

Duane Litfin

Paul's Theology of Preaching: The Apostle's Challenge to the Art of Persuasion in Ancient Corinth

Downer's Grove, Illinois USA, IVP Academic, 2015, 401.

In *Paul's Theology of Preaching*, Wheaton College president emeritus, Duane Litfin, considers Paul's "philosophy of rhetoric" or more relevantly his "theology of preaching" through an exegetical analysis of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in light of a classical Greco-Roman rhetoric. Litfin clarifies that his study is not a general commentary on the passage nor a consideration of the larger scholarly question of whether Paul purposefully used rhetorical elements in his epistles, but rather the more focused question of how Paul's argument in this text informs readers of his views of the oral proclamation of the Gospel in light of the widespread pervasiveness of professional rhetorical practice in Greco-Roman culture. Litfin's thesis is that "the values and practices of Greco-Roman rhetoric were what prompted some of the Corinthians to criticize Paul's preaching, and that 1 Corinthians 1–4 is Paul's primary response to this criticism" (p. 151). Litfin shows that the goal of professional orators was to appropriate rhetorical skills to bring about the desired results of the speaker among his audience. Paul found this appropriation of human and psychological means to "engender πίστις" (faith) to be antithetical to the Gospel proclamation of the cross and to run the risk of producing false results. True faith could only be brought by divine initiative through the proclamation of the cross.

The book consists of three parts. Part One establishes the pervasiveness, values, goals, and methods of ancient rhetoric through analysis of relevant Greco-Roman sources. Part Two then considers 1 Corinthians 1–4 in light of this background and Part Three synthesizes the findings and puts forth a Pauline theology of preaching with an eye toward contemporary ecclesial practice. The body of the work is followed by five appendices, the fourth of which, "Implications for Preaching," looms near the end as an ongoing temptation for preachers to skip ahead.

The author's impressive integration of a balanced and fair analysis of Greco-Roman rhetoric, focused contextual exegesis of 1 Corinthians 1–4, and relevant contemporary analysis owes itself to his background, which includes a PhD in rhetorical theory from Purdue University, a DPhil from Oxford University in New Testament, and many years of experience as a pastor, preacher, and educator. Moreover, the present volume, published in 2015, is a reworking of his 1994 monograph *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1–4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric* (Cambridge University Press), which is based on his Oxford dissertation. *Paul's Theology of Preaching* is therefore a work Litfin has reflected on and labored on for many years. Undoubtedly, there are few others in the world other

than Litfin who could have written precisely this kind of book on this particular subject.

One would be mistaken, however, to see the reworking as a downsized popular version of an academic monograph. The present volume, despite certain adjustments in order to, as Litfin says, “bridge some of the demands of both academics and practitioners,” remains an erudite historical and philological analysis based on primary source texts both Greco-Roman and Biblical. Litfin appeals in Part One to an array of source texts from Aristotle to Cicero to Quintilian, among others, to establish important conclusions about classical rhetoric that provide the necessary background for his analysis of 1 Corinthians 1–4. At its core, rhetoric was the “art of persuasion.” Litfin summarizes the values and goals of rhetoric in what he describes as a three-part “grand equation”: the “audience, the desired results and the speaker’s efforts.” The orator would enter into a given situation with particular results in mind, what Litfin calls the “independent variable,” but would be faced with a “given” audience with which he had to work. He was reliant therefore, on his own efforts, the “dependent variable”—based on his rigorous training and natural talent—to persuade this particular audience to bring about the desired results.

In addition to emphasizing the widespread familiarity of rhetoric in the Greco-Roman world of the first century, both among its professional practitioners and its “consumers” (i.e. the population at large), the author distinguishes, using George Kennedy’s terminology, between “primary rhetoric” and “secondary rhetoric”—the latter being the decorative display of flowery language for exhibition, while the former adhered to the original goals of classical rhetoric as the “art of persuasion.” (70). Litfin maintains that though the quality of rhetoric had somewhat deteriorated by the first century A.D., “primary rhetoric had not died.” This is an important point for the author as he argues against the notion that Paul was combating “secondary rhetoric” or simply bad or manipulative forms of rhetoric. Litfin maintains that it was precisely the “primary rhetoric” at its best and noblest that Paul had in mind in 1 Corinthians 1–4.

