

Reflection on 1 Corinthians 9:16-23 and Mark 1:29-39

Hearing how divided God's church in Corinth has become, Paul the Apostle reminds them of their call as God's people called to proclaim the Good News. Paul warns them that division within the church can hinder the very reason why they have been called. The church in Corinth was divided between those who qualified to belong and those who didn't; Paul was concerned about why Christ's church, freely saved, should draw a boundary to include and exclude whilst Christ whom they followed never did that.

He reminds them, *"If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe betide me if I do not."* (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Admonishing them that performing the task we have been called is no basis for boasting, no reason to boast when a person proclaims the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ calls us, and we are privileged to join in ministry with Christ; therefore, just as Christ did for us, we, too, are responsible for leading all to be part of this family. Paul encouraged them not to allow the division to overshadow what Christ had called them for. Paul told the church in Corinth, *"For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission."* 1Cor. 9:17).

Paul's words remind the church that it is not what they "will" but what Christ has entrusted them to do. Paul, here, reformulates Jesus's statement to God: *"Nevertheless, not my will your will be done."* As we can see from the following verses,

"Abba, Father," he said, *"everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."* Mark 14:36

"He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." Matt. 26:42

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." Luke 22:42

Jesus submits his will to the Father; I wonder what it means for us to do the will of the one who has called us. How often do we allow God's will to be done without allowing ourselves

to dominate? Just imagine in those verses if Jesus at that time had to avoid saving the world, we wouldn't have been here to be called the followers of Jesus.

Paul gave himself to sharing the gospel, calling himself a servant of God. Though Paul was "free from all",¹ he has voluntarily "enslaved himself to all"². Paul uses the servant of Christ metaphor elsewhere in his letters too,

Paul, **a servant of Christ Jesus**, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.³

Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be **a servant of Christ**.⁴

Paul and Timothy, **servants of Christ Jesus**, to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.⁵

Paul fully understands that salvation is God's gift and that he cannot achieve it through his own effort. Thus, he "becomes all things,"⁶ not to gain salvation for himself but to embody the release of self for the well-being of others. In this way, he becomes a fellow sharer in the gospel.

For Paul, God's will is for all to be saved, so he tries whatever possible to reach out to others with the gospel of love, the salvation message, and the good news of Jesus. In doing so, he leads people to experience the good news, he identifies himself with the people to be able to reach out to the good news.

I have made myself a slave to all so that I might win more of them. v.19

To the Jews, I became a Jew. v.20.

To those outside the law, I became one outside the law. v.21.

To the weak, I became weak so that I might win the weak. v.22.

¹ 1 Corinthians 6:12

² 1 Corinthians 9:19

³ Romans 1:1

⁴ Galatians 1:10

⁵ Philippians 1:1

⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:22b

I do it all for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in its blessings. v.23.

I ask myself, how am I identifying myself with the people in my community in order to share the good news? Paul was not a slave, not weak, but for the benefit of the community, he identified himself with his community. Freedom in Jesus precisely means the radical freedom to identify with “*others*” in their otherness, Jews and Greeks, the strong and the weak.

For Paul, how a community orders its life and how members relate to each other are part and parcel of the proclamation of God's reconciliation of the world. The church is a community that God calls into existence to incarnate, live out and proclaim this new reality. But this means that in Christ, people find radical freedom to identify fully with others, to become as they are, and thus to experience a genuine transformation of the self. This is what Paul means when he describes his own freedom to be a Jew among the Jews, to be a Gentile among the Gentiles, to be weak among the weak, in short, to be all things to all people.

Paul describes the central principle for his proclamation and communal care: every aspect of the Christian life must be shaped by Christ's death on behalf of others. True Christian freedom, therefore, expresses itself in service.

In Mark's reading, Peter's mother-in-law: *“He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. Mark 1:31.*

The mother-in-law got up and began to serve them. Service is a key topic in the call and pursuit of Jesus. This woman gets up and turns the Sabbath into a day of service to others. Jesus does not command her. She is the one who assumes the initiative and awaits the consequences, discovering the value of mutual service above the sacredness of the Sabbath. She was healed and responded by serving those gathered in his house. Again, it was the Sabbath, but God's gift, Jesus' grace, transcends all the limits imposed by the dogma of religion.

In serving the one who has called us, we must constantly communicate with him. Mark points to us that *In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up, went to a deserted place, and prayed there.*⁷

Jesus moved to a deserted place to pray. In Mark's Gospel, we have heard this same description for where John the Baptist appears at 1:4 and where Jesus is tempted at 1:12-13.

This description of Jesus at prayer does not seem to be a "precious" moment. In Jesus' busyness, he finds solitude to pray with his Father before going out for the next day's assignment. For Jesus, it is very important to do. As followers of Jesus, the encouragement for us is that the ministry, mission, and vision cannot be fully done in accordance with God's will if we fail to sit in solitude, pray and reflect as a community to move in God's direction.

The disciples wanted Jesus to be in one place, but it was after the prayer that he moved out of where the disciple's "will", he said."

'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.' v.38.

When we pray and reflect together as a community, we trust that the Holy Spirit will lead us to know God's will.

In conclusion, the church is a part of the gospel, the good news. Therefore, how we order ourselves is part and parcel of the proclamation of God's reconciliation of the world. By living out this pattern of self-giving, the church is an eschatological sign of what God is bringing about for the whole cosmos, the new creation.

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⁷ Mark 1:35