

Exploring Paul's Global Leadership Strategy Through 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Biblical Perspectives – May 2008

Chantel C. Upshur-Myles, MSW

The Apostle Paul was used by the Lord in his missionary and evangelistic activities to set in motion a great deal of the organization of the early Christian Church. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul spread the gospel of Christ in the Gentile world from Syria to Italy during the 30 years or so which followed his conversion to Christianity (Bruce, 1977). Throughout his journeys, Paul confronted considerable internal and external opposition to his leadership and tremendous persecution - not only from the Jews who disliked his teaching - but also from the Gentile authorities. Yet, despite the strong resistance, Paul successfully sought to integrate changes into the institutional norms of his present day society.

Paul wrote the foundational documents for the Christian way of life (more than half of the New Testament is attributed to him). In particular, the Pauline letters provide insight into the strategies that Paul used to overcome the obstacles and challenges that he faced in developing and expanding the early church across cultural, political, economic, and social boundaries. This essay explores Paul's leadership strategies through an ideological texture analysis of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, beginning with an explanation of social rhetorical criticism.

Ideological Texture

Robbins (1996) proposes a multi-dimensional method of exploring the scripture through analysis of texts that he calls socio-rhetorical criticism. Socio-rhetorical criticism is an approach to literature that focuses on values, convictions and beliefs, both in the texts that we read and in the world in which we live. It invites detailed attention to the text itself, and moves interactively into the world of the people who wrote the texts and into our present world. Ideological texture interpretation, which serves as the foundation for this essay, is a form of social-rhetorical analysis that explores the biases, opinions, preferences and stereotypes of people, specifically examining the social, cultural and individual location of a particular writer or reader (Robbins, 1996). An overview of the text serves as the basis for exploration in the paper.

An Overview of the Text

Our focal text is found in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. As with most of the Pauline letters, 1 Corinthians was written to address specific issues faced by the recipients, and Paul's decision to include or exclude certain items, reflects the specific controversies facing this particular group of readers. When studying the epistles, determining the occasion for which each letter was written becomes a key to understanding the book. Paul had three primary purposes for writing 1 Corinthians. They were: 1) to deal with several moral problems and the divisions that had formed as people had divided into fan-clubs and were proclaiming themselves followers of Paul, Apollos, Peter or Christ (1:10); 2) to address several questions that had been asked in a letter the Corinthians had sent to him (7:1); and 3) to defend his apostolic authority (MacArthur, 2005).

In Corinth, Paul was the constant target of persecution. He was subjected to the accusations of false teachers, who asserted that he carried on his evangelization and labors from interested motives, and took the property of Christians, availing himself of their devotedness (Griffith-Jones, 2004). In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, we find Paul defending his apostolic authority as follows:

19 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. **20** To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. 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. **21** 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. **22** To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. **23** I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (Barker, 1995).

What were the underlying values, convictions and beliefs that caused Paul to defend himself in the aforementioned manner? What social, cultural, and individual forces were at play in leading Paul to draw the conclusions that he did? What does the aforementioned scripture tell us about Paul's leadership strategies and how can Paul's wisdom be applied in today's global society? Let us begin exploring the answers by taking a closer look at the life of Apostle Paul and the socio-cultural context of Corinth.

The Apostle Paul

Paul's background provides us with some insight into his writing. Paul was a Jew who, although born in the Greek city of Tarsus, had been sent to Jerusalem for his education. He was educated by his mother until the age of five. From age five to ten, he studied the Hebrew scriptures and traditional writings with his father. At the same time, being a Roman citizen and living in a Greek and Roman environment, he received a thorough education in the Greek language, history, and culture (Laymon, 1971). Paul was sent to Jerusalem at about the age of ten to attend the rabbinical school of Gamaliel, who was the son of Simeon. Gamaliel was a most eminent rabbi who was mentioned both in the Talmud and in the New Testament (Acts 5:24-40; 22:3).

Gamaliel was called Rabban - one of only seven teachers so called (Laymon, 1971). Throughout his epistles, Paul made note of his Jewish heritage. Murphy-O'Connor (1996) notes "No one would be able to accuse him of being more Jewish than he (2 Corinthians 11:22). He was a son of Abraham and of the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1), and his Jewish name, Saul, comes from the most famous Benjaminites, King Saul. He had been circumcised eight days according to Jewish Law, and was raised as a Pharisee. Pharisees believed in a literal and strict interpretation of the Jewish law" (p. 18). And by using such a strict interpretation, Paul was able to claim that he was blameless under the law (Philippians 3:6). Indeed, Paul was "a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Philippians 3:5).

So, Paul was a Jew with Roman citizenship educated in a Roman city. He demonstrated vital concern for the Torah and was dedicated to its social implications. By his own repeated account, Paul's first relation to the young Christian movement was that of persecutor. "I am the least of the apostles," he could say in later days, "unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Corinthians 15:9). "You have heard of my former life in Judaism," he reminds the Galatian converts, "how I have persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it" (Galatians 1:13).

Yet, Paul was just as diligent in spreading the Gospel message after his conversion as he had been in persecuting Christians prior to it (Bruce, 1977). God miraculously converted him while on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians in that city; Paul immediately began proclaiming the gospel message. Bruce (1977) writes "No single event, apart from the Christ-event itself, has proved so determinant for the course of Christian history as the conversion and commissioning of Paul" (p.75). After narrowly escaping from Damascus with his life, Paul spent three years in Nabatean, Arabia, southeast of the Dead Sea. During that time, he received much of his doctrine as a direct revelation from the Lord (Galatians 1:11, 12).

