

# All Things to All Men: Where is the Limit?

## An Exegetical Study of I Corinthians 9:19-23

by Richard Krause

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The Lord has commanded us to proclaim his gospel to all nations. Today issues such as the Church Growth Movement and multiculturalism challenge and confront us in this task. Where is the limit as we seek to become all things to all men in order to save some? May we learn from Paul and his uncompromising dedication to Gospel outreach. May we also be led to prayerfully consider our own mission methodology in this age of apostasy and relativism.

Paul had the arduous task of working in two distinct cultures: that of Jewish Christians who lived by the Mosaic law, and that of Gentile Christians who were free from that law. To both of these people groups he proclaimed the gospel while attempting to unite all into one community of believers. He was also called to serve as a faithful pastor to those Christians who had weak consciences. In this endeavor Paul seeks to be free so that he could be of service to all. Having displayed this desire to be free as a proclaimer of the gospel, he discloses the mission strategy he employs in seeking to win people for Christ.

<sup>19</sup> *Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.*

Ἐλεύθερος γὰρ ὢν ἐκ πάντων πᾶσιν ἐμαυτὸν ἐδούλωσα, ἵνα τοὺς πλείονας κερδήσω·

Paul returns to his discussion on freedom that began at the beginning of the chapter. There he stated that he was free from the dietary restrictions that the Mosaic law had placed on the Jews. Now he relates that he is free from monetary dependence on anyone. By denying compensation from the church at Corinth for his ministry, he was free from any type of hindrance that might obstruct his preaching.

Freedom is a relative concept with its own limitations. Paul does not state that he is free from all things but free from “all men” (ἐκ πάντων πᾶσιν). This echoes the idea that he initiated at the beginning of the chapter (v. 1). There he states that he is free because he has Christian liberty. Now he states that he is free from “all men”, as an objective fact, because he has not availed himself of the complete freedom which he possesses.

As a free man, Paul is able to relate to every believer in the church at Corinth. He has full apostolic rights to be free from human control; nevertheless, he chooses to be a servant to all the Corinthian believers. Here he literally fulfills Jesus’ words addressed to the disciples: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave” (Matthew 20:25-27). Paul is an imitator of Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve.

Paul characterized himself as a slave of Christ (δοῦλος Χριστοῦ, Romans 1:1) and understood the imitation of Jesus to also include a participation in Jesus’ sufferings. A slave (δοῦλος) is not his own person; he does his master’s will. He is nothing; his master is everything. The word ἐδούλωσα is very strong. It is used to describe Israel’s 400 year experience in Egypt (Acts 7:6), the marriage bond (I Corinthians 7:15), addiction to wine (Titus 2:3) and the Christian’s new relationship to righteousness (Romans 6:18).

It was not an easy thing to be enslaved to all. Paul’s objective as a slave to all is to win as many people as possible for Christ (τοὺς πλείονας). He uses the verb “to win” (κερδήσω) five times in these few verses. He is not in some kind of contest with the other apostles to bring in the most converts. Rather, he hopes to gain adherents with the strategy of becoming a slave as his methodology. Paul demonstrates that he is a slave of Jesus by being a slave to Christ’s people (Galatians 5:13).

As far as his rights were concerned he was free from all men, but because of his love for all men, he would gladly limit those rights for their sakes. He would modify his life-style, habits or customs, if any of these things caused someone to stumble, to be offended, or to be hindered from faith in the Lord.

The question of Christian liberty for Paul is not only answered in a consideration of what is lawful. Rather the fact that “all things are lawful for me” must constantly be tempered by the realization that “not everything is beneficial” (I Corinthians 10:23), and the determination that “I will not be enslaved by anything” (I Corinthians 6:12).

These thoughts are reflected in Martin Luther’s famous tract *The Freedom of the Christian* where he developed two thoughts: (1) A Christian through faith is a free lord and subject to no one. (2) A Christian is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to everyone. Luther explained the first point by showing God’s justifying grace liberates the sinner who has been a slave. God in justification, not only declares all people free from all sin and guilt for Christ’s sake through faith; he has also effected an inward generation of the person’s soul which in turn effects his whole inner life. No longer is he a slave to his own passions and desires, for Christ now reigns in his new life of faith. He no longer lives under law, but by Gospel. This inward liberation meant freedom from those outward regulations with which Rome at that time sought to strangle Christendom.

<sup>20</sup> *To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.*

καὶ ἐγενόμην τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ὡς Ἰουδαῖος, ἵνα Ἰουδαίους κερδήσω· τοῖς ὑπὸ νόμον ὡς ὑπὸ νόμον, μὴ ὢν αὐτὸς ὑπὸ νόμον, ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον κερδήσω·

As a slave to all, Paul begins with his own people and abides by the principle “first to the Jew and then to the Gentile.” Paul was born a Jew and was a Hebrew of the Hebrews (Philippians 3:5). Nevertheless by writing that he became a Jew to the Jews, he is implying that by becoming a follower of Jesus he is a new creation (II Corinthians 5:17) and thus is no longer a Jew or a Gentile. During the course of his ministry, Paul adapted himself to the customs of the Jews when he tried to win the Jews to Christ. We cite a few examples: he had Timothy circumcised “because of the Jews” (Acts 16:3); he joined four Nazirites in their purification rites and paid their expenses for the sacrificial offering (Acts 21:23-24,26); and the special Jewish vow he took in Cenchrrea (Acts 18:18) which may have been for the sake of some Jews.

As the champion of Christian liberty (Galatians 2:4, 5:13), Paul sets aside his freedom in Christ and places himself in bondage to the law of Moses. He does this in Jewish settings for one reason: to win the Jews to Christ. However, he also adds the striking disclaimer to this willingness to observe the commandments found in the law of Moses: “I myself am not under the law.” Paul remains free in Christ Jesus. He is able as a Jew to practice Jewish customs, without teaching that the law is a way of salvation. And he does not have to deliver the Jews from their practice of the law, but from their “confidence” in the law as a way of salvation (Philippians 3:2).

