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# Lessons from Laredo: How to "Do Church" in a Complex Environment

EDDIE SHARP

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The University Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas loves missions. Missions form the core of the congregation's identity. God has blessed the efforts of the congregation in the past, but the last work was begun more than twenty years ago. For the past two years, University has sought a new stateside mission site. The criteria for the selection of a site included that it be in a growing area, within driving distance of Abilene and have good receptivity to the teaching of Jesus. After much study, consideration, and an act that was purely by the hand of God, we have selected Laredo, Texas as our new mission site.

Laredo, the second fastest growing city in the nation for the decade of the nineties, is now a city of 176,576 according to the 2000 census. Laredo is 94.1% Hispanic, 5% White, 0.4% Asian. Laredo sits at the southern end of the I-35 NAFTA corridor. One million semi-trailers cross the border at Laredo annually. Sixty-three *maquiladoras* in Nuevo Laredo fabricate much of that freight into finished goods. Catholicism is the dominant faith. Many citizens of Laredo are Catholic by preference but functionally unchurched. Three small Churches of Christ with a total attendance of less than one hundred are in the city. Half of these members are Hispanic and worship in Spanish. Two of the congregations are conservative and isolationist in orientation to the general culture. The challenge of planting a new church in Laredo calls for divine wisdom and sound thinking about the issues involved.

Paul's word in 1 Corinthians has much to say about how to plant a church in a faithful and culturally appropriate way in a city like Laredo. In many ways, Corinth and Laredo are similar. Both are cities dominated by the movement of commerce. Material goods moved through Corinth on the seven and one-half mile trek from Cenchræa to Lechaëum across the Corinthian isthmus. Both cities have many gods. Corinth contained twelve temples. In Laredo the materialism, the sensuality, the de facto paganism of the culturally Catholic, and the multiple sources of religious authority available to the devoutly Catholic smack of Corinth's idolatrous spirit. Corinth had its Jewish Christians with their sensitivities to pagan practices and love of their Jewish heritage. Laredo has its "Church of Christ" members who have lived isolated and critical of the culture for so long that evangelism is comfortable only if it is an invitation for others to come and to conform. The University Church desires to plant a biblically centered, culturally sensitive congregation in Laredo in such a way that as few Abilene church cultural elements as possible transfer. We hope as much as possible to let the attraction of the church be Jesus and offence of the church be Jesus.

Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 8 helps us face the issues of faith, freedom, and fellowship in local churches of today. Paul loved to walk into cities where worship of the true God was found in a synagogue or a place of prayer. He loved the challenge of facing down the false gods and lords of his day in the marketplaces and circles of discussion. As Paul taught about Jesus, people responded to the good news. When they came to Jesus, they were incorporated into bodies of fellowship in which they learned to live life in Christ. These new Christians





learned amazing lessons as they distinguished the true God and Father from the gods of the day and as they learned and practiced a new freedom in the context of nurturing, interdependent Christian relationships.

Paul begins his argument in 1 Cor 8 expressing his desire that people be built up rather than puffed up. The two elements of Christian faith that might inflate the believer's ego are Christian knowledge and

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Christian freedom. The edifying component of love joins with knowledge and freedom to create Christian fellowship. Paul asserts that knowledge and freedom are meaningless unless love and consideration operate in the life of the church to create fellowship. A brief review of 1 Cor 8 will show how these three elements interact.

Paul begins his section on food sacrificed to idols in 1 Cor 8. The fact that the Christians are having fellowship problems from eating meat sacrificed to idols

reminds us that Paul brought the message of Christ to a culture with many gods and lords. Christ appeared to Paul in Corinth and told him not to be afraid to speak to the people of the diverse, perverse city but to stay "because I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:10). Paul brought the knowledge of the true God and his son Jesus Christ to a city filled with idols and philosophies, rituals and rites. Paul expresses his knowledge about the place of the Father and the Son powerfully:

For even if there are so called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. (1 Cor 8:5, 6)

Paul acknowledges that other masters have operated in the lives of the Corinthians. Whether such gods and lords exist in fact as forces of darkness or as merely enthroned illusions in the hearts of women and men matters not at all to Paul. Even these gods and lords did exist, they are puny and second-rate compared to the Father and the Son.

The presence and power of the Father and the Son in the life of the Christian sets the new Christian free. Those who are in Christ are released from the basic principles of the universe (Col 2:8, 20). The gift of salvation by grace through faith replaces the principle of salvation by law keeping. The word from heaven was that nothing God had made was unclean in the new economy of things (Acts 10:9-16). In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes about such freedom in Christ: "Everything is permissible" (1 Cor 10:23). This kind of freedom is heady stuff.

With such freedom, practices that had been at the core of one's faith can be discontinued. Circumcision and Sabbath keeping can go out the window. The food from the idol's temple can be seen as mere food rather than as a participation with the idol. Paul used his freedom in Christ to acclimate himself to the different settings of ministry, becoming like a Jew to the Jews and like a Gentile to the Gentiles (1 Cor 9:19-23). Unfortunately, great freedom brings temptation to become selfish. In the same way that knowledge about God can create arrogance, Christian freedom, pure and simple, is the stuff of anarchy in the hands of the spiritually immature.

Knowledge and freedom come to the Corinthians as great gifts. But knowledge and freedom must come under the discipline of loving consideration for others in order to create fellowship appropriate for the body of Christ: "The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God" (1 Cor 8:2, 3). Paul urges the Corinthians to learn consideration for one another in matters related to the practice of freedom.



