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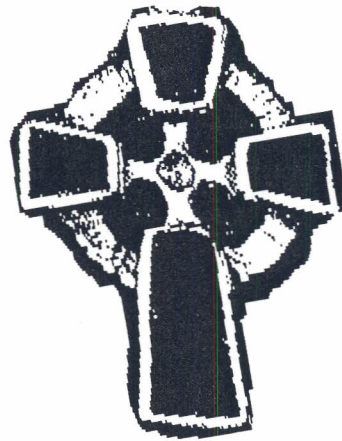
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Biblical



Studies

# “All Things To All Men”: Paul’s Motto For Missions?

James W. Thompson

The return of American service personnel after World War II transformed the consciousness, not only of the soldiers themselves, but of the population as well. After generations of relative isolation from Europe and Asia, Americans widened their horizons to the larger world and took on a new sense of global responsibility. The new global consciousness that shaped American society also influenced the church, leading to an explosion in missionary efforts. Indeed, in many instances missionaries were sent to distant lands so hastily that they took little time to learn the languages and customs of the lands to which they would go. In some instances, the missionaries learned the languages of their host countries well enough to initiate a successful work. In other instances, missionary efforts met with failure because the missionaries abandoned their work before they could complete the difficult task of adjusting to the new culture.

After the initial experiences in missions, a new generation of evangelists turned their attention to the study of missionary technique and strategy. For many, Paul became the paradigmatic missionary. With this new consciousness of missions, churches examined the portrait of Paul in Acts, observing both his passion for missions and his ability to preach in different situations. According to this portrait,

the apostle was a student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) who could reason with synagogue leaders (Acts 17:2; 18:4), address a Jerusalem mob in Aramaic (Acts 21:40), and reason with the philosophers of Athens (Acts 17:16–33). Thus Luke presents Paul as the missionary who is equally at home in a variety of cultures, capable of adapting to both Jews and Greeks.

Did Paul self-consciously adopt a strategy of flexibility in order to advance the gospel? Paul’s own statement in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 is commonly understood as the motto that governed his missions:

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 . . . that I might win those outside the law. . . . I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. (1 Cor 9:20–22 RSV)

The words suggest, at first glance, that Paul was multicultural before his time. To modern hearers, the words sound sensitive, cosmopolitan, and all-inclusive. As one writer has said, “Like the apostle Paul, we will want to

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‘make [ourselves] all things to all [people] in order to save some at any cost.’”<sup>1</sup>

Paul’s upbringing in Tarsus and Jerusalem undoubtedly equipped him to speak to both Jew and Greek, as the words from 1 Corinthians suggest. However, an examination of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 within its context suggests that Paul’s statement is more—or less—than a comment on missionary strategy. He is engaged in a conversation with the Corinthians on the subject of meat offered to idols (1 Cor 8:1–13). More specifically, the issue involves the exercise of one’s rights (8:9) at the expense of the weaker brother or sister. Because of their knowledge that idols do not exist, the Corinthians have claimed the right to eat sacrificial meat. Paul answers their claim by warning them against using their rights to create a stumbling block for the weak person who lacks that knowledge. To do so would be to destroy a person for whom Christ died (8:11). Paul argues, therefore, for an ethic of deference to one’s brothers and sisters—a denial of one’s own rights—that is rooted in the cross. According to 8:13, Paul becomes the example of this denial of his rights, saying, “If food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat.”

Paul’s statement is actually an admission of inconsistency. Because he agrees with the strong, apparently he will eat meat when he is not in the presence of the weaker Christian. This apparent inconsistency would have been troubling to the Greco-Roman audience. It would have suggested a lack of character and the sacrifice of one’s freedom. Peter Marshall has shown that one of the stock figures of antiquity was the flatterer, the chameleon figure who was consistent only in his adaptation to his surroundings.<sup>2</sup> The Greeks admired the man who was true to his character in all circumstances of life. “But the free man who deliberately and consciously changed his character to that of others for the sake of advantage was regarded as abjectly servile and deserving of ridicule.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the words “all things to all men” were a common invective hurled at the flatterer who always adapted to his circumstances. Therefore, in saying that he

is “a Jew to the Jews” and “weak to the weak,” Paul very likely is quoting from charges that have been made against him.

