart, it penetrates our emotions and allures us'.9 Moreover, he suggests,

Aesthetic and beauty can be used as unspoken signposts of Christ's presence. We should be less interested in the production of Jesus junk – the paraphernalia produced by a sickly-sweet version of Christian subculture – than in taking formerly broken and ugly things, environs, and locations and making them beautiful, attractive, or contemplative. Our shaping of the physical space around us, again, can be a testimony of the love of God in our hearts.10

Generally speaking then, Pentecostal preaching is characterised by an emphasis on quality of delivery over quality of content. And while there is value to be found in the extravagance of what many of our churches do each Sunday, care must be taken that the beauty and excellence that we pursue does not become a stumbling stone to our congregations. In what follows, we will look at Paul's explanation of his initial ministry in Corinth followed by a brief discussion of how this might inform contemporary worship practices in general and preaching in particular.

**Paul's Initial Ministry in Light of First-Century Oratory**

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my

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message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

1 Cor 2.1–5 ESV

In 1 Cor. 2.1–5, Paul recounts his initial ministry when he came to Corinth. This mini-autobiography has come about in response to questions from some within the Christian community as to Paul’s efficacy as a preacher. Some of these members have taken a preference to the perceived superiority of Apollos,11 who they deemed to be a far superior orator and minister to Paul,12 and divisions in the Christian community have resulted. To properly understand this situation, however, we must examine the practice of oratory in the first century.

The importance of oratory in the ancient world simply cannot be overstated. Rhetoric was as central to Greek and Roman education as it was to Greek and Roman society as a whole. It was used in every area of public and many areas of private life, for business and pleasure, by a wide range of social groups. It was also studied endlessly, and features in every account of Hellenistic and Roman education to survive, having been taught to wealthy young Greeks from the fifth century BCE to beyond our present period of study.13 Orators themselves were politicians, statesmen, and celebrities, their fame being well attested. Tacitus notes:

Why, where is there a profession whose fame and glory are to be compared with the distinction of the orator? Who is a more illustrious man at Rome, not only with the busy class, intent on public affairs, but even with people of leisure, and with the young? Whose name does the father din into his children’s ears before that of the orator? Whom, as he passes by, do the ignorant mob and the men with the tunic oftener speak of by name and point out with the finger? Strangers too and foreigners, having heard of him in their towns and colonies, as soon as they have arrived at Rome, ask for him and are eager, as it were to recognise him.

Tacitus, Dial. 7.3–414

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11 This is indicated by Paul’s summary of the divisions within the church in 1 Cor. 1.10–12 and his specific reference to the two leading figures of himself and Apollos in 1 Cor. 3.5.
14 Such fame brought with it potential wealth. A receipt from 110 CE found in Egypt gives instructions to pay Licinnius Dr [---] a fee of 400 Drachmas of silver for orations given in
He says again that the orator ‘can always bring aid to friends, succour to strangers, deliverance to the imperilled, while to malignant foes he is an actual fear and terror, himself the while secure and entrenched’ (Dial 5.5). Furthermore, there is the pleasure derived from the orator’s eloquence, its delights being enjoyed not just for a single moment, but also on every day and at every hour. He says that for the orator there is no greater pleasure than his house being constantly full with crowds of the most important men; people both high and low, young and old, coming to him so that he can plead their case; or the large retinue of clients that accompany him to and from the courts; not to mention the great show he makes in public, and the reverence paid to him. This pleasure, he says, is apparent to all, even to the uneducated.

Oratory, in other words, was a central part of first-century life. And while only a few would ever be trained in it, everyone would be exposed to it. Moreover, by the period of the NT, oratory was reaching its peak of eloquence throughout the Roman Empire; so much so, that Kennedy notes,

Any fair estimate would judge the early Roman Empire as one of the most eloquent periods in human history. Rhetoric monopolised secondary education and in this period the crest was probably reached in the number of students trained in declamation and in the influence of rhetorical study on literary composition. The ideal orator continued to be an inspiration and a goal for thousands.

The importance of oratory was not just in its aesthetics, however. Historically, oratory was central to public life and pre-requisite for the elite citizen and ruler.