Paul had been appointed as an apostle primarily to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:7-9), yet he preached the good news of salvation to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 20:21). To both Jews and Gentiles, Paul adapted himself for the benefit of the gospel. Thus he sought to win both “those under the law” and “those not having the law.”

<sup>21</sup> *To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law.*

τοῖς ἀνόμοις ὡς ἄνομος, μὴ ὢν ἄνομος θεοῦ ἀλλ’ ἔννομος Χριστοῦ, ἵνα κερδάνω τοὺς ἀνόμους·

God had entrusted to the Jews the “very words of God” (Romans 3:2). The “nations” or Gentiles were people without the law. In Greek, Paul writes the term ἀνόμος. This has a double meaning: objectively, the Gentiles were without the law of God; subjectively, they were people who paid no attention to that law. Here the objective meaning in this verse would prevail. Paul is making a contrast between those without the law to

those who have already received the law. Yet the subjective sense is also here in force because Paul immediately adds that he himself is not without God's law. He lives in accordance with the law of Christ.

When Paul spent time with the Gentiles, he did not observe the Jewish food laws, circumcision, new moon and Sabbath preparations (Galatians 2:11-14; Colossians 2:11,16). It is not surprising that in Jerusalem he was accused of teaching the Jews in Dispersion to turn away from the laws and customs of Moses (Acts 20:21). In the mind of the Jew, Paul's conduct among the Gentiles made him a Gentile.

The Jews reasoned that he was not ignorant of the law; thus he transgressed God's precepts. Paul seeks to make clear to both Jewish and Gentile Christians that he is not a lawless person. He states clearly, "I am under Christ's law." To be free means being neither under law or outside law, but in Christ. The one who is in Christ Jesus is a new creation. Paul is free in relation to Christ, yet at the same time he is under the law of Christ. Paul engages in a play on words, saying that he is free from the law by which the Jews sought salvation. Through Christ, Paul's view of the law of God has changed. He no longer seeks salvation in relation to the law, but now he desires to keep the law in gratitude to his loving Savior.

What is this law of Christ? This expression occurs also in Galatians 6:2. It describes "bearing one another's burdens" or the implementation of love. Although Christ has abolished the civil and ceremonial laws, God's moral commands remain. Love does not abrogate God's moral law but fulfills it (Romans 13:8,10; Matthew 5:17). If the believer is within Christ's law at the same time he is within God's law and obeys his will. Because Christ mediates God's law, Paul must abide by the constraints of that law. Whatever God demands of him as a believer, binds him; he cannot step outside those constraints. There is a rigid limit to his flexibility as he seeks to win the lost from different cultural and religious groups; he must not do anything that is forbidden to the Christian, and he must do everything mandated of the Christian. He is not free from God's laws; he is under Christ's law.

<sup>22</sup> *To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.*

ἐγενόμην τοῖς ἀσθενέσιν ἀσθενής, ἵνα τοὺς ἀσθενεῖς κερδήσω· τοῖς πᾶσιν γέγονα πάντα, ἵνα πάντως τινὰς σώσω.

Paul here turns to the topic of Christians with weak consciences (8:9-13). He reviews the freedom he has in Christ as he discusses his relationship to the weak. Paul does not make a comparison here with the strong. The strong were already free in Christ and had no guilty conscience when they ate meat that had been sacrificed to an idol. The weak were the Corinthian believers who were weak in conscience; they were in need of Paul's counsel and his encouragement to be strengthened in their Christian faith (Romans 14:1; 15:1). Paul's loving insight enabled him to understand the scruples and weaknesses of those that had not made much headway in Christian knowledge.

Paul's missiology is a model for everyone who desires to win people for the Lord. Paul adapted himself to different situations in every culture. He tried to find "common ground." He met people where they were. With the Jews he lived as a Jew, and with the Gentiles as a Gentile (within the boundaries of Christ's command). To the weak he became weak.

Opponents accused Paul of duplicity (II Corinthians 1:12; 4:2; 12:16; Galatians 1:10). However, if this was the case they misunderstood his motive. They would have failed to see the driving purpose that propelled Paul and his mission endeavors; to bring the gospel to as many people as possible. Paul was convinced of the power of the gospel which would open the heart of every person God chose to save. If God was pleased to save Paul, who calls himself the worst of sinners (I Timothy 1:15), then the Lord could break into the darkness of anyone's heart and make a convert. Paul was God's instrument to bring sinners to Christ through the power of the gospel. Paul preached, exhorted, counseled, encouraged, but the actual work of salvation belonged to God.

Paul also expresses sober realism when he writes, "I might save some." Paul knew that even though his whole life was devoted to the proclamation of the gospel to all people, yet God alone effects salvation

(Philippians 2:13). Paul works as if all people are to be saved, but he knows that only some will respond to the gospel (Romans 11:14).

<sup>23</sup> *I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*  
 πάντα δὲ ποιῶ διὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, ἵνα συγκοινωνὸς αὐτοῦ γένωμαι.

Paul writes the word “all” (τοῖς πᾶσιν...πάντα...πάντως...πάντα) four times in verses 22 and 23. He is the humble servant of the gospel and will go to any extreme, descend or ascend to any level of society, perform any task as long as the gospel is proclaimed to all people. What was “discrimination” to Paul? For it was he who wrote that in Christ there “is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female” (Galatians 3:28). He knew that in Christ all believers are one.

Up to this point, all the purpose clauses reveal Paul’s desire to save others. Now we see that this purpose also extends to himself. This statement however, must not be separated from Paul’s general understanding of salvation—*sola gratia*.

