

“An Evangelistic Church”

Dr. Rodney W. Kennedy
(1 Corinthians 9:16-23)
Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany
February 8, 2009

The relationship between churches and pastors is never a simple one. Paul and the church at Corinth are engaged in an argumentative, painful, and yet filled with love debate.^[i] Back and forth they go: preacher and congregation.^[ii] And so it has been and always will be till Jesus comes.

Let's begin with the problem from Paul's point of view: Avoid idolatry.^[iii] You are probably thinking, well I'm off the hook this Sunday. No golden calves on my mantle.

Background: The church at Corinth is in a food fight. The congregation thinks it is silly for Paul to get all bent out of shape over meat offered to idols; the preacher thinks it's demonic.^[iv] "It's just food," chime those in the know at Corinth.^[v] Well, when it comes to religion, there's no such thing as mere food. There are two meals at odds with one another in I Corinthians 8 – 10.^[vi] One is a meal served at the temple of the gods – idolatry. The other is the Lord's Supper served at church.

So idolatry is not just an ancient problem. An idol is whatever takes God's place in our hearts. Tertullian uses the term "illusions of our culture."

So look out! We can be lured back into old practices. Paul is concerned that the Corinthians will be reeled back into idolatry. No wonder Paul says: idols will not be tolerated. Listen, Christianity demands an exclusive loyalty to God (Exodus 20:2-5).^[vii]

A graduate school dean started every new semester telling students that 50% of them would not make it through the program. I thought that sounded a bit harsh, but over the next four years, I realized the professor was simply telling the truth. Some students, working full time jobs and giving part time attention to graduate study, reduced course loads to 3 hours per semester and then quit in frustration. Some students finished the course work, but failed the final examination. Others made it to the launching pad known as ABD – "All But Dissertation." They then took teaching jobs or moved away from the campus and became NFD – "Never Finished Dissertation." Well, about 60% of church members do not last. They start but they do not finish. Don't we owe it to prospective members to tell them of the demand involved?

What we have in I Corinthians is a pastor deeply concerned for the faith of his people. Paul is willing to do anything, sacrifice anything for them.

“Am I not free?”^[viii] Paul asks. The rhetorical question demands a YES answer.^[ix] What red-blooded American doesn't feel pride at such a powerful assertion of freedom? Well, Paul turns freedom on its ear: "Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more." He even refuses to take pay, working instead as a tent maker as part of his personal example. A Durham University scholar argues that Paul's tent-making trade was an avenue for him to identify with the lowly and to exhort the Corinthians to do the same. You've heard that old saying, "I rather see a sermon any day." Well, look at Paul. His life and his preaching match. Margaret Mitchell calls I Cor. 9 an

“exemplary argument.” He provides an example for the Corinthians to follow in hope that these elite and knowledgeable Christians would give up their freedom and rights for the gospel. The word is ETHOS: character and credibility.

Then Paul claims, **“I HAVE ALL THESE RIGHTS.”** Our Constitution contains a Bill of Rights. We are zealous about the protection of our rights. Legions of lawyers protect our rights. Martin Marty says that we will never understand the religious right until we realize they believe they have been left out of everyone else’s rights movement. Remember ghost in C. S. Lewis: “I just want my rights!”

Then of all things, Paul dismisses his rights.^[xi] Paul asks the church members to give up their rights as individuals for the good of the body of Christ. The gospel must be proclaimed freely. Did you know that the book of Acts ends with the adverb: “unhinderedly”? “Proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and unhinderedly.” Get it?

We are the people on whom God’s witness depends.^[xii] Do you think Wall Street will preach the gospel? “Put to death greed (which is idolatry)” Gal 3:5. Do you think Macy’s will preach the gospel? “Do not worry about what you wear. Is not the body more than clothing?” Do you think the Pentagon will preach the gospel? “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Listen! We are not gathered in this place to call attention to ourselves, but to worship Jesus, so that we might spread his Word and the world may know that the God who rules the sun and the stars lives in each of us and in our faithful witness.^[xiii]

The world deserves a better church than we have given it so far. It deserves a church that will not sell out the gospel just to draw a crowd. What the world needs is a faithful church that bears witness. The world deserves a church whose commitment judges them, challenges their idols and false ideas with faithful renditions of the gospel, with clear and concise definitions of what it means to be the body of Christ, and makes the world want to be rid of us for shining the white hot light of God’s amazing grace on its darkness. And in so doing, we will win over some of them.

