

God's Communicators in Mission

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A Booklet of Essays
Delivered At The
Third Annual
Missions Congress

Concordia Theological Seminary
Fort Wayne, Indiana
September 30 – October 2, 1987

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“CROSS-CULTURAL” IS FOR EVERYBODY

*A Sermon Preached by Prof. Cameron A. MacKenzie
on October 1, 1987*

Text: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Can you imagine a more extraordinary career? From Pharisee of the Pharisees to cross-cultural missionary, from meticulous observation of all Jewish laws and customs to rubbing shoulders and breaking bread with vile pagans, from the rabbi, Saul of Tarsus, to the apostle, St. Paul, of the Christian Church. It's mind-boggling. As a young man, Paul was so careful to eat just what the Jewish law prescribed, so careful not to incur ritual defilement by association with Gentiles, so careful to keep the Jewish Sabbath—not just out of habit or custom but for reasons of conscience, out of obedience to the God who had made such laws; and yet later on, he gave it all up—the peculiar food, dress, and laws—in order to associate easily and freely with all kinds of non-Jews, ranging from Athenian intellectuals on Mars Hill to the gross pagans of Lystra who thought he was the god Mercury.

And at what personal cost Paul made this change! He had been the fair-haired boy of Jerusalem's Pharisees—a disciple of the great Gamaliel, full of zeal and enthusiasm for the cause; in fact, so talented and dedicated was Paul that when the leadership looked about for someone to entrust with the extirpation of the new Christian heresy they chose Paul and even granted him authority to extend his persecuting work into Damascus. Yes, Paul was their man—he had the right background, the right education, and the right dedication for keeping Judaism the way the Pharisees liked it—pure and separate from all alien influences—and therefore, within this circle, Paul's future seemed secure.

But when Paul kicked over the traces to enter the camp of the Christians, we must admit that his career immediately went down hill, for not only did he have to travel thereafter and give up all hope of normal family life, not only did he have to associate with all kinds of people that by previous training he must have found repulsive, he also had to suffer rejection, alienation, and persecution from his erstwhile friends the Jews *and* from his new-found cause the Gentiles. Beaten, scourged, stoned, almost drowned, hounded by enemies from one place to the next, misunderstood by friends, betrayed by those whom he loved, until at last we find him at the end virtually alone, awaiting death at the hands of Roman authorities. It sounds harsh to say it but from a worldly point of view, Paul was a loser, a failure.

And yet in the words of our text, Paul seems to be holding himself forth as an example, i.e., if you and I also claim to follow Jesus, then we too should be ready to surrender our past, our ways and customs, indeed our freedom to be what we want to be in order to reach people with Paul's message about Christ.

Now, there's a lot within me that rebels at a text like this. In fact when it was first assigned me, I did not want to preach on it—because I don't want to accommodate myself to all kinds of people the way Paul did. In fact, by temperament I'm much more comfortable with the Pharisees than with the cross-cultural types—I like things to stay the same. So my first thought was to restrict this text to missionaries or would-be missionaries, where of course the application is obvious. As in Paul's case, to prove effective, a missionary has to adjust to the people he's trying to reach with his message—has to learn their language, their ways and customs, and so establish a bond of understanding and trust between himself and the people so that they will listen to his word when he speaks it.

Upon reflection, however, it seems clear that the same considerations must also apply to the clergy in general—not just the ones who stay put right here in the United States: good pastors, effective pastors, are sensitive to cultural barriers that separate them even partially from their people and seek to penetrate those barriers. Ethnicity and race are, of course, obvious ones; but so are education and taste, even interests and hobbies. Let me cite just a few examples: the inner city pastor

who commutes from the suburbs, or the rural pastor who takes no interest in the price of grain, or the Detroit pastor who drives a Toyota, or the Chicago pastor who roots for the New York Mets—all are making the mistake of failing to identify as closely as possible with the people they serve.

Now, certainly, from one point of view such things are trivial, and most people can accommodate the cultural eccentricities of their shepherds. However, it is very easy for the trivial to become significant when people begin to see such differences as signs of pride or manifestations of feelings of superiority on the part of their pastors—and as soon as that happens, they erect an enormous wall between themselves and the one they call “pastor”: they lose respect for him, they find fault with him, and they talk about him—not about his message but about him. In fact, the message becomes almost irrelevant when people believe that their pastor is not one with them, for they interpret his words as those of a hypocrite—how can he preach about the law of God when he doesn't love them? Paul's words in our text apply to all pastors, not just missionaries.

