I Corinthians 9:19-23 "Developing a Missionary Mentality"

Introduction: I am preaching a sermon series in which the major themes are based on the book by Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer entitled, *Transformational Church*. Today we are look at the first of 7 characteristics of churches that the authors believe have the greatest transformational impact in making disciples and impacting their community and world for Christ. 81% of those surveyed in transformational churches agreed with this statement, "Our congregation cares deeply about the people in our city or community" (p.53). So our authors say, "a missionary mentality is a key component in Transformational Churches" (p.48). The text that I just read to you represents the missionary mentality of one of the greatest missionaries of all time, the apostle Paul.

The key phrase in this text is repeated five times in four verses: "that I might win" (vv.19, 20, 21, 22). That was Paul's missionary objective, to win over or gain souls for Christ. Have you heard the term, "soul winner"? Here we see that the term is indeed a biblical term. Another similar use of this word is found in 1 Peter 3:1, where Peter talks about wives winning their husbands to the Lord by their submissive conduct rather than with words. Then in the last of v.22 he substitutes a different term when he says, "that I might by all means save some." He knew that only Christ can rescue sinners from the consequences of sin, both in this life, and the life to come. So one statement of our missionary objective is that we are to so live and so share the gospel with unbelievers that at least some are saved from sin and death by repentance and faith in Christ. The result is they are gained for the kingdom of God.

Now when it came to winning unbelievers to Christ, Paul was a realist. He says in the last of v.22, "that I might by all means save some," not all, but some. If we share the gospel with unbelievers at least some will be saved. Why will only "some" be saved? Jesus warned in Mt. 22:14, "For many are called, but few are chosen." He said in Mt. 7:14 that "narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." And yet what joy and happiness it was to Paul and is to us that we are able to save at least "some."

Yet Paul was not content with just a very few. Notice he says in the last of v.19, "that I might win the more." He would take the course of action that we will talk about today in order to gain more. In my message today we will see that with the proper missionary mentality we will gain and rescue more souls for Christ.

The main statement regarding the kind of missionary mentality that will win more people to the Lord is found in the last of v.23, "Now this I do for the gospel's sake…." Literally he says, "*All things* I do for the gospel sake." To Paul the gospel witness was of utmost importance. This is a primary theme in I Corinthians. For example, in chapter 6 he says that Christians should not take fellow Christians to court for the sake of our gospel witness. In chapter 8 Paul says that he would give up his liberty if that keeps a brother from stumbling, or if exercising liberty hurts the cause of Christ. Paul evaluated every decision based on whether or not it would hinder the gospel, or hurt the cause of Christ. Thus, we should clear the ground of unnecessary obstacles that might hinder unbelievers from coming to Christ.

I want to challenge us all to have the same attitude. Why is it so important that we do nothing to hinder the gospel, and do everything to support the spread of the gospel of Jesus

Christ? Why is it so important to do nothing to hurt the church's witness in the community, and do everything to help that witness? The gospel is preeminent because it alone is the power God unto salvation to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16).

The need for a missionary mentality has never been greater. I am told that only two countries have more nonbelievers than the US: India and China.

So what should we be willing to do to win more to Christ? I see three principles in this text of Scripture:

I. BECOME A SERVANT TO OTHERS FOR THE GOSPEL

Paul says in v.19, "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all…." Paul was free in Christ (7:22; 9:1). Yet, he was willing to sacrifice personal liberty and become a servant, literally make himself a slave (*douloo*). Yet he did so voluntarily. He followed the example of Jesus, who said in Matt. 20:28, "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Why did Paul become a servant? He said in the last of v.19, "…that I might win the more." Paul teaches us that our greatest ambition as Christians should be to win someone to faith in Jesus Christ, even at the cost of becoming a servant to others.

Every day physicians and nurses sacrifice their time and effort in emergency rooms to save people from death or serious illness or injury.

Now if people are willing to make sacrifices to save someone from physical death, how much more should we be willing to make sacrifices to save souls from spiritual and eternal death? Will you sacrifice an evening at home or a Saturday morning at home to serve your community in the name of Jesus or to win people to Christ? Are you a servant or are you looking to be served?

