

All Things to All People

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

One of the things that any observer of the church has to note during the past century, but especially during the past thirty years, is the way in which our methods of ministry have changed, the way in which the job of the pastor has changed, the way in which we look at music, missions, property.

There have been many periods of what we might call innovation throughout the church's history. Back in the 1500's Martin Luther realized that people were kind of sick of the music they had to sing in church.

So one of his innovations was to take popular songs that were sung in taverns and put Christian lyrics to them. Of course he was widely criticized for this. But now in 2012 that tactic has proven to be quite successful for churches that are still trying to be relevant in the modern world.

When radio and TV were invented, savvy church leaders realized that they could use those mediums to reach a larger audience than the one that might show up at church on a Sunday morning. So they began broadcasting church services on radio and TV.

In the time since I was a youngster in the church, I've noticed an ever accelerating process of seeing what kinds of innovations appear in the world, and church leaders trying to figure out how to turn those innovations into tools for ministry. I'll say a little more about that in just a moment.

The passage we're looking at today reminds me of just such a moment in time. This passage is a section of a letter written by one of Jesus' followers named Paul. Paul was not one of the original twelve disciples, nor was he part of their larger group that continued Jesus' ministry after Jesus died.

In fact, Paul used to try to put those folks in jail because he thought they were teaching something contrary to what God wanted. In a sense, he was right about that. The problem is that God had chosen to do something entirely different from the past, and Paul hadn't figured that out.

At some point in his pursuit of these folks Paul says that the resurrected Jesus appeared to him personally. From that experience he received teaching, and he received a calling to go all over the world as he knew it to teach people about what God did through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul did not coordinate with Jesus' other followers. He went and did his own thing. He travelled to places like Turkey and Greece and Yugoslavia and started churches in city after city.

He would come into town, often find the local Jewish synagogue, and tell those people that while God had done things the way they knew in the past, now God was doing things in a new way through Jesus.

Some people thought he was crazy. Other people found him quite convincing. Paul was able to perform some kind of miracles as proof that what he was saying really was from God. When he got a group of converts together, he organized them into a church and instructed them on how a church should operate.

When he was done, he would go on to some other place and start another church. But he would get reports from the churches after he left. And other times he would make a visit to check up on them.

After Paul started the church in the city of Corinth Greece and had left to start another church, he received a report that really made him upset. Apparently Jesus' original followers, who were based all the way down in Jerusalem, had gotten wind of what Paul was doing.

He was teaching people to follow Jesus, but it wasn't the way they taught people to follow Jesus. So Jesus' original followers, who were then called apostles, sent representatives to some of the churches that Paul started.

These representatives told the people in the churches that Paul was misguided. They said he had some of the teachings wrong. The apostles taught that if you wanted to follow Jesus, you had to basically become a Jew and follow all of the Jewish rituals.

They said Paul lacked knowledge. They said he was just in it for the money. And in the process they eventually turned the church in Corinth against Paul. In fact, the same kind of thing happened in other churches that Paul started.

This letter is Paul's response to the Corinthians who were kind of caught in the middle. Not only did you have this tug of war between Paul and the apostles, but you also had the influence of Greek religion that many people had grown up with. How do you square Christianity with that?

Paul tries to defend himself in this letter. And one thing I want to focus on today is the way he responds to the accusation that he didn't teach those Corinthian Christians to become like Jews.

Despite what the apostles said, Paul said that Jesus was kind of an innovation. In the past people were saved by following all the laws that God gave to Moses. But Paul says that Jesus brought an end to all of that.

Paul taught that the Christian faith was not to be patterned after Judaism. Instead, it was adaptable to any culture because those who believe in Jesus are guided by God's spirit to do what is right in any given situation.

That was a huge change. They accused Paul of being a chameleon, of just trying to blend in wherever he was. Paul said that he was right to do that because if he did so, people would be more likely to listen to what he had to tell them about Jesus.

In the end, Paul kind of won out. Churches that forced people to become Jews in order to follow Jesus eventually gave way to churches like the ones Paul had tried to start. And the process of doing ministry in a way that's relevant to the people in any given place has been evolving ever since.

But what amazes me is just how much faster things are changing than they used to. The result is that the church can no longer say, as they did when I was younger, "Hey, this is the way we do things. Take it or leave it." Believe me, these days people will leave it.

And while that sounds very challenging, the good news is that some of these innovations make us a lot more effective at doing ministry. When I was young we would content ourselves with a letter from a missionary.

These days we can show video of the places and the people where they do their work. And when everything's working right, we can literally see and talk to them in real time even when they're on the other side of the planet. Talk about making mission real to people!

Let me give you some other examples of innovation, mostly related to the influence of social networking. Back in the day, and this is how lots of people still do it today, if you had a relative in the hospital, you would call your minister and let him or her know. If there was no answer you would leave a message on voicemail or the answering machine.

Not anymore, apparently. Two weeks ago, on Sunday I did all of the things I that I do on a Sunday morning. And after church Michelle and I went out for some lunch. When we were finished, Michelle went up to get one more refill on her drink.

