

Epiphany 5—February 4, 2024
Text: 1 Corinthians 9:16–27
Theme: Becoming Whatever They Need

It is interesting when St. Paul speaks to the Corinthians about him becoming whatever he needed to become in order to preach the Gospel. He says,

“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.”

This idea has been horribly abused by some people. Paul is not suggesting that we blend into the world so that no one recognizes us as “Christian.” Remember that when we are interpreting the Bible, Scripture interprets Scripture. To suggest that we should just blend in and keep quiet would contradict what we know from the rest of the Bible. For instance, all the food laws in Leviticus were given specifically so that God’s people would stand out from the Canaanites. Or Jesus himself tells us to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” You cannot teach people all the things of God while blending in. Any time we want to know what Scripture means; we look to the rest of Scripture to interpret it. It is maddening when I explain to someone why they are wrong about

some theological point, and they say, “well that’s your interpretation.” No, that’s God’s interpretation because He wrote the Bible! If you are teaching or believing something contrary to the clear witness of Scripture, you are teaching or believing false doctrine. You cannot reinterpret it however it makes your life easier. So, we know what Paul is saying here because of everything else the Holy Spirit wrote through Paul.

He is saying that we dare not allow human traditions cause a stumbling block for faith. For instance, I love liturgical worship with traditional music. That is how I worship best. But so long as it is Biblically true, there is absolutely nothing wrong with a more modern worship with more modern instrumentation. My opinion is that our worship here is the best worship, but the contemporary worship over at St. John’s is also great for people who worship best with that format. If we had the money and the personnel, I would start a contemporary worship in Founders’ Hall in a heartbeat. But the Lord has seen fit to give us a beautiful traditional sanctuary and a magnificent pipe organ, so we use what the Lord has given us to the best of our ability and to His glory. If someone calls and asks if we have a contemporary service, I recommend St. John’s, because they do a pretty good job there of using what the Lord has given them.

However, we do not refuse to have any modern music or modern instrumentations. Mary is a genius at incorporating everyone's gifts into worship. If you want to sing or play a modern worship song, she will figure out a way for you to use your gift. We strive to make worship as meaningful as possible for as many as possible to be all things to all people. We are not perfect but we give it our utmost.

When you gather with your non-Christian friends, it would not be very appropriate to demand that everyone participate in a family devotion but it is appropriate to have a prayer before you eat. Or if someone who is not very faithful has a problem, you wouldn't demand that they begin attending worship weekly, but it would be good to meet with them to talk at a neutral location and eventually get around to inviting them to one of our Bible Studies.

We need to be aware of how intimidating Christianity can be. We serve the Almighty God and that is frightening to the unbeliever and even the peripheral believer. They might not even recognize what makes them uncomfortable but meeting Jesus is no small thing. It is powerful and daunting and the closer you get to Him the more you see in your life that needs altering. If someone is overwhelmed, he might walk away out of sheer terror.

Paul is simply telling us here to dial it back a little. Be aware of how brightly your faith shines and rely more on being the hands of Jesus and less on explaining the hands of Jesus. The Word is a powerful tool. You have to use it deftly and of course in order to use God's Word, you have to know God's Word. That's why we have so many Bible Studies here and why we celebrate Holy Communion every week. We have to be filled with the power to use the power, but we use the power carefully. Don't pull out a 12-gauge when all that is called for is a slingshot. The Lord will lay them in your path. You just have to figure out what they need most from him and how to deliver it.

Being all things to all people takes practice. We do not get it right every time but the more we practice, the more we will get right and when we get it right, the Holy Spirit opens the gates of paradise to those we encounter.