

By All Means

Sterling UMC
February 5, 2012
1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Why does the church exist? What is the reason that we gather here as a people? What is our overarching mission and purpose? Is it to provide a place where we come together for the purpose of worshipping the Lord? As important as that is, that is not the main reason. Is it to offer us the opportunity to share in fellowship with like-minded people? As nice as that is, it is not the reason. Is it to build an organization that will nurture us and take care of our own needs? As great as that would be, that is not the reason. No. The church does not primarily exist for itself.

Scripture is clear. The church exists to spread the Gospel and to further the kingdom of God. Our mission, our mandate, our reason for existence as the church is to go into the world and reach men and women, boys and girls with the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We were made to fulfill the Great Commission. We can spend all eternity worshipping God, learning from his Word, praying to him, and encouraging and edifying one another. But only here and now do we have the chance to reach lost people for Christ.

Do we really care about lost people? Do we sincerely believe that knowing Christ is the best way to live and the only way to die? Are we convinced that everyone we know, without exception, needs to find the forgiveness, friendship, life, and leadership Jesus offers? Do we really believe that? If so, are we willing to take risks to reach them? And are we willing to invest our time and energy in developing a church that will attract, challenge, and teach them to step across that line of faith? Are we willing to step out of our comfort zones and to do some things that would make this a reality instead of just pious platitudes?

The apostle Paul was. He writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 9, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."

But what does he mean by that? How do we balance the uncompromising message of the good news of Jesus Christ with the need to be all things to all people so that by all possible means we might save some?

A New York family bought a ranch in Texas where they intended to raise cattle. Friends visited and asked if the ranch had a name.

"Well," said the would-be cattleman, "I wanted to name it the Bar-J. My wife favored Suzy-Q. One son liked the Flying-W, and the other son wanted the Lazy-Y. So we're calling it the Bar-J-Suzy-Q-Flying-W-Lazy-Y."

"But where are all your cattle?" the friends asked. "None survived the branding."

Compromise can be dangerous. When we try to please everyone we often end up pleasing no one. When we first read Paul's words in this passage from 1 Cor. 9, it sounds an awful lot like he was compromising his beliefs. He says he became like the people he was trying to "win" for Christ.

To the Jews he became as a Jew; to those who followed the law he became like a person under the law; to those who didn't follow the Jewish laws he became like one of them; and to the weak he became weak.

He says he has become "all things to all people." We might wonder how that's even possible. It sounds like trying to please all the people all the time, and if you've ever tried to do that you know it doesn't usually have good results. Maybe you have heard the phrase, "If you try to please everyone, you end up making no one happy."

I think ministers are well-known for being people pleasers. I know when I first started in the ministry, I believed that I had to keep all the people in the congregation liking me, and if I found out someone didn't like me, it made me really upset. And I have to admit that that still bothers me.

About ten years ago a couple in the church I was serving at the time came and told me that they had some problems with the United Methodist denomination and they were going to leave our church and join another, more evangelical church. Even though we got along very well and it wasn't anything personal about me, still that was very upsetting to me. I couldn't help but take it personally. This couple had been very active in our church and they were generous financial supporters of the church. It was the first time I had experienced something like this.

They told me this in the summer, right before we left on vacation, and I worried about the effect their leaving would have on the church the whole time we were away. I came to find out that while we missed them in the church, the church survived and continued to grow without them.

It helps to learn this lesson as early as you can: that you can't be all things to all people. Whether we are teachers or parents or nurses or students, whatever our many roles in life, we have to learn to set boundaries, to realize our limits, to do the best we can with who we are, and that we're not going to be able to please everyone all the time. The harder we try, the greater the toll it will take on our physical and emotional health.

But is that what Paul means when he says in verse 22: "I have become all things to all people?" That Paul was a people-pleaser, a sort of social chameleon who could change to suit the situation and become whatever people wanted him to be? No, I don't believe that's what he meant. He's talking about something different.

Paul is talking specifically about his role as an apostle, an evangelist. Paul is saying he feels both compelled by his calling from Christ, yet he has also freely chosen, to

proclaim the Gospel and win as many people as he can to Christ. He feels obligated and yet he freely chooses to do this.

He was willing to do whatever it took to save whomever he came in contact with.

Why did Paul say that? Why would he wish such a thing? What prompted that level of emotion? What provoked that degree of commitment? Paul loved others so much that he was willing to do whatever it took to help them come to faith.

God established the church for the purpose of spreading the message of His love and forgiveness. He gave to us the resources in order to do it. He also gave us the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us. But how are we doing today?

Unfortunately if you look at most of our churches, you would have to say, the answer to that question is not very well. When you look at the United Methodist church has been in a steady decline in membership and attendance for the last 20 years.

And on top of that we find ourselves living in a world that is becoming increasingly more hostile to the Gospel. If not hostile then apathetic and unconcern. Many people just don't see the need. A recent study gave these reasons:

- 74% - There is no value in attending
- 81% - Churches have too many problems
- 48% - I don't have time
- 42% - I'm simply not interested
- 34% - The church is irrelevant to the way I live

Do you hear what these figures are saying? For the most part people think the church and its message are irrelevant. I find that staggering.

