

14. Healthy Churches Understand Godly Flexibility

In our last topic, we talked about developing godly flexibility. Today, we are going to focus on the topic of understanding godly flexibility. Paul was a Jew who was called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. As a result, he had to understand this flexibility fully, and apply it in his own life, so he could effectively share the Gospel, both with the Jews and with the Gentiles. Since over one-half of his recorded ministry happened in just four cities, he also gives us an example of how to reach the people of the cities for Christ. Those four cities were Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome, which also happened to be four of the five largest cities in the Roman Empire (the fifth being Alexandria, Egypt).

Paul gives a summary of his understanding of godly flexibility, in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, where we read: “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; 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; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.” In these verses, we see that Paul was willing to make many changes in his own life in order to reach people for Christ. In these verses, we learn several very important principles.

First, Paul said that he was free from all men. This is a key principle if we are going to be effective as churches, and Christians, that develop effective reproducing Christians. In verse 18, Paul had said, “What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel.” Paul said that, as he traveled to the various cities, he did not expect the people there to pay his expenses so he could preach the Gospel. In fact, when he began his ministry in Corinth, he made tents to support himself. Paul chose to be free from self-interest by not charging the people he was trying to reach.

Second, we see that Paul chose to make himself a servant or bond slave to all. He was willing to adapt himself to the people he was trying to reach in order to reach them for Christ. That meant that he circumcised Timothy, in Acts 16:3, because he was part Jewish. At the same time, it meant that he did not circumcise Titus, in Galatians 2:3, because he was a Greek. Paul was willing to be very flexible, so he could reach both Jews and Gentiles for Christ.

Third, Paul said that his real concern was to be able to avoid creating any barriers between himself and those who were not Christians, so he could win more people to Christ. Paul was even willing to forsake foods that might be his favorites in order to win more people to Christ. Romans 14:15-19 says, “Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by

which one may edify another.”

Paul shared with the Corinthians how he had applied this principle among them for the sake of evangelism. In 1 Corinthians 10:23-27, Paul said, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake; for ‘the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness.’” If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake.” Paul ate the food that those who did not believe served him at dinner, unless they made a point of the fact that they had bought the meat at the temple of the idol. Then, based on the four things Gentile Christians were not to do, from the decision of the Jerusalem Council, Paul would abstain from eating the meat, but would not condemn his host.

In fact, Paul went on to say that he was very careful not to offend anyone by what he ate or did not eat. 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 says, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved. Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” Paul became a bondservant to all so he would not offend Jews, Greeks, or the church. He did what he did to bring glory to God in a way that would reach more people for Christ.

Fourth, Paul said, in 1 Corinthians 9:20, “...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...” Paul took Jewish vows to show that he did the things that were commanded by the Levitical law for Jews. Acts 18:18 says, “So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow.” Here, we see that Paul shaved his head to fulfill all of the requirements of a Jewish vow. He also avoided eating those animals the Jews would consider unclean.

Fifth, Paul also said, in 1 Corinthians 9:20, “...to those who are without law, as without law...” Since most of the Gentiles were not familiar with the Jewish law, Paul did not even use the Old Testament law when he shared the Gospel with Gentiles. In fact, Paul summarized his teaching of the Gospel to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 2:1-2, where he said: “And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” He did not depend on either the Jewish law or Greek philosophy.

Paul repeated the Gospel that he preached to the Corinthians a second time, in 1 Corinthians 15:1-6 which says: “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the

greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.” His message, to Jews or Gentiles, was the death and the resurrection of Christ.

Sixth, in 1 Corinthians 9:20, Paul said that he did function under one law. “... (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ)...” Here, we see that Paul did obey the law of Christ in his relationship with all people. Christ gave this commandment to His disciples in John 13:34-35, where we read: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Galatians 5:13 says, “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” Paul chose to be a bond slave to all, because he made it his purpose to serve everyone in love. This meant that Paul acted out of love and set aside his own desires for the sake of reaching others for Christ.

Seventh, Paul said, in 1 Corinthians 9:22, “...to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak...” The word that is translated “weak” is used in 1 Thessalonians 5:14 to speak of those who are without strength. That verse says, “Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.” Here, we see that Paul said to uphold those who are without strength. Paul showed love to those who had no strength in themselves by holding them up in their weakness. In 1 Thessalonians 2:7, he described the way he, Silas, and Timothy had helped the new Christians. “But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.” Paul said they had provided the same kind of care a mother provides to her newborn child.

Paul summarized his entire ministry in the last part of 1 Corinthians 9:22, where he said: “...I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.” Paul understood that to reach people of many different cultures and religions, he had to become totally flexible in his ministry. That is the kind of Christians we need today if we are going to plant churches among the many different cultures of our world. In many of our cities, we find a tremendous variety of cultures. We need to follow the example of Paul and seek to understand how to most effectively reach each of these cultures with the Gospel.

Understanding godly flexibility is a very important key to reaching people for Christ and developing reproducing churches in every culture. May the Lord richly bless you as you grow and continue to develop your flexibility so you can reach people for Christ in an increasing number of cultures.