

Credible Witnesses

1 Corinthians 9:19-26

During the last few years the tribalism that was already present in our society seems to have increased and intensified. What is tribalism? To clarify, although the word can be used in a more generic sense, it has taken on negative connotations and can refer to discriminatory behavior or attitudes towards out-groups, stemming from in-group loyalty. In sociology, an in-group is the social group that a particular person identifies with, whereas an out-group is a social group that a person does not identify with.

The variety of groups that people identify with today are numerous, such as political parties, nationalities, and gender, just to name a few. So, to reiterate, tribalism refers to more than just a particular group, but the discriminatory behavior or attitudes that can arise within a group that a person identifies with and has strong loyalty to.

What has contributed to much of the tribalism in our cancel culture today is that we are living in the Information Age. Social and mainstream media has played a huge role in fueling the divisiveness and increasing tribalism that we are experiencing today. In fact, just this past week, an insider, who worked for a social media giant, exposed how the company for profit is controlling the information the public receives on their site. Whatever her motivation, she revealed that their own research shows that the information their users receive, which they manipulate for financial gain, is fueling the tribalism in our society and inciting social unrest.

Sadly, many professing Christians are imbibing the information that they receive on social media, and it's negatively controlling their behaviors and attitudes, even toward their fellow Christians who are not part of their tribe. Much of the division that exists in our society has spilled into the church. And this is the case because many in the church are being disciplined more by social media and cable news than they are by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's impossible for the church to impact the world for Christ if the world is influencing the church more than the church is influencing the world. And if things are going to turn around, the church needs to cast off the tribalism and unite around the centrality of the gospel and the mission of the church, namely, to live counter-cultural Christians lives and make disciples whose ultimate loyalty is to King Jesus.

Main idea: Soul winners learn to adapt to make a lasting impact for Christ.

To unfold this theme, we are going to consider three counter-cultural marks of a credible witness of Jesus Christ.

1. Credible Witnesses Are Available

The first mark of a credible witness of Jesus is that they are **available**. Remember we learned last week that the reason why Paul could minister the gospel *free of charge* was because the *free of charge gospel* was his treasure (v.18). Now having explained that his reward was the privilege of preaching the gospel *free of charge*, Paul wrote: “*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them*” (1 Corinthians 9:19). What is Paul talking about when he says, *for though I am free from all...*” (v.19a). Paul is saying he was free from human entanglements, like tribalism, which allowed him to serve all kinds of people.

In verses 20-23, Paul refers to various tribes, which included the one where he once found his primary identify. Before his conversion to Christ, how Paul related to others had much to do with his loyalty to his tribe and negative view of other tribes whom he didn't identify with. But after he came to Christ, Paul no longer found his primary identity in a particular in-group or viewed other out-groups as his enemies. He didn't need the approval or acceptance of prominent Jewish religious leaders that he formerly aligned with to feel significant. And Paul no longer found any satisfaction in condemning non-Jewish groups that he did not identify with, as so many do today on social media. Paul's new identity in Christ set him free not only

from the bondage of living for the approval of his former tribe, but also to minister to all the other tribes, especially the non-Jewish groups that he once loved to hate.

Notice that Paul, although he was free from all, qualifies that sentiment by explaining, *“I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them”* (v.19b). Paul, who was set free in Christ, made himself and his gospel ministry **available** to all people. He didn't just minister to people that had the same ethnicity that he did, or that observed the same religious customs and traditions that he observed, or that held the same political views that he held.

As we will see, Paul made himself and his ministry available and accessible to people of different cultures and backgrounds and with radically different preferences for just about anything you can think of. Similarly, if our church, especially in our polarized society, is going to be a credible witness for Christ, we must be marked by openness to serve and receive all people regardless of their color, class, culture, crime or crisis.