The Development and Practice of Oratory

Oratory had its roots in Classical Greece; its development came about largely from two main needs: first, the need of either prosecutors or defendants to


15 Similarly, Cicero, *De Or* 1.34.
16 Tacitus, *Dial* 6.2.
represent themselves in civil or criminal cases; and second, the need for governing officials to address the government and the populace. In Hellenistic times, schools of grammar and rhetoric appeared in every important town and city, and in this new environment, the ability to speak Greek in the law court, or conduct business in Greek became important for many citizens. Moreover, it brought with it understanding of and acceptance into the dominant culture. Similarly, in ancient Rome, oratory also served these two areas of politics and law. During the Republic period, deliberative rhetoric was taught in the schools to those who in the future would urge particular matters, whether in the senate or public assembly and judicial oratory was taught with a view to appearances in the law courts. In this climate, the eloquent orator became a civic ideal, ‘the master artist of civic life, being in full control of language that served his art and personal claim’.

However, by the Augustan age, deliberative rhetoric in the form of political oratory, or more specifically, the ability to speak freely, shrank in proportion to the power of the emperor. In its place arose a new use of oratory, one that, whilst devoid of any real political force, captivated its audience with style and eloquence: the practice of declamation.

**Declamation as Preparation for Adulthood**

Declamation was the main form of training in oratory; here a teacher would set a topic for the student to speak on, and it was their task to write and perform the speech in front of the class. In the early Empire, declamation became the main form of rhetorical training in the schools of oratory. Declamation prepared the

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21 This was the main form of oratory taught in Roman schools of rhetoric. See Donald Lemen Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education* (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1977), p. 64.
22 Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*, p. 29. Tacitus says that in these times, the speaker’s political wisdom was measured by his power of carrying conviction to the unstable populace. These, he says, were times of hereditary feuds between whole families, of schisms among the aristocracy and never-ending struggles between the senate and the commons. But although these many issues tore apart the commonwealth, he says that they provided ‘a sphere for the oratory of those days and heaped on it vast rewards. The more influence a man could wield by his powers of speech, the more readily did he attain to high office; the further did he, when in office, outstrip his colleagues in the race for precedence, the more did he gain favour with the great, authority with the senate and fame with the common people’ (*Dial* 36.4).
student for adulthood through numerous exercises whereby the boy took on the speaking role of his father or other adult roles. In writing speeches and declaiming, a boy was taught gender and status roles, and in doing so, was being shaped for his position at the top of the social ladder. In practice, he would speak like a patron or patr

erfamilias on behalf of his social subordinates. Additionally, he might speak for the freedman accused of ingratitude, the son accused of rape or patricide, the stepmother accused of poisoning, or the military hero accused of desertion. The overall purpose of declamation was to inculcate, through repetition, approved values in the young minds of the next generation of the elite. By becoming steeped in these values, beliefs, and stereotypes, the students acquired the reflexes needed to live as respectable men. Overall, the practice of declamation allowed future leaders to master the complexities and contradictions of Roman ideology and Roman practice.

Declamation as a Cultural Phenomenon

But what began as a form of training for students of oratory soon developed into a popular form of entertainment for adults. By the mid-sixties BCE, schools of declamation were starting to attract adults from the Roman elite who sat in classes as auditors. Additionally, Roman orators also used declaiming as a way of staying limber for the stage or the forum. Because declamation was a performance, it could also take place in settings such as private homes. Moreover,
it also became a means by which one could discuss political themes, themes that might otherwise not be safe to speak about; and as time went on, it became a public spectacle at various games and with travelling sophists.\textsuperscript{30} It was even practised by the emperor. Augustus, it is said, took his teacher of declamation Apollodorus of Pergamon with him from Rome to Apollonia.\textsuperscript{31} Overall, declamation reflected the tastes of an age that appreciated style, technique, and artistic effects as virtues in themselves.\textsuperscript{32}

**Declamation and the Second Sophistic**

It was noted above that political oratory in Rome shrank in proportion to the power of the emperor; the same is true in first-century Greece. Although Greek civic life went on in a semi-autonomous manner and internal peace was conducive to stimulated intellectual life and opportunity for speech,\textsuperscript{33} political deliberation on matters of the economy and external relations was largely a matter of form.\textsuperscript{34} However, in this new political milieu, declamation provided an avenue for orators to demonstrate their skills and compete for eminence and fame; this was most notable amongst the sophists.