Paul says his motive is the saving interest of others but this also involves his own salvation. He means that his entire method of gospel proclamation—filled with love for others—has its bearing on his own participation in the gospel. “For the sake of the gospel” is meant subjectively: for the saving success of the gospel among people generally, including also himself. Paul knows that if he omits this concern of love for others even though many may be saved through his work, he knows that he himself would not be saved. He has a two-fold interest that holds him to his course. We have heard about his interest for others and now he speaks about the interest for himself so that he might be (the aorist: actually be) a συγκοινωνὸς of the gospel. This term is only used here by Paul: one who shares with others in the saving fellowship of the gospel.

Paul asserts that he may preach the gospel, yet nevertheless lose his own personal participation in that gospel. The point of this explanation is to be found in the last clause of v. 27. There Paul says “I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” Paul was a herald (κηρύξ). He was “to herald” (κηρύσσειν), to proclaim, to preach. This is a standard term in the New Testament to designate this function. The verb here, κηρύξας—an aorist participle “after having preached” to others, is well chosen, for a herald may shout an order or give a piece of information without letting his announcement effect his own heart or life. That is exactly what may happen in the case of a herald who is sent out to announce the gospel news to others. What a tragedy when a professing Christian finds himself rejected at the end of time. How much worse when one of the Lord’s own heralds has this same experience. Paul regards his work and his methods in doing this work with extreme seriousness.

In these verses Paul shows himself as a disciple of Jesus, who during the time of his earthly ministry ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. Jesus was known as their friend (Matthew 11:19). He was considered to be one of them. We remember that Jesus drank water which was given to him by a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, and his disciples were surprised to see him talking with the woman (John 4:9,11,27). Jesus told the Pharisees to pay taxes to Caesar and to give to God that which belongs to God (Matthew 22:21). Jesus has already set the example of accommodating himself to the culture and circumstances of the people among whom he preached the gospel. Nevertheless, the gospel itself remained unadulterated. In the interest of the gospel missionaries, evangelists and pastors must adapt themselves to the people and community into which they have been called. Their purpose should never be to compromise the gospel but rather to bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We remember the emphasis in Jesus’ high-priestly prayer to his Father, “That they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). In this knowledge is eternal life.

### **Paul’s Basic Message**

Paul was sent to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. Through Christ alone we are rescued from the kingdom of darkness, granted the forgiveness of sins and placed as sons of God into his very family. Paul's message centered around the cross and the empty tomb.

Paul says that he was sent "to preach the gospel" (I Corinthians 1:17). He says again, "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (I Corinthians 2:1,2). "I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you," he tells them; and then he further relates this description of the gospel: "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures,...he was buried,...he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures" (I Corinthians 15:1,3,4). This was, as he states it, the message of "first importance" (I Corinthians 15:3).

This is not the "social" gospel that is so popular in our day, nor is it the "liberation" gospel which seeks to revolutionize societies and abolish all types of oppression found in our contemporary world. No, the message of Paul is that Christ is crucified and risen.

### Paul's Different Approaches

In Professor David Valleskey's *A Portrait of Paul with Application to Current Trends and Methods in Mission Work* it is stated that as Paul traveled from place to place with his basic mission message he was very far from a "canned speech" approach. In different situations he used a manner which was relevant to that place and time. Edgar Hoenecke speaks of "the complete freedom from hidebound rules in St. Paul's approach and his remarkable flexibility in adapting himself and his message to all sorts of people and situations." Paul, he states, "is the greatest exponent and teacher of Christian doctrine after Christ, and yet one will search in vain for a set pattern of dialectic preaching or teaching in his sermons."<sup>1</sup>

The three mission messages of Paul that Luke has preserved, at least in summary, show this unique approach to circumstances and places. They display how Paul preached in three dissimilar situations to three unique audiences.

In Antioch of Pisidia Luke records for us a relatively lengthy message to serve as an example of Paul's initial sermons in the synagogues which he visited. Paul's point of contact was that he and the synagogue worshipers had the Old Testament Scriptures in common. This was the starting point that Paul used to proceed to his message: the heart and center of the Scriptures is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, through whom alone there is forgiveness and justification.

In Lystra, Paul does not talk about Jesus and his death and resurrection at all; but this is probably because the people, in their desire to offer sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas, did not allow Paul to finish his preaching. What we have here then is an approach to evangelism or as some might term it "pre-evangelism,"<sup>2</sup> which no doubt would have led, if the occasion had permitted it, to greater opportunities to communicate the message of the one true God and what he had done for the Lystrans and all people.

In Athens, at the Areopagus Paul in his famous discourse to the "unknown God" demonstrates the folly of idolatry and skillfully decimates both the deism of the Epicureans and the pantheism of the Stoics. Paul uses excerpts from two Greek poems that were dedicated to Zeus to back up his contention that God is both the creator and the preserver, and thus is deeply concerned about his creation. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Epimenides, c. 600 B.C.), and "we are his offspring" (Aratus, c. 315-240 B.C.).

Paul makes clear who the unknown God is and then concludes with a call to repentance. "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31).

Was Paul conscious that these words directly contradicted the Athean Aeschylus? "About five hundred years before this day, when describing the institution of the Areopagus by Athene, the cities patron deity,

<sup>1</sup> David Valleskey, *A Portrait of Paul with Application to Current Trends and Methods in Mission Work*, 1992, pg. 43.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 45.

Aeschylus put these words into the mouth of the god Apollo: When the dust has soaked up a man's blood, once he is dead, there is no resurrection."<sup>3</sup>

It would have been easier for Paul to have simply affirmed the immortality of the soul. Many of the Greeks could have readily accepted this, however Paul's purpose was not to please, but to proclaim the truth.

