



## Cutting the Anchor

### 1 Corinthians 9:1-23

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October 20, 2019

There's been a Facebook post making the rounds in my circle of friends the past few weeks that in a very short and succinct way says, "The most dangerous phrase in the English language is: *We've always done it that way.*" This phrase is one that plagues not only the church, but most organizations, businesses, and even our nation.

"We've always done it that way" is a change-averse reactive announcement that seeks to uphold the rules, the practices, and the structure that have existed for years, decades, and in some cases, even centuries. It's the sentiment behind this phrase that leads to presidential campaign slogans such as William McKinley's slogan in 1900, which read, "Let Well Enough Alone"; or Herbert Hoover's 1932, "Happy Days are Here Again"; in 1980, Ronald Reagan used the slogan, "Let's Make America Great Again," and of course, our current president continues to lift up his slogan, a slight variation of Reagan's, "Make America Great Again." In all of these slogans, there is this veiled claim that the way we *used* to do things is the way we should still be doing things today.

Similar phrases and claims are made in the church (and I'm speaking of the Church more broadly right now – not necessarily specific to us here at Washington Street). These claims come in the testimonials that declare the practices of years past led to better worship attendance, or that there was a time when we had "more children" in the church ... and we see this sentiment offered more covertly in the more subtle statements that reflect on how good things were when such-and-such pastor was here, or even the veiled comment, "the church sure has changed a lot over the years."

Much like presidential slogans, church statements making claims that past years were better than the present are often based on the reality that certain subsets of the population no longer have the power and privilege they once had. It's a hard reality, but the truth of the decline for businesses, churches, and the nation itself, is that the makeup of our population has changed. The people in the community no longer look, talk, or think like our community did 20 or 50 or 100 years ago, but we still look back fondly as if those years "were the golden years." When we claim that things would be fixed if we could just get back to *that* model, what we're really saying is, "wouldn't it be great if we got rid of all the people who weren't here back then, so we could reclaim our identity and power as it was realized back then?"

The reality for our church, most of our organizations, many national and international businesses, and our national identity, is that the people who make up our communities – whether it is our physical neighbors, our possible clients, or our general demographic makeup as a nation – the truth is that the people have changed. We are more diverse in age, in race, in religious thought, in political leanings, in family structure, in ethnicity ... we are more diverse in every statistically measurable demographic way. And yet, even as our communities have become more diverse, our organizations and our churches

have continued to maintain a model and power structure that gives weight to the demographically stagnant. It's as if we prefer to think of diversity as a fleeting exception in the historical timeline rather than a permanent shift that requires a self-reflective change. *We've always done it that way.*

General thought and practices in the church are even more difficult to change than in many of our businesses and in the national identity because, while our country may be only 243 years old, the church is nearly 2000 years old. Many in the church have this mentality that claims, "God said it, the Biblical authors wrote it, and therefore it is." As we discussed in our worship series that looked at the parables of Jesus, the problem with this claim is that what we *think* the Biblical authors wrote is not always correct. What for some may seem black and white, when read in the fuller context of God's story, it becomes gray at best, and wrong at worst.

This idea that *we've always done it that way* is a good example. Such a claim would make it seem that the church hour of Sunday morning has *always* been the most segregated hour of the week. While this truth might be the reality for the history of America, it is not the truth for the history of the church. As those who stand on a tradition that is over 2000 years old, it's often troubling how much our identity is tied in to the reality of our national landscape that is less than 250 years old.

Just look at today's text in 1 Corinthians 9. This text seems to be comprised of two convictions of the apostle Paul.

Paul's first conviction is to his faithfulness and responsibility to the people of the early church in Corinth. He begins by asking these rhetorical questions of the community, "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Are you not my work in the Lord?" Paul clearly seems bothered by something, as this is about as passive aggressive as he gets. The church in Corinth exists because of the seeds of foundation Paul planted. He is the apostle who gets credit for the formation of this early church.

Because he is the one responsible for the Corinthian church, Paul says there are certain compensatory rights he has – he has the right to receive food and drink and financial resources from the Corinthians for the work he has done and is doing with them. While making some more cryptic statements to this effect, he makes the argument very clear in verse 11 and 12, "If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? If others share this rightful claim on you, do we not still more?"

This set up is not Paul's argument, it is just the foundation for his argument to come. He uses other scriptural examples to say that, because of his service to the church in Corinth, he has the *right* to be compensated and cared for by the community. He has the *right* to exert his power over the church as the founding apostle of the church. His claim is made both on human authority and on Biblical authority – the authority of the law.

But in verse 15, his focus shifts from what is *right* to what is *righteous*. He says, "I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing so that they may be applied in my case. ... If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe betide me if I do not proclaim the gospel! ... What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel."

Leading up to his real argument, Paul first explains why he is not asking the Corinthians to make good on the giving of resources which he is rightfully due. He doesn't want their resources because, at the end of the day, he doesn't want to be beholden to their understanding of the gospel. His calling is not to the church of Corinth, his calling is to the proclamation of the gospel. He refuses the power of the church because by doing so, he's free to proclaim the gospel with no fear of the local church's disagreement with his voice and action. Like a politician bought out by interest groups and political action campaigns, Paul doesn't want to be limited in his ability to speak the truth of the gospel ... he doesn't want to be limited in his ability to proclaim the good news – to proclaim God's goodness.