In the mid-first century, a movement arose in the Eastern part of the Empire known as the Second Sophistic.\textsuperscript{35} This was a phenomenon of elite professional

\textsuperscript{31} Suetonius, *Aug.*, 89.1.
\textsuperscript{32} Kennedy, *The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World*, p. 316.
\textsuperscript{33} Kennedy, *The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World*, p. 553.
\textsuperscript{34} Joy Connolly, ‘Problems of the Past in Imperial Greek Education’, in Yun Lee Too (ed.), *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), p. 351. She also notes the continuing importance of public speaking in the Greek imperial city (p. 341 n. 10). Although politicians were not as free to say what they wanted, public speech was still a primary method of ruling. See Simon Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World AD 50–250* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 90. Other occasions for public speech included welcoming dignitaries, funeral orations, speeches to honour the gods, and various competitions.
orators, ‘virtuoso rhetors with a big public reputation’. Sophists were the celebrity declaimers, men whose lives were focussed on the perfection of their art and in particular, the recreation of Greece’s classical past. Dio describes them as performers who could be ‘destroyed by popular opinion, their livers swelling and growing whenever they were praised and shrivelling again when they were censured’ (Or. 8.33). Sophists were also teachers of declamation, men of vast wealth who were often benefactors to their own and to their adopted cities; in fact their wealth and benevolence became characteristic of the movement. Philo gives the following description of this group:

Those who take care of themselves [i.e., sophists] are men of mark and wealth, holding leading positions, praised on all hands, recipients of honours, portly, healthy, stout, and vigorous; revelling in luxurious and riotous living, strangers to labour, conversant with pleasures which carry the sweets of life to the all-welcoming soul by every channel and sense.

**PHILO, Det. 34**

Sophists were particularly noted for their skill with words. Philo says of them that ‘day after day the swarms of sophists to be found everywhere wears out the ears of any audience they happen to have with disquisitions on minutiae, unravelling phrases that are ambiguous and can bear two meanings’ (Agr. 136). Philo is typically critical of the sophistic movement, yet he is still compelled to praise their eloquence: ‘There are the sophists who are exceedingly skilful in explaining their ideas, but very bad hands at forming intentions; for the mind of these sophists is destitute of all harmony and of all real learning; but their speeches, which are uttered by the organs of their voice, are full of music and beauty’ (Migr. 72).

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38 Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, pp. 26–27. For other discussion on the difference between rhetors and sophists, see Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, pp. 97–99.

39 He argues that it is in fact dangerous for the untrained in oratory to enter into an argument with them; thus it is necessary for those who are wise to be both armed with wisdom in council and good deeds, as well in the arts of eloquence (Det. 35).
This movement became prominent in the time of the NT and sophists would have been well known through all of the cities in which Paul travelled.

In summary, oratory, initially practised as a means of political influence and persuasion, was now popularly used as a form of entertainment. It became the predominant means of shaping an elite young man for his future roles in society and setting him apart from the lower status and the uneducated. Orators embodied elite values and education and were thus highly praised by high and low alike. In fact, it was generally assumed that one’s skill in oratory was an indication of one’s status and very character.

**Style and Character**

One’s rhetorical style was typically associated with their character and was considered an indication of their manliness. Seneca opens one of his letters with the popular maxim ‘a man’s speech is just like his life’ (*Ep. 114.2*). He goes on:

Exactly as each individual man’s actions seem to speak, so people’s style of speaking often reproduces the general character of the time, if the morale of the public has relaxed and has given itself over to effeminacy. Wantonness in speech is proof of public luxury, if it is popular and fashionable, and not confined to one or two individual instances. A man’s ability cannot possibly be of one sort and his soul of another. If his soul be wholesome, well-ordered, serious, and restrained, his ability also is sound and sober. Conversely, when the one degenerates, the other is also contaminated.