Let me be clear, when Paul said that he made himself a servant to all, he doesn't mean that he was indifferent to the sinful lifestyles that the people of his day were living. The entirety of Paul's letter to the Corinthians clearly shows that he did not condone any sinful attitudes or behaviors. However, Paul's letter also clearly reveals that he loved the Corinthians wherever they were in their spiritual lives, even those who were in opposition to his ministry.

Before he addressed the sinful division, conflict and tribalism in the church of Corinth, Paul opened his letter by thanking God for the grace of God in their lives (1 Corinthians 1:4-9). It's been said, God will meet us wherever we are, but he loves us too much to leave us there. In the same way, Paul loved the Corinthians.

Recently I heard a message from a Pastor who shared a motto that he derived from the life of Paul and his love for the dysfunctional church of Corinth. The motto that he has to remind himself more often in these challenging days, is: “I need to love my people more than I hate

where they are.” The apostle Paul didn’t condone sinful behavior, but he was willing and open to serving all people no matter where they were in life.

Contrary to the way of the world, like Paul, we are to love people even when we don’t agree with them and doing so doesn’t mean we are affirming everything they believe, say or do.

Do you know that the primary reason the Holy Spirit was given to the church was to empower us to be witnesses for Christ to all people? (Acts 1:8). In light this, Jim Cymbala noted, “If our lives, our homes, our churches, and all our ministries are not fully open to all people we are not fully open to the Holy Spirit.”

What gave Paul the liberty to make himself a servant to all people? He was open and available because he was no longer enslaved to tribalism. He wasn’t enslaved because in his new identity in Christ he found divine approval and acceptance that enabled him to meet people where they are no matter who they are. He could serve all people because his ultimate allegiance wasn’t to a social, political or cultural group, but to the kingdom of God.

What about you and me? Where do you find your primary identity? Who or what has your allegiance? When our allegiance is to Christ we will be more than available to serve all people and meet them where they are; we will learn to adapt to where people are so that we can better minister to their needs.

This brings us to a second mark of a credible witness of Christ.

2. Credible Witnesses Are Adaptable

In addition to being **available**, credible witnesses of Jesus are **adaptable**. Beginning in verse 20, Paul expounds on what he means by making himself a servant of all:

“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 not being myself

under the law) that I might win those under the law” (1 Corinthians 9:20). Remember that before coming to Christ, Paul was a Jew in a every sense. He kept the Old Testament Law, which included dietary laws, the Levitical priesthood, and the observance of festivals and temple sacrifices. But although ethnically he would still consider himself a Jew, he understood that, because of the finished work of Christ, he was no longer under the law or the old covenant.

However, Paul did not flaunt his liberties in Christ before the Jews. On the contrary, Paul laid aside his liberties and observed Jewish traditions and customs so that he might win his fellow Jews to Christ.

And as Paul was willing to adapt and accommodate his fellow Jews to win them to Christ, he did the same with non-Jewish and non-religious people. Paul continues: *“To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law” (1 Corinthians 9:21).*

Paul lived as a Jew and was immersed in that culture all his life before coming to Christ. And no doubt he willingly held on to certain Jewish customs and traditions related to foods and festivals. However, Paul was not a legalist. He did not impose his preferences or extra biblical standards upon others. In fact, Paul was willing to adapt to the customs of other cultures in order to build the relationships that are often necessary to be able to share the gospel effectively and lead others to Christ. Paul’s strategy for reaching others for Christ was not building walls; it was all about building bridges. He sought to make connections with all kinds of people so that he could show them and tell them about the love and saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Sadly because of the fierce tribalism in our society, which has infiltrated the church, many professing Christians today seem more adept at building walls around themselves rather than building bridges to people who need Jesus. Many Christians, for example, have so aligned themselves to a particular political party and their platforms that it appears to non-Christians that they must first convert to the political party these Christians identify with before they are able

to come to Christ. Over the last couple of years, I've observed many professing Christians becoming bolder and more passionate about politics and social causes, but when it comes to connecting with a neighbor to build a friendship and sharing the gospel, crickets.