This is the problem with many churches – both at the denominational and the local church level. We tend to care more about institutional survival than we do gospel proclamation. We tend to think that if we focus in on those teachings and practices that have always worked, we can continue to grow, to lift ourselves up, and to reap the rewards of what we have to offer.

This seems to be Paul's critique of the Corinthians ... he isn't giving into their limited understanding of what it means to be church. He continues in verses 19-23: "though I am free with respect to all," that is, though he is not financially beholden to anyone, "I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them." He believes that his call is not to a specific group of people, or a specific church, but to the gospel of God which proclaims God's goodness in the world to all. (Remember, this is why the Spirit was gifted to the church, that we all might proclaim God's goodness in the world.)

Paul continues, "to the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win the Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law, so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law 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, so that I might by any means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might share in its blessings."

Paul makes this very challenging claim that the purpose of following the gospel – the purpose of being gifted with the Spirit – the purpose of God's redemptive work through Jesus Christ is that all people might know God's love. The purpose of proclaiming God's love is not that we might set ourselves up in beautiful buildings adorned with silver and gold so that we can join in a ritualistic gathering with those who look and sound most like us, the purpose of proclaiming God's love is so that everyone in the world may know of God's goodness!

Paul rejects the notion that *we've always done it this way* ... in fact, he says, even though it's been done this way in the past, that's not how I'm going to do it. Even though I have every foundational explanation, both personal and lawful, as to why I should do it your way, that's not faithfulness to the gospel. For us to say, *it's always been done that way*, is to intentionally ignore Paul's apostolic leadership – for it is Paul who says our call to the gospel and proclaiming God's will is far more important than doing it the way it's always been done.

There are many examples of churches who have always done it that way – and in a sad sense, we gather at Annual Conference every year to give permission for those churches to close their doors. For

some churches, adapting their practice of ministry is just too hard, and instead of seeking or allowing change, they close their doors.

But this isn't true of every church. Some churches are cutting the anchor, and allowing themselves to drift into uncharted waters in search of a more faithful way. I want to name just a couple of examples.

The first example is Board Street Ministry, which is a Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. In 2005, they took an old church building that's in the shadow of City Hall, and recreated a new church body that threw out the widow all of the "we've always done it that way" ideas. Literally. They took out all the pews from the sanctuary, and brought in tables and chairs. While they still have worship on Sunday afternoons, they serve lunch in that same space to the community Monday through Friday every week.

Another example is Los Angeles United Methodist Church. They are a 166 year old church that no longer has a building. Faced with a difficult financial decision, and acknowledging their building was of no use to a shrinking congregation, they tore the entire building down, gave some of the land for the purpose of public housing, and retained part of the property where they paved a parking lot. Housing and parking are both vital needs in Downtown LA, and the church realized that they could have a more faithful future without a building than they could with the building. They still meet for worship in that parking lot, and are still proclaiming God's goodness in their community because they were willing to try something new.

There's a number of growing examples of other churches selling their property to low-income housing projects. Many in our area. Emory Fellowship opened their apartment complex just last year in DC, Arlington Presbyterian is preparing to open their apartment complex soon, Fairlington Presbyterian here in Alexandria and Central United Methodist in Arlington are both awaiting work to begin on their projects. Each of these churches, and the many others across the nation who are doing similar work, are buying back into the apartment buildings where they still have office and worship space, but they've all realized that their work in the community is no longer driven by a church building. The communities have changed enough that people don't just come to church – and so the buildings have become for many a stumbling block to proclaiming God's goodness. Instead, they're removing the building and finding a more faithful way to be present in their communities.

One last example is Fort McKinley United Methodist in downtown Dayton, Ohio. Fort McKinley used to be a very wealthy white church in a very white neighborhood. As white-flight plagued Dayton and the white community moved into the suburbs, the church remained to be a white church in the presence of a black community. The church members continued to commute to worship. The church decreased in size and vitality over a number of years, and was at the precipice of having to close its doors. A new pastor was brought in who started inquiring with the local community, the black community, as to why they didn't attend the church. Among many comments was one that stood out to the pastor. The local neighbor said, "We don't have any fancy clothes, so we know we won't be welcome there." ... The pastor paid attention in worship the next week, and sure enough, all of the suburban families who drove back into town for worship on Sundays were dressed in their Sunday best – expensive suits and dresses. So the pastor told his Church Council they needed to stop dressing up so nice for church, that it was a barrier for the local community. ... The church made other changes too, but today, that church

worships over 500 on Sunday mornings, and its demographic makeup is now about 50/50 black and white.

I think what Paul is trying to stress for us is that we are not beholden to specific way of doing things. We aren't obligated to anyone to do this thing called church a specific way. We have the ability to become whoever it is we need to become so that we might be faithful to our call of *Making a Place for Everyone to Know God's Love*.

If you weren't told, "this is the way it has to be done," how would you do it? What would church look like if, instead of being a response to tradition, it were only a response to proclaiming God's goodness in the world? How would you proclaim God's love? How are people listening? Where are the connecting points in our community?

Where the glory of the Lord is, there is freedom. We have been gifted with the freedom of the Spirit, and we have been offered invitation to respond. How might we cut the anchor to set ourselves free of even 170 years of history in this location, that we might fully be who God has called, created, and cultivated us to be?

Whatever we do, whoever we become, we do it all for the sake of the gospel, that we might share in its many blessings. All for the glory of God. Amen.