

Devotional: I Corinthians 9:19-23 ~ Whom are we not meant to reach?

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. 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. ~ I Corinthians 9:19-23 (ESV)

Brothers, this week I want to make just one simple observation and one suggestion from this famous text from Paul. This text is well known and well taught in our day as an apologetic for contextualizing our ministry -- that we are to major on the majors and not let matters of Christian freedom become an obstacle to the Gospel. How to apply that principle today -- say to the question of worship music -- is, of course, an item of hot debate, and I do not intend to help at all in that effort. Except to suggest that there is one kind of person we are not meant to reach, just as they are.

The immediate context of this passage is a long answer Paul gives to one of the questions the Corinthians wrote to Paul -- whether Christians may eat meat previously used in pagan ceremonies. And in three chapters, Paul famously answers by saying: sometimes yes, sometimes no, depending on your motive for eating it and what it does to your neighbor (cf. I Corinthians 8:4-13, 10:23-31). If these three chapters are chiasmic in structure as I think, then the two principles in 8:1 and 10:31 frame the debate: first, that "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up;" and second, "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." In other words, the bigger questions when it comes down to matters of Christian Freedom are not so much whether to smoke or not smoke cigars, but to ask: 1) which choice most loves my neighbor?; and 2) which choice most glorifies God?

So it is important to understand this principle of contextualization within its original context. Paul is trying to love both Jew and Greek as best he can to the glory of God and for the advancement of the Gospel. But it is perhaps even more important to understand our text within the larger context of the whole of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And that is this. Paul wrote this letter to answer a number of questions the Corinthians had, and he does answer them in turn, beginning in chapter 7. But before he even gets to their questions, he first deals with the *real* issues which are really going on, things he has heard from "Chloe's people" (cf. 1:11). (Man, how would you have liked to be Chloe when this letter first got read out loud in church?)

Heh.) And what Chloe's people reported is that the Corinthians were divided, quarrelsome, and proud. They were the mega-church of their day with many gifts and much wealth, but boy, were they dysfunctional.

So Paul spends the first six chapters going after the Corinthians' pride, reminding them of their calling, that "not many of you were wise, not many powerful, not many noble; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world ... so that no flesh might boast in the presence of God." (1:26-29, sel.). Paul says that when he himself preached to them, he came not "with lofty speech or wisdom, but 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." (2:1-3). And when it came to church leaders, Paul reminded them that neither he who plants or he waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (3:7); that the truest leaders of Christ's church are like "the scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (4:13). Imagine being a Christian in Corinth who was proud of your church and its many gifts and achievement, with your strong, polished leaders -- and then hearing that!

Now, all of that background is necessary if my simple observation and suggestion are to make any sense. The observation is this. In Chapter 9:20-22, Paul describes two pairs of people he "becomes like" in order to reach them; except that the second pair is incomplete. Look at the text:

9:20 -- Paul becomes as a Jew, to win Jews

9:21 -- Paul becomes as a Gentile (those outside the Law), to win Gentiles

9:22 -- Paul becomes as weak, to win the weak

Now, what is missing? We have Jews and Gentiles, mentioned over against each other. And we have the weak, then the..... nothing. There is no counterpoint to the weak. That is my simple observation. Paul leaves off there, and never mentions becoming strong, to win the strong. See that?

Now my suggestion is this, based on the main thrust of I Corinthians as a whole. I believe that Paul left out "the strong" from his list quite on purpose. He meant to leave off where he did, to make a point. Why? Think about it. We can make cultural accommodations at times in order

for the Gospel to go forth, surely. Few of us sing in Latin or worship in non-climate controlled church buildings, for instance. And we can -- and should -- become weak, to those who are weak. We are to follow Paul's example in 2:1-5, so that when we preach, we preach not ourselves but Christ as strong. We should preach plainly and passionately, of a Savior who was crucified, something that the weak will begin to understand, but the world will not until it is too late.

But it makes no sense that we "become strong" to win the strong, because the very sin which is keeping them from the Kingdom is their own self-evaluation of themselves as strong in the first place! How can we cozy up to a vainglorious man with our own pathetic versions of vaingloriousness and hope to show them a crucified Lord in that? We can't. We might win them to our church, or to a more moral lifestyle, or even as a friend. But we will never win them *to Christ* that way.

And yet, I think, churches and ministries around this world are trying to do just that. They are trying to become strong to the strong. They may be growing their ministry that way but they are not growing the Kingdom. Think about every time you try to get someone interested in your church because of how well things are going outwardly, some program or growth. We all do it. And it may get folks there, and there they may hear of Christ. But telling them of successful programs and growth is not Christ. And in fact, if we emphasize them, we actually may be undermining the Gospel since we would be trying to win people by strength rather than by a crucified Lord.

Now, one last thing. I do not think we should give up on the proud and self-strong. Otherwise, there would have been no hope for any of us. We should try to reach them. And I have no golden keys to share of how to do that -- except to say that if they are to come to Christ, it will not be until they are humbled, until they are weak. And so we must not "become strong" with them in order to win them, but display our own weakness and tell them of Christ's grace. Such an approach will do two things -- it will both attract and repel. It will repel those who wish to remain strong in themselves. But it attract those who know they need God's grace. Those who know they are weak. Them we can reach. And if we aim to do that, to really aim for the weak, I think our churches will begin to overflow, so that *we* become weak, and must depend on God all the more. That is my prayer for us.