In this world we have no official standing and no legal authority. Our only power is **moral persuasion**. Standing here, hat in hand, waiting permission to tell a story – that’s our stance. At the back of the room waiting to be invited forward. Slaves. Servants.

Paul says, “I will be all things to all people that I might win some of them.”^[xiv] Winning is everything to Paul. Echoes of Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric: “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” Win over is a good way to translate the meaning. Use everything. All the available means to win some.

Paul doesn’t mean that what happens in Corinth stays in Corinth, or that anything goes, or that pagans are as good as Christians any day. Paul is not a chameleon. Have you seen Woody Allen’s movie about Leonard Zelig? It recounts the life and times of a “chameleon man” who was so completely compliant that even his physical appearance changed to accommodate his companions. Standing between two orthodox rabbis, Zelig sprouts a beard and side curls. In a Chinese laundry his features become Asian. Faced with a group of psychiatrists, he speaks fluent psychobabble. Paul the Christian!

There's a difference in Paul's unrelenting willingness to win people to the gospel and our reticence, timidity, and silence. When I presented seminars, I needed a sales director at the office in Baton Rouge. I went through four sales people in one year. After a 22 day excursion in Nebraska, where I did 21 workshops in a row, I came back to the office to find the sales director sweeping out the warehouse.

What I'm saying is that churches will multiply activities to avoid the hard work of witness. I was pastor of a Baptist church in Louisiana that had so many programs and committee meetings that I was at the church seven nights a week. I thought I was a successful pastor because I was so busy. The church and its busy work became my idol. See the danger?

We are an evangelistic church but our baptistery is gathering dust. Come on people of the Lord. Tell somebody! Talk to somebody about the gospel! Invite somebody. Bring somebody. Friends don't let friends stay home from church! Evangelism is our calling. I'm not asking you to join the evangelical movement – that strange hodgepodge of religion and politics with its grocery list of social issues. I'm asking you to be the witness to your faith that God expects of you.

So my hope and my prayer is this: May FBC be a place about which people say, "Jesus is alive there." May it be a place where human beings are coming alive because Jesus is alive. And may he give us the courage to witness with boldness and without hindrance. Then, God's church will be honoured, God's spirit will be at work. Jesus will be proclaimed as Lord and God will be proclaimed as Father. Amen.

[i] The primary commentary resource for this sermon was Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians. Sacra Pagina*. One of the interesting claims of Collins is that I Corinthians may be a response to the anonymous compiler of the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*. N. T. Wright draws parallels between Corinth in the first century and today. "Why do you think that the *Gospel of Thomas* has suddenly returned to vogue?" I also found N. T. Wright's "Communion and Koinonia: Pauline Reflections on Tolerance and Boundaries" helpful. Wright says, "The problem of what counts as compromise, what is perfectly acceptable, what must be resisted at all costs, and what you may get away with for a while but should expect to tidy up sooner or later – all of this is therefore familiar ground to most Jews of the first century, certainly those who did any traveling." Wright argues that Paul tolerates differences that had to do with ethnic boundary lines, but there was no toleration for the ones that marked the difference between genuine, living, renewed humanity, and false, corruptible, destructive humanity. Ethnic, social, and cultural origin issues are irrelevant. Sexual misconduct and anger are not to be tolerated (Col 3:5 – 10). We should never say, "Some Christians think fornication is wrong," while other Christians say it is acceptable, so we should be tolerant of one another.

[ii] Acts 18 details Paul's founding of the church at Corinth. Gordon Fee says that the problem in Corinth was not divisions in the church, but the church opposed to the high demands of Paul. We know that Paul, for example, made a painful visit to Corinth. He wrote at least four letters to the church and the church sent him a number of letters. The church complained that Paul's sermons were too simple, and he responds in 3:2 with "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food." "My speech and proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (2:4).