Knowledge of Christ and the freedom that he brings does not automatically change involuntary responses to various kinds of actions or practices. A person might know in his or her thoughts that an idol is nothing at all, but years of serving at an idol temple may leave one very sensitive to things taken from there. A Jewish Christian might have a caution in his or her heart about the Sabbath or a ham salad; even though, he or she might know that there is nothing to such rules this side of the cross. Paul teaches that these matters are not settled by deciding who is factually correct. Such questions are not academic, but relational. Paul warns against destroying the weak one, for whom Christ died, by the improper use of knowledge and freedom: "When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ" (1 Cor 8:12).

Implied in the use of the term "weak brother" is the notion that those stronger in faith have the privilege of giving in or giving up first. Some have argued that "weak" might indicate one who is in a numerically weaker position in the church, like the Jews being fewer than the Gentiles in all probability. Still, it seems that the force of the argument is that those who are more mature are called to be considerate of the consciences of those weaker in faith. The paradox is that the surer people are of their faith and freedom, the more ready they should be to curtail their freedom out of respect for the object of their faith and love for his people. Christian fellowship issues from such consideration of one another.

With Paul's lesson about knowledge, freedom, and fellowship in hand, I would like to allow him to mentor us at the University Church as we think about establishing a new congregation in Laredo, Texas.

The great divide in the Laredo project lies in a possible friction between the need to reach out to the lost in the most relevant way possible and the need to be considerate of the feelings and sensitivities of those within the church. We want to plan like bold missionaries. In planning our world missions in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Rostov-on-Don, Russia, we ask ourselves how to create the most culturally appropriate Christian presence possible. We try in every way possible to resist the urge to transplant an American, white, middle-class, university educated church into these contexts. The Argentine church needed to smell like beef and *mate*. The Russian church needed to smell like borscht and *chai*. Of course, there is oversimplification here, but basically we were blessed in our efforts to the extent that we were able to remain culturally sensitive and to know what of the culture to embrace and what to reject.

The difficulty in Laredo is that, on the one hand, we see the need to do foreign missions domestically. On the other hand, we already know some of the established churches in Laredo are suspicious of our effort. We know some are influenced by the most right wing people and papers. So a delicious question hangs over us—do we build a church for the lost or the found?

We need to plant a church that can acclimate itself as much as possible to Catholic culture while holding on to biblical teaching. We expect to dedicate babies when they are born. We think people should be able to kneel to pray. A candle may not be of the Devil. We think that someone who has made the sign of the cross when she prays all her life should not have to change that practice. We can imagine other culturally open and accepting behaviors that would lie completely within the bounds of Christian freedom. Christ has set us free to think of such adaptations.

On the other hand, we will be sharing fellowship in a city with conservative churches that will look with a jaundiced eye at anything hinting of Catholic influence. No doubt some people will place membership

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with the new church and bring their “this is the way we did it back in Dallas in 1958” views. Immediately, our sweet, innocent church plant will be in the throes of conflict.

Does Paul have anything to relate to us from 1 Cor 8? I believe Paul calls for us to have a paradoxical stance. We must be strong in the proclamation of salvation by grace through faith, certain of our freedom in Christ, and generous in our consideration of one another as long as such consideration does not change the message of the gospel.

Paul does call us to share the great news of what God has done in Christ. We get to share the knowledge of biblical faith with the unchurched and with the barely churched. The opportunity to inform such hearts is a high privilege. In Laredo, the biblical witness confronts tradition, superstition, materialism, cultural religion, and a certain border hedonism. Announcing the mighty acts of God in Laredo will be good.

We will also be proclaiming freedom in Christ. Christ frees people from sin. Christ frees people from oppressive, legalistic religion. Christ frees people to good works in the name of Jesus. Christ frees us to enter the world carrying the message of the good news of Jesus. Everyone who comes to Jesus experiences freedom in Christ in a different way. We are all bound in different ways; so, we are all freed in different ways.

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Paul then reminds us that the knowledge and freedom that people might find in Laredo in the year 2001 is just as likely to puff people up with pride now as it was in 55 A.D. When the church that God raises up is gathered, the people will have to learn to love one another in radical, personal, and sometimes self-limiting ways.

Those who come into the new church with a background in the faith and with a knowledge of Churches of Christ will be given the opportunity to catch the dream of building a culturally appropriate congregation in a predominately Hispanic and Catholic city. Those who can catch the dream will be welcomed. Those who have trouble understanding the dream will be welcomed too. Those who seem committed to willful orneriness will be pushed in the Rio Grande.

Those who come to faith in Christ and are new to the church and to Churches of Christ will be welcomed. Surely, by the time such a commitment is made, they will already know that the church embraces Hispanic culture and values those who come to faith out of a culturally Catholic background. These new brothers and sisters will be given the opportunity to understand the brothers and sisters who have come to faith from more Anglo or more “Church of Christ” points on the compass.

The greatest fact of the church must be that love builds up. For a congregation to be built, it must find the way of love. The fellowship must be focused not on who gets their way but on who goes out of their way to be considerate in all things. To be sure, the culture that insures health and growth in the church is neither Hispanic, nor Anglo, but a culture of love. The church when it is right has culture of love. This is the lesson from Paul in 1 Cor 8. Paul is a great mentor for ministry. We have a new church that will be marked by his teaching.

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