

# ***“The Holy Catholic Church”***

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***To love the Holy Catholic Church is to love the bride of Christ.***

***1 Corinthians 9:19-23***

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at [corinthtoday.org/sermons](http://corinthtoday.org/sermons).)

***A Sunday poll***

Today we continue our sermons on the Apostles’ Creed, which we also affirm each week in the 11:00 Traditional Service. The phrase that seems to prompt the most questions “the holy catholic church.” On that subject, I would like to begin with a poll.

- For how many of you is Corinth the first church you’ve attended regularly where the Apostles’ Creed was a regular part of the worship service?
- How many of you have attended a church where instead of saying “the holy catholic church” they substituted something like “the holy Christian church”?
- The first time you attended this church or another where you heard “I believe in the holy catholic church,” how many of you found it confusing or offensive?
- A multiple choice question: yes, no, maybe, or I don’t care. Are you today comfortable with saying, “I believe in the holy catholic church”?

At the beginning of my week of study and preparation, it was my goal to move more of you to a “yes” position on saying the words “the holy catholic church.” I’ve changed my mind on that, as a direct result of studying 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

***Paul gets personal***

In our studies of 1 Corinthians, two weeks ago we looked at the introduction to this section, which spans chapters 8 through 10. The Apostle Paul is raising a divisive

matter, at least in his day. At issue is whether Paul's readers should eat meat that has been previously sacrificed as an offering to the idols other Corinthians worshiped.

Paul's answer was two-fold. First, Paul himself feels free to eat because an idol is a nothing. Offering meat to a nothing doesn't change the composition of the meat. That's a remarkable statement for someone raised to understand, debate, and follow every Jewish scruple about food.

Second, Paul will not eat that food if it will cause spiritual harm to someone else. Steak is not more important than people. If it will confuse an unbeliever, making them think their god is just as legitimate as Paul's God, or if it will cause other believers to violate their own conscience, Paul is just as free not to eat as he is to eat.

Chapter 9 is sandwiched between the introduction (chapter 8) and conclusion (chapter 10) to Paul's argument about eating meat. The theme of chapter 9 is Paul's approach to Christian freedom as it applies to his own life and work.

In our text, verses 19-23, Paul connects Christian freedom and evangelism. The most important recurring word is "win," which Paul uses 5 times in 4 verses. It's an accounting word: "gain," as in the credit side of the ledger. Paul wants to "gain" followers of Jesus. Let's look at these few verses in some detail.

### ***Free to be a slave (19)***

The Apostle Paul is the quintessentially original Christian thinker. Only Jesus precedes and tops Paul on the subject of Christian freedom. Anyone who followed him – most notably Martin Luther – built on Paul's legacy and his words.

Paul himself moved from being a slave to the Law (passionately understanding, observing, teaching, and enforcing every aspect and detail of it) – to a position of complete freedom to follow his own Spirit-directed conscience in respect to the distinctively Jewish aspects of the Law. Paul did not even defer to Jesus' 12 "original apostles" when it came to the application of Christian freedom.

Paul didn't have the New Testament to guide him; he was writing the New Testament. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul had to wrestle with how to apply the Old Testament to us. We, therefore, owe to Paul a great debt. Without Paul we all might have had to choose between not following Jesus and being enslaved to the same laws and attitudes that had bound Paul early in his life. Paul taught us to live free – free from condemnation, free from fear, free from needing the approval of God, because that approval was freely given by what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Because we're free in all those ways, we are free from the need to appease other Christians or non-Christians. As Paul phrases it, "I am free and belong to no one." So are you and I.

That's why it is so remarkable for Paul to add, "I have made myself a slave to everyone." Only one passion superseded Christian freedom for Paul: evangelism.

Gaining more followers of Jesus was so important to Paul that he could describe his adaptation to their way of life as “slavery.”

For Paul, of all people, to say, “I make myself a slave to everyone” is one of the most remarkable ironies in the Bible. Paul is free to be a slave.

***Adapt, adjust, accommodate (20-22)***

“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews” (20). When Paul was around people who fervently followed Jewish laws, he joined them. He attended synagogue, covered his head while he prayed, abstained from offensive food. Even though Paul didn’t think circumcision was spiritually necessary, he had his colleague Timothy circumcised to “become like a Jew.”