Neither is Litfin arguing that Paul found fault, in general, with classical rhetoric. The problem was rather in the reliance on human skill, over against divine grace, in the preaching of the Gospel to bring about faith. There were two “persuasive dynamics,” the rhetor and the cross, and they were “mutually exclusive” (179). Litfin goes on to say that “Paul feared that operating according to the rhetor’s dynamic would encroach upon the cross’s Spirit-driven power to create belief.” Thus, where Paul defends his proclamation as not with eloquent words of wisdom but in the power of God through the folly of the cross (1 Cor 1:17; 2:1-5), it was against the background of professional rhetoric that he was speaking. Litfin therefore distinguishes between a “natural paradigm,” of professional rhetoric,

and the “Pauline paradigm” of Gospel proclamation. Where in the natural paradigm of rhetoric the results are driven by the speaker’s efforts, in the Pauline paradigm results are dependent on “the sovereign working of the Spirit in ‘commending the word of the cross’ . . . to human hearts” (270).

For some readers generally familiar with Pauline studies, the question of Paul’s own use of rhetoric in his epistles - a hotly contested but not uncommon approach to Pauline interpretation in contemporary scholarship - might seem to put into question the background Litfin proposes. However, the author astutely avoids this controversy by distinguishing between Paul’s written instruction to believers and his oral proclamation (κηρυσσω) of the Gospel to unbelievers. Thus, Paul’s use or non-use of rhetoric in his epistles is irrelevant to Litfin’s thesis. It is rather proclamation that is the central point of concern in 1 Corinthians 1–4, and in turn Litfin is able to contrast the goals and methods of the orator with the goals and methods of another kind of public speaker in the ancient world, the herald (κηρυξ).

The herald was also a prominent public speaker, like the orator, who had to skillfully address a given audience. The herald was also expected to make use of whatever means possible to accurately pass on the message he was commissioned to communicate. Litfin appropriates a modern view of human persuasion by psychologist William McGuire. According to McGuire, there are five levels of persuasion: *attention*, *comprehension*, *yielding*, *retention*, and *action* (278). Litfin shows that the herald could indeed adapt his message on the first two levels, to better gain his audience’s attention, and to help them comprehend the message as clearly as possible (279). Further, a rejection of rhetorical methods in preaching is not to say that preaching is irrational or unreasonable, it rather “made good sense” (266). However, the major difference was that the herald, unlike the orator, was not responsible to produce results, that is, to persuade the audience to yield to the speaker’s desired outcome. The herald’s job was simply to obediently proclaim the message he was given by the one who sent him and was under no obligation to bring about a positive response. Thus, Litfin articulates a crucial point: While the orator’s task was “results driven,” the herald’s was “obedience driven” (272).

In addition, the proclamation of the herald also put the audience in a different position. As Litfin earlier explained in Part One, audiences were highly critical, and learned to sit in judgment of public speakers. Rhetors who were successful, who won over their audience with the variety of persuasive techniques, would earn the praise of their audience. But a less successful orator might earn disapproval or derision. The crowds became the judges, making the orator’s discernment of their mood and opinions all the more important. But for the herald, this was not an issue. Since the herald was not the author of the message, and

since his job was not to get the audience to yield to his will, the audience could not sit in judgment of the herald but had to either accept or reject the message as it stood. In the preaching of the Gospel therefore, “the audience is dethroned from its proud role as judge” (212).

This is the role that Paul then saw himself to occupy in his preaching of the Gospel. His role as divine herald was to proclaim the Gospel of the crucified Christ as God had commissioned him to do and rely on the Holy Spirit to bring about the results in his hearers – faith in Christ. Apparently, some of the Corinthians, who were like other Greeks, immersed in a culture awash in the popularity and power of rhetoric, were not satisfied with Paul’s role as herald, but would rather have had him fill the role of orator. Litfin appears to understand the factions mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:10–17 to be at least partially based on this very controversy such that the Apollos faction, enamored with his eloquence and appearance, was critical of Paul’s deficiencies in those areas (246–48). On a side note, the recognition of Paul’s role of herald in his preaching occasions a related question with regard to contemporary preaching. If “preaching” for Paul is the oral proclamation (*κηρύσσω* or *εὐαγγελίζω*) of the Gospel to unbelievers, what should we properly understand the kind of contemporary “preaching” that takes place in most churches Sunday mornings to a group of assembled believers? It seems there may be a fundamental difference that may affect the approach of the speaker.

Litfin presents a very strong, carefully considered and compelling argument. However, there are a few points which warrant criticism or need further clarification. First, I briefly mention a formatting element in the book that I found to be a distraction. In an effort to take some of the more technical material out of the main text, numerous “text boxes” focusing on particular topics were inserted throughout. While I admire the good intentions behind this procedure, I found the text boxes to interrupt my reading of the main text. In some cases, I thought the material in the text boxes should have remained within the main text as it would have contributed to the argument, while in other cases the material would have just as well been placed in an extended footnote.