*Ep. 114.2–3*

He argues that ‘Just as an angry man will talk in an angry way, an excitable man in a flurried way, and an effeminate man in a style that is soft and unresisting’ (*Ep. 114.21*). By contrast, however, ‘When the soul is sound and strong, the style too is vigorous, energetic, (and) manly’ (*Ep. 114.23*). In another place he says, ‘People’s style of speaking often reproduces the general character of the time, the morale of the public has relaxed and has given itself over to effeminacy’ (*Ep. 114.3*).

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40 See also Cicero, *Tusc. 5.47*; Quintilian, *Inst. 11.1.30*.
41 Both Seneca and Lucian note that there are those who wear cloaks of outlandish colours, who wear transparent togas, and who never deign to do anything which will escape general notice. See *Ep. 114.21*; *Rhet. Praec. 15*. 
One of the leading professors of oratory in the late-first century was a Roman statesman named Quintilian. He says that in training an orator, it is important to develop his voice in order that it does not dwindle to the ‘feeble shrillness’ of eunuchs, women, and invalids.\textsuperscript{42} In regard to his performance, he says that the orator, above all, needs to avoid effeminate movements.\textsuperscript{43} In regard to his dress, ‘as with all men of standing’, it needs to be distinguished and masculine.\textsuperscript{44} Quintilian’s primary concern is the formation of the \textit{vir bonus} (‘good man’). Erik Gunderson suggests that \textit{vir} (the Latin term for an adult male), particularly in this case, would imply a real man or a ‘manly man’. It designates a position of authority and responsibility. Moreover, the \textit{bonus} points to a person who is socially reliable or reputable; and when used of men, it indicates men of substance or social standing: a prominent, leading citizen. He says that ‘these handbooks that purport to aid one to speak well are thus handbooks to the elite male self’.\textsuperscript{45} In other words, the primary concern surrounding both the practice and training of oratory was the embodiment of manliness.\textsuperscript{46}

In summary, the first century was a culture fixated with rhetorical performance; moreover, one’s rhetorical style was seen as directly connected with one’s manliness and character.\textsuperscript{47} In this culture, the skilled speaker was seen as a man sent from heaven to earth as a blessing to humanity.\textsuperscript{48} It is in light of this cultural backdrop that we must now consider Paul’s words to the Corinthians.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} Quintilian, \textit{Inst.} 11.3.13; similarly, 11.3.30.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Quintilian, \textit{Inst.} 11.3.128.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Quintilian, \textit{Inst.} 11.3.137.
\item \textsuperscript{46} In this performance driven culture, audience participation was essential. They were judges of the relative success or failure of a performance, whether through praise or punishment by ridicule, the educated audience relished being the ultimate arbiter of success. See Maud Gleason, \textit{Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 159. Pliny talks about the practice in the courts of buying crowds in order to create an atmosphere of praise. He says that these ‘bravo-callers’ or ‘dinner-clappers’ are paid up to three denarii each to stand in the crowd and cheer and ‘acclaim the eloquence of the speaker’. He says that if you happen to be passing by the court and want to know about the speakers, there is no need to come to the bench, pay attention to the proceedings; it is easy to guess – ‘the man who raises the most cheers is the worst speaker’ (\textit{Ep.} 2.14.8).
\item \textsuperscript{47} In fact, Quintilian (\textit{Inst.} 12.5.5) states that the natural tools of an orator, voice, lungs, and good looks, are so important that they often give rise to a reputation for talent.
\item \textsuperscript{48} ‘The perfect orator is a man sent by heaven to be the blessing of mankind, one to whom all history can find no parallel, uniquely perfect in every detail and utterly noble alike in thought and speech’ (Quintilian, \textit{Inst.} 12.1.25).
\end{itemize}
Paul's preaching in Corinth

Paul writes to the church in Corinth and reminds them of his initial preaching in the city. He says to them ‘when I came to you, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty (ὑπεροχή) speech or wisdom’ (1 Cor. 2.1). The term ‘lofty’ (ὑπεροχή) would have in mind a superiority of rhetorical style as well as the superior social status of those who mastered it; 49 that is, the elite products of the schools of oratory. By refusing to employ this impressive and eloquent style of rhetoric, Paul gives no opportunity for the personal acclamations that would naturally arise from a quality performance. Moreover, he does not allow for the efficacy of the message to be a result of his superior ability as a preacher.

