

1.1.2023 The Circumcision of Christ

In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul wrote, *“I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To 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 not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some”* (1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

St. Paul is a man quite familiar to us. We often read his inspired words, speak about details of his life, and consider his example on Sunday morning. Since you know him well, I'm sure you would agree that these words he wrote to the Corinthians are an accurate description of his sacrificial life and ministry. You don't need to be a Bible scholar to recognize the truth that St. Paul certainly made himself *“a servant to all,”* and this effort began with the Jews. Paul wrote, *“To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.”* Paul was born in Tarsus, circumcised on the eighth day, raised in Jerusalem, and educated in the strictest form of traditional Judaism at the feet of the revered pharisee Gamaliel (Philippians 3:5; Acts 22:3). Paul was a Jew by both birth and religion, and he *“became as a Jew, in order to win Jews,”* by using his birthright and religion as a means of finding common ground, a way to look his own people in the eye, and share the Gospel message with them.

Paul *“became as a Jew, in order to win Jews,”* and he *“became as one under the law... that I might win those under the law.”* Though Paul viewed the ceremonial law as a *“yoke of bondage”* (Galatians 5:1) that was removed by Christ, he still humbly became *“as one under the law”* by submitting and conforming to the rites and customs of the Jews - when he could do so with a clear conscience. Just as he used his birthright and religion as a means to share the Gospel with his own people, Paul often observed the law in order to avoid offending those he was trying to reach. He *“became as one under the law”* to the end that he may speak with Jews and proselytes on an intimate and personal level about the Truth of the Christian faith, and in the same way,

Paul said, *“to those outside the law I became as one outside the law... that I might win those outside the law.”*

Once again, with a clear conscience, St. Paul adapted his preaching and ministry in order to effectively share the Good News with the entirety of *“the world”* our Lord gave His life to save (John 3:16) - Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, and female. When Paul was among the Jews, he may have decided to practice the rites and ceremonies attached to the law of Moses, even though they were no longer binding, but when he was with those *“outside the law,”* he wouldn't observe those ceremonial rites, or urge others to do so. Rather, he would look for ways, in all honesty and sincerity, to speak the truth boldly, while becoming *“as one”* of them. A great example of this is seen in Acts 17, where we find St. Paul preaching in Athens, quoting Greek poetry (vs. 28), and basing his argument on an inscription found on one of their own altars, an altar *“To the unknown god”* (vs. 23). In Athens, on Mars Hill, Paul became *“as one outside the law,”* by commending these people for their desire to worship, and then, as one of them, Paul was able to effectively speak, and be heard, as he proclaimed the One, True God who they unknowingly worshipped.

To the Jews, Paul became as a Jew. To those under the law, he became as one under the law. To those outside the law, he became as one outside the law, and to the weak, Paul said, *“I became weak, that I might win the weak.”* We know Paul well, and often admire his sharp intellect, unwavering faith, and his ability to press on in the most unimaginable circumstances, and yet, it seems that Paul, perhaps more than anyone, knew that it was not his own human strength, but his weakness that unveiled the amazing grace of God. Therefore, St. Paul didn't hide his weakness, but in Holy Scripture referred to himself as the *“worst”* of all sinners (1 Timothy 1:15), a man plagued by a *“thorn in the flesh”* (2 Corinthians 12:7), who would boast only *“of the things that show my weakness”* (2 Corinthians 11:30). Paul's desire was to win to the weak, and because only God can give us *“a new heart and put a new spirit in you,”* because only He can *“remove from you your heart of stone”* (Ezekiel 36:26), Paul chose to become weak *“so that the power of Christ”* would rest upon him (2 Corinthians 12:9), and God would perform

the supernatural work of drawing the world to Him (John 6:44, 65).

