

"Life is Filled with Change, Therefore . . ."

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I Corinthians 9:19-23

This passage is from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. He gives us here a glimpse of his methodology for spreading the Gospel. This passage has been very influential in recent years. A number of churches have taken this passage very seriously and have benefitted from doing so. Let's take a look.

I Corinthians 9:19-23

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

Life is Filled with Change, Therefore"

Life is filled with change. The old Greek Philosophers recognized this long ago. Hereclitus of Ephesus taught that change is the only constant in life. His most famous quote is this: *You can never step in the same river twice*. Because by the time you stick your foot back into the river, it's a different river. The water you first stepped into is already down stream. Life is filled with change. And most of do not like a whole lot of change.

I live with a female who hates change. Her name is Maddie. She's 3. And if we move some furniture around she immediately puts it back. "No,

Daddy. It belongs over here!" Life is much better when it's predictable.

I'll bet you've heard the joke that goes like this:

*How many Congregationalists does it take to change a light bulb?
And the answer is: What's the matter with that light bulb!! My Grandfather
donated that light bulb. Don't you go changing it!*

Churches and change. They go together like oil and water. It's because church is by nature a conservative institution. We are here to preserve a tradition - a way of looking at the world, a way of thinking about God - that is 4000 years old. - all the way back to Abraham & Sarah. It's our job to honor that tradition by protecting it and passing it on unblemished, unchanged. And yet Life is filled with change.

There's been a lot of change in the world in our lifetimes and much of it has made the church's job harder. When I was growing up most stores weren't open on Sunday, and there were never sporting events on a Sunday. The church had no competition, except for the Sunday paper. Now-a-days families are being squeezed and stretched every single day of the week.

My previous church was next door to the town hall. The town hall actually sat on church land. And yet, one day the town officials in all their wisdom gave permission for a road race to occur on Sunday morning down the main street of the town, blocking the traffic for people to get to church - and there were 3 churches on that main street! The town hall officials didn't think about church. Sadly they're in the majority. Times have changed. Christendom is over. - the culture no longer helps us. It no longer reinforces our faith and our values.

Years ago Mary Tyler Moore and Dick Van Dyke slept in separate beds on the Dick Van Dyke TV show, even though they were married. In the movies couples could not be shown lying down in bed. They always had to have at least one foot on the floor. Safe to say, times have changed. Christendom is over. And we're probably not going back any time soon.

Life is filled with change, therefore we have to learn to grow and adapt, keeping what is essential in our tradition - keeping the Gospel Truth - and yet changing what can be changed to be more relevant to a culture that is largely indifferent to Christianity.

Leo Tolstoy once wrote: *"Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself."*

How about this? - *"Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing the methodology of their church."* - What's wrong with that light bulb?

I heard an interesting report on the radio this week. A number of years ago some professors at MIT came up with something called "email." Since it involved mail they decided they'd better talk to the U.S. Postal Service about it. They offered the technology to the postal service. They offered to give it to them. But the people they met with were not exactly visionaries. The only use they ever had for computers was keeping track of packages and payroll. So they told the professors they weren't interested in this thing called email. Instead they put their money into sponsoring Lance Armstrong! And today the post office is nearly bankrupt.

Another example is the Eastman-Kodak company. They actually invented the digital camera. They held the patent until last year. But they never made a dime off of it because they couldn't adapt what they were doing into the digital age. And now Rochester NY has a lot of empty Kodak buildings. Life is filled with change, therefore we'd better learn to adapt or we're in trouble.

In business it's adapt or die. We expect it to be different in the church. But in a culture that has changed, it's not. We have to learn to adapt.

St. Paul learned to adapt. The great theologian of the early church was also the most strategic church planter in the history of Christianity, and he did it by learning to adapt. And when you consider that Paul used to be a Pharisee, that's a remarkable thing. Pharisees had it all figured out. They took the laws of the Old Testament and added another 600 of their own. So they never had to guess how to behave in any occasion, because they had a rule for everything.

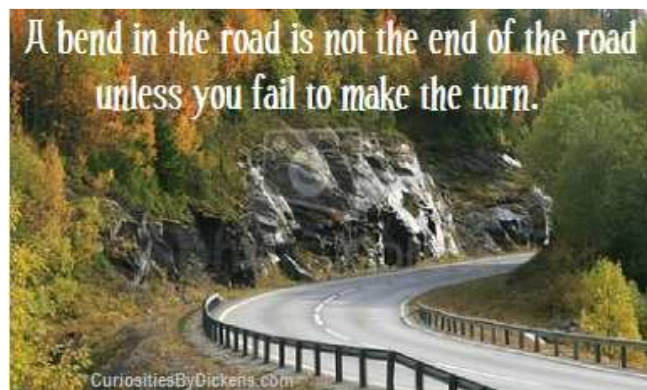
- how far you could walk on the sabbath
- how much meal preparation you could do on the sabbath.
- how to give a tithe of everything you harvested, including the spices from your herb garden.

Every aspect of life was regulated. But then Paul met Christ. God turned his world upside-down. He described it as being set free! But then he tells us an interesting thing.

He says, *"To the Jew I become a Jew. To those under the law of Moses, I live under the law of Moses. To those not under the law, I do not live under the law when I'm with them. I become all things to all people in order to win them to Christ."*

"I become all things to all people in order to win them to Christ."

In other words he adapts. He doesn't change the message. He doesn't change the Good News of Christ. Instead he changes his methods, his approach. "When I'm with Jews that keep the laws, I keep the laws. When I'm with Gentiles who don't keep the Jewish laws, I don't either." I adapt in order to win them to Christ. I adapt so they can hear the message.



Many churches are failing to make the turn. In the last 40 years most mainline denominations have declined 40%. Methodist have declined 50%. Our denomination has also declined 50%. Perhaps we need to do things a little differently?

Think of it this way . . . Imagine that all of us collectively purchased a restaurant. This restaurant had not had a thriving business for a number of years. Folks had started to say it was the location. You know how many towns have a spot that no matter what business they put in there, it just doesn't do well. Folks were thinking that about this restaurant. So we all go in to buy it. Now, suppose we decide to keep the same menu, and the same help and the same staff, and we decide it's best

not to change the decor, the landscaping or the sign out front. What can we expect our business to do? It will undoubtedly remain the same as it was before.

I use this analogy because **it's time to tinker**. It's time to make some changes. I have made very few in 3 years. But it's time. Please share your feedback with me regarding the changes we make. But don't get on my case for making a few, because it's time. Your Diaconate agrees.

And remember this - you're not a customer. If you're a member of this church, you're a shareholder. So even if you don't like the small changes I make, it's your church.

If you have a customer mentality you say, "This church isn't meeting my needs. I'll take my business elsewhere." But if you're "all in," you'll say to yourself, "I'm a co-owner here. I'm a shareholder. We need to do what's best for organization. We need to think about the folks out there, and not just the ones in here."

There's a church north of Chicago that took this seriously. Before they actually started the church they conducted a large survey in their area. They asked folks what turned them off about church, and what they thought they'd enjoy in a church. And then they designed their entire church, but especially the worship service around the answers they got. You see the church, like any business, has to think as much about who is not inside their walls and why, as we do about each other.

Life is filled with changed, therefore we need to grow and adapt.

And with God's help, we will.

Amen.