He then tells them ‘I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified’ (1 Cor. 2.2). This decision to ‘know nothing’ was in contrast to the standard sophistic convention whereby the audience would nominate a topic for the orator to declaim on.

In rhetorical performances, it was a great demonstration of rhetorical prowess to declaim extempore; that is, to speak immediately on any given topic without prior preparation. However, the orator also had the option to go away and prepare, then return the next day to speak. 50 Either way, it was a central part of the performance to give the audience control over the topic and impress them with one’s knowledge and skill. The following anecdote demonstrates this well:

The scenic effects 51 which he (Polemo) employed in his declamations we may learn from Herodes ... He would come forward to declaim with a countenance serene and full of confidence, and he always arrived in a litter, because his joints were already diseased. When a theme had been proposed, he did not meditate on it in public but would withdraw from the crowd for a short time. His utterance was clear and incisive, and there was a fine ringing sound in the tones of his voice. He used to rise to such a pitch of excitement that he would jump up from his chair when he came to the most striking conclusions in his argument, and whenever

51 Σκηνή: literally the ‘outfit’ or the ‘get up’ of a sophist who declaims. It refers to his voice, expression, smile, dress, and any mannerisms of diction or delivery.
he rounded off a period he would utter the final clause with a smile, as though to show clearly that he could deliver it without effort, and at certain places in the argument he would stamp the ground just like the horses in Homer.

*Philostratus, Vita. 538*

By not allowing the Corinthians to nominate what he would speak on, Paul was able to maintain a singular focus on the central message of Christ crucified.

He then says in 2.3 that in coming to them, he became amongst them one who spoke, not in persuasive wisdom, but rather presented himself in weakness (ἀσθένεια), fear, and much trembling. For Paul, this was a conscious choice, one calculated to directly contrast himself with the popular orators of the culture. We have already seen the importance of rhetorical style as a measure of one’s masculinity; it is not too difficult then, to imagine the contrast such a characterisation would present. In fact, in describing himself in these terms, Paul portrays himself as a well known character from the theatre: the befuddled orator. This was a base character who was often portrayed as a low-class type with a bald head and stupid coarse features, mouth open, and hands lifted in gestures.

This reference to the ancient theatre is important in light of the above discussion. Quintilian suggests (hesitatingly) that in the early stages of rhetorical training, the student should study with the comic actor. By contrast, he is far less hesitant about the training of the gymnast and insistent of the involvement of the musician.

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52 A similar accusation is made of him by his detractor in 2 Cor. 10.10, where his rhetorical presence is described as weak (ἀσθενής) and speaking ability is described as contemptible. The repetition of the term ἀσθένεια/ἀσθενής to describe Paul's oratorical style is important. As Welborn notes, 'even if the term did not establish itself in the rhetorical tradition with the force of a technical term, it is nevertheless clear that a deficiency in rhetorical delivery is consistently portrayed as “weakness” , with all of the attendant symptoms – confused head, stammering voice, trembling hands, etc’. (L. L. Welborn, *An End to Enmity: Paul and the “Wrongdoer” of Second Corinthians* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011], p. 117).

53 Winter has argued that v. 1 ‘is constructed in such a way as to focus not on the fact of his physical arrival but on the stance he adopted when he arrived’ (Winter, *Philo and Paul among the Sophists*, p. 156; similarly, Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 92). “I was with you”, suggesting that he manifested “weakness” in his ongoing relationship with them.


55 Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, p. 95.

