

Chameleon Christianity
1 Corinthians 9:19-27
Summer Sermon Series
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This question is from last week's Sunday crossword puzzle. Four letters, last letter "s." The clue is "Small quantities." Any ideas? The answer is "tots." Probably not where your mind went first. Certainly not where my mind went first when I was working it last week. That's what I like about crossword puzzles (also what makes me want to tear my hair out!). Working a crossword forces you to get out of a certain pattern of thinking, and think in different ways.

We all can fall into patterns of thinking, looking at the world the same way we always have. I appreciate the wisdom of the adage that says, If your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. In confronting life's challenges, we need to understand that we have more than just a hammer at our disposal. We need to be willing to rummage around in our emotional and spiritual and intellectual toolbox and see that we have lots of other tools. That's one of the amazing things about the Apostle Paul. He knew he had lots of tools in his spiritual toolbox, and he wasn't afraid to use every single one of them.

Today's passage shows us something about Paul's single-minded obsession with winning people to Christ: his willingness to identify in any way he could with those he was trying to reach.

So when he preached to Jews, he started in the synagogue. When he preached to Gentiles, he started where they were—sometimes, as with Lydia at Phillipi along a river bank. Sometimes, as in Athens, in the marketplace where everyone gathered. He routinely violated the law that forbade Jews to eat with Gentiles, and ate with them in their homes. He used language and stories and methods appropriate to whomever he was trying to evangelize, whether they were rich and powerful and educated, or poor and weak and in the world's eyes, unimportant.

As I said last week, Paul would never compromise on the essentials of the gospel. But he was perfectly willing to compromise on those things he believed to be non-essentials. In fact, he knew it was imperative to be willing to compromise on those things in order to proclaim the gospel. "I have become all things to all people that I might save some."

There is an important lesson for the church of today in Paul's flexibility. We can get a certain idea of what church should look like. We can become a little like the missionaries James Michener describes in his novel *Hawaii*. The New England missionaries who brought Christianity to Hawaii brought their culture along with the gospel. They insisted the natives praise God in English rather than their native language. They refused to ordain Hawaiian men to preach. And every fall, in the lovely temperate climate of Hawaii, they would put on their winter underwear, just like they had back home in New England, and insist that the Hawaiians in their church put on winter underwear as well, because that was the proper way of doing things.

Maybe we aren't that rigid, but we all carry a certain image of what church should be. Maybe our vision of what a church looks like was shaped in our childhood. Or maybe in the years when we were raising our family. We don't really think about our assumptions about what a church should be like; they are just part of us.

But when we have a very fixed way of thinking about the church, we tend to have a very narrow vision of what it means to be church. And without much thinking about it, we assume that the problems in the church today would be solved if only it would conform to our ideal church of yesterday. We become like the person who thinks their only tool is a hammer—every problem becomes a nail. We get stuck operating with a very limited toolbox as we struggle to be God's faithful church in a rapidly changing world. And if we think the only thing we have in our toolbox is a hammer, then we are in big trouble, because this is a time when the church and the world around us is in such rapid transition that only those churches that are willing to use all the tools in their toolbox will survive.

Churches who focus on structure rather than mission; on tradition rather than outreach; on the past rather than the future; on budgets rather than service; on propriety rather than a passion for the gospel will have trouble. Churches who do church as if it were still 1955, and we lived in a time when the culture expected and encouraged people to come to church so there was no need to reach out to them, or worry about speaking their language, will not survive.

But churches who understand Paul's willingness to enter into the mindset of those outside the church, churches who are willing to bend and grow and change and

adapt—while still holding on to the essential message of the gospel—these churches will thrive.

Here at First Christian, we have found our way through some of the thorny issues that confront the church today. We understand that we need different styles of worship to reach different people, so counting our contemplative service; we have four distinct worship experiences. We know that mission and outreach are key components of what it means to be a vital, faithful church, so this is a growing edge for us. We know that to most effectively reach young adults we needed a pastor who is a young adult, so we called Robyn. What we are still learning is that young adults may not choose to do church in the same way as their parents and grandparents.

These are the things we know, the stuff we have gotten figured out. But there are still so many changes and challenges ahead for us and for all churches. Things are changing so rapidly today. It wasn't that long ago that non-denominational mega-churches were the trendsetters. Churches like Westside and Christ Community and Trinity—huge churches who became huge by being pioneers in contemporary worship with slick professional worship services that showcased the latest in presentation technology. But now there is a whole generation of young Christians who grew up in mega-churches who are seeking something more, young adults who long for what was missing in those mega-churches. They are looking for ritual and a sense of mystery, and are rejecting the rigid literalism of the mega-church. This loosely organized movement is called the emergent church, and is reaching across many boundaries. Almost impossible to define, It is evangelical and post-evangelical; liberal and post-liberal;

conservative and post-conservative, Anabaptist, reformed, charismatic, neocharismatic, post-charismatic. Mainly the emergent church is concerned with how to be the church in a post-modern age. And like Paul, those who are a part of the emergent movement are willing to try almost anything. You find emergent churches meeting in storefronts and coffee shops, in old traditional church buildings and in warehouses. They have quirky but evocative names like House for All, Solomon's Porch, and Scum of the Earth.

So is the emergent church showing us the church of the future? Could be, but at best, it is just the future for a while. The one thing we know for sure is that the church of the future always becomes the church of the past. The house churches of the early church gave way to the great cathedrals of the middle ages. The small rural open country churches of the nineteenth and early twentieth century gave way to city churches which gave way to suburban congregations. The post-war mainline Protestant churches crammed with ex-GI's and their families in the 50's and early 60's gave way to the mega-churches of the 80's and 90's.

One of Rick's favorite hymn texts says, "New occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth..." The only thing we know for sure about the church of tomorrow is that it probably will look different than the church of today. And that's not only okay, it's good. It means that we in the church, like the Apostle Paul, have learned that we must change and adapt and grow to reach those who do not know the joy of following Jesus Christ. We have learned to be all things to all people that we might reach some for the sake of the gospel.