In many ways, Paul was not all things to all men. He elsewhere indicates that he did not “please men” (Gal 1:10; 1 Thess 2:4). Indeed, his demeanor in Corinth was deeply offensive to the Greco-Roman audience. When he insisted on working with his hands and rejected payment for his work, he offended the cultural sensibilities of the people. Nevertheless, his inconsistency in such matters as the acceptance of pay for his work or his adaptability in such matters as the eating of meat opened Paul to the charge that he was the stock chameleon figure who was “all things to all men.”

These charges probably form the background to Paul’s statement about his strategy in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. Over against Corinthians who insist on their own rights, Paul presents himself as the model of one who sacrifices his right (8:13) to eat meat. Paul’s self-presentation continues in 1 Corinthians 9, finally climaxing in 9:19–23. In 9:3–12 he focuses on his right to compensation, recalling that he has not made use of that right. In 9:13–18 he reiterates the same theme, demonstrating that he is not a worker who earns his pay (9:13–15). He explains that instead he is a person under constraint to the gospel. He is not his own man. As a result, he does not make use of his right in the gospel (9:18).

Paul’s personal example is the context for his comments about his work in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, which have commonly been understood as Paul’s missionary strategy. When Paul says in 9:19, “While being free of all, I became a slave to all, in order that I might win the many,” he demonstrates that he is continuing the previous discussion. As in the case of eating meat in 8:13, Paul has become a slave to others rather than insisting on his own rights. When Paul says in verse 22 that he was “weak to the weak,” he again alludes to the conversation about eating meat offered to idols. His statements that he became “a Jew to the Jews,” “under the law to those under the law,” and “not under the law to those who are not under law,” are also to be seen within the general context. Paul’s statement that he is “all things to all men” sums up his attitude toward each of the groups. The context indicates that Paul is not making a major point about his flexibility as a missionary. The larger issue is the fact that he has given up his freedom in order to be the “slave of all.” To be “slave of all” is not the approach that would have ap-

pealed to the Corinthians, who disdained inconsistency. Paul is explaining a mode of existence that was determined by the gospel, offering himself as the example of one who sacrificed his own rights. To be "all things to all people" is to be the slave of all. In deferring to others, he has become their slave. His opposition charges him with being a chameleon—"all things to all men." He responds by placing his inconsistency in context: he is the slave of others.

Paul's statement about his missionary activity is less a comment about his strategy than about the real driving force of his work. What motivates Paul is the gospel that has compelled him to service. He is not a volunteer in the service of the gospel, nor is he a hired worker. He is not his own man. "Necessity has been laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel" (9:16). In saying that he has been summoned by "necessity," Paul uses the language of the philosophers who spoke of the *constraint* or *destiny* that made personal decisions impossible. The language suggests persons who are not free to choose but must follow the destiny that fate has laid upon them. Although Paul uses the language of the philosophers, his self-understanding is that of the prophets who were called by God to speak. Like the prophets, he speaks only when he has been "entrusted with a commission" (9:17). He thus speaks the same message to Jews and Greeks, because he is not free to alter it. Indeed, his message is far more important than his strategy. Therefore, Paul's essential point is that he is not a free man. As one who has been conscripted into the service of the gospel and given a sacred trust, the primary fact is that he is a slave to the gospel and a slave to all men for the sake of the gospel.

Paul indicates his ultimate aim when he says "that I may gain some" (9:19), which is followed by the fourfold

repetition of the verb "gain" (*kerdaino*) in verses 19–22. His concluding parallel phrase, "that I might save some" (9:22), indicates his commitment to the evangelistic task. As one who is committed to the missionary enterprise, his primary goal is to bring all people under the rule of Christ. In a similar fashion, he says to the Romans, "I am a debtor to the Greeks and the barbarians, to the wise and the foolish" (Rom 1:14).

To what extent is Paul a model for missions? In one sense, Paul's missionary activity is unrepeatable because, as he indicates in 1 Corinthians 9, he was an apostle with a distinctive commission. In this passage, Paul is defending his work, not offering a motto for other missionaries. His statement that he is "all things to all men" is not meant to encourage the missionary's flexibility, but to describe his willingness to be the slave of the gospel and of others. Nevertheless, Paul is a model for missions at another level. He is the reminder to all missionaries that the gospel is a trust that one may not alter to fit the audience. He also reminds us that the missionary message, not missionary strategy, is his primary concern. We share with Paul the commitment to win others for the gospel.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 114.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's Relations with the Corinthians* (WUNT 2.23; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 310.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.