

“Decision ‘09”
2 Corinthians 6:1-13

¹ Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For he says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. ³ We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. ¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. ¹² You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³ In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also. (ESV)

It’s always interesting to get feedback after the first service. I told them that one of the benefits of being a neuroscience sales rep working with psychiatrists is that I traveled from Renton down to Vancouver and out to Port Angeles and called on every psychiatrist in between here and there as a sales person. One of the great things is you get free therapy with every psychiatrist in the state or at least free diagnosis. Among the many things that they told me about myself was, “Tommy, you don’t seem to have the capacity for anxiety.” I said, “Really? Is that bad?” They said, “No. You know, firemen, police officers, rangers, some people just don’t have that much capacity for anxiety.” It actually turned out great because my partner suffered anxiety attacks so we sort of balanced each other out. The reason I told them that is because I felt a little anxiety coming to church this morning, talking about what I felt like I had to talk about. It was interesting as a response that some people walked out and said, “Man, I never thought about that before.” Other people walked out and said, “Neh, that’s the same thing you say every week.”

We’re in the middle of a sermon series in the Book of Samuel and yet I read to you from Corinthians. If you’re wondering why I’m not preaching I Samuel it’s because there are several things that happened this week that made me feel like we needed to address some issues within our congregation, to almost have a time of decision as to what kind of church we’re going to be.

There was some significant conflict that arose at the beginning of the week which ultimately had its genesis in the direction of the church. What kind of church are we going to be? What’s the direction of this church and what is our focus going to be? That was one thing. The second thing was a meeting I had with the women’s ministry leadership team where I showed them some stuff that I had came up with ten years ago. They asked me what it means to gather. What does it mean for our church to do outreach and gather people in? Several of the people there, one of them in particular who’s been in this church for twenty or thirty years said, “I’ve never heard this before. Have you shown this to the church or did you plan on showing it to the church. She said, “I think you should.” Then, my wife gave me an article that she came across in World magazine. The reason she gave it to me is because she’s been hearing me rant about this for almost eighteen long years. After reading this article, it pushed me over the edge and I said, “You know what? Now’s the time in our church when we need to talk about this because we’re wasting our time to do otherwise.”

If you’re interested in reading the whole article later you can go to <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/16009>. Basically it’s a short article about new research by the Barna Group that polled people who are not Christians from the ages of sixteen to twenty-nine and asked them what they thought about the church. It’s people who are outside the church in the time of their life when they’re the most apt to be considering going to church or not, the time of their life when people become Christians. If they don’t grow up in the church, that’s the time when they do it. So when they asked people who are outside the church (not churchgoers), “Tell me what you think about the church,” here were the results. Is the church judgmental? Eighty-seven percent of them said yes.” Hypocritical? Eighty-five percent. Old fashioned? Seventy-eight percent. Here’s a fun one. Too involved in politics? Seventy-five percent. Out of touch with reality? Seventy-two percent. Insensitive to others? Seventy percent. Boring? Sixty-eight percent. Confusing? Sixty-one percent. The response of people outside the church should bother you. Whether they’re right or wrong, perception is reality, correct? So people outside the church think that the church is hypocritical and judgmental. That’s what we are to them and they’re never going to come in. Now here’s some more interesting information for you. It affects our own children as well. When I first came on staff (four years ago to the week almost), I came o basically just help out with Christian Education, and I guess because I was younger than Jeff (significantly younger, I might add – not really), many people who were older came to me and said, “You’ve got to help us figure out a way to get our children to come back to church.” In other words, a lot of kids had grown up in church and after they had gotten to a certain age, they went to college (or whatever) and they just never came back. The Barna polled those people, too. Do you know what those people said? The church is judgmental? Fifty-two percent. The church is hypocritical? Forty-seven percent. Old-fashioned? Thirty-six percent. Too involved in politics? Fifty percent. People who

grew up in the church are twenty or thirty points better than those outside the church. But at the end of the day, the church has a pretty bad rap, and here's the problem. I hate to say it., we deserve it.