II. ADAPT TO EACH CULTURE WE ARE SEEKING TO REACH

Notice what Paul was willing do to win more people to Christ. He says in vv.20-21, "and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law." He would relate to them in their particular culture by adapting as necessary. It helped many unbelievers to listen to the gospel and be more open to receive it. Note the two examples that Paul gives here:

A. Paul Adapted to Jewish Culture – Again, he says in v.20, "to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law."[1] Having once been a Jew, he could do this perfectly. Paul accommodated himself to them when he shared the gospel by carefully avoiding anything that might arouse their antagonism. So when ministering to Jews and proselytes to Judaism, he would voluntarily give up his Christian liberty and follow Jewish customs and practices, including Jewish law. He observed their laws regarding food, drink, and similar matters. Paul did not parade his liberty before the Jews. Within scriptural limits he would be as Jewish as

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[1] While "Jews" and "those under the law" are identical, "Jews" refers to nationality, and "under law" refers to religion. – Lenski.

necessary when working with Jews. If following Jewish laws and traditions would open a door for his witnessing to Jews, he would gladly accommodate. What had once been legal restraints now had become love restraints.

Let me give you two examples. In Acts 16:3 he had Timothy circumcised, for he was half-Jewish, and that would give the gospel greater access to the Jews Paul and Timothy were trying to reach. Though Timothy was certainly not bound by that Jewish law, he agreed to sacrifice his liberty for the sake of the gospel. What a sacrifice! In Acts 21:24 we read that Paul was willing to go through a Jewish purification ritual that involved shaving his head, all for the sake of reaching Jews (Cf. also Acts 16:3; 18:18). Paul was willing to give up his hair if that would help lead Jewish people to Jesus! For Paul, submission to Jewish law was not a matter of salvation or spiritual development, but a matter of removing a barrier for acceptance of the gospel.

Contemporary Jewish Christianity helpfully incorporates Sabbath worship, Christianized versions of the major Jewish festivals, folk dance and music, use of key Hebrew terms, and so on, in ways designed to make Christianity seem less Gentile and more true to its Jewish roots. (Blomberg).

B. Paul Adapted to Gentile Culture – Paul said in v.21, "to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law." Paul became mainly a missionary to the Gentiles, especially by his second and third missionary journeys. So to reach Gentiles, he would give up Jewish distinctiveness. In fact, Paul probably ate the same food as Gentiles did, even though it was ceremonially unclean. Paul also formulated his teaching so that it might make the strongest appeal to the Gentile mind. For example, he would use numerous illustrations from the Greek athletic games, even though the games had morally and spiritually objectionable aspects. One example is found in vv.24-27.

Hudson Taylor was a missionary to China. At first he did not win anyone to Christ. But then he changed his manner of clothing and began to dress like the Chinese. The moment he identified with them, he began to win them successfully to Jesus Christ.

Yet notice that Paul said in the middle of v.21, "(not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ)…." Just because Paul ministered to people who did not receive God's law, that did not mean that Paul lived in a lawless and in godless fashion when he was among Gentiles. Cultural adaptation is right as long as we are not violating Romans 12:2, "Don't be conformed to this age…," particularly in doctrine and morality.

So we see that Paul does not assume that all aspects of culture are inherently evil. Adapting to culture has come to be called the contextualization of the gospel. Some cultural practices are contrary to Christian doctrine or morality. So when participating in any one of these would inherently compromise the gospel, Christians must refrain (1 Thess. 4:3; 5:22). However, when abstaining from morally and spiritually neutral practices would inappropriately distance believers from their non-Christian friends and neighbors, we should participate to overcome non-Christian misconceptions about the nature of Christianity, misconceptions that more often than not involve religious legalism.

Suppose your neighbor or co-worker invites you to their daughter's wedding. Yet you have a personal conviction about abstaining from alcoholic beverages and the kind of dancing that will likely take place at the reception. Will you go or stay home. I believe you should go to the wedding but abstain from any activity that violates your conscience. It is important to build

and maintain relationships with the unsaved and unchurched.