### Characteristics of Paul's Mission Message

#### 1. *Paul's message was contextual and conciliatory, but not compromising.*

The message of Paul was contextual in that it related to the cultural context of the society to which it was proclaimed, nevertheless it was non-political in its tone. Paul sought to woo and to win and not to alienate his audience. His message was contextual and conciliatory, but it was never compromising.<sup>4</sup>

There was no weak condoning of the offense of idolatry, no eager anxiety to make the best of a false religion, no hazy suggestion that every religion, if only it is rightly understood, is a worship of the true God and a teaching which leads to him. St. Paul gave his hearers a perfectly clear, definite understanding of what was required of them. To enjoy the hope set before them they must be prepared for a complete break with the past...there was no easy road to Christ's glory, no making the best of both worlds, no hope of salvation but in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

No compromise is ever to be found in any of the mission messages of the Apostle Paul. At Antioch he asserts: "Through (Jesus) everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39). Paul calls the practice of idolatry "worthless" in Lystra (Acts 14:15). Those in Lystra are urged to break away from it. He ends his message at the Areopagus in Athens with the one truth he knew the council would most definitely not accept, the resurrection. Paul never compromised his message for he knew that only the truth sets people free.

There are boundaries, then, beyond which one will not go if he is determined to be a faithful transmitter of the gospel. But this does mean that, within proper bounds, one won't seek to tailor his message to the audience. Charles Kraft uses the term "receptor orientated communicator." Such a one, he says, "is careful to bend every effort to meet his receptors where they are. He will choose methods of presentation that are appealing to them, he will use language that is maximally intelligible to them."<sup>6</sup>

#### 2. *Paul's message was persuasive, but not dependent on the power of human logic.*

Only the power of God the Holy Spirit working through the Word will convert anyone. Paul knew this fact. He also recognized that human beings do not have some kind of tiny spark of the divine inside of them, nor were they filled with infused grace which he simply had to fan into a flame. These unregenerate people were "dead in transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1).<sup>7</sup>

Conversion only comes through the power of the gospel (Romans 1:16,17). "Eloquence" or "superior wisdom" (I Corinthians 2:1) could not give the gospel any kind of help or boost nor could "wise and persuasive words" (I Corinthians 2:4). Only the "spirit's power" (I Corinthians 2:4) working through the gospel, not the persuasiveness of Paul would work faith in anyone's heart.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 46.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Allen, as cited in Valleskey's, *A Portrait of Paul with Application to Current Trends and Methods in Mission Work*, pg. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Valleskey, pg. 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 48.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 48-49.

Paul had supreme confidence in the power of the Word to effect conversion in the heart of the unregenerate sinner. This great confidence in the Word led him to preach and teach in the most unashamed, bold, persuasive, confident, and forceful manner. He knew that he was handling the power of God in the gospel. He expected results because God himself had promised such results (Isaiah 55:10,11).

Shouldn't we have the same confidence? We are working with the same power of God. With that knowledge our work should be positive, optimistic, and filled with confidence. There is no reason to rely on gimmicks or entertainment. Paul didn't. He had the Word. That was enough. Through the power of the Word God will accomplish his gracious purpose.

### **Pauline Missiology vs. The Church Growth Movement**

It has been said that the Church Growth Movement (CGM) is the most threatening danger to the theological integrity of the WELS and contemporary confessional Lutheranism. Some say it may eventually divide us. At this point it has already separated a number of brethren from our midst. No doubt more will be leaving. The purpose of this paper is not to theologically evaluate the CGM. Others have done this. Our purpose is to look at Pauline missiology and question: Where is the limit in methodology as we seek to win souls for Christ? Does the use of principles as delineated by leaders of the CGM compromise our theological integrity? Does the warning to "avoid them" (Romans 16:17) apply to all that has been produced by this Movement? Is the CGM so encumbered with the errors of Arminianism and Reformed Evangelicalism that it is impossible to take a drink from its fountain without being sickened by the pollution of its errors?

Sometimes it appears in our circles that theology and evangelistic zeal are placed in antithesis. We are reminded that evangelism, however, is proclaimed doctrine and doctrine is meant to be proclaimed. Without a solid Biblical grounding, evangelism will be shallow at best and heretical at worst.

Paul was concerned about false doctrine and teaching out on the mission fields. He knew that sound doctrine was bound with evangelism (Matthew 28:18-20). Paul instructed the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:18-35), "I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in the Lord Jesus." He also relates, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock."

Paul also urges young Timothy "to do the work of an evangelist". This directive was given in a context (Timothy 3:14-4:4) concerned with maintaining sound doctrine based on the scriptures which was at that time under attack by false teachers.

Advocates of CG have been known to put the cart before the horse. In other words they will determine their theological basis after their field observation is complete. "Most of church growth missiology's theological bases have been worked out after the methodological insights and mission principles were arrived at through field observation and experience."<sup>9</sup>

Evangelicals must learn to look beneath the exposed iceberg tip of missiology and recognize the theological foundations that sustain or stifle mission. Good missiology grows out of good, biblical theology; bad missiology grows out of bad, extra biblical theology. Sound and deep theology is essential for the true growth of the church."<sup>10</sup>

We certainly agree with this summation. Historian Mark A. Noll underscores the point.

<sup>9</sup> Roger S. Greenway, "Winnable People," in *Theological Perspectives On Church Growth*. Harvie M. Conn, Editor, Nathey, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1976, pg. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur P. Johnson, "Reply" (to a critique of his earlier essay "Church Growth and World Evangelism") in *Theology and Mission: Papers given at Trinity Consultation No. 1*, Edited by David J. Hesselgrave, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978, pg. 221.

The twentieth-century heirs of nineteenth century revivalism need very much to put evangelism back under the control of a full-orbed biblical theology rather than letting evangelistic practice dictate the shape of Christian doctrine.<sup>11</sup>

Kent R. Hunter, an LCMS proponent of CG states:

Correct doctrine is essential, but it is never to be a priority at the expense of mission. In fact, when the quest for proper doctrine, intensifies to the point of neglecting mission and ministry, then it is no longer doctrine!<sup>12</sup>

This could be properly understood. Yet sound doctrine is essential to the health of the church. The second sentence here appears to be redundant. Paul exhorts Timothy to “teach what is in accord with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). He is actually telling him to teach in accord with healthy or health giving doctrine. The word ὑγιαινούση means “sound.” It is the root of the word “to be well” or “to be healthy.” Error is the fatal disease in the church and is only conquered by the teachings of Scripture. Theology without practice is empty, and practice without theology is blind. Without the other each one is bankrupt.