And these tribal walls and obstacles that some Christians are building, which are often marked with hostility, are not only preventing us from connecting with non-Christians, but are dividing the church. Rather than uniting around the centrality of the gospel and the mission of Christ, the church has become fragmented by disagreements over political and social issues to the reproach of Christ.

Notice that while explaining how he became all things to all people for the sake of Christ, Paul adds: "*To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some*" (1 Corinthians 9:22). There's some debate as to who Paul is thinking of when he refers to the *weak*. Is he talking about the unsaved or believers? But if we consider the immediate and broader context of the letter, the *weak* seem to be the less knowledgeable believers who stumble over how other believers exercise their Christian liberties (1 Corinthians 8:11-13).

In reference to the conscience of the *weak* being defiled by food offered to idols, Paul wrote in the previous chapter, "*Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble*" (1 Corinthians 8:13). So, when Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:22: "*To the weak I became weak*" he's stating the same principle, namely that love and not his liberties, rights or entitlements, ultimately control his actions, especially when they could negatively impact others.

Remember that Paul's motivation for giving up his rights for the sake of others was that he might *save some* (v.22). So in the case of *weak* believers we should understand that Paul is giving up his rights to *save some* in the broader sense of winning a Christian to a deeper level of spiritual maturity.

Do we readily lay down our rights, entitlements and preferences for the sake of gospel unity or do we like the cancel culture dig in our heels and declare war when someone doesn't agree with us? To be credible witnesses for Christ the world needs to see a unity and harmony in the church that is evident among a diverse community. And to demonstrate this counter cultural unity we must respect a person's freedom of conscience even if we believe their conscience is weak. We must not only respect a person's freedom of conscience, but also be accommodating and flexible rather than insisting that others accommodate our preferences and serve our interests.

Credible witnesses are adaptable, flexible and accommodating because their identity is in Christ who humbled himself to accommodate our weakness and bring us to salvation. Notice once again Paul's motivation for his accommodations, "*I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*" (1 Corinthians 9:23). Like our Savior, when a credible witness accommodates others they don't do so begrudgingly, like a 2-year-old might when asked to share his toys, but in a spirit of generosity.

Now it's important to note here that when Paul speaks of his willingness to adapt to the Jews, to the gentiles and to the weak, he's not implying that that he would compromise truth to accommodate others. Remember that in verse 21 he wrote: "*To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ)*"—1 Corinthians 9:21a).

So, although Paul would go to great lengths to meet people where they are, he did so without compromising the truths of the gospel or the holiness that is to distinguish a follower of Jesus Christ. Paul could adjust his practice on neutral issues related to diet, cultural norms and worship styles, because his ultimate allegiance was not to the ways of a tribe, but to the law of Christ. Paul would adapt and accommodate not because he was a compromiser, but because of his wholehearted allegiance to the higher law of love.

This brings us to third mark of a credible witness of Christ.

3. Credible Witnesses Are Accountable

Credible witnesses are not only **available**, and **adaptable**, but they are **accountable**. What gave Paul the ability to lay aside his entitlements, rights and liberties *for the sake of the gospel* and in order to *by all means save some* (v.22-23)? Notice that Paul likens the sacrifices he made in the ministry to what it takes for an athlete to be competitive in his sport and win the coveted prize. Paul writes: “*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it*” (1 Corinthians 9:24).

The Apostles Paul often used athletic metaphors to explain what it takes to live the Christian life. And no doubt he used this metaphor for both its applications to living the Christian life and its familiarity to the Corinthians. The Corinthians, who were very much aware of the Olympic games, also took part in their own Olympic type games which were held just outside the city of Corinth.

Knowing that they understood the devotion that it takes to be a competitive athlete, Paul paints a picture of a runner competing in a race. And he paints this picture to show them that like a competitive athlete runs with intention, focus and purpose, namely to win, so too are we to run the Christian race to win. But it's important to note here that winning the race for a Christian doesn't mean achieving more spiritual accolades than another believer. We win our race not by being better than anyone else at serving the Lord, but by being faithful to fulfill God's purpose for each of our lives.