What America really needs, what people really need. And what the world needs more than anything else is the Church. People need the church as it is described, and pictured and seen in the Bible. What the world needs is the Church!!

And remember, the church is not a set of walls that decay. The church is not a building; the church is you. We are the church, not this building. This is just a convenient place we gather together to have worship, and study, and fellowship time. What the world needs is the church, that is... you and me, as God's people living like God's people. What the world needs is a relevant church.

Unfortunately for many churches, they have become irrelevant. And so instead of making a difference, instead of being relevant, and offering that which matters to people, many times the church just sits around talking their own language, going through their own motions, pleasing themselves, doing what they are comfortable with. But, the church is not intended by God to just sit around in our nice little comfort zones. The church is intended by God to go into all the world, to make followers of Jesus Christ, to reach a dying world with a relevant message of hope and forgiveness.

What the world needs is a relevant Church! What Sterling needs is a relevant church!

After all, the message we have for the world is relevant. The message has not changed for 2000 years. The message is perfect just the way it is. Our message of hope and forgiveness that is found only in Jesus Christ... that message can and does make a difference. God's message is relevant for all people. But, sometimes the way we deliver that message is not always relevant. And that is what we, as a church, must avoid.

You see it's not so much about us. It's about people; people who don't know the Lord. People who are searching for hope, who are searching for forgiveness. It's your neighbors, it's the people you work with, the people you go to school with, the people who live in your house, who are a part of your family. People who need to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That is the prize for which we reach for. To see people come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. That is a prize that will last for all of eternity.

The church does not exist for those who are already members, the church exists and must continue to exist for those who are not yet members.

So how can we make a difference in the lives of those who are not yet members? How can our church make an impact in a community where there are more people sleeping in on Sunday Morning than going to church. The only way the church can find itself filled to the brim with people who are learning about Jesus Christ, is if the church is relevant. The message is relevant, but the way we deliver it must be relevant as well. And why must it be relevant? So that we can win the prize of seeing lost people come to Christ.

That's our challenge; we must be willing to leave the familiar without disturbing the essentials. In fact, that's the very challenge that Paul lays out for us in I Corinthians 9.

Paul says he is willing by all means necessary to do whatever is necessary to relate/reach the lost! Are we willing to go to those lengths to reach the lost of Sterling?

In other words, Paul is saying, despite my background, despite what I am comfortable with, despite what I like and am used to, I will do whatever it takes to make sure all people hear God's message of hope and forgiveness. The relevant message stays the same, but the way I deliver it becomes different depending on whom I am trying to reach. And that is our call, to share God's relevant message in a way that the people of this community and beyond can understand and accept it.

One very cold snowy evening a man was sitting in his living room reading the newspaper by the warmth of his fireplace. Suddenly he heard a loud crash outside the window. He could not tell where it came from, so he got out of his easy chair to go explore the situation. He opened his front door and saw a small flock of birds huddled outside the window. Apparently one of the birds in an attempt to escape the cold had flown into the window. The man was moved with compassion for the birds and sat out to try to save them from certain death. He went out to his barn opened the doors and turned on the light hoping to attract the birds. But they sat huddled together and would not move. He went to try to shoo the birds into the barn but

they would not go. Finally he thought he might be able to lure them in. So he took some corn and laid it on the ground and formed a path leading into the safety of the barn but they still wouldn't move. The man was so upset and frustrated because all of his efforts were in vain. Finally he cried out, "if only I could become one of them and tell them how much I care about them and could lead them into the warmth and safety of the barn. That in effect is what Christ did for us. He became one of us. He took on human form so that we might identify with him and show us the way to salvation. He came to reveal God to us. It is He who told us that God loves us and is interested in our lives. It is Christ who told us of the mercy, the long-suffering, and the grace of God.

And that is what we must do in order to be obedient to our mission as the church. And what is the best way for us to do that? We must live Relevant Lives. We must live our lives in a way that makes a difference in people's lives. That reaches out to people the way Christ reached out to people. This happens as we provide ways for people to grow and mature in their Christian discipleship. It happens as we train and equip each other to use their spiritual gifts. It happens as you ask yourself... Who is your life relevant to? Does your life make a difference for Christ in other people's lives? Are you loving people, caring for people, reaching out to people in a way that shows them the love of Christ? The greatest way this church can be relevant, is when the people of this church live relevant lives on a daily basis... when we live our lives in such a way that people can see Christ burning brightly in our hearts.

After all that's the way Christ lived his life. His life made a difference in people's lives. From the outcast leper whom he touched, to the adulterous woman whom he showed grace. From the despised tax collector, to the zealous Jew. From the blind, crippled, and lame to the Samaritan, Jew and Gentile. All were impacted by the life of Jesus. His life mattered to people. But, even more than his life, his death truly made the difference in my life, and in yours. Such a relevant Christ demands a relevant church. A church that is willing to share God's relevant message of hope and forgiveness in such a way that this community and beyond cannot ignore it.

In closing I would like to ask if you would be willing to join me as we strive for this goal.

Will we be a relevant church? By all means!

Will we lead relevant lives? By all means!

How will we accomplish this? By all means!