“Theology is practical...the ability to apply God’s Law and Gospel to people, for the purpose of incorporating them through faith with Christ and His church and teaching them through Word and Sacrament to everlasting life.” Without this perspective “theological learning turns into a hobby which those so inclined may pursue but which is basically discouraged by the ‘reward systems’ of pragmatic, success orientated denominational machineries...for it is of course precisely Lutheran orthodoxy which cannot remain content as an academic ‘theory’ on a shelf, while ‘practice’ apes the latest sectarian success story.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Recent Analytical Works on The Church Growth Movement**

Robert J. Koester, in his *Law and Gospel: Foundation of Lutheran Ministry*, reveals the Evangelical and Reformed theology of the CGM. He rebuts the Movement point for point. He asserts that this Movement is of a different spirit. In opposition to its theology of glory, Koester reasserts the theology of the cross along with the centrality of the doctrine of justification and the use of the means of grace. He capably demonstrates that theology and methodology are tied together. He asserts that people led into the church through CG methodology centering in “felt needs” will be disappointed, even offended, by the Law and Gospel message of confessional Lutheranism.

When speaking on I Corinthians 9:19-23 (pg. 164 ff.) and “felt needs,” he makes a differentiation between “felt needs” and “point of contact.” “Felt needs” we are told is Reformed and “point of contact” is Lutheran (pg. 182). In a footnote on the same page, he states that this use of semantics does not really solve the issue. He is right. Nevertheless, he proceeds at length to make a defense of this terminology. We certainly reject the idea of cutting the heart out of the message by having the audience determine its content (the Reformed’s idea of “felt needs”). Yet “felt needs” may also lead people to us and give opportunity to address what they really do need. Might some of these people be offended by the message of the cross? Certainly—what does one expect from people who are spiritually blind and dead? The important thing is to lead them into the Word, to unleash the Holy Spirit’s power through the use of Law and Gospel.

<sup>11</sup> Mark A. Noll, Dec. 5, 1975, as cited by Curtis Peterson in “A Second and Third Look at Church Growth Principles,” Metro South Pastors’ Conference, Feb. 3, 1993, Mishicot, Wisconsin.

<sup>12</sup> Kent R. Hunter, *Foundations for Church Growth*, New Haven: Leader Publishing Co., 1983, pgs. 152-153.

<sup>13</sup> Kurt Marquart, “Doctor Robert David Preus: An Appreciation” in *A Lively Legacy*, edited by Kurt Marquart, John Stephenson, Bjarne Teigen, Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1985, pg. IX-XII.



Dr. William Kessel of Bethany Seminary in Mankato asserts that we should not overreact against CG thinking. He argues that pastors who think their calling is to exclusively preach to those who attend church, waiting for the unchurched person to take the initiative to attend his church “may secretly be harboring a synergistic view of conversion.” “A ‘here we are, come and get it if you like’ spirit invites a pastoral and congregational lethargy and a subtle theological synergism.”<sup>14</sup>

This view must always be balanced against pragmatism at the expense of theology: truth taking second place to growth. This would lead to another church growth flaw; a theology of glory which often equates growth with God’s blessings and lack of growth or decline with unfaithfulness. Noah was a faithful “preacher of righteousness” for 120 years. He had only his family to list in the annual statistics. A pastor validates and legitimizes his ministry not by pointing to all his successes, but also by referring to his weaknesses and lack of power, his sufferings for the sake of the gospel. His legitimacy is always to be found in his preaching of the Word of the cross and resurrection.

Professor David Valleskey in, “The Church Growth Movement: An Evaluation” concludes that there are four options when it comes to the CGM. The first three he rejects: (1) Accept uncritically everything that the CGM offers and become a part of the Movement; (2) Reject the CGM and everything about it; (3) Identify oneself with the CGM, but attempt to be a Lutheran voice in the Movement, e.g., Kent Hunter of the LCMS.

The fourth option he calls “spoiling the Egyptians.” This is terminology borrowed from Laurence Crabb, a Christian counselor who advocates selective use of secular counseling resources. This idea is based on Israel’s actions when they left Egypt and took from the Egyptians whatever would help them on their journey (Exodus 12:36). He asserts:

We are convinced that this is also the best way to approach the CGM. The parallel is not an exact one, of course, since CGM principles do not spring from a secular source. Though there are obvious advantages to this, there is one disadvantage. It may be easier to discern the error of some secular psychological principles, since they are blatantly anti-Christian, than to discern the error of a certain CGM principle which may be couched in language more harmonious to our ears.<sup>15</sup>

The LCMS has written assorted materials in the area of the CGM. However, we should be careful in uncritically adopting some of their argumentation. The doctrine of church and ministry in the LCMS

does not allow the flexibility which should be the hallmark of our practice since we understand that God has given us the ministry of word and sacrament, but has not determined its form. Frequently, Missourian critiques attack CG principles because they fear it subverts a certain form of the church and the office of the pastoral ministry.<sup>16</sup>

Professor Kurt Marquart’s recent “*Church Growth*” vs. *Mission Paradigm: A Lutheran Assessment* is a profound rebuttal to the Movement. He concludes:

Sticking our heads in the sand will not make the crisis go away. Quite the contrary. Failure to spot and resist hostile takeover spells the surrender of our confession by default: “Church growth is a process which, like yeast in dough, slowly but surely revolutionizes and reforms every segment of the church” (Hunter, 1983:29). The real secret of true and God-pleasing growth is plain evangelical, biblical, confessional integrity. Principle, therefore, not pragmatism, must settle the present free-for-all of church and mission paradigms. The noblest aim and prayer of

<sup>14</sup> William Kessel as quoted by Peterson in “A Second and Third Look at Church Growth Principles,” pg. 16.