“To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law” (20). This may be the Jewish example reworded, or Paul may be talking about moralists or rule keepers in general. In any subculture there are those who are sticklers for going by the book. You know the type, right? They read the employee handbook and follow it to the T. They never use personal cell phones on company time. If they inadvertently took a paper clip home, it might as well be \$20,000 fraud. Paul, the slave of Jesus who has been freed, can make himself a slave to many kinds of rules if that wins rule keepers to Jesus.

“To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so as to win those not having the law” (21). Paul clarifies that his freedom from God’s law is not absolute – more on that in a moment – but Paul can join the rule breakers with the best of them if it helps him connect with people who need Jesus.

“To the weak I became weak, to win the weak” (22). Paul has already used this term “weak” to describe Christians who find spiritual security in specific boundaries. He calls them “weak,” but he’s willing to join them. Maybe there’s more to this than just rules, however. Paul will seek anyone, anywhere, including the spiritually, physically, mentally, or emotionally weak – to draw them in.

He summarizes: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (22). Just in case you didn’t get the point – his examples are only examples. He will adapt, adjust, or accommodate in whatever way necessary for greater gospel impact. He now uses the word “save” (“rescue”) instead of “win.” Paul sees all of humanity as endangered. He’s on a mission to rescue as many as possible.

On this Father’s Day, I want to say that my Dad was the greatest example of this principle that I personally have known. At Dad’s funeral, my brother Jim said,

Dad was born and raised in the part of the world where he spent his lifework. As a result, the nuances of the culture and the fine points of dealing with Islam were not just second nature—they were completely natural for him.

Dad loved languages, and was himself a brilliant linguist. He could discern subtleties of idioms; make puns in any language; translate ideas into the vocabularies and dialects of northern Pakistan.

In his own element (Dad) was warm and comfortable around his people—the Pashtu people—the Pathans. He was accepted as a member of the tribe. He laughed with them; sang with them; prayed with them; wept with them; rejoiced with them. There are barely a handful of missionaries to that part of the world who ever achieved that critical intimacy.

I would add that Dad even adopted their food scruples. Fifty years after he left Pakistan, Dad still wouldn't eat pork. My father never compromised the message of the Gospel, but to the Muslim he became like a Muslim that he might win some. This principle of becoming all things to all people has been a part of my entire life.

Later, when Linda and I were in college, our choir director, Bill Supplee, was also born in India. In fact, he went to the same boarding school as my Dad: Woodstock. (No, not that Woodstock.) When we would accept the hospitality of others on choir tours, we were taught this same principle. Some of you know that the only cup of coffee I ever drank in its entirety I drank because a choir hostess set it at my place without asking me.

All my life I have tried very hard to eat what's set before me. Usually it's not difficult, such as when I visited Scott and Phyllis Polo this past week and they set Moo Moo Chocolate ice cream from Udderly Delicious before me. It's been a little more difficult on mission trips, but it's really important to eat the food and honor the customs of one's hosts – for the sake of the gospel.

Every Dad who plays with blocks on the floor or makes time to kick the soccer ball or throw the baseball or attends his daughter's dance recital whether he likes dance or not is modeling the principle. Yield your preferences for the sake of the relationship.

The American asks, "What are my rights?" The Christian asks, "What is the gospel impact?"

### ***The limits and the test (23)***

But are there no limits, then, to cultural or moral adaptation? Would Paul visit the brothel to reach the prostitutes, bow down to idols to win the Hindus, or get hooked on opioids to gain converts from among the addicts? Absolutely not. Why not?

Paul has already said he is a "slave to God's law." In his writings Paul draws a sharp line between laws about Sabbath and circumcision and food that define Jewishness and the moral laws of God that are unchanging. That's one answer.

Verse 23 gives us the other answer: “I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.” I’m not fond of that translation. Literally it reads, “in order that I might become a fellow-partaker” – a co-partner, a companion. It’s not that Paul is trying to assure himself more blessings; it’s that he’s trying to share blessings.