56 By contrast, he is far less hesitant about the training of the gymnast (Inst. 1.11.15–19) and insistent of the involvement of the musician (Inst. 1.10.11).
trainer can add some value to the orator;\(^{57}\) however, Quintilian tempers this with extreme caution, since actors were considered low status and were generally scorned by the elite. He warns, ‘I do not want the boy we are educating for this purpose to have a weak or womanish voice or to quaver like an old man. Nor ought he to mimic the failings of drunkenness, be taught the cringing manner of a slave, or learn the emotions of love, greed, or fear’ (\textit{Inst. 1.11.2}). In rhetorical terms, other than effeminacy, a major source of anxiety about style was the danger of resembling an actor. The sexuality of actors was itself suspect, and as a result, actors suffered diminished civil status as \textit{infames}.\(^{58}\) In other words, in a city and culture deeply concerned with manliness in regard to oratorical style, Paul, by locating his own style in the context of a weak, cringing, effeminate actor would place himself as far from the Corinthians’ ideal as one could probably go.

Finally, in verses 4–5, Paul tells them that he did not preach in persuasive (\(\pi\epsilon\theta\omicron\varsigma\)) words of wisdom, but rather with proof (\(\acute{\alpha}π\omicron\delta\varepsilon\iota\varsigma\varsigma\)) of the Spirit and power. Both of these terms (\(\pi\epsilon\theta\omicron\varsigma\) and \(\acute{\alpha}π\omicron\delta\varepsilon\iota\varsigma\varsigma\)) were central in oratory. The former referred to the speakers ability to ‘play on the feelings of his audience. In fact, one of the prime objectives of oratory was to move the listener’s emotions as a means of convincing them.\(^{59}\) The latter term referred to the ‘clear proofs a speaker was able to produce; the ‘proving what is not certain by means of what is certain’. It referred to the arguments produced to persuade a listener to a certain point of view.\(^{60}\) In other words, Paul refused to allow his rhetorical abilities to demonstrate the gospel. He was not persuasive in either his style or the content of his argument, but rather, he relied on the power of the Spirit to convince his hearers.

In summary, when Paul first preached the gospel in Corinth, he did not come like an elite orator or sophist, embodiments of elite education and training. His reason for this was simple: such an approach would draw the focus away from Christ and on to Paul. The result would be that the power of the message – the crucified and risen Jesus Christ – would be rendered ineffective (cf. 1 Cor. 1.17). Instead, he came with a singular focus: to teach and demonstrate Christ crucified;\(^{61}\) therefore, his method needed to reflect a humiliated,

\(^{57}\) I.e., in regard to enunciation, how to lend authority to advice, what stimulus to use in order to produce a surge of anger, and what change of tone is appropriate to an appeal to pity.


\(^{59}\) Winter, \textit{Philo and Paul among the Sophists}, p. 149.

\(^{60}\) Winter, \textit{Philo and Paul among the Sophists}, pp. 149–150.

\(^{61}\) Moffatt (\textit{The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians}, p. 24) notes that ‘to know nothing’ was a phrase which for Greeks meant, ‘I was to have no philosophy’.
crucified messiah.62 However, when Apollos came to Corinth, some of the Corinthians had found what they wanted: a skilled orator like the sophists they loved, who also powerfully and eloquently communicated the message of Christ. The result was an almost immediate division between those who preferred Paul and those who preferred Apollos.

**Reflections for Modern Churches and Preachers**

What then is the lesson or principle for the 21st century church meeting, particularly in regard to the preaching? Like our first-century predecessors, we too are a culture enamoured by media and entertainers. The only difference, really, is that our orators take the form of musicians and actors; such men and women we esteem and give prominent places in our culture and society. Moreover, our demand for ever increasing quality and excellence is insatiable. Churches, therefore, are inevitably filled with people who have been conditioned to highest standards of media and entertainment. In such a culture, the worship leaders and the preacher, being the ‘performers’ of the service, can take on a celebrity status not unlike the orators of Paul’s day. The dangers that this presents are obvious. Preferences towards a particular style and quality of worship service or towards a particular style of preaching are almost inevitable, resulting in something akin to ‘I follow Paul’, or ‘I follow Apollos’. Again, there is an inherent temptation to pursue the highest possible standard of service in order to keep our congregations satisfied, and (dare we say it) stay ahead of the church down the road. As Enyinnaya notes,

> There is a tendency among some Pentecostal preachers to focus their preaching on what people like to hear rather on what they need to hear. The shifting membership base of some of these churches make the preachers tend to preach what would suit the taste of listeners so they would come back next Sunday. This listener-friendly disposition or public relations concern of much of Pentecostal preaching makes it open to much suspicion.63

The result of this cultural pressure is a pendulum swing, with the quality of the delivery taking precedence over the content of the message.