<sup>15</sup> David Valleskey, “The Church Growth Movement,” in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 2, Spring 1991, pg. 115.

<sup>16</sup> Peterson in “A Second and Third Look at Church Growth Principles,” pg. 9.

theological work is that God's "Word, as becomes it, may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people."<sup>17</sup>

Professor Marquart in a most scholarly fashion states the cause of confessional Lutheranism vs. the CGM yet paints the issue black and white. He leaves no middle ground. The gospel does not change nor dare it be compromised yet can we devoid ourselves of all pragmatism in this matter and still hope to reach out to this generation? If we are afraid to attempt anything for Christ, lest we be labeled CG enthusiasts or pietists, are we serving Christ or might we be serving Satan? Was Paul afraid to use any and every situation to witness for his Savior?

Certainly not to be excluded here is David Luecke's *Evangelical Style and Lutheran Substance* (Concordia Publishing House, 1988). This book dare not be ignored. It can be dangerous as he delves into areas untrod by others.

Luecke maintains that Lutherans must compete to get more members in the American religious "free market" environment. He proposes that Lutherans employ an "evangelical style" and not sacrifice "Lutheran substance," i.e., theology. The challenge is "learning new subtleties of communicating the gospel to American cultural subgroups that are becoming more diverse" (pg. 57). Interestingly, Luecke associates liturgical renewal with a decline in membership in Lutheran churches (pg. 86).

As a whole Luecke makes this assessment of the Lutherans in America:

The new Lutherans today seem headed in the direction of further assimilation into the theological orientation and the agenda and style of mainline Protestant churches. They tend to look to liturgical practices and social action to set the style for their modernized piety. Neither of these two emphases however, appear very well related to infectious church growth at this stage of religious life in America. (pg. 91)

Luecke's idea is that Lutheran churches need to be simple and democratic. Whatever means to attract others into the church should be used. For all his talk of "Lutheran substance" there is not too much that is Lutheran which is left. His strange emphasis on "new sacraments" (pg. 85) and lack of stress on justification seem more accommodating to reformed revivalism than traditional Lutheranism.

Nevertheless, he does raise the issue of what are we doing or not doing in our quest as Lutherans to be "all things to all men." It is sad that the Lutheran Church has not been more creative in developing its ministry. This is particularly tragic for us in the WELS, with our theoretical freedom from legalism expressed in our doctrine of church and ministry which insists that God has not mandated the form of either the church or its ministry. Too often, if one is to look for true creativity in Protestantism, one must look at the Evangelicals.<sup>18</sup>

As we lash out against the CGM, do we fail to penetrate the Scriptures and ascertain a strategy of missions and evangelism squarely rooted in Scripture? God will not allow this world to go on without witness to Him. Luther's gospel as a traveling rainstorm strikes a warning here. Others do not appear to be adapting what we do. Typically it is the other way around. The Lord wants all to be saved. Thus numbers do have some relevance. God is never pleased with a "glorification of littleness." Or as it has been stated, "A church without a viable mission program is not a living body. It is a corpse."<sup>19</sup>

### **Multiculturalism and Ethnocentrism**

It would be easier to avoid the issue of multiculturalism yet it appears connected to the text at hand. Multiculturalism is tied to one of the most controversial principles of the CGM, namely, the homogeneous unit

<sup>17</sup> Kurt Marquart, "Church Growth" vs. *Mission Paradigm: A Lutheran Assessment*, A Luther Academy Monograph Published by Our Savior Lutheran Church, Houston, TX, 1994, pg. 143.

<sup>18</sup> Peterson, pg. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ernst H. Wendland, "Church Growth Theology," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume 78, Number 2, April 1981, pg. 118.

principle. It seems that this principle is at times misunderstood or exaggerated. The principle is especially developed in C. Peter Wagner's *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979). Here Wagner makes a defense of the homogeneous unit principle. His typical relativism is present but the book is actually one of Wagner's best-researched and scholarly books.

This principle was developed in world mission fields as people came to recognize that missions best flourish in single "people groups." We have, for example, missions in Hong Kong, Japan and Africa, but this is in some respects an over-simplification. Which identifiable people group are we reaching or attempting to reach in a specific place? CG adherents have been accused of being racist and preaching a principle which violates the catholicity of the church. Actually this principle is designed to do the opposite—to identify various people groups and strategize how to reach them. We may do this by knowingly or unknowingly placing churches in white, suburban, middle-class America.

To talk about multiculturalism one has first to define the term. I believe in our circles especially from, *Mission and Ministry Across Cultures in Urban North America*, prepared by the Multicultural Mission Committee of the Board for Home Missions, that the definition would be something akin to learning about other cultures and races; mastering their languages; learning to value differences as well as similarities among people; and preparing to live in an increasingly diverse society without prejudice and bigotry.

This definition certainly proves no problem to us in our attempts to reach out to others with the gospel. But a problem does arise if the definition is broadened to state that multiculturalism will never criticize any values or practices of other cultures, even the immoral practices of cultures. We should also add that if cultural values were relative, one would think that Western culture would be presented in a light equal to others. Yet multiculturalists commonly denounce the Western cultural influences of American society. Along with its dislike for the "Eurocentric" American culture, multiculturalism has no love for Christianity.

