

1 Co 9:16-23
5 February 2012

“Flip Flopping”

In recent years, to be accused of flip flopping has emerged as one of the cardinal sins, especially for politicians. It is not a desirable quality. It is especially bad when there's **video** of the person taking a position on an issue, and within a short time—maybe months, weeks, or even days—strongly coming out for a viewpoint that is the exact opposite.

A few years ago, I commented on flip flopping in a sermon. This was 2004, when George W. Bush and John Kerry were the candidates for president from the two major parties. I had to do some digging and find out which sermon it was! This is what I said at the time:

I watched all three of the debates between President Bush and Senator Kerry. (And I apologize in advance to those of you who thought they were very enlightening exercises!) Amid the dodged questions and repeated slogans, I thought there was one especially telling moment.

In the second debate, the one in St. Louis, in which the candidates fielded questions from the audience, it was the final question that I found really revealing. There was a woman who asked the president if he could name three mistakes he had made...and what he had learned from them.

He couldn't even name one, besides regrets about appointing a few people to certain positions. And when it was Kerry's turn, he didn't do any better. He simply started listing mistakes that Bush had made.

Neither man took this opportunity to admit that, of course, I have made mistakes. This woman's question gave each of them a chance to show a little bit of maturity. They could have acknowledged, “Yes, I am human. I haven't always gotten stuff right, but I **have learned** some things. Let me share some wisdom I've gained!” But apparently, the fear of being labeled a “flip flopper” prevents our political leaders from respecting our intelligence.

As you might be able to tell, to say that I was less than impressed with either of them would be an understatement! And I trust it doesn't need to be said, but flip flopping and changing one's mind are two very different things.

The reason I begin with “flip flopping” is because it is appropriate for today's epistle reading. Those who attended our Bible study on 1 and 2 Corinthians heard plenty about this, but the apostle Paul is accused by the church in Corinth of many things. He has his proponents, and he has his opponents. **One** criticism is that he is wishy-washy—Paul is a flip flopper.

To understand why he might be accused of such a thing, let's look back at chapter 8, which was last week's epistle reading.

Some in the church have asked him about eating food that has been “sacrificed to idols” (v. 1). In Corinth, as in other places, much of the meat for sale in the market comes from animals that have been sacrificed in pagan temples. Paul says that, of course, those pagan gods don't really exist. On that point, there's nothing wrong with eating the meat.

The problem is that some in the church have become very accustomed to associating that food with the pagan practices. When they see other Christians eating the food, it seems to them that, in some roundabout way, their brothers and sisters are giving a stamp of approval to those practices.

Paul refers to those who know that there's nothing wrong with eating the food as the "strong." They are the ones who have the knowledge. He refers to those who still have qualms with eating the food as the "weak." Still, he warns the strong not to hinder their weaker brothers and sisters. Using a recurring theme of his, he says, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (v. 1).

Paul reaffirms their freedom in Christ. Still, freedom must be joined with love. Having the **right** to do something doesn't mean that it **needs** to be done.

Later in the chapter, he expands on this. "But take care that this liberty of yours 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 eating food sacrificed to idols?...Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall" (vv. 9-10, 13).

That's in the background of the discussion in chapter 9. Now, Paul makes it more personal. He begins talking about **his own** rights, **his own** freedom.

It's been pointed out that the apostle isn't trying to lay down a new set of rules. He isn't interested in "abstractions [that are] detached from human conditions...Paul [writes] in order to respond to particular moments in the lives of these early churches."¹ When we read the letters to the Corinthians, over and over we see, "now concerning" this or that. He's responding to their questions and trying to give them a theological footing.

For us today, concerns about food from pagan sacrifices don't arise very often! (I hope we would be concerned about animals being sacrificed in the first place!) Still, can we think of practices that we understand to be okay, given our freedom in Christ? Can we also think of those practices as being genuinely harmful, or at least offensive, to others?

(And when I say "offensive," I don't mean people who always seem to be **trying** to get offended. I mean stuff about which we ourselves should be sensitive.)

It would be easier to simply lay down an unbending, inflexible rule that applies to everyone, everywhere, now and forever. Paul understands that temptation; his training as a Pharisee introduced him to some of that thinking.

Still, "Our freedom, treasured as it is, can never be absolute, for we are called to be in service to the other. Our strength is neither earned by ourselves or for our own sake; instead, real strength is drawing alongside the weak and walking with them."² Many in our country don't see it that way. For them, their freedom is absolute. And if others get hurt—or even die—well, that's just too bad!

In verse 19, Paul begins a sequence that leads some to conclude that he's flip flopping. "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them." One might cynically say that he's posing in order to ingratiate himself with whoever comes along.

¹ www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=2/5/2012&tab=3

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He speaks of behaving as a Jew among the Jews, as a Gentile among the Gentiles, as weak among the weak. He concludes, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (v. 22). If that doesn’t mean flip flopping—changing who you are to fit your audience—then what does it mean?

We need to look at Paul’s motivation. Understanding that lets us know if he’s simply putting on a front. Verse 23 says that “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.” Paul is talking about evangelism. That word “gospel” comes from “evangel,” which means “good news.”

I find it interesting that so often that phrase, “all things to all people,” gets yanked from its context and used in a way that Paul definitely **does not** mean. Talk about flip flopping!

Australian minister Bill Loader picks up on this. “Paul is eager to point out that he does not mean anything goes. This had always been the accusation: if you drop some parts of the Law, don’t you invite lawlessness!?”³ There will be anarchy! There will be chaos!

“For Paul, the law of Christ demands much more than the biblical law, but it is also able to relate to new situations more flexibly, because its starting point is not rules but a central principle and relationship. Paul is arguing for flexibility. Notice that the underlying motivation is love.” Sometimes we have to decide if we want to take the scriptures literally—or if we want to take them seriously.

Paul is being attacked; he is being accused. We’re told, “The conflict he faced is still around today and his way of responding to it is still a model to be considered. At a more basic level, it alerts us to a range of things which happen when people engage in ministry—only some of them are life giving; some of them are life-sapping... Paul will have none of that.” And **we** should have none of that.

What drives the apostle is love. What drives him is the good news. He not only wants to **proclaim** it, as we see at the beginning of our passage, but he also wants to **live** it, as we see in the verses following. For Paul, to **live** the good news means becoming all things to all people.

What about us? Do we want to live the good news? Do we want to explore “becoming all things to all people”? Are we afraid of being labeled a “flip flopper”? Or have we just decided that it’s too much trouble—it’s not worth the bother? Is there anything we are willing to forego in order to not damage others?

At the end of the day, “becoming all things to all people” means seeing value in all people. But much more than that, it means learning to see Christ in **all** people. If **that** is our goal, we will be changing our minds—but we won’t be flip flopping.

³ wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/BEpEpiphany5.htm