Now to adapt to the culture we need to understand the cultures of people in our community. I have to acknowledge that the mindset and culture of many Millennials is almost foreign to me. I understand that "authenticity" is big with that generation, and I need help in grasping what that means *to them*. Millennials are also big on non-discrimination, and if you say or do something that seems discriminatory, you will put up an unnecessary barrier for the Gospel. So let's learn what we can about the Millennials and do better at reaching them for Christ.

Yet what about the other end of the generational spectrum? I spoke to a pastor that acknowledged that the vast majority of the people in his church is now under 50, whereas 10 years ago they had many more over 50 than they do now. Yet what is the fastest growing age-group in America? According to the Census Bureau. the U.S. population 65 and older is now the largest in terms of size and percent of the population, compared with any previous census. Between 2000 and 2010, the population 65 and older grew 15.1 percent, while the total U.S. population grew 9.7 percent (www.census.gov). How many churches are talking about cultural adaptation to reach *that* growing population?

The bottom line in both of Paul's examples is this: We are not to say or do anything that will cause unnecessary barriers to people hearing the gospel. For Paul to exercise his Christian liberty while among Jewish unbelievers would cause them not to hear what he had to say. For him to impose Jewish legalism on Gentiles would have closed their minds to the gospel. If you are ministering to senior adults, Millennials, or some other group, don't say or do anything that will cause that group to become closed to the Gospel. However, we must never change the gospel itself to gain a hearing. Paul said in 1 Cor. 1:23, "but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness."

One big question is to what extent we adapt to culture in our worship gatherings? We certainly should to some degree. We do not want unbelievers who do attend to be repelled as soon as they enter. Yet how much we adapt to the culture largely depends on the purpose of our gatherings and who is attending. Do we gather mainly for worship and discipleship? After all, only believers can truly worship God, and few acknowledged unbelievers attend worship services these days. The main thrust of the cultural adaptation principle applies to what we do outside our church gatherings. Our authors quote Alan Hirsh, author of *Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. He wrote, "a genuine missional impulse is a sending rather than an attractional one." While many churches have sought to reach the lost and unchurched by making church more attractive to unbelievers, that was not Paul's thrust. His adaptions occurred as he went *to* the Jews and Gentiles in *their* cultural setting. Our cultural adaptions should mainly take place as we go to where the unchurched are, and contextualize the gospel in the places where they are, in their homes, at work, in their places of recreation. However, we also should be more sensitive to cultural adaptations when we have special events here for people in our community. 64 percent in transformational churches agreed with this statement, "The activities of our church are designed to relate to the type of people who live in our city or community" (p.55).

The question for us is whether we as a church are going to be intentional in making connections with the people of our community in the name of Jesus. 71% of the members of transformational churches agreed with this statement, "Our leadership senses a call to our local city or community and not just our church" (p.55). Let me give some examples of community connections that we have planned. On December 10 our church will have the opportunity to

minister to the students and families of Ettrick Elementary School. Will you be involved? We hope that many of the children that sing for their parents that Saturday morning will come here and sing for *our* church. In the spring we plan to host another banquet for local police officers. We want to bless them in the name of Jesus. Will you be involved?

Yet as we do good works in the community, our authors warn of a danger. Many are inclined to do good works that are void of a gospel witness. We work with our hands but not our mouths (pp.69-70). We must at some point move from doing good works to telling the good news. Good works will open the door to people's hearts, but we must walk through that door with the gospel. As Paul said in Romans 1:16, it is the gospel that "is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes…."

III. ADAPT TO THE CONDITION OF THOSE WE ARE SEEKING TO REACH

Paul said in v.22, "to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak." It is not so clear who "the weak" are. Paul may primarily have in mind spiritual weaknesses, but which type of spiritual weakness? In chapter 8 they referred to weak Christians who were still bound by Jewish legalism, but here in this immediate context Paul seems to be talking about those who need salvation. Romans 5:6 says, "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly." Yet in what way did Paul become as weak to such people? All things considered, I believe he is most likely referring to Christians with weak consciences, still bound by legalistic scruples. Thus, he is just giving another example of adaptation and accommodation. So to reach the weak, he would accommodate to their weaknesses in order to win them to a stronger spiritual condition, and prevent them from falling away from Christ. This is similar to what he said in 8:13, "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." In this case the "weak" refers to those undeveloped in knowledge and in faith (compare 8:10). Likewise, he said in Rom. 14:21, "It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak." When Paul was with the spiritually weak, he would refrain from exercise his full liberty in Christ in those areas that would cause them to stumble.