One teacher's manual, the *Anti-Bias Curriculum* (1989), tells teachers to instruct pupils in holidays other than Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, for example—to expose Christian children to other important December traditions and to support the children who do not celebrate Christmas.<sup>20</sup>

This Anti-Bias Curriculum also presents witches positively. It encourages grade-school teachers to tell their children that witches are not "bad," but women "who really helped people."<sup>21</sup>

Ethnocentrism also pertains here. In *Mission and Ministry Across Cultures in Urban North America*, we read:

No individual human and no human culture may ever sit in judgment upon scripture's truth, the inspired and inerrant Word of God. It is because we WELS Christians are so committed to the Word of God that we strive to communicate it in such a way that it will be clearly and correctly understood by all people from every culture. (pg. 2)

This is true and the text goes on to define ethnocentrism as:

the tendency humans have to levy a judgment upon another culture using their own culture as the standard of excellence. The word is new but the problem isn't. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" is an ancient example of the even more ancient problem of judging others on the basis of accent, occupation, skin color and other cultural factors. Especially for the person born and raised in a one-culture context, the conviction that "my culture is the best culture" comes naturally. (pg. 4)

<sup>20</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, "Multiculturalism: A New Threat," *The Lutheran Witness*, December 1994, pg. 24.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet if this is where the definition of ethnocentrism ends for us then we should at least be aware that in the eyes of most this is but a superficial definition and an impossibility.

There is no such thing as “objective” theology—nor is there any such thing as an “objective reading” of a biblical text...One of the major contributions of liberation movements around the world has been their criticism of the assumption on the part of many white, First-World Christians that their experience is universal...Many of us who are white, male, First-World Christians have assumed universal validity for our theology, for our way of reading the Bible, that only reflects our limited range of experience and concern...My point is simply that many, though by no means all, of them, as well as a number of women who have received their theological training exclusively from them, do operate under the assumption that their theological position is objective, unbiased, and therefore universally valid...Isn't the assumption often that our position is normative, objective, and untainted by biases, while these other points of view are highly biased, from a particular perspective, and in need of correction by reference to our objective norm? The point, however, is that all theology is perspectival—from a particular perspective. What has become apparent is that there is no such thing as objective, impartial knowers. There are only those who are aware of the context of their deeply held beliefs and the advantages and limitations of their belief systems, and those who are not...There is no such thing as a universally valid theology, or a universally valid reading of the Bible. There are rather diverse perspectives on the Gospel arising out of different social, political, and cultural realities...How important it is to honor their insights as well as our own, because the Bible cannot be contained within any one perspective.<sup>22</sup>

In this age of relativism, others reject the idea such as ours that the Scriptures contain objective or universal truth. Ours is but another perspective on the Gospel in their reasoning. The use of terms such as multiculturalism and ethnocentrism as defined by us without the broader meaning of the terms being brought into discussion may be leading us down dangerous paths from which there is no easy escape.

Today we are facing new threats to gospel outreach. The great commission of Jesus, namely, to take his good news to all nations (cultures) and to make disciples is considered politically incorrect. Christianity's claim to truth is made to be just as relative as the religion of any other culture. It is an offense to multiculturalism to teach other cultures the message of Jesus, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me” (John 14:6).

As stated earlier the danger is in the definition of multiculturalism. Let us be cautious. Rudolf Bultmann “demythologized” the New Testament in an attempt to make God's Word palatable to his modern generation. Multiculturalism appears to give “demythologizing a practical twist.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Where is the Limit? Liberalism vs. Legalism**

It has been said that there is a fine line between liberalism and legalism. Liberalism asserts that all is relative and subject to change. No distinction is made between doctrine and practice. However God has delivered his inherent Word (Titus 2:1) to the church “once for all” (Jude 3).

Opposed to liberalism is legalism, which equates any change with liberalism. Thus all change is resisted. Traditional legalism stands condemned by our Savior, “They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Matthew 15:9).

Both the restless and sometimes rebellious lust for change and also resistance to threatening changes may spring from a sinful heart rather than from a loving God. Scriptural teachings are never matters of Christian

<sup>22</sup> Frances Taylor Gench, “The Bible From the Underside: Contributions of ‘Third World’ Christians to the Believing Community,” *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin*, Fall 1994, pgs. 16-17.

<sup>23</sup> David P. Scaer, in Letters to the Editor, *The Lutheran Witness*, February 1995, pg. 20.

liberty or open questions. However in matters of adiaphora it is different. We dare not bind consciences on matters where Scripture is silent no matter how sacred our traditions or heritage. By setting aside God's will by our traditions (Matthew 15:6), we violate the doctrine of Christian liberty (Romans 14,15 and I Corinthians 8-10).

"I have become all things to all men so that *by all possible means* I might save some." Our goal is to win all men. Any method, technique or approach consistent with God's Word may be used if it serves to win the lost or strengthen the existing flock. The message and the mission of God are much more important than our heritage, traditions, and prejudices.

In his *Theses On Parish Renewal* Paul Kelm states:

1. No effective, God pleasing ministry can occur without faithfulness to the Word of God and clear focus on Jesus Christ.
  - a. Lutheran congregations dare not borrow methods of ministry that substitute sociological pragmatism for Biblical truth and efficacy. Approaches to ministry inherently based on a false theology have no place in a confessional Lutheran church.<sup>24</sup>

However, in these same *Theses* Kelm states:

Lutheran congregations dare not canonize customs and traditions, however useful and meaningful they have been...Ministry structures and styles developed in other churches can be judiciously evaluated and, where appropriate, adopted.<sup>25</sup>

What is proper and what is not? Can CGM methodologies be presented as theologically neutral? In terms of Lutheran tradition we are reminded that "adiaphora are not always adiaphora."<sup>26</sup> Luther once remarked that when reason becomes a means to the Kingdom of God, it becomes "the devil's whore." In other words if we use the correct sociological methods and the church appears to grow and then declare that this is the will of God, we have denied the means of grace their place in Christ's Kingdom. The "devil's whore" is on the loose.

Paul makes clear that love will dictate those things which will be changed as Christ's mission is carried out. These changes will not be an offense to the believer or give the impression that we agree with legalists or false teachers (I Corinthians 8,9; Galatians 2; FC Art. X). Methodologies may vary as long as they are not commanded by God and as long as there is agreement with Scripture.