And like a professional athlete, if we are going to be faithful witnesses for Christ, we must be **disciplined**. Paul continues: “*Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable*” (1 Corinthians 9:25).

Often these verses are applied to the discipline and self-control needed to live godly and upright lives. But although the need for believers to

be disciplined applies to many areas of the Christian life, the context has to do with laying aside our liberties for the sake of winning others to Christ and helping a weak brother grow in their faith. The discipline that Paul is speaking of is the discipline it takes, for example, to give up pork or a drink not because you're watching your waist line, but because the unsaved Muslim you invited to dinner may be offended, or has a drinking problem.

If an Olympic Athlete watches what he eats and makes good use of his time to train because he's after a perishable prize, how much more disciplined should we be in lieu of the imperishable rewards that await the faithful? When you wake up in the morning do you arise from your bed, leave the house and start your day with a sense of purpose and accountability to God?

A professional athlete training for a competition will get up early to train because they want to achieve the goal of winning earthly rewards. And if they're intently focused on winning and the stakes are really high, an athlete will seek out a trainer who can coach them, train them and hold them accountable. But whatever the stakes are that motivates a professional athlete to be disciplined, they don't even come close to what's at stake for the Christian and those he's seeking to win for Christ. We have been entrusted with a mission from God and what's at stake is the eternal souls of people and the glory of Christ.

We need the discipline it takes to rise early to get alone with God to get our marching orders and receive the strength we need to carry them out. If we're living an undisciplined Christian life, we may have good intentions, but if we're not practicing self-control, and making sacrifices, we will not have the direction and devotion that it takes to win.

And remember, winning for the Christian is not earning our salvation, but being faithful to the mission. Getting to the finish line and hearing Jesus say, well done, that's the win. Are you running the Christian race with purpose and intention? Are you running to win? Notice that Paul concludes: *"So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the*

air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Like a runner in a competition runs to win and a boxer swings not to beat the air but to knock out his opponent to win the fight, so too Paul lived the Christian life. Paul was on a mission. And to fulfill that mission he laid aside his entitlements, rights and liberties to serve and to win others to Christ (v.22-23). He was able to lay aside his rights because he had the discipline and self-control to do so. He had the discipline because he understood that like a world class athlete has to disciplined his body and exercise self-control to compete and win the prize, he must do the same or he would be disqualified.

And to be clear, when Paul says that he disciplined his body so that he would not be disqualified, he's not talking about losing his salvation. When a contestant in a athletic competition in Paul's day was disqualified, he didn't lose his citizenship, only his opportunity to win the prize. Similarly, Paul knew that at the end of his race he would stand before Christ and give an account for the stewardship entrusted to him to preach the gospel and build up the body of Christ.

What gave Paul the discipline and self-control necessary to run his race to win? He had the disciplined because he lived with a sense of accountability to Christ. He lived for the day that he would stand before Christ and he wanted to be found faithful. The discipline and self-control that Paul had to live the Christian life and give up his rights for the sake of others didn't come from his own will power. Paul's counter-cultural lifestyle was the out working of his salvation as he lived his life according to the law of love and in dependence on the Holy Spirit day by day.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, are you running your race? Run your race and run it to win. And remember winning is not doing what God called us to do better than someone else. Winning is making ourselves available

by being adaptable, flexible and accommodating to all people for the sake of the gospel in order that by all means we might save some.

Winning is staying accountable to God under the law of Christ so that we live disciplined and self-control lives in dependence upon the Spirit. Winning is not living for ourselves, but for the one who loved us gave Himself for us. Winning is not outdoing or outsmarting everyone else in the service of Christ, but being faithful to fulfill God's purpose for each of our lives. It's giving up immediate gains so that we might live for what will count for all eternity. By the grace of God, let us all run our race to win to the glory of Christ.