Here then is Paul’s criterion: Does a change in my personal behavior remove barriers to the Gospel? Does it make it easier for people to believe in Jesus? An unbeliever can smell out inauthenticity or showmanship or even “trying too hard.” If you’re just mimicking someone’s accent or dress or even food preferences, they can tell, and you won’t win them. At any rate, Paul would never go so far in his accommodation that even the unbeliever would say, “You’re no longer acting like a Christian.”

So the limits, and the test, of cultural adaptability must be whether I’m making Jesus more attractive. Is my willingness to adjust and accommodate winning people?

### ***Love the bride of Christ***

We return to that phrase in the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in...the holy catholic church.” My goal is not to have you love the words, “holy catholic church.” My goal is that you will love the holy catholic church.

The phrase “holy catholic church” stands in contrast to next week’s topic, “the communion of the saints,” which refers to relationships within a local church. “The holy catholic church” is about the church universal. The word “catholic” has a Greek origin – *kata holos*, which means “toward wholeness.” I like that.

One of the most common responses I get about this phrase is, “Well, you mean the catholic church with a small ‘c,’ right? Don’t get hung up on the lower case. If you look at the creed on page 38 of the hymnal in your pew rack, the words “Catholic” and “Church” are both capitalized. The reason is that the capital letters generally distinguish the larger body. I would say that the “Catholic” church I’m a part of is even greater of a capital “C” than the Roman Catholic church. This is the Whole Church. You’ll also notice in the footnote of our Hymnal that there is an alternative: “One Holy Universal Christian Church. Note that every word is capitalized.

When I say I want you to love the holy catholic church, I don’t mean the Roman Catholic church – but I do mean the Roman Catholic church. I mean the church in all its forms and denominations and weaknesses and blind spots.

Why? Two reasons. First, the holy catholic church is the bride of Christ. Not Corinth, not the Reformed church, not the UCC or Baptists or Pentecostals, not the church in Hickory, not the church in America. The holy catholic church, made up of all of God’s people, most of whom look differently and think differently than we do.

A week ago Saturday, while waiting in a restaurant for a couple of hours while Linda was with our daughters and their friends, I was trying to focus on writing the

sermon. I was continually distracted by what was on the television in front of me – an “Ultimate Fighting Championship” match. Because that’s not my usual choice in TV, I was deeply annoyed, even offended, by men trying to batter and bloody each other into submission. It got worse later when another TV had women doing the same thing. At the same time, I was almost mesmerized. It was hard not to look away.

A lot of Christians have that same perspective toward “the holy catholic church” – big c or little c. Maybe not with our fists but with our words, we want to batter them into submission to be more like us. To “believe in the holy catholic church” is more than just an intellectual statement. It is to love the bride of Christ.

The second reason to love the holy catholic church is that loving the holy catholic church is the best strategy for winning the world. That’s what Jesus said.

Jesus prayed that all of his followers would be one “so that the world may believe” that God sent him into the world (John 17:20-23). It’s no big deal for all Americans to cheer as one when we watch the World Cup. Commonality breeds unity. But if followers of Jesus can be one – black, white, old, young, liberal, conservative, American, Asian, rich, poor – that speaks to the world that Jesus must be real.

It’s why I try very hard not to criticize other Christians in public – not Catholics or Joel Osteen or John MacArthur or Elevation Church or Pentecostals or Baptists or the UCC – even though I have differences with all of them. When we scold each other, all the world hears is “Blah, blah, blah, you Christians don’t even like each other.”

What I learn from Paul in 1 Corinthians 9 is that this variety of church – in his case, Jew, Gentile, slave, free, rule-focused or not – is not only OK with God, it’s part of his strategy reach the world. We adjust the package so that we bring Jesus to every nation and cultural group. It’s important that it’s still the package – the gospel – but in a million different ways Jesus isn’t hung up on everyone presenting it the same way, or even everyone doing it right.

This coming week Pastor Lori, Linda, and I will have a different but related challenge when we attend the General Synod of the UCC. We don’t go there because it’s comfortable – believe me, it’s not! We go so we can share our passion for Jesus and his gospel, so we can pray for and with the church, so we can be with the church, so we can love and be loved by the holy catholic church.

Whether or not you love the Roman Catholic church or the UCC or any other name or form, love the bride of Christ so we can win the world to him. Amen.