Faith With Integrity

I Corinthians 9:16-23 If 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! [17]For if I do this of my own will, I have a wage, but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. [18]What then is my wage? 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. [19]For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might gain all the more. [20]To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to gain 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 gain those under the law. [21]To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not outside God's law but am within Christ's law) so that I might gain those outside the law. [22]To the weak I became weak, so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. [23]I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might become a partner in it.
The Word of God for the people of God!

One of my passions as a pastor began to emerge in my first weeks as a seminary student and a student minister. I was serving a church in a small farming community in northwestern Oklahoma. A couple of families in that church had adult children living in Nebraska where there was a strong movement among some Christian churches to withdraw from the "Brotherhood" (we didn't call ourselves a denomination back then.) That movement had come to be called the "Independent Christian Church."

The Nebraska kids were stirring up their parents and the parents were stirring things up in our church, and I was fresh out of the Southern Baptist Church and didn't know the answers to a lot of their questions. There was a long history behind that movement, but the upshot was a distrust of the Regional and General offices of the church. In seeking counsel from my faculty advisor, I called it "Institutional Paranoia."

One of the hot button issues was the term, "Social Action," a new term denoting ministries of peace and justice; addressing issues of poverty and racism. The Independent influence was saying the church had no business messing in those things. We should be getting people saved before Jesus returned.

My first classroom sermon addressed that tension and called for balance. Basically I said that the same New Testament contained the "Roman Road to Salvation" AND Matthew 25, "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me to drink…"

Admittedly, I was preaching to the choir—or to a classroom full of seminarians; still, if the message is valid, it's not been heard. I'm not sure it's been preached.

America is a house divided. There isn't much room for denial. And while there are obvious political manifestations, it's basically a spiritual issue; and it makes little difference what issue is before us, important human concerns are decided, not on the basis of need, but on the basis of making sure the "other party" doesn't win.

Some psychologists believe American values tend to cluster around certain motivational poles, described as "intrinsic" and "extrinsic". People who are intrinsically motivated engage in activities for enjoyment and the personal satisfaction that comes with

accomplishing a task. They're inclined towards empathy, intimacy and self-acceptance. They tend to be open to challenge and change, interested in universal rights and equality, and concerned about human need and the environment.

People at the extrinsic end of the spectrum engage in activities in order to gain an external reward. They're more attracted to prestige, status, image, fame, power, and wealth, and ar strongly motivated by the prospect of individual reward and praise. They're more likely to objectify and aggressively exploit people to attain their goals and to dismiss social and environmental consequences. They have little interest in cooperation or community, and are more likely to suffer from frustration, dissatisfaction, stress, anxiety, anger, and compulsive behavior.

We are not born with those values. They're shaped by cues from the influential people in our lives and from the prevailing ethos of our society, in which political values generally take precedence over religious or spiritual values. People who live under a cruel and grasping political system tend to normalize that culture and translate it into extrinsic values. And, by extension, people who *think* they live under an oppressive political system tend to reflect the same values.

The process is called policy feedback, or "values ratchet". Strong extrinsic values usually reflect insecurity and unfulfilled needs—whether it's a lost football game (the officials are paid off!) or political election (it's a conspiracy)—and that experience of losing ratchets further insecurity and lack of fulfillment.

By contrast, life experiences in a culture with low levels of poverty, where social norms reflect kindness, empathy, community and security (some of the Nordic countries for example) tend to ratchet intrinsic motivational values.

In conflict resolution we note specific kinds of conflict, and the most serious kind, the one that's most difficult to resolve, is a collision of values. In a conflict of needs, it's usually a matter of defining who really owns the problem and what specific needs are at stake. There almost aways is a win/win solution.

Values are a completely different setup. They rarely are rational and logical; they're imbedded in our personal, family, and group identity; they form the basis of our spirituality and often are perceived as personal rights: cherished beliefs and convictions, personal preferences and tastes, lifestyles, ideals … People generally are not willing to place them on the bargaining table; they're pretty much non-negotiable.