But do they apply to all Christians, clergy and laity alike? Do they speak to believers who have no desire at all to become clergy? Certainly, they do, for the same things that can separate pastor from people can also separate people from one another. Just think how difficult it has been, for example, for the parishes of our large cities to survive when the neighborhood has changed from white to black or from Anglo to Hispanic or from middle-class German-American to almost anything else: finances have dried up, numbers have dwindled, and the doors of churches have closed. Why? Certainly not for any lack of people to tell about Jesus nor because other ethnic groups won't respond to the Gospel. No—the problem is class, culture, customs. Unfortunately, too many church people are like me—comfortable with the way things are and with people like ourselves and therefore resistant to doing what it takes to overcome the things that divide us from others for the sake of reaching them with the Gospel.

But that's certainly not the word or example of St. Paul, is it? However, is St. Paul's word or example reason enough for changing the way we behave and inconveniencing ourselves to reach others different from ourselves? I don't think so: it certainly

wasn't enough for Paul—who sought not to please himself but someone else. Let's go back to that career story as we sketched it before and realize that the transformation in Paul took place in the first instance outside of Paul, i.e., Jesus Christ appeared to Paul and changed him from Pharisee to apostle.

Apart from the reality of Jesus Christ crucified and risen again, Paul's life and career make no sense at all—they defy rational explanation. But when we realize that the Lord Himself appeared to Paul, convicted and converted him, then what the apostle did with the rest of his life seems almost inevitable, for Christ had freed him from a horrible burden, an actual slavery, to observing the smallest particulars of traditional law. Furthermore, Paul was laboring under the enormous weight of sin: the pride, the cruelty, the murder, the blasphemy that had characterized his "successful" life were only taken away by Christ's cross and washed away in baptism. Therefore, having experienced God's grace for him and knowing that forgiveness, life, and heaven were his eternally, Paul freely surrendered his time, talents, tastes, and predilections to the service of Christ and His Gospel. And that is why we should do the same—not for Paul but for Jesus.

If the barriers of race, language, culture and the like sometimes seem too great for us to overcome and we'd prefer just to hunker down content with our own little worlds, let's remember what barriers Christ had to overcome in order to save us. Since human beings were at risk, Christ became a human being, God became flesh, the Creator became creature. Then, since it was God's law that demanded obedience, Christ humbled Himself in order to obey that law, even though that meant submitting to human needs and emotions as well as to the whims of other human beings. Thus, He who made all things hungered and thirsted; He who could do all things became tired and slept; He who ruled all things obeyed parents, teachers, governors. Furthermore, since God's justice demanded payment for sins, Christ did that, too: He suffered and died; the Prince of Life yielded up His life to save those who had freely chosen death. Therefore, when at last our Lord burst from the tomb, He was breaking through all the seemingly insurmountable barriers separating God from man; but not one thing—not humanity nor the law nor sin nor death—would the Savior permit to stand between God and man. In

Christ, Paul, you, I, everybody has a gracious God, a heavenly Father: we are one in Him and one with each other.

In a sense, therefore, when we accommodate ourselves to others for the sake of the Gospel, we are only realizing visibly the reality that Christ has already accomplished, viz., our oneness in Him. When we learn another language in order to preach God's Word or live next to someone of another race in order to share the Gospel or simply welcome a stranger into our congregation, we are embracing a brother in Christ—we are saying that what Jesus has done for him and me renders all differences between us meaningless, superficial, indeed nothing. It still may not be *easy* for us to be all things to all men, and we will always be imperfect in our efforts and accomplishments—but it can be done by missionaries, pastors, and laity alike on the basis of what Christ has done already for us. "This I do for the Gospel's sake," said St. Paul, "that I might be a partaker thereof with you."

When the Pharisee of the Jews became the apostle to the Gentiles he appeared to be joining the losing side; and even when he died, though he left little bands of followers throughout the Mediterranean basin, his executioners would hardly have recognized him as a great success. In spite of appearances, however, God had used Paul to save some—indeed countless numbers—through the end of time by his powerful pen.

Of course, none of us here is another St. Paul; but God will also use us for His work. We may never really see the fruits of our labors, but we can be confident that God is still saving some when the Gospel tears down barriers: between us and each other, between us and others, between us and God. Amen.