### **The Pauline Ethic and the WELS Today**

J.P. Koehler asserts in *Gesetzliche Wesen* that a period of creativity, idealism and vitality is replaced by gradual ossification. It may begin with a person or group sitting on its laurels and depending on its traditions. These traditions become a straitjacket and the laurel lead into a rut, and eventually that which was peaking in the full bloom of life becomes a hollow shell.

Have we entered the period of ossification in the WELS and more specifically our Metro-North Conference? The pews in many of our congregations are occupied by "senior citizens" who recall the glory days of their congregation and cannot understand why "young people" don't attend or won't get involved. Many of our local congregations are slipping and eroding. Our Synod is plateaued and our conference has been losing a substantial number of members for many years. Many are the excuses that are heard—neighborhoods changing, families falling apart, the faithful older members are dying, younger people are not committed to the church as in past generations.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Kelm, *Parish Renewal: Theses and Implications*, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Carter Lindberg, in "Pietism and the Church Growth Movement in a Confessional Lutheran Perspective," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, pg. 140.

Maybe it is the time to question what we are doing or not doing as a church, a conference, a synod. Companies, large and small, are today ruining themselves because they have lost their real purpose. They somewhere forgot their most important purpose was to produce the very best product (or give the best service). Now the bottom line is king. Research and development, creativity, innovativeness were neglected from the management side, just as skilled craftsmanship was ignored from labor's point of view. All that remained of importance were the contracted benefits for labor and the accountant's manipulations for management. The result is that many a business destroyed itself from both ends, and then people cry about our trade deficits and blame the Japanese, assorted Asians, Mexicans and, of course, the Germans.

Paul had a definite missiological strategy. For example, he went to the great cities of his day. Are we? Most of our city churches are in a survival mode or going down for the third time. Paul went to the people where they were at—both Jew and Gentile. He adapted to different situations. He gathered a congregation at a river bank (Acts 16:3), a market place (Acts 17:17), a public forum (Acts 17:22; 18:28). Much of his work was done in homes (Acts 16:40; 18:8; 20:20; 28:30). In these small groups he worked with the converted and unconverted. At Ephesus Paul taught about Christianity in a lecture hall (Acts 19:9-10). He had prison ministries at Philippi and Rome. He turned situations into witness opportunities (e.g. his trial before Felix and Agrippa [Acts 24:22,25 ff.] or the hardships on his prison journey [Acts 27:21-26; ch. 28]). Paul's whole life was dedicated to winning people for Christ? Is that our life's dedication or is it to keep a building or a tradition afloat? Are we missing opportunities for outreach because we bind ourselves to traditional places and approaches? Maybe it is the time to ask: What are we doing? What are we not doing? Maybe as good Lutherans, we might at least set up a committee to consider our methodology in this apostate generation.

Through the centuries "we have domesticated and institutionalized the ministry."<sup>27</sup> We have to look past much accumulation of acculturated expectations to get back to Paul's remarkable ministry. As Paul planted churches and nurtured new Christians, he followed a pattern that has some dissimilarities to our own methodology. He gathered people around the Word, trained elders and then left the new congregation. The church remained in its culture and had to learn to think for itself in many matters. Paul does not leave them with a mission handbook for new converts.

Of course, Paul did not "shun to declare...all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). His constant prayer for his flock was that they "might be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19), and that they should "grow up into him in all things which is the head, even Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). Paul was a bold man. His boldness was born of the conviction of the power of God at work in his ministry.

"The beginning of the end of any religious group occurs when it allows itself to become another of the many denominations in America. To become a denomination is to lose one's distinctiveness."<sup>28</sup>

The story of American Protestantism is filled with religious groups' loss of identity in the face of American culture. Some identifying traits are bound to be lost. For instance, our Synod's use of the German language. The crucial question however is, what identifying marks must be maintained? David Gustafson in *Lutherans in Crisis* warns:

One thing is certain: when a group's origins are forgotten, its ritual abandoned, and its theological foundations ignored, all that is left is the name...Every religious community that cares about its identity has to struggle to preserve that identity. This means that its identifying marks must retain their integrity and importance for the life of the community...In the ongoing struggle to maintain a group's identity, there are always those who advocate a compromise of some sort—often ironically—in the name of preservation of the community.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan F. Grothe, *Reclaiming Patterns of Pastoral Ministry: Jesus and Paul*, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo., 1988, pg. 9.

<sup>28</sup> David A. Gustafson, *Lutherans in Crisis*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1993, pg. 10.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 165.

How much accommodation can we withstand and still remain as confessional Lutherans? What does it mean to be a WELS Lutheran in 20th century America? What about our future? How should we respond to the issues of Americanization and pragmatism approaching and attacking our church?

We live in a complex world filled with social, ethical, and moral issues. Some of these issues are new to our generation. Each issue is complex; none has easy answers. The magnitude of these issues may tempt us to ignore or not thoroughly ponder the theological dimensions because of the practical concerns. How will we react? How will we respond? Might we lose our identity in the process?

“All things to all men.” Where is the limit? St. Paul’s whole life was dedicated to winning people to Christ through the power of the Gospel. He would never compromise the message of “Christ and him crucified,” yet his methodology adapted to the circumstances at hand. This debate for us will and must go on. The question in methodology must not only be “Does this work?,” but “Is this faithful?” We remember that our calling is not to teach something new, but, as Paul says, “that which he also had received.” The doctrine is not ours, nor is the church; they belong to Christ. Our mandate is to take his gospel to all nations. This command is not optional. As we continue the debate let’s not sell our birthright. Some claim that we already have. May the Lord give us direction and guidance as we seek to reach out to this generation and build the Lutheran church founded on Christ through the pure preaching of the Word and right use of the sacraments.