How come the church in the United States generally, and our church specifically, very rarely sees people come to Christ? Very rarely sees the Holy Spirit just work Himself out in the confession of sin and people loving one another? And why is it in countries where there are oppressive political regimes, the Gospel is booming? It must be something different than politics or position on this or that or the other thing. You know what I'm going to tell you. It's the Gospel. Over time all churches tend to drift away from their first love, every one of them. A lot of people would say to come to a church like ours, which is 125 years old (I think—1893), and which sort of re-booted about thirty years ago, "Tommy, a church like that isn't going to change. It can't change. It can't become effective. The best thing to do is to leave those kinds of churches behind, churches like ours, and just plant new churches because new churches can do the things they need to do to actually see people come to Christ." I fundamentally disagree with that, and the reason is if churches couldn't change, the apostle Paul would have never written a letter. He would have been wasting ink, and it was pretty expensive back then. The letter I read to you today was the thing that kept coming to mind as I was thinking about our church. It's the apostle Paul's admonition to the people in Corinth.

We're going to look at three things this morning. We're going to look at an appeal, we're going to look at a reminder, and finally we're going to look at a call for decision. What is the appeal that the apostle Paul makes to the Corinthians? He says,

¹ *Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For he says, "In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you." Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. (ESV)*

The problem in Corinth is the problem with every church that has ever existed. It's a problem I'm going to call, "Corinthian drift." The Gospel went into Corinth and all these people became Christians. They had to deal with all these issues, but then eventually they began to deal with other things like lawsuits between believers. They began to have lots and lots of arguments about worship. Could you ever imagine something like that happening in a church? Corinthian drift. Their focus was basically on everything but the important thing. So the first thing Paul does is make an appeal for them to come back to that. He says,

¹ *Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. (ESV)*

So that either means one of two things. One, it means that the grace of God was given to them but they didn't really receive it. Or they received the grace of God but it really hasn't affected their lives, it hasn't changed their lives much, or there's no fruit in their lives from the grace of God having come in and among them. Paul makes an appeal. "Today is the day of your salvation." He just spent chapter five laying out the Gospel. What is the Gospel? He says in verse 20,

^{5:20} *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (ESV)*

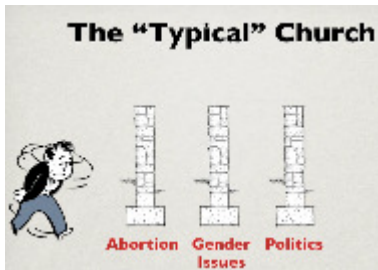
You see, the starting point when a church begins to drift is to ask yourself, "Do I believe the Gospel? Do I understand that the whole thing, this whole gig, we're involved in is about one thing. It's about God reconciling us to Himself, and in turn changing the whole world, renewing the whole world?" Do you believe that? It's not uncommon for people to be in church fifteen, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years and not really get that. Paul says, "Today is the day of your salvation." Do you believe that?

Have you been trusting Jesus or do you trust in your political party? Do you trust in Jesus or do you trust in your own righteousness? Do you trust in Jesus or do you trust in whether or not we use organ or guitars? What do you put your trust in? Paul says there's only one thing that can help you and it is the finished work of Jesus. If the finished work of Jesus is the thing that defines you, everything else doesn't matter in some sense, or it changes everything else and it changes your relationship to everything else. How many people are broken hearted and downcast and joyless? The extent that we have no joy and the extent that we have no passion is the same extent to which we don't really understand the Gospel. We can go to Bible studies and we can go to Bible Study Fellowship and we can go to Sunday night services, but if you don't understand the Gospel at a heart level, it doesn't change anything. The question you have to ask yourself is, "Have I been changed? And if I've been changed, how does it work itself out in the world? And once I am changed, what does that mean for myself and my ministry?" I think that's where Paul goes next because Paul's calling the Corinthians back to the way they started, and the way they started was by understanding and embracing the Gospel of Jesus.

Then Paul moves from an appeal to a reminder, and he reminds them of how their church was started in the first place. This is going to surprise you because the way their church started is the same thing that our church and every other church needs to do in order to be effective for the sake of Christ. Let me read to you what Paul says.