Paul's statement could apply to those who are physically and even mentally weak. To reach children you need to get down on their level. You need to speak with simplicity, and avoid abstract statements. When I speak to a child I even like to get down to their eyelevel.

Paul summarizes his position by saying in the last of v.22, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." He would modify his habits, his preferences, his entire life-style if any of those things caused someone to stumble. Paul was not a compromiser who adjusted his *message or morals*, but he did adjust his *lifestyle*. If a person is offended by God's Word, that is his problem. But if he is offended by our unnecessary behavior or practices, his problem becomes our problem. Paul is simply saying, "I find sinners where they are, and I identify with them in order to win them to faith in Christ."

Jesus did the same thing. The Bible says He was called "the friend of sinners" (Mt. 9:10-13). That included tax collectors and even harlots. He would eat with them and socialize with them without participating in any of their sins. No habits in our lives are worth keeping if they prevent sinners from entering the kingdom.

Paul is not promoting pure situation ethics. These verses form part of his larger discussion of morally neutral matters (8:1-11:1). So we dare not apply his strategy of "all things to all people" to issues of fundamental morality. Paul would never have said, "to the thief I

became like a thief," or "to the adulterer I became an adulterer."

Notice that Paul speaks of reaching "all men" or "all people." It didn't matter if they were Jew or Gentile, weak or strong. Ministries to the outcast and marginalized of our day began to implement the vision of "all things to all people" that Paul present so challengingly.

So imagine a church that reaches people of all generations as well as all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. That is humanly impossible. Yet when the church was born by the power of the Holy Spirit, people who spoke different languages and who came from different cultures were united in praise of the same Savior. God gets glory when people who dress, eat, talk, and live differently join around the dinner table or communion table with one heart. Imagine people who would not normally be caught dead in a room together are found together lovingly greeting one another and calling one another brother and sister!

In light of verses 19-23, it is hard to justify prepackaged approaches on every one with whom we want to share Christ. Paul's model far more closely approximates "friendship evangelism." Yet Leonard Sweet wrote about a harsh reality. He said, "Few believers have relationships, much less friendships with non-believers."[2] Yet as we get to know unbelievers, we can contextualize the gospel in such a way as to speak most directly to their needs and concerns. Many Christians barely know any non-Christians well enough to share their faith in less than superficial fashion.

We have seen what Paul was willing to do, but what about you and me? In v.23 Paul made application to the Corinthians when he said, "Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you" (*sugkoinonos*-participant with others). We are all to share together in making sacrifices for the gospel. We are all to develop a missionary mentality, and to make the kinds of accommodations that Paul made to reach people for Christ.

I must make one more point that is made in our book. The missionary mentality must include more than our own Jerusalem, so to speak. We must go and apply these principles to the ends of the earth. Our authors wrote, "Transformational Churches …have a mindset to be a missionary in their community and ultimately to the entire world."

Conclusion: So what will you do? What sacrifices are you willing to make to see more souls won to Christ? Will you give up any personal liberties if they interfere with the reception of the Gospel? Will you adapt to the culture you are with when ministering to them? For Paul, winning people to Christ was more important than anything else. I can think of no greater example of such loving sacrifice for the sake of others than Jesus. Christ had a right to all the glories of heaven, but He gave them up for you. 2 Cor. 8:9 says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." Christ was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for us. What sacrifices will you make for Him?

Sources: Craig Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Paige Patterson, *The Troubled Triumphant Church: an Exposition of First Corinthians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2010); Jerry Vines, *God Speaks Today: A Study of I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Wise: I Corinthians* (Wheaton: Victor

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[2] Quoted in *Transformational Church,* p.68.

Books, 1983). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

ABOUT THESE SERMON NOTES