

You've most likely pulled up behind a vehicle with this: the "Coexist" bumper sticker. The letters in the word "coexist" are made up of symbols for various world religions. There's the *T* as a cross for Christianity. The *X* is a Star of David, signifying Judaism. The *C* is a crescent moon and star for Islam. The yin yang over the "i" represents Taoism. It's a bumper sticker making a plea for *tolerance* and acceptance of whatever a person or group believes.

You wouldn't have found a "coexist" bumper sticker on the back of Saul's donkey cart – not when he was a follower of Judaism. Saul had no interest in coexisting with Christians. Acts 9:1-2, "Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem."

But then things changed for Saul. Saul changed - his name and his new outlook on life - from Saul the persecutor of Christians, to Paul the convert and apostle to Christianity. He changed from intolerance toward those who believed differently to pleading for peace and acceptance among the Jews and Gentiles, agnostics and atheists, the spiritual and the non-religious, the Christians and the Romans. But his plea was never that they coexist, but that they would come to exist with the peace and acceptance of the Gospel.

Here's how Paul explained it: 1 Corinthians 9:20-23, "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. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."

Becoming all things to all people did not mean Paul was willing to "coexist" with all the other religions. He was zealous for the truth, and he was met by that Truth on the road to Damascus. Once he had his eyes opened by the Truth, Paul would go wherever and to whomever the Truth was needed — not to hate or persecute or kill as he once did, but to reach out with the one and only *saving* message, 1 Peter 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an

answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope, *the Truth*, that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

The hope is in the Truth, the Way, and the Life, who Paul unapologetically and unashamedly shared as the Gospel of Christ Jesus, who once was dead but now was alive.

Some years ago, the Barna Organization published a study of what those outside the Christian church think about those of us inside the church. Outsiders said they see the church as hypocritical and unconcerned about others, concerned only with filling their own pews and offering plates. Many described the church as judgmental. Others said the church today is too politically focused and out of touch with reality.

So how are we in the church doing when it comes to being all things to all people? According to the Barna study, not very well!

I remember how for years as a young believer in the Lutheran church I was motivated and troubled by guilt. Nobody had to tell me I was the chief of sinners. I got reminders everyday from most of the adults in my life, but no one was harder on me than me. And the more I kicked myself, the more I thought being a Christian depended on me. I thought I knew the Gospel, but I certainly wasn't living by it.

When I announced to my pastor and parents that I wanted to become a pastor someday, I thought that it would somehow assure or guarantee a place for me in heaven. I remember my mother telling me, “If you expect to be a pastor someday, you better start behaving like one!” I thought that way, too...

Until, while in seminary, the hope and the truth of the Gospel became clearer. It was explained to me that, if I wanted to be a pastor, I had better start taking God at His Word.

It was at the seminary I heard and witnessed the Gospel as, “It's not what you do or don't do that brings you to God and God to you. It's what God has said He has done for you that make you His child, His man, His messenger, His servant. It is knowing you are forgiven not because you asked Him, but because He wants to and assure you.”

And then to hear Paul say, 1 Corinthians 9:16, "For if I preach the gospel it gives me no ground for boasting," helped me see it is not about me, or you any more than it was about Paul. The Gospel hope and truth is about the lengths God has gone for us!

This then is what it means for us to be all things to all – not to coexist with all the Christ-less religions that exist, but respectfully and with gentleness, without apology and without shame or excuses, confessing Christ who chose to coexist with us chief of sinners. It's going into our callings with the Truth who became one of us, yet was without sin but chose to coexist with our guilt and our sin for a brief but torturous time on a cross and in a grave to assure anyone, Jew or Gentile, who receives Christ will coexist with Him along with the Father, and the Holy Spirit for eternity.

That means relishing every opportunity here and out there to connect people to Christ and learning how we can reach them where they are at while not expecting them to conform to us. We can go to those lengths since we've already got the hope and the Truth who has already gone the distance for us. In His name. Amen!