

## **Missional Living for the Gospel's Sake**

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A quick pop quiz. Name the biggest *church* in Australia with the greatest number of most committed followers in its network of local gatherings across the country. They hold their services a few times every single day in nice, air-conditioned buildings with comfy chairs.

Nope, it's not Hillsong.

It's St. Hoyts of Modern-Day Saints.

Think about it. Members of St Hoyts willingly queue up for services just to get through the entrance, particularly on their most popular services on Tuesday. They faithfully support the organisation by willingly and joyfully give their offering money to further enhance St Hoyts' programs. Each member on average gives \$17.50 per week! (Those who give more get a bit of royal treatment).

Every week the services are led by different preachers (Matt Damon, Nicolas Cage, Robert DeNiro, etc.) who beamed the various messages that powerfully touches human hearts, often illustrating a point in dramatic ways that left indelible imprints in the hearts of their congregations. No wonder they tell others outside their mold to join them, often with genuine excitement: "Hey, come and see for yourself at St Hoyts. This week we have DiCaprio speaking on 'Don't Waste Your Dream'. It's gonna be awesome!" Judge it all you want, but they are the most missional bunch the world has ever known since the 1st century churches.

Meanwhile, those who call themselves the Church of Jesus Christ across Australia are continuing to struggle. The stats and realities around the country do not lie. Attendance is sluggish with a steadily declining trend seen among the young people. Of those who regularly attend services, many have commitment-phobia, merely playing spectators (churches are more akin to footie games where 36 people actively play in the field and 20,000 passively watch in the sideline). Of those who do get involved in ministry, some are doing it for personal agenda that has nothing to do with expression of gratitude to God. To top it all, their individual offering on average is less than \$17.50 a week!

*[Disclaimer: If you find the above simile rather discomfoting, it has served its purpose]*

Would the stats and realities be different had we lived differently as Christians? The Apostle Paul would certainly think so. Let's look at his approach in life and ministry. Ministering to the Corinthian Church filled with freedom-maximizing believers fascinated with man-made wisdom rather than the pure gospel of the crucified Christ, Paul had to discuss at length how a Christian should exercise his/her freedom (1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1).

The entire section on that subject concludes with the injunction: "Follow me, as I follow Christ" (11:1), which implies that the principle and strategy he expounded

and lived, which he learned from the Lord, was not exclusively reserved for the apostles or ordained ministers/elders, but for all believers of all shapes and forms.

The 'big idea' of 1 Corinthians 9, on which this article is based, is: **Every Christian should be missional by foregoing his/her rights for the sake the Gospel.** The following paragraphs will unpack this sentence.

### **Missional Living**

The repeated usage of three key words in chapter 9 is telling. The all-embracing life ambition of the Apostle is the Gospel (the word 'Gospel' appears 8 times in the entire chapter), which regulates the way he lives his life, particularly his rights (the word 'right' appears 10 times), in order to win more and more people to Christ (the word 'win' appears 5 times). What preoccupies Paul's mind is to have as many people see the beauty of Christ most clearly exemplified in the Gospel. He is, to use T.E. Lawrence's phrase, 'the dreamer of day' who act his dream with open eyes to get more, more, and more people know Christ as their personal Saviour and Lord.

In this politically correct environment, we often shy away to talk about evangelism, let alone winning people for Christ (which implies persuading people to embrace the Christian faith). In the name of 'tolerance', we think it's intolerant to get non-Christians to be Christians. In fact, once we become Christians, we feel safer to just focus on quality rather than quantity, a position often rationalized by a theological lingo taken out of context such as "Aren't we Calvinists who believe in God's predestination of the elect?" Those of us in the spiritual growth camp would argue "But isn't it more important to disciple rather than to win people?" Yes, but you cannot disciple anyone without winning them first to Christ. Yet those in cultural mandate camp might quip "Isn't it more important to be the salt of the earth and light of the world?" (by the way, this is a common excuse why many Christians are never out of the saltshaker!) Yes, but they will not be salt and light unless they have been won for Christ.