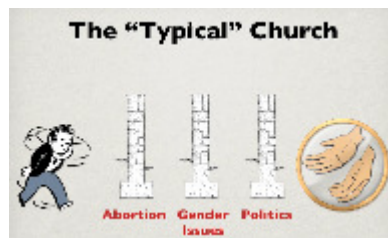
³ *We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry.*

That's it. Paul says, "You want to know how my ministry is faultless before you? When I came to bring you the Gospel of Jesus I put no obstacle in your way. There was nothing between you and Jesus, and having nothing between you and Jesus you could therefore deal with Him." In fact, the Gospel is all about taking down obstacles, is it not? Why did Paul get beat up so much? Because he would go in and say, "The law is not obstacle. Jesus has taken care of it." This is where most churches blow it, I think. What a church does with this whole idea of obstacles is the difference between the typical church and the atypical church. Most churches are typical. I'm going to show you now what I showed to the women's ministry leadership team that they thought you ought to see.



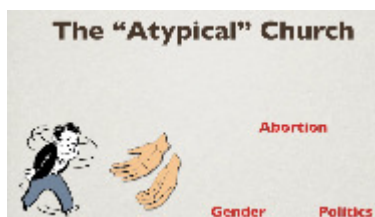
I want to look quickly at the difference between a typical church and an atypical church. In the typical church that guy right there, let's call him Bob. Bob's not a Christian and he's looking for something. He thinks, "I wonder if church can help?" So he comes to church looking for something that can soothe his soul, something that can change him and transform him, but he runs into a wall. By the way, I have several walls here and I tried to pick things that weren't going to be particularly controversial [laughter]. So the first thing he does is he bumps into a wall. The church thinks they're being righteous and they're taking a stand, so Bob walks in and he begins to wonder, "I wonder if I have to have the same view about these issues to be here?" If Bob doesn't have the right view when he walks in, what does he do then? He's going to have to leave. Now, if he does

have the right view, good for Bob, he gets to go to the next step which is something like gender issues. They're not in a particular order. For example, a couple weeks ago when I came to the church early, someone (without permission) had put how to vote for Referendum 71 all over our walls. So Bob walks in and thinks, "I guess if I'm not against this referendum this place isn't for me." But if you're Bob and you vote correctly you get to be here. And, you get to take the next step which might be politics. After Bob has decided whether he's pro-life or pro-choice and after Bob has decided how he's going to vote on this issue or that, he then gets to answer the question, "Are you a Republican or are you a Democrat?" The irony is that most people, I guess, believe that Jesus actually endorses their political values and political views. The reason I think that is because whenever election times come I get packets in my box that tell me, "Tommy, here's how you can tell people to vote for the Republican candidate." But what they don't know is that someone in our church will also slip me things on how to preach how to vote for the Democratic candidate. You see, even everyone in this room doesn't believe the same thing. Yet somehow you expect the church to take a stand on one issue or the other. The irony is, when you think about issues like abortion, is it really taking a stand to say, "We're against abortion" (which this church is)? You can tell that

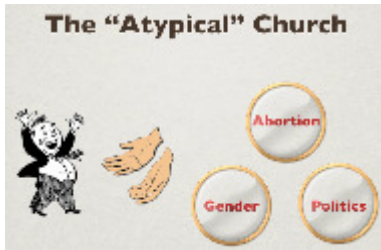


a church like ours and churches all around are not really particularly concerned about abortion because when you look at our congregation, the pews are not filled with adopted children. You know what, you can say you care about abortion all day long but until our church and other churches start filling their pews with children that no one else wants, does it really mean anything to say you're against abortion? It doesn't. Wouldn't you rather go to a church that helps anyone who wants to adopt a child pay for it? Instead we bicker about little budget line items when in fact we should be the most generous people in the world. The Roman Empire changed in a matter of a century or so from being completely hostile to Christianity to endorsing Christianity.

It wasn't because Christians chose the right candidate and made sure he got into the emperor's seat. It was because Christians refused to have any obstacles in the way and the way Christians lived their lives was completely different. The Romans had a low view of life. They got rid of children they didn't want and they were big on abortion. Christians took children. Well, Bob, if he can get past all three of these hypothetical walls, then Jesus is graciously waiting to receive him. Now, is it any wonder that very few people become Christians in our churches? Do you see that gold ring on the screen? That's a lens. For the rest of his life what Bob is going to do is look at Jesus through the lens of those issues. And Jesus is always going to be distorted. Of course, usually what happens, is Bob just leaves. It's a typical church. That's my experience over the past twenty years.



