

Your Allegiance

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

The definition of allegiance is loyalty or commitment of a subordinate to a superior or of an individual to a group or cause. So let me tell you two stories:

A friend of mine was a citizen of Jamaica. She had lived and worked in this country for about 35 years using a green card. Last year her lawyer told her to apply for US citizenship. In July she became a US citizen and can now travel aboard as long as she wishes and will always be welcomed back home. When I asked what was different in her life she said “not much.” She does not experience anything different in her allegiance.

On the other hand my mother drilled into me that citizenship in this country has its responsibilities. I was taught to give allegiance to my family, my community and my country. There is an expectation of behaviors that demonstrates what it means to be a member of a family. There is an expectation of behaviors that demonstrates what it means to be a student of our public school district. There is an expectation of behaviors that demonstrates what it means to be a citizen of Pemiscot county. There is an expectation of behaviors that demonstrates what it means to be a citizen of Missouri or Michigan. There is an expectation of behaviors that demonstrates what it means to be a citizen of the United States of America. There is an expectation of behaviors that demonstrates what it means to be a citizen of planet earth; but even more importantly, there is an expectation of behaviors that demonstrates what it means to be a citizen of the church of Jesus Christ and the reign of God. So, I proudly recited the pledge of allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. I proudly recited the pledge to the Christian

flag. I proudly recited the pledge to the Bible, and when I joined the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) I gladly recited our statement of faith:

*We confess that Jesus is the Christ,
the Son of the living God,
and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world.
In Christ's name and by his grace
we accept our mission of witness
and service to all people.
We rejoice in God,
maker of heaven and earth,
and in God's covenant of love
which binds us to God and to one another.
Through baptism into Christ
we enter into newness of life
and are made one with the whole people of God.
In the communion of the Holy Spirit
we are joined together in discipleship
and in obedience to Christ.
At the Table of the Lord
we celebrate with thanksgiving
the saving acts and presence of Christ.
Within the universal church
we receive the gift of ministry
and the light of scripture.
In the bonds of Christian faith
we yield ourselves to God
that we may serve the One*

whose kingdom has no end.

Blessing, glory, and honor

be to God forever. Amen.

I understand my membership requires allegiance! Paul also had ideas about membership and allegiance. Our reading is set within the instructions for faithful living. The broader instructions address everything from a man "living with his father's wife" (5:1) and why Christians should settle disputes without recourse to Roman courts (6:1-8), to questions about marriages to nonbelievers (7:12-16) and eating food sacrificed to idols (8:1-13). There is a persistent concern with sexual morality, for example, conjugal rights in marriage and whether the unmarried should remain single (7:3-9). Our passage itself comments on visiting prostitutes and fornication, but largely as an occasion to present a thicket of more general arguments. Therefore this message is not confined to fidelity, but what it means to allegiant as a member of the Body of Christ.

"All things are lawful for me" (6:12). Paul may not entirely disagree. In Christ we are put into right relationship with God by grace. This is the free gift (Rom. 5:15), the basis for Christian freedom—for the fact is that our standing before God does not depend on satisfying the law. Nevertheless, said Paul, "not all things are beneficial" (1 Cor. 6:12; cf. 10:23). What's more, if I am truly free, then I will not be dominated or enslaved by anything (6:12).

Our scripture is really about how we determine which things benefit and which dominate. We can try to determine what things are meant for. Thus, food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food. But food and stomach are material things that pass away; God will destroy them both. The body is different because "the body is meant ... for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (6:13b). In fact, our bodies (and indeed our selves) are members of Christ (v. 15a) that will not be destroyed but will be raised as Christ was. For Paul, our resurrected body is not

flesh and blood, as the stomach and food are, but spiritual [1 Cor. 15:35-53].

Members of Christ should not be joined with a prostitute. Moreover, this does not correspond to what our bodies are meant for, namely imperishable life in God's kingdom.

“Anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (v. 17). One’s body therefore becomes “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (v. 19) that is not to be defiled. Moreover, “you are not your own,” but “were bought with a price,” that is, Christ's cross. “Therefore glorify God in your body” (19-20). Now if glorifying God is what we are for, then it becomes a criterion. Activities that do not glorify God skew life. They indicate that we are not oriented toward what we are meant for, but are captivated by another object.

Paul thought Jesus would soon return, and that many of Paul's hearers would be living when he did (1 Thess. 4:13-18). But Paul was wrong about the timing of the Lord's return. However this does not invalidate his ethic. We may have different understand Jesus’ instructions: Sell all that you have and give it to the poor; Do not resist evil or Paul's opinion that “in view of the impending crisis” (7:26) it is better for those who are married, single, and virgins simply to remain so. We generally don't dispense this kind of advice, although we might endorse some of Paul's other views, for example, about the mutual conjugal rights of husband and wife (7:1-6). Interestingly, however, the arguments presented in our passage, do not depend especially on Paul's imminent belief in end-time expectations.

John Calvin noted that, for Paul, we are “to present [our] bodies to God as a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). We understand ourselves to be before God and responsible to God. This is why we should be transformed in our minds rather than simply conformed to the fashion and concerns of this world. This is why we ultimately should be oriented to God and God's glory rather than simply to the many mundane pleasures, rewards, and goods. Calvin also wrote:

We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will therefore sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.

Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal.

To update this: our lives may be ordered by commitments to many different things: career, wealth, power, reputation, sex, nation, church, tribe, or ethnic group. But we are not meant only for these things. We are not fitted to live only for these things. These things, important as they are, need to be fitted into a broader context. They need to be put into their proper places. Indeed, when we are oriented toward these things alone, when our attitude and disposition is not adjusted by an appreciation for and loyalty to some greater and grander reality, we become skewed and enslaved. Then we do things that are neither beneficial nor helpful.

If Calvin was right, then our passage makes an enduring point. Our lives are appropriately ordered when they are oriented by devotion to a good that extends beyond our designs and indeed beyond both our control and our complete comprehension. Human life is well ordered when it is oriented toward the larger reality of God and God's glory. **Douglas F. Ottati**

Our allegiance is to be to God's kingdom and we are to live to bring glory to God!