Second, and now in terms of content, Litfin emphasizes in numerous places that the problem with the Corinthians was not a theological one (167), and that the Corinthians, including those critical of Paul personally, were not at odds with the Gospel (254, 271). Yet, this appears inconsistent with Litfin’s very thesis that Paul was repudiating their calls for him to be a more persuasive preacher using human rhetorical techniques to engender faith. If the Corinthians thought better persuasive techniques would engender more faith, and that this was a consequence of human skill, then it implies at least a theological distortion or misunderstanding of the nature of the Gospel as a divinely initiated work of grace. And, if

their approach was the cause of division and factions, is this not an error that hits at the fundamental character of the Gospel? In my view, Litfin makes too much of a distinction between theology and theopraxis.

Related is a question that lies at the very heart of the argument: what, if any, is the role of persuasion in the preaching of the Gospel? Here, one delves into more foggy theological waters – the human role in divine soteriological action. Could not a Gospel preacher make use of – in faith – persuasive techniques such as those found in professional rhetoric, in the same way that a believer might endeavor to appropriate any learned human skill excellently but yet with a recognition that God is the ultimate source of his abilities? In a section entitled “the ambiguity of persuasion” (280–284) Litfin seems to anticipate such questions. While he concedes that Paul once refers to himself as in the role of persuader (2 Cor. 5:11), he maintains that while Paul’s preaching may have been perceived as persuasive because of successful results, the means of persuasion are yet found in divine action, not human techniques. Litfin insists that the evidence shows that Paul intentionally restrained himself from human techniques of persuasion, and sets off this perceived Pauline approach from Augustine, who argued for the sacred use of rhetoric with the recognition that the preacher’s efforts alone could not produce true salvation (280).

In response, it seems to me that there will always be a level of ambiguity when it comes to this question. What, for example, in our contemporary context constitutes an intentional act of persuasion? Should preachers and evangelists go to great lengths to assure they eschew any such moves to guard against false results? On the one hand, it seems to me that overzealousness on this point could lead to preaching paralysis, or to an overly cold and indifferent “proclamation” that lacks love and compassion. On the other hand, a recognition of the dangers of the use of techniques of persuasion may be a good check against contemporary tendencies to apply this or that new trend, which its proponents insist will bring about the desired results of conversion (For this, see especially Litfin’s gracious critique of the church growth movement in appendix five).

In the final analysis, the fruit of Litfin’s work on Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 1–4 is that it reminds evangelists and preachers not to forget that true faith in Christ is a work of God brought about by the message of the crucified and risen Christ and cannot be manufactured artificially on the basis of human wisdom or eloquence. This understanding of Paul’s paradigm frees preachers of the Gospel to rightly see their role as obedient heralds with a divine message of the grace and love of God, without bearing the responsibility of their listener’s salvation as if it were dependent on their skill as communicators. Yet, rightly balanced, this should not result in indifferent, uncaring proclamation, irrational argumentation, or lack of preparation but rather in sincere, heartfelt, well thou-

ght out communication of the good news of Christ with the expectation that the Spirit of God will bring about new life in those who will believe. Litfin's work is an important contribution both to an understanding of 1 Corinthians 1-4 and to Christian preaching and is thankfully one that can be put to use both by academic theologians and Christian practitioners alike.

Greg Thellman

Gregg Allison and Chris Castaldo

The Unfinished Reformation: What Unites and Divides Catholics and Protestants After 500 Years

Grand Rapids, Michigan USA, Zondervan, 2016, 171.

Since this year marks the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it was to be expected that this round number would arouse special interest of theologians of all persuasions to think and write about the consequences that the Protestant Reformation had brought to Christianity and the world at large, but also to ask the question: Is the Reformation over?

This book was written by two very accomplished authors. Professor of historical theology at the *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*, Dr. Gregg Allison, wrote, among other books, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* several years ago, which gave us a fresh perspective on modern Catholic theology. Dr. Chris Castaldo is a pastor and also an author of several books, including an autobiographical book, *Holy Ground: Walking with Jesus as a Former Catholic*.

Allison and Castaldo's book, *The Unfinished Reformation*, answers the question "Is the Reformation over" right from its cover. Nevertheless, this does not mean that since we know the simple answer, we can just skip the book and find something else to read. This is one of those books which we could almost describe with the saying "the journey is more important than the destination."

In their Introduction, authors bring forth a historical overview of the Reformation. We need to differentiate between different movements of the Reformation (for example, the Lutheran Reformation, Radical Reformation etc.) and the reformation as "a widespread desire for, and movement toward, greater fidelity in the areas of theology, pastoral care, and overall piety" (20).

Thinking through the question "Is the Reformation over?" helps us to grasp more clearly practical issues, like possible conflicts in families with both sides represented, the question of "Nicodemism," a growing number of conversions from Catholicism to Protestantism and vice versa, and cooperation between these traditions in social engagement (22-29).

In the first chapter, the authors point out that there are two fundamental issu-