

# Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – Epistle

## PARTICIPATING IN THE GOOD MESSAGE

### 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

### Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

### Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

16If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! 17For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. 18What 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. 19For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. 20To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. 21To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. 22To 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. 23I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

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**DIAGNOSIS: We are not impressed; neither is God.**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Our leader is**

*under-impressive.*

Paul writes to a community that does not think much of him because he does not exhibit what they consider good leadership qualities. He does not have a commanding presence and power. So, the community has become divided, with some claiming to be disciples of more impressive teachers. The resulting split is evident in the different ethical sensibilities people have, in competition over who is more knowledgeable about theological issues, and in a gap along socioeconomic lines.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Our community is under-impressive.*

Underlying this gap is the idea that a message about God must come from someone stronger than you, an authority, someone that you have to pay. There is respect only for the powerful. What does someone on your own level, or worse, weaker than you, have to tell you? According to this attitude, those who are spiritually, charismatically, or economically weak can be disregarded. The primary concern is to reach higher and higher in order to become secure in one's own expansive knowledge, free conscience and physical pleasure and well being.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *God is under-impressive (and under-impressed).*

Paul wants to save the Corinthians from this way of thinking and from the divisions stemming out of it because this attitude reveals a disconnection between their minds and God's mind. The way they envision salvation is not the way God does it. God is not impressed by status or by power over others. God intends to save people through Jesus' life. Paul reminds the Corinthians about Jesus in the language he uses to refer to his own living example: "a slave to all" (1 Corinthians 9:19). The upwardly mobile vision of the Corinthians is causing them to miss seeing Jesus. Paul warns them as gently as one can that God does not exercise effective leadership Corinthian-style, but has stooped

to the earth once again to fashion them all together into the body of Christ. By their strength, they are crucifying the body of Christ by tearing it apart instead of building it up where it is weak. It is their own destruction.

## **PROGNOSIS: God has a good message for the unimpressive.**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *God wants and wins the weak.*

Paul's message and actions were meant to show the Corinthians God's mind in Jesus. Jesus began his work under the radar screen of those obsessed with status and power as he went to the poor fishing village of Capernaum and was accepted with astounding effects (Mark 1:29-39). It was as Isaiah said: Rulers fall. God is different; God always creates new things, especially among those who are exhausted, powerless, and faint (Isaiah 40:21-31). Paul's good message is that God considers the Corinthians foolish and low on the status scale, which makes them the very ones with whom God has identified in Jesus. God sent them no illustrious sage befitting those of high position in the world, but only Paul, determined to know only "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** – *God builds up the community.*

That makes the Corinthians the bearers of Christ's body, not the destroyers of it. They are participants, as Paul is, of this good message. It becomes the story of their lives. It is a story that gives them no reason to boast, but it does make their eyes see the Lord and the Lord's whole body, including the weak parts. Now the whole congregation can sing together Psalm 147: "Praise the Lord! ...The Lord lifts up the downtrodden; he casts the wicked to the ground. ...His delight is not in the strength of the horse, not his pleasure in the speed of a runner; but the

Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love" (vv. 1a, 6, 10-11).

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** – *God makes the message effective.*

And so the roles become flexible, which makes it hard to maintain a division: The strong become weak and the weak become strong. The Corinthians can imitate Paul and put themselves in the place of the other in order to create a win-win situation for more and more people. All such empathetic means are freely at their disposal. As Martin Luther once expressed it: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" ("The Freedom of a Christian," translated by W.A. Lambert and revised by Harold J. Grimm, in "Luther's Works," American Edition, vol. 31 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957], 344).