[iii] Idolatry would have been one of the earliest and most pressing issues confronting new converts anywhere many gods and lords exist (I Thess 1:9-10; Gal 4:8-9; I Cor 12:2; Acts 14:15; 17:16; 19:11-40). Paul forbade Christians from any association with any food overtly connected to idolatry. Exclusive loyalty to God precluded even a token show of fealty to an idol. In 10:14 Paul says, "flee

idolatry.” As Christians took part in civic life in Corinth, they would have many opportunities to participate in a festival’s sacrificial meals in some form. The imperial cult was important to Corinthian citizens, and sacrifices were part of the Isthmian games.

[iv] “No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (10:20-21). I believe this is the crucial issue: the table of the Lord v. the table of demons.

[v] The dominant view here is that the strong thought nothing of eating meat offered to idols while the weak were being led astray. The Corinthians were asking Paul, “Why can’t we eat idol food?” They thought Paul was giving them some religious mumbo jumbo that had no spiritual effect on them. This interpretation says that the strong try to enlist the support of Paul in urging the weak to get with it and join the world of those in the know. In contrast to this view, I believe that the rift is between Paul and the congregation. Paul worries they will be drawn back into idolatry. So Paul forbids the idolatrous behavior and the church objects to his demands. David E. Garland, “The Dispute Over Food Sacrificed to Idols (I Cor 8:1 – 11:1). *Journal of the NABPR*.

[vi] In I Cor 8 – 10 the primary issue is food sacrificed to idols. Chapter 9, rather than being a digression defending Paul’s apostleship, is part of Paul’s argument against idolatry. This passage is not the same as Romans 14. I Cor 8 – 10 deals with Christians and idol worshipers. Romans 14 deals with Jewish and Gentile Christians. Thus chapters 8 – 10 are part of Paul’s continuing saga of knocking heads and disagreeing with the congregation at Corinth. According to J. C. Hurd, Jr. the “weak” are not an actual group, but a hypothetical person invented (rhetorical concept of invention) by Paul as part of his argument to convince the Corinthians.

[vii] “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God” (Ex 20:3-5).

[viii] Russell Sisson suggests that I Cor. 9 begins with a rhetorical syllogism. Aristotle said that the most powerful way to begin a speech is with a syllogism. Thus 9:1 may be outlined as follows: Unstated major premise: All apostles are free. Minor premise: I am an apostle. Conclusion: Therefore, I am free.

[ix] Paul asks 16 rhetorical questions in chapter 9. Vernon K. Robbins (1996) *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology*, 77 – 89. The analysis of repetitive and progressive texture revealed that the discourse in I Cor. 8 – 10 was argumentative and in the form of a traditional Greek rhetoric “judicial” speech. The purpose is persuasion.

[x] Everything Paul does, including not exercising his rights as an apostle, is aimed at winning others to the gospel and avoiding anything that might needlessly hinder another from coming to faith. Chapter 9 is an exemplary argument that Paul develops. His powerful use of ETHOS, a rhetorical concept that includes character and credibility is solid Aristotle. Paul, who has a one-up position, takes a one-down position by surrendering his apostolic authority. Low-status persons, the weak have no authority to surrender. Paul uses this autobiographical information to establish ETHOS to persuade. The task of advancing the gospel totally dominates his life, inspiring his willingness to make any sacrifice to win others. He wishes this attitude was more evident in the lives of the Corinthian Christians.

[xi] Chapter 9 is a rhetorical digression that serves Paul’s purpose as he argues why the knowledgeable members of the Corinthian community should forego their right to eat food offered to

idols. Paul's argument is a literary piece in the form of a judicial defense and is filled with rhetorical devices. This passage shows Paul well-versed in the communication skills of Greek culture even though he is rooted in the Jewish and Christian traditions. The barrage of rhetorical questions – 16 overall – leave no doubt that Paul had certain apostolic rights and he has chosen not to exercise those rights. For the sake of the gospel he has not done so. He would place no obstacle in the path of the gospel. Therefore the Corinthians ought to forego their right to eat for the sake of all that the gospel implies, including the salvation of those presumed to be weak.

[xii] Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church As Polis*.

[xiii] See Philip D. Kenneson's analysis of the church growth movement to see how this statement by Paul doesn't mean that Paul was willing to sell out the gospel to pagan compromises. "Selling [Out] the Church in the Marketplace of Desire." *Modern Theology* 9:4 October 1993.