The divisiveness we experience in America generally represents a collision of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivational values.

Along the Rio Grande River in Texas there's a collision of values that appears on the surface to be mutually exclusive: the value of border security versus the value of compassion in the face of human need. Am I the only one to note that both values are legitimate? Is there not a way to honor both?

I made a list of some other values collisions that make headlines, and I began to see a pattern in which one of the values reflects some level of compassionate response to human need and pain and suffering. The opposing value, in many cases, is reasonable, logical, and valid, but is presented in such a way that it discounts or even denies the validity of human need. In many cases the response is to blame the victim: poverty is the result of laziness and irresponsibility (in some cases it's true); most disability is fake (the records don't support that); there's massive fraud in Medicare (again, the records don't agree); on and on. A collision of values, the one generating empathy with human need, the other discounting or denying the validity of human need.

So, as Christians, how do we engage the divisiveness? I had an epiphany this week as I was studying our reading from I Corinthians; Paul says, "***To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to gain Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law …so that I might gain those under the law.*** [21]***To those outside the law I became as one outside the law …so that I might gain those outside the law.*** [22]***To the weak I became weak, so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.*** [23]***I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might become a partner in it."***

I've had problems with this passage. Paul comes across as wishy-washy: "…all things to all people?" Sounds like a marketing strategy. But as I studied the text in the original language, the syntax suggests Paul is not adapting—he's not becoming a chameleon; he's empathizing. He's endured suffering, so he can understand and relate. And Paul never prioritizes religious doctrine or political ideology over human need.

And here is his motivating value: ***"I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might become a partner in it."*** Paul has come under some criticism in recent years. And, when you read the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles and his epistles—if you read them through the lens of 21st century, millennial spirituality, yes, Paul's 1st century, Hellenized Jewish perspective doesn't always mesh, especially when you consider his audience came from Greco-Roman paganism.

But see, here's the thing: Paul was under fire then, too. The Jewish oligarchy was after him; a sect of Christianity called "Judaizers" was undercutting his message and his work; and the Greco-Roman intelligentsia was ridiculing him.

Now, I need more study to confirm what I'm about to say; but, until further notice, a key to Paul's ministry has his discernible integrity. It is grounded consistently in one primary motivating value: the Gospel, and even if you find it incongruent with 21st century spirituality, it offers a standard of integrity to all who bear the name of Christ.

We claim that name; but which has more influence on our lives: the Gospel, or our culture, or our politics?

If our faith conflicts with our politics, we have some choices to make, don't we?

Invitation to the Table

British-American author, Andrew Sullivan, wrote, *"When you fuse Christianity with power, it isn't long before Christians start imposing the cross on others rather than taking it up for themselves."*

Maybe the most difficult thing about Christianity is that our faith represents the opposite of power.

Nowhere is that more clearly demonstrated than in the cross of Jesus, which Paul said was *"a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."*

I said it was clear. I didn't say it made sense.

On the other hand, human history is an exercise in trying to prove that he who has the most power wins. Wins what? Peace? Justice? an end to poverty and political oppression? How' that been working out for humanity?

G.K. Chesterton said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."

Yet, here we are, once again, at a Table that declares the salvation of the world is in an ultimate act of weakness—and of love.

Pastoral Prayer:

Holy and awesome God, thank you for the gift of your Son, whose authority is found in integrity and living truth rather than in any declaration of power over others.

You create the universe and gather it into your presence; and you continually reveal Jesus as the Way by which we may live out your vision in which all nations of the earth are blessed.

You call us as partners in the fulfillment of your vision. Open our imaginations to perceive the depth of love that powers that vision and grant us grace to follow Jesus as we grow into the vision as you unfold it before us.

Heal us of our strong desires for material things. Grant us grace to seek first your kingdom and to pursue right relationships with all your children. Remove from us the fears and mistrust that divide us, and use us as living examples of your kingdom come, your will accomplished, on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.