In this passage, after he listed the examples we've considered, Paul wrote, "*I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.*" Paul described himself here as a man who saved others by becoming like them, and his exhortation to us is this: "*And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ*" (1 Corinthians 11:1 NLT). Everything we've discussed so far should not be seen as original to St. Paul. This particular method of evangelism, this call to become like others in order to "*seek and to save that which was lost*" (Luke 19:10) is in fact an imitation of Christ, for it was our Lord who truly became "*all things to all people.*" He chose to be born of Mary, circumcised on the eighth day, baptized in the Jordan river, tempted in the wilderness, tortured in Jerusalem, He was crucified, dead, and buried that "*by all means*" He might "*win more of them,*" safely leading us home to His heavenly kingdom.

Jesus is God, and Jesus is a man, a man who saved others by becoming like them. He "*became as a Jew, in order to win Jews... became as one under the law... that I might win those under the law.*" Our Savior Christ, as we read in Scripture, was sent forth by God at the perfect time, to be "*born of woman, born under the law*" (Galatians 4:4). In humble obedience, "*the Word was made flesh*" (John 1:14) and came "*to the Jew first*" (Romans 1:16), thereby fulfilling God's promise to faithful Abraham that through his seed "*shall all the nations of the earth be blessed*" (Genesis 22:18). Jesus was born into a Jewish family, raised in a Jewish town, selected twelve Jewish men to be His Apostles, and worshipped in the Jewish Temple, but be assured that the One who "*became as one under the law*" also "*became as one outside the law... that I might win those outside the law.*" He healed a demon-possessed daughter of a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28) and a Roman centurion's servant (Luke 7:1-10). He ministered to a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:4-45) and drove out a Legion of demons in the "*country of the Gerasenes*" (Luke 8:26), and now, through the Church He built, our Lord continues to win those "*outside the law*" every moment of every day as the Gospel is proclaimed not only in Jerusalem and in Judea, but in Samaria and "*unto the uttermost part of the earth*" (Acts 1:8).

Our Savior “*became as a Jew... became as one under the law... became as one outside the law... became all things to all people...*” and in doing so, the all-powerful, all-knowing, everywhere present Creator of Heaven and Earth, in some mysterious way, “*became weak, that I might win the weak.*” Holy Scripture confirms that truth, and exhorts Christians to do likewise, by saying: “*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness*” (Philippians 2:5-7). In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis, reflecting on that truth wrote, “The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a woman’s body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.” God Almighty became weak, that He might win the weak.

We’ve spent this time today considering the way God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, “*emptied Himself*” by choosing to become “*a servant to all*” - to the Jew, those under the law, those outside the law, and to the weak, that “*by all means*” He might lead us home. In conclusion, I’d ask you to consider how this truth relates to the feast we celebrate this morning: The Circumcision of our Lord. In this season of Christmas, we often reflect on the Incarnation and Birth of the Savior, but our sentimental thoughts about that *Silent Night*, and the Christ Child lying so peacefully in a manger, betray the truth of the pain and darkness and danger into which our Savior was born. The Feast of the Circumcision however, doesn’t allow such disconnected sentimentality, for as you know circumcision is intimate, bloody, and painful. Therefore today we forget about the stockings and tinsel and lights, and remember that the true miracle of Christmas is God with us in human flesh. Flesh that was cut and bled eight days after His birth. Flesh that was cut, and blood that was poured out for us on the Cross, at the time of His death.

Christ is our example. Christ is the example we are called to imitate, and if He chose to empty Himself, to be made in human likeness, and endure this bloody, painful practice certainly not for his own benefit, but for the eternal benefit of others, can we not recognize the priceless worth of submitting

ourselves to painful, personal suffering for the sake of another? If Jesus did so humble Himself, can we not humble ourselves, gracefully bearing the cross of self-denial, and viewing every personal sacrifice as the necessary cost of identifying with others, and leading them to Him? As the power of Christ rested upon St. Paul, may His power rest upon us, to the end that we may *“become all things to all people,”* and as we strive in our personal lives to *“save some,”* we pray, *“by all means,”* God save us.