For Paul, the issue is not about a transfer from religion A to religion B. Nor is it about proselytism. It is about getting people out from serving idols into serving the living and true God (1 Thes 1:9). It is about snatching sinners out of fire (Jude 1:23). As such, heaven and hell is at stake with people's eternal souls hung in the balance. Paul understood that there is a huge gap between God and sinners, and it is a personal issue for God because He stands at one end of that gap. So grave is his concern that God sent his only son to stand in the gap, living the life we should have lived and dying the death we should have had. In many ways, we are called to do the same. The content of God's heart has gripped Paul's. Has it gripped yours?

But is this whole issue of quantity really biblical? I submit that we should be familiar with those themes that permeate throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation (e.g., God's glory in creation and new creation; the first marriage and marriage supper of the Lamb). One such theme has to do with quantity. The Bible starts with a commandment to 'multiply and fill the earth' (Gen 1:28) so that in a world not yet corrupted by the Fall, as many men and women bearing God's image

extend God's glory on earth. Skip 64 books and you will find in Revelation 7 a scene like no other. "A great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb . . . and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:9).

Confirming that biblical pattern, our Lord summoned his disciples with these words: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt 4:19). We are meant to fish for people from our neighbourhoods, university campuses, corporations, and other public arenas we are providentially stationed by God. That places us squarely head-to-head with people of all backgrounds – seeker, agnostics, skeptics, atheists, postmodernists, religious believers, etc. Just like Paul who in his days had to deal winsomely with the Jews, the Gentiles, the weak (1 Cor 9:19-23), we too have to do the same with our (post)modern day Jews and Gentiles.

To that end, we can learn from Paul two things he had applied personally. One has to do with strategy of his life, the other with structure of his life. In my day job as management researcher, I have read enough empirical research findings which confirm the right sequence in having a successful venture, be it in the context of company or individual. Structure should follow strategy, and strategy should follow mission. Get that sequence mixed up, and your house will be in a state of disarray. Let's look at both of them in turn.

### **Surrendering Personal Rights**

In an emotionally-charged defense before his ungrateful critics at Corinth who questioned his ministry, he laid out his personal rights to be appreciated as an apostle of Jesus Christ (v. 1-3), to be financially supported (v. 4), to have a spouse who is also financially supported (v. 5), and to be freed from working for a living so he can devote his time exclusively for the Gospel ministry (v. 6). He then proceeded by giving five compelling reasons in support of those rights from Scripture and common sense that forever silenced his critics who should have known better (v. 7-14). Paul in essence exclaimed, "C'mon Corinthians, use your common sense, read your Scripture, be fair, know your religious tradition, and remember Christ's command. And you will know that I don't pluck these rights out of thin air!"

But Paul did not stop in verse 14, for the whole point of airing his rights in public was to set an example for others that he did not cling to any of those rights, let alone maximize them (v. 15). Instead he surrendered his rights to Christ and endures anything rather than putting 'an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ' (v. 12b).

As believers, we have been freed from sin, hell, death, the devil, the wrath of God in and through Christ and him alone. But our freedom is not a license to do whatever we want or an opportunity to demand our rights. To be sure, we'd like to think of freedom as the rights to do whatever we like. Ask a five-year old, a teenager, or a full-grown person on the street, chances are you will get that answer. But those who associate freedom with "I do it my way" are actually not free at all.

On the contrary, they are prisoners of their hearts' inclination to demand things their way. They are oblivious to the fact that "the obsession to demand that things go the way we want them to go is one of the greatest bondages in human society today."<sup>ii</sup> As such, when they have the faintest hint that their rights have been unappreciated, disregarded, or violated, they bath in self-pity and sinful anger. It is not uncommon to hear churches split or the Christian testimony spoiled because of this character flaw of insisting on rights.

I am however painfully aware that every cell in our body will scream against the idea of foregoing our rights. "But I have worked very hard at work and strived to be morally good, isn't it just fair if I can decide what kind of house I want to buy, cars I want to drive, activities I want to do in weekends? As long as I don't violate other people's rights, I have the right to use my rights!" If this is our attitude, we will be never be useful for the kingdom of God.