So I decided to check up and see what was going on with my friends. I pulled out my cell phone, got on Facebook and read what my friends had posted. Since I last checked. Millions of people do this every day.

Sure enough Obed, the bass player for the Hispanic praise band posted a picture of his poor mother in a hospital gown, laying on a gurney in the ER. In Spanish he wrote that his mom was sick and that he was sorry, and that he hoped she would feel better soon.

So I called him up, asked him where they were, and headed down to the hospital to see her. Now I just want you to imagine how some of us would react to one of our kids putting a picture of us in a hospital gown on the internet for all his friends to see.

Many of us would be furious. But here's the thing, here's Obed's thought process: Instead of making ten calls to friends and relatives, all of whom have Facebook, instead of even sending text messages to all these folks. He posts one picture to Facebook and everyone knows Lupe's in the hospital.

Now you can say that he's right or wrong to do that. My point is that this is the way my parishioners communicate with me today, like it or not. And had I not checked Facebook when I did, I wouldn't have even known. I would have never made it to the hospital before she was discharged.

Let me give you another example. Back in the day, when someone wanted to find a church to attend, they might look in a phone book, maybe drive around town, check out a couple of different churches. Well, not anymore.

Last week, at some point during the week, I was in my office and I checked Facebook. I hope by now that the reasons why I check Facebook at work should be obvious. That day I got what they call a "friend request" from someone I didn't know.

A friend request usually comes from someone you know who finds your Facebook page while they're looking around. They're basically asking if they can know what you're doing, see the pictures you post, and see what your interests are.

It's usually only a good idea to "friend" someone you know and can trust with your information. Well, this request came from someone I didn't know, a young man from Peru who was living in Waukesha.

What I didn't know at the time was that this young man grew up in a Baptist church in Peru, and was now here working at an internship at Quad Graphics. So when he wanted to start looking for a Baptist church to attend in Waukesha, where did he go? To Facebook.

And sure enough, when he started looking, I came up on his computer screen. Our church's Facebook page came up on his screen. And Facebook directed him to our web page where he was able to read all about us and find out that we have our own Hispanic ministry.

I didn't know any of this. But I had a sneaking suspicion that this might be the case. So I accepted his friend request, let him see all of my information, let him see all the pictures I've posted from church events.

He got to read about how our Hispanic Praise band had just recorded four songs for a TV show that will be broadcast in early March. He got to see pictures of our Burmese choir singing. He got to see pictures of us serving Loaves and Fishes at Hope Center. He got to read about Catered Wednesday.

So last Sunday, when he walked through the door and came to worship, it was because we've used social networking to try to be all things to all people, just like Paul.

One last example. Back in the day, when you wanted to increase attendance in your Sunday School, you would try to get the kids to invite their friends. Of course, if their friends wanted to know what went on during Sunday School, our kids might show a craft that they made. They might tell them about singing songs and memorizing Bible verses.

Suffice it to say, it's been nearly impossible to get kids to come to Sunday School. We went from needing to add an entire Sunday School wing onto our building in 1959 to Sunday School being nearly non-existent ten years ago.

So what do you do now in order to get kids to invite their friends? Keep begging them to make invitation after invitation? Not anymore.

That same week (must have been a good week!) Michelle told me that the youth Sunday School class wanted a Facebook page for the class. So I worked with Terry after class last Sunday to set up the page.

She had dozens of pictures that she had taken of the students hamming it up in class. There were pictures of Carol teaching them the books of the Bible. There were pictures of them dressed in costumes, doing activities and having discussions.

I got the parents' permission and uploaded most of those onto Facebook. I also told Terry that at the end of each class she should get on to Facebook and have the kids tell her what to post. I said they should post what they did in class and what they learned that week.

This just happened to coincide with Emma getting on to Facebook for the first time. Every last friend of hers was already on Facebook. Now it takes physical force to get her off of Facebook.

But as I was finishing the setup, it dawned on me just how this all really works. I hadn't really realized it until I set the page up for the class. When the students interact with all their friends, their friends can see that Emma and Brooqlenn and the rest of them are in the class.

The more they interact and chat and make more friends on Facebook, the more people see that these kids are in the class. The number of eyes looking at our Facebook page increases exponentially. It's like free advertising. I never realized that until last Sunday.

Now I know this sounds like a big long commercial for Facebook, and I don't intend it to be. My point is that the way we connect with people both within and outside the of the church is in the process of changing in a radical, powerful new way.

In order to be relevant to people and have the chance to share our faith with them, we need to be able and willing to be what they need us to be, or least to connect in the way that they need us to connect.

I'm not talking about changing our message. But I am talking about changing our approach. Paul discovered that God had made an innovation in the way God connected to the world. Today the church is still grappling with new innovations in the way people connect.

Someday in the future it won't be Facebook. Some new innovation will take its place. My prayer is that the church will be smart enough to use those tools to connect people to Jesus in yet another, more powerful way.