The Social Cultural Texture of Corinth

Corinth was one of the most strategically located cities in the ancient world. Virtually impregnable before the advent of gunpowder, its prime location earned the city a reputation as one of the "fettlers of Greece." As a seaport, Corinth was a meeting place of all nationalities (Tenney, 1976). The city of Corinth offered great wealth derived from its commercial traffic (both by land and sea), and, in the Roman times, the city was notorious as the place of indulgence and corruption. To "live as a Corinthian" became synonymous with living in luxury and immorality. In fact, the most serious problem of the Corinthian church was worldliness and an unwillingness to divorce the culture around them (Mays, 1998).

The Apostle Paul first visited Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18). He had just arrived from Athens, where he had been poorly received, and began his work at Corinth with weakness, fear and trembling (MacArthur, 2005). Paul had planned to remain only a short time in Corinth before returning to Thessalonica, but the Lord spoke to him in a night vision (Acts 18: 9, 10; 1 Thessalonians 2:17,18). Paul began his ministry in Corinth under much opposition (Acts 18:6-17), but he was able to convert several influential people and consequently remained for about one and a half years in Corinth (probably from the fall of A.D. 50 to the spring of A.D. 52.). He originally taught in the synagogue on each Sabbath before strong opposition arose; however, in spite of the sustained resistance, Paul laid the foundation of a large and gifted church.

In order to impact this key, wealthy, commercial port, he planted the church with the help of Aquilla and Priscilla (Acts 18:1-17). Subsequently, the city of Corinth became a strategic center for Paul and even influenced his missionary endeavors (while in Corinth, Paul started one of the first underground seminaries) (Pittenger, 1968).

Leadership Lessons from Paul

The fact that Paul chose Corinth, a strategic port city with great influence and exposure to the rest of the Roman Empire, as a site for a church plant shows his leadership intuition. Cities like Corinth, Ephesus, Athens and Rome all provided great exposure for the new movement (Maxwell, 2002). Yet, in Corinthians 9, Paul exhibits much more than intuition. He underscores the importance of flexibility and humility as essential characteristics for global leadership.

In vv. 20-22, he states, "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. 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. 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. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (Barker, 1995). Paul adapted his approaches to leading followers according to the readiness level of the followers. He tailored his style to the characteristics of his audiences and understood the necessity of matching leadership behaviors, including communications, to the readiness level of followers.

Paul conformed to the customs or departed from them according to the company, Jewish or Gentile, in which he found himself from time to time, making the interests of the gospel of supreme consideration. Paul personalizes his teachings on the exercise of Christian liberty (Ascol, 2006). He willingly gives up those things that are rightfully his as Christ's free man for the sake of preaching the gospel. He formulates a principle that governs all his conduct as a gospel minister. And in so doing he outlines for us what we could call the doctrine of accommodation. Despite the rage and opposition of his enemies, Paul practiced a form of situational leadership by exhibiting a willingness to be flexible and assess each encounter with a group of potential converts on a case-by-case basis. Where he encountered prejudices that resulted from ignorance, misunderstanding, or custom, Paul practiced diplomacy and great courage by giving up things which he knew to be indifferent to gain greater influence with those he was trying to reach.

As a result, Paul's relationship with the church at Corinth suggests that, as a leader, he understood the importance of working with people and developing relationships. In an effort to accommodate others, he surrendered the rights he could have legally held on to for the sake of the greater good. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, we find that, while he was free from legalism and bondage, Paul was willing to subject himself to the customs and traditions of others for the sake of the Gospel. As a global leader, Paul modelled what he exhorted others to do in Philippians 2:3-8:

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who,

being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men (Barker, 1995).

By living a crucified, self-sacrificial life, Paul consciously and courageously sought to exude the spirit of the gospel in the way he conducted himself toward others. This is, indeed, an important lesson for every global leader to learn.

References

- Ascol, T. (May, 2005). 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul on Accommodation Retrieved June 16, 2007 at [HTTP://WWW.FOUNDERS.ORG/BLOG/2006/05/1-CORINTHIANS-919-23-PAUL-ON.HTML](http://wwwFOUNDERS.ORG/BLOG/2006/05/1-CORINTHIANS-919-23-PAUL-ON.HTML).
- Barker, K. (1995). The new international study bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company.
- Bruce, F. (1977). Paul: apostle of the heart set free. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Griffith-Jones, R. (2004). The Gospel according to paul. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco Publishers.
- Laymon, C. (ed) (1971). The Interpreter's one-volume commentary on the bible. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- MacArthur, J. (2005). The McArthur bible commentary. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Maxwell, J (2002). The Maxwell leadership bible. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.
- Mays, J. (1998). Harper's bible commentary. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row Publishers.
- Murphy-O'Connor, J. (1996). Paul: a critical life. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pittenger, W.N. (1968). The Life of st. paul. New York: Franklin Watts.
- Robbins, V. (1996). Exploring the texture of texts. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.
- Tenney, M. (1976). The Zondervan pictorial encyclopedia of the bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.