Paul, on the other hand, who was a highly educated, most religious, and free Roman citizen, summarized his life in the following sentences (and I hope that its radical tone never stops to afflict our comfortable our lifestyle): "I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win more (v. 19)" and "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some (v. 23). Commenting on verse 19, Prior remarked "there is a gold-mine of evangelistic methodology in that single sentence, particularly when we remember the way that Jesus himself modeled the servant/slave way of life."<sup>iii</sup> Centuries later Martin Luther echoed Paul when he wrote "A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Indeed, the most effective strategy in mission and evangelism has nothing do with abundant financial resources or pre-packaged approach like Evangelism Explosion or the Four Spiritual Laws (as useful as they might have been). The most effective strategy in missional living has to do with renouncing our personal rights to Christ.

Paul instinctively knew that he was free to exercise his rights but in order to win as many people to Christ, he accommodated others with sacrificial love in **cultural** areas without compromising himself in **moral** and **doctrinal** areas. His message to Corinthians was loud and clear when it comes to moral precepts (e.g., "Flee from sexual immorality" – 1 Cor 6:18) and doctrinal teaching (e.g., the resurrection of the body – 1 Cor 15). No second guessing with these absolutes. But when it comes to cultural issues, he was very flexible. When he was with the Jews, he would never order bacon and egg for breakfast. But when he hung out with the Gentiles, he would unashamedly have grilled ribs on the BBQ. And he would refrain from those ribs in the presence of new Christian Gentiles whose faith might be hindered by his preference. At face value he may appear like a chameleon, but a closer examination would reveal that he was very consistent with the principle he holds: To win as many, he will be all things to all people in non-moral areas. God does not require us to adopt a new culture when we come to know his Son. Neither did Paul, and neither should we.

While throughout history the church of Jesus Christ has been struggling to live by the same principle, several Christian missionaries served as anomalies. People like

Adonirom Judson (missionary to Burma) Hudson Taylor (missionary to China), Jim Elliot (missionary to Ecuador), William Carey (missionary to India), and many others have poured out their lives sacrificially to the strangers they soon fell in love with. Hudson Taylor, for example, in his 51 years living among the Chinese not only spoke multiple Chinese dialects and translated English bibles into Mandarin but also wore native Chinese clothing and grew a long Chinese pigtail.

Today we don't have to go to faraway places across the globe to find non-believers of different cultures, ethnicities, races, etc. We live in a huge melting pot of different kinds of cultures in Melbourne, and we are called to be missionaries in this vibrant city. In fact, even to people whom we thought were raised in similar cultural values and all, we need to be very flexible and adaptive in our approaches. And this is precisely an area that we are caught off guard. Tim Keller tells a poignant story on this subject, which is worth repeating here:

The British missionary Lesslie Newbigin went to India around 1950. There he was involved with a church living 'in mission' in a very non-Christian culture. When he returned to England some 30 years later, he discovered that now the Western church too existed in a non-Christian society, but it had not adapted to its new situation. Though public institutions and popular culture of Europe and North America [and Australia, too – *my addition*] no longer 'Christianized' people, the church still ran its ministries assuming that a stream of 'Christianized', traditional/moral people would simply show up in services. Some churches certainly did 'evangelism' as one ministry among many. But the church in the West had not become completely '*missional*' – adapting and reformulating absolutely everything it did in worship, discipleship, community, and service--so as to be engaged with the non-Christian society around it. It had not developed a 'missiology of western culture' the way it had done so for other non-believing cultures.<sup>iii</sup>

I am proud to report that the Elders of Scots' Church adopted this missional mindset when they unanimously agreed to accept the Indonesian-language congregation as an integral part of the Scots' Church. Their generosity towards the Korean-language congregation in using the Scots' Church facilities confirmed this missional priority. Beyond these however there is a need to have a more robust and encompassing mission strategy to reach out to Melbournians. Consider for example a few selected stats on the City of Melbourne (CoM) demographics. Nearly half of the CoM's 350,000+ workers are in the 15-39 age group; many families living in the CoM municipalities have young children between 0-5 years; as many as 122 languages are spoken by residents of the CoM, and so on.<sup>iv</sup> God's people also should be equipped to think biblically to be able to discern the cultural practices that need to be embraced from those that need to be adapted or rejected.

