

**Flip-flopping for the Gospel of Jesus**  
**1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Epiphany 5, Year B**  
**5 February 2012**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

One year, a constantly nagged and harried son-in-law decided to buy his mother-in-law a cemetery plot as a birthday present. The following year his mother-in-law's birthday arrived but he bought her no gift at all. The mother-in-law was understandably upset and asked her son-in-law why he had failed to acknowledge her with a gift. The angry son-in-law responded, "Well, you still haven't used the gift I bought you last year!"

Perhaps the greatest miracle in all of Holy Scripture comes in today's reading from Mark. Simon's mother-in-law is desperately ill in bed. Her fever is high and unabated. As Simon looks on, his mother-in-law may well leave this mortal world and thus be parted from his life forever. And here's the miracle: Not that Jesus heals her, but that we are told Simon goes to Jesus and asks him to do so!

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But let's shift gears and look at the first reading. This is a portion of Paul's incredibly honest and forthright First Letter to the Corinthians. Listen again to what Paul says:

"To the Jews I became a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those outside the law [that's Gentiles, by the way] I became as one outside the 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."

This week I studied Paul's words as I also intermittently read reports from the political news cycle, and in juxtaposition his is a stunning admission.

What do we say of our leaders, be they political or religious, when we detect that they are attempting to be all things to all people? What do pundits—and his opponents—call Mitt Romney, when some of his approaches as governor in liberal Massachusetts conflict with his statements as presidential candidate in the conservative South?

Romney is called a flip-flopper, and he's not alone—it's only that he's in the spotlight these days. His opponent Newt Gingrich, Gingrich's old sparring partner Bill Clinton, President Obama, and countless other political and other leaders have been vulnerable to the charge of trying to be all things to all people. It's a charge more difficult to overcome than virtually any other in our coiled-spring society. Plagiarism? Barely makes the news. Unethical business practices? All in a day's work. Infidelity? Let he who is without sin cast the first stone. But trying to be all things to all people? That's unconscionable in our culture. Leaders of all stripes

will contort themselves into verbal pretzels trying to deny it.

And then here, today, St. Paul wears this claim like a badge of honor. “I have become all things to all people,” he admits, and one imagines he quills these words on parchment with bold strokes.

It’s important to remember that First Corinthians is a letter written to address specific issues in a specific place. In this case, just before today’s reading, Paul has addressed the question of food sacrificed to idols. Some in the church at Corinth believe that, by eating food dedicated to false gods, the consumer becomes complicit in worshipping those gods. Others in the church say that’s ridiculous. The false gods aren’t real, and the food is plentiful, succulent, and—most importantly in a scarce economy—available. Why *shouldn’t* Christians eat it?

Here is where we would hope our leaders would make a bold stand. “Dang right!” We want Paul to say. “Eat that food and pass the butter.” The false gods aren’t real, and by eating their food we’ll prove it. Right is right, and making a stand is important.

Well, Paul makes a stand of sorts, but not in the way we expect. He says, “Take care that your liberty does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of participating in the sacrifice to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.”<sup>i</sup>

And that brings us to today’s reading, in which Paul most curiously advocates flip-flopping. He begins by saying, “Woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel!” But Paul has already revealed in the conversation about food dedicated to idols that not all proclamation looks like bold, prophetic, line-in-the-sand speech. The Gospel must, instead, be offered in such a way that it can be received. In today’s leaders we contend that flip-flopping is sniveling, pandering, and disingenuous. But Paul says this is not always so. For those who believe, a balance must be struck between *integrity of conviction* and *humility in both utterance and attitude*.

When Paul interacts with his Jewish brothers and sisters, he says, he must share the news of Jesus in terms that Jews will understand and can hear. But when he takes the Good News to the Gentiles, he must speak a different language, which will sometimes seem contradictory. Paul embodies in his dealings the principle, “In essentials, unity; in all else charity.” He bends and yields wherever he can in order to convey the Gospel and enable it to take hold of the heart. Anyone who studies Paul’s letters encounters his flip-flopping as soon as they compare, for instance, Romans and Galatians.

Can we forgive Paul? Surely. Can we agree with him? Maybe. Can we emulate him? Now there's the challenge.

Think, for a moment, about the issues most important to you politically, socially, and in the church. Surely in all three our faith commitments pertain. Whether liberal or conservative, we prefer what we perceive to be heroic, Alamo-like stands. But Paul reveals to us that these often serve to alienate rather than reconcile. "I have become all things to all people," Paul tells us, "that I might by all means save some."

Paul can live this way, ignoring the charges of flip-flopping (which he, too, received in his day) and carrying on his chameleon ways, because the message he bears is not his own. He preaches not the Gospel of Paul, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Good News of grace to all people. "I do it for the sake of the Gospel," he says, "so that I may share in its blessings." And so he will share that Gospel of grace in whatever ways it can be heard, in whatever ways draw people to freedom and love.

That's harder work than taking a stand. It means the impetus to ratchet down the rhetoric falls to us, not to those to whom we're speaking. It means the burden of changing behavior, of embodying humility and perhaps even deference lies on us, rather than those with whom we disagree.

It's also trickier. How will we know the point at which the humility we take in our sharing begins to compromise the essential truth? How will we know when being all things to all people compromises God's justice?

We won't know for sure, any more than Paul knew. We will pray for wisdom and guidance. And we will do one more thing. The overarching reason that Paul writes his First Letter to the Corinthians is that the church in Corinth risks splintering. It is nearly falling apart. And Paul counsels again and again that the humble work of sharing the Gospel in a desperate world can only be done when the Body stays together, when the church first says, "We love one another, and we share in the grace of Jesus, and therefore we, too, can share in his blessings."

Because, at the end of the day, that is our greatest witness. More than any attitude, more than any words, the fact that we—this motley, disagreeable, misfit family of Christians—are bound together in love proclaims to the world that our Jesus is worth knowing.

So to the weak, let us become weak. To the conservative, the liberal, the apathetic, the seeking, the conflicted and the hurt let us speak humbly and with an attitude of grace, that by all means we might save some and share in the blessings of the Gospel. *Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:9-11.