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However, this is not to say we must throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. While there is an obvious danger that our emphasis on style can lead to divisions, the preacher must still be able to engage his or her audience. In other words, we need not jettison excellence and aesthetics altogether; as we saw above, these things can be of some spiritual benefit. Indeed, even Paul himself was not entirely opposed to the use of rhetorical skills. While we have seen in 1 Cor. 2.1–5 that Paul was intentionally restrained in his preaching style at Corinth, we also note that in his overall argument (1 Corinthians 1–4), he at no point rejects the use of eloquent style; rather – and this is important to note – he rebukes the Corinthians’ preference towards it. In fact, it must be assumed that Paul himself had some rhetorical abilities, both through his education and his experience as a travelling preacher.

For example, whatever his preaching actually looked like when he first came to Corinth, it clearly had some effect in winning converts, and in particular, elite men like Crispus and Gaius, who would no doubt have had high expectations of their teachers. Moreover, we see throughout Acts numerous accounts of Paul’s preaching that would suggest some abilities as an orator. In Athens, for example, Paul was able to gain an audience with one of the leading political bodies in the Areopagus. Here we see him not only capturing their attention with his preaching, but also drawing from Greek poets in order to illustrate his message. Even more remarkably, he was able to convert some of these council members! Again, we see Paul in Jerusalem proclaiming his testimony to a large crowd and holding them spellbound throughout. We must assume, therefore, that Paul was quite capable as an orator and was able to draw on the resources available to him in his culture. But as in the case of Corinth, Paul never sacrificed the content of his message at the cost of style.

So where does this leave us? On the one hand, Pentecostal preachers face the continual pressure to meet their audiences’ increasing expectations for quality and excellence, which is the product of our broader culture. And with


65 For discussion, see Welborn, *An End to Enmity*, pp. 392–398.

66 Acts 17.16–34.

this comes the ever-present danger of focussing all of our efforts on entertain-
ing, rather than transforming, leaving sermons quite anaemic at best, or even
unscriptural at worst. On the other hand, in focussing all of their effort on qual-
ity of content and good exegesis with little concern for delivery, the preacher’s
sermon can be inaccessible to the Sunday worshipper, whose expectations are
being informed by this media savvy culture. How then do we move forward?
Clearly this is not a case of either/or; rather, it is a case of both/and. We should
take advantage of the technical resources available to us as well as attempt to
engage our audience through rhetorical eloquence. But we cannot confuse the
efficacy of this delivery as something spiritual. True spiritual transformation in
a sermon can only be attained through faithful handling of scripture and a
commitment to present solid exposition of the text. As Alvarado notes,

What are the essential characteristics of effective, Spirit-filled liturgical
leadership? The first axiom is skillful handling of the biblical text. The
Bible must be first and foremost when one considers the requisites for
liturgical leadership. As our book of faith and practice, the Bible provides
the common ground upon which all Christian worship must be built.
Those who lead in worship must possess knowledge of the Bible and its
overarching message, and they must implement skill in biblical interpre-
tation for the facilitation of worship within the gathered community ...
To do anything less than this cheapens the experience of worship and
reduces it to a common meeting for good advice or moral enhancement.
Good liturgy needs strong biblical/theological moorings, and this is only
accomplished when the liturgical leader is trained (either formally or
informally) in the text of Scripture and its applicability as the ultimate
book of common worship.68

Herein lies the challenge to the Pentecostal preacher.

68 Alvarado, ‘Worship in the Spirit: Pentecostal Perspectives on Liturgical Theology and
Praxis’, p. 146.