At the individual level, if we really love Christ and the Gospel more than we love our personal comfort zone, renouncing rights means that we may need to redesign

our lives, modify our habits, adjust our preferences, and build our priorities around the Gospel. We need to start somewhere; the following are a few pointers:

- Develop genuine friendship with non-believers (research suggests that after two years, a Christian typically no longer has any non-believing friends – don't get too comfy in our holy huddle).
- Invite non-believing couples for informal dinner to show hospitality, including those who talk with their mouth full or suck in noodle with a tremendous noise!
- Allow yourselves to be interrupted by God who often sends us people with claims, problems, and petitions.
- Avoid culturally or spiritually superior attitude, *Christianese* jargons, and critical spirit towards those who are different from us.
- Live as God's good steward and be generous towards others with your time, energy, and money.
- Socialize with colleagues after work with a missional intent (not just for the sake of hanging out).
- Spend your leisure time reading quality Christian literature on mission and personal evangelism.
- Be host parents for an international student (55 per cent of students studying in the city are international students).

Missional people are Gospel-centered. That is, they strive to live a Gospel-saturated life sacrificially on a daily basis. They are unlike the Consumeristic Christian who just wants a \$3 worth of the Gospel:

“I would like to buy about three dollars worth of gospel, please. Not too much – just enough to make me happy . . . I certainly don't want so much that I start to love my enemies, cherish self-denial, and contemplate missionary service in some alien culture. I would like to be cherished by some nice, forgiving, broad-minded people, but I myself don't want to love those from different races – especially if they smell. I would like enough gospel to make my family secure and my children well behaved, but not so much that I find my ambitions redirected or my giving too greatly enlarged. I would like about three dollars worth of the gospel, please.”<sup>v</sup>

### **Becoming Missional**

Having read this article thus far, you might think “Okay, I understand the importance and urgency of missional living, but I am light years from all that. How on earth do people like me can even remotely imitate the Apostle Paul?” Well, you can't. Not if you rely on your strength, experience, wisdom, talents, or even religious efforts. Here is why.

We all know full well that it is wrong and *unnatural* for an individual to be stripped of his or her unalienable rights (life, liberty, pursuit of happiness). We also agree it is only *natural* for individuals to be granted these rights. But to forego these

unalienable rights is a *supernatural* act of worship that necessitates the power of the Gospel to work within us through and through.

We are enabled to become all things to all people when we turn our eyes upon Jesus Christ who had become all things to you and me. “Though he was in the form of God . . . [he] made himself nothing, taking a form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross” (Phil 2:6-8). The degree to which this truth permeates our heart will determine our willingness to live a missional lifestyle. The deeper we grasp how he went missional for us will empower us to be missional for his sake. For he lived a sacrificial life not so that we are exempted from it, but for the very purpose that when we live sacrificially we become like him.

Let the following lines from St Augustine, perhaps the most beautiful portrayal of the missional Christ, melt our hearts so they can be re-ordered for the Gospel’s sake:

“Man’s maker was made man,  
that He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at His mother’s breast;  
that the Bread might hunger,  
the Fountain thirst,  
the Light sleep,  
the Way be tired on its journey;  
that the Truth might be accused of false witness,  
the Teacher be beaten with whips,  
the Foundation be suspended on wood;  
that Strength might grow weak;  
that the Healer might be wounded;  
that Life might die.”<sup>vi</sup>

## Endnote:

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<sup>i</sup> R. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), p. 140.

<sup>ii</sup> D. Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), p. 160.

<sup>iii</sup> Timothy J. Keller. *The Missional Church*. An online full-text article is available at:  
<http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/missional.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Many other relevant stats like these are available in the public domain such as:  
<http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/AboutMelbourne/Statistics/Pages/SuburbanDemographics.aspx>

<sup>v</sup> D.A. Carson. *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Baker, 1996), pp. 12-13.

<sup>vi</sup> Augustine of Hippo (Sermons 191.1)