What does an atypical church look like? Bob comes in. All of those issues are still there. All of those issues are important issues. They're extremely important issues, but in the atypical church the first thing that Bob runs into is not a wall that has to do with politics or some issue, the first thing he runs into is Jesus. Isn't that sad that in church you have to make it a point to say the first thing that people need to deal with is Jesus, not all the periphery stuff?



Bob runs into Jesus first. Then what happens to him? Oh, that's beautiful. He's transformed! Then he begins to look at all these issues through the lens of Jesus and not the other way around. When he begins to look at the issues through the lens of Jesus, they're completely different to him.

When I was on Capitol Hill I can't tell you how many women came in who were radical feminists and pro-choice and everything else. They would hear Jesus preached, their hearts would be changed, and they would say, "Tommy, if the first thing you told me was about your pro-life stance, I would have never come back. And now that I've come to know Jesus, this is one of the most important issues in the world to me." That wouldn't have happened unless she had had the opportunity to interact with Jesus. That's what the atypical church does.

I'm not advocating that we don't take a hard stand on anything or we don't put our foot down on anything. When I've refused to take a stand on this or that, I've been called a coward. Do you think taking away obstacles so that people can interact with Jesus is more dangerous or less dangerous than just simply being political or being driven by something else? The apostle Paul tells us right here. Here's what it's like to have a ministry that won't take a stand on anything but Jesus. Let me read that to you.

⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (ESV)

The reason that most people don't have the kind of ministry that puts Jesus right out in front is because when you begin to emphasize Jesus as opposed to politics or anything else it becomes very inconvenient very quickly. When people come to know Jesus, things are very messy. It's just not clean. It's not as clean as deciding whom you're going to vote for. It's not as clean as deciding what kind of music you like or don't like. But you can't have the joy or the transformation without the inconvenience. I used to make church planters to write on a piece of paper what kind of music and worship style did they like? For me it would be traditional hymns almost 100% of the time. That's my personal opinion. Then I'd ask them to write on the other side of the paper what kind of music would best reach those in your community? Are they the same? Let me ask you to do that when you go home. What kind of music do you like? What kind of worship style do you like? Then say (keep this in mind) that the vast majority of the community that we live in is between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five, and fifty percent of them are not white. If they're not the same, are you willing to change? Paul says if you understand the Gospel you will be.

Paul ends this passage with an invitation to the Corinthians, and it's interesting to me. Notice what he says,

¹¹ We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. ¹² You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³ In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also. (ESV)

Paul says, "You know, I've been straight-up with you. I've opened my heart wide to you. Here, I've given to you everything I've got. The only thing that restricts you is your own affections." Your affections, the way you feel about all this stuff. That's new language for Presbyterians, I know. Yet one of the greatest reformed thinkers of all time, maybe the greatest, was Jonathan Edwards. In the Great Awakening, there were lots of abuses of things like people speaking in tongues and different kinds of things that were sort of crazy (not that that is), but there's just very interesting manifestations and Edwards would say, "That's not necessarily evidence of the Spirit's working." He wrote that in his treatise on religious affections. People would come back, "See, Jonathan Edwards says all that stuff isn't evidence of spiritual working." And Edwards would say, "Eh, eh, eh. Not so fast. On the other hand, if your affections are not moved, if your heart is not broken by your sin, if your heart is not overjoyed because of what Jesus has done and it doesn't work itself out in your life then you probably don't get it either." In other words, if the Gospel is really effecting our lives then it really is affecting our lives, then everything else will take care of itself. Spurgeon said the same thing. When asked, "How do you grow a church," he said, "I preach the Gospel. Nothing but the bold, pure, and clear Gospel and everything else takes care of itself." The question that you have to ask yourselves, First EPC is: Is that what you want? Do you want an inconvenient, hard church that is overjoyed and filled with people coming to know Christ and filled with the Spirit's working and moving in our lives, or do you want a cold place that votes for the right party? I feel bad that I even have to stand up front and say that, to be honest with you, and yet it has to be said. Will we trust Jesus or will we not? Paul brings the whole thing full circle. He said, "Do not receive the grace of God in vain." Would that we as a church, and not just our church but every church, not receive the grace of God in vain.