

# **“The Art of Being All Things to All Men . . . While in the World, but Not of It”<sup>1</sup>**

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When in that solemn moment of glorious surrender, you said “yes” to the summons of the Spirit to follow Christ, you were accepting the invitation to spend the rest of your life striving to be all things to all men. The purpose of this study, as I understand it from your Agenda Committee, is to compel all of us to take an analytical look at the measure of our adeptness at being all things to all men, and to explore some of the forms of that art which remain to be mastered and put into practice in our daily life. So let go of your ego and your image-building proclivities, lower your self-defense mechanisms, and let's go analyzing and exploring.

If we devoutly wish to master the art of being all things to all men, we might begin by sitting for a while at the feet of the one who coined the phrase and who was himself a master of the art, St. Paul. We want to try to penetrate his thought, then to see how his life as God's willing love-slave illuminates his thought, and then to apply what we discover to our own lives as public servants of the Word.

First an interpretive look at the context in which the words occur, then a look at the words themselves. Paul was a man who had penetrated the mind of his Lord, and who sought to make the Lord's way of thinking his own way of thinking. “We have the mind of Christ,” he once wrote of himself and his co-laborers (I Cor. 2:16). “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,” he urges us. That is the key to being all things to all men. In chapter 9 of Corinthians Paul is talking about the rights to which he is entitled as a Gospel-dispenser. But with him, having rights is one thing, while claiming those rights is quite another thing. He reminds the Corinthian Christians that plowman and reaper work in expectation of getting in on their share of the crop. Paul and his companions had plowed ground and sowed Gospel seed among these people. So, as sowers, they were entitled to reap some benefits from those among whom they sowed. He is thinking of material benefits. It was their right, he insists.

But, he reminds them, while we *had* the right to make claims on you, we didn't *use* the right. And the reason he didn't, Paul insists, is because he did not want to put any obstacle in the way of the Gospel. He did not want any man to be able to point to a single thing in Paul and then use it as an excuse for not accepting Paul's message about Jesus. What a marvelous example of self-effacing self-restraint. What an incredible concern for souls!

Now, if you really want to begin to grasp what it means to be all things to all men, buckle up the belts of your minds and get ready to dive with me into the exhilarating depths of Paul's thought. In verse 15 Paul reiterates the point of the previous verses and then plunges deeper. “When I was in Corinth as your teacher, I didn't lay any obligation on you whatsoever, and I'm not writing these words now to claim anything for myself. I'd rather die than do that. I'm not going to give anyone the opportunity to turn my rightful boast about never taking anything for my Gospel-work into empty words.” His boast is not, “I preach the Gospel, isn't that something?” You don't boast about things you do when you've been ordered to do them. And in Paul's case, he reminds the Corinthians, he had been “ordered” to preach the Gospel. “Woe to me if I didn't do it,” he says.

Then in the verses which lead up directly to the words about being all things to all men, Paul introduces the concept of his being God's slave-steward. None of us will ever become adept at the art of being all things to all men until, with a push from the Spirit, we think ourselves into Paul's shoes. In verse 17 he uses two words, *ekwn* and *akwn* in the Greek, the one meaning “with my will and consent,” the other meaning “without my will and consent. He says, “If I did my work as a matter of free choice,” if I had chosen on my own to become an apostle, “then I could expect to be paid.” But since I do it, *not* as a matter of my own choice, but because of a

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<sup>1</sup> (Read: I Cor. 9:1-27 and 10:31-33)

choice made for me, that means that I do my duty in the role of a slave-steward (*oikonomos*). It is a job that has been given me to do. In Paul's case the Lord decided the matter for him without first preparing him and without asking his consent. The light that hit him on the Damascus road wasn't some kind of soft, ethereal funeral parlorish luminescence. It was more like a "Buck Rogers" ray that knocked him flat in the dirt. You can't learn anything from the Damascus story about the Carnegie art of gentle persuasion, but you *can* learn something about how the Lord makes willing love-slaves out of rebellious self-servers.

We need to interrupt our reconstruction of Paul's thread of thought here for a moment in order to emphasize that stewards in those days were slaves whose masters gave certain goods or property into their hands to be administered in trust. The slavemaster's will was supreme. He didn't ask, "Will you accept the stewardship?" He simply gave the order: "Take it!" And woe to the slave who balked or refused. "When a slave, who had nothing to say in the matter, was put in charge of such a trust, he had no claim to wages for administering this trust. Being only a slave and belonging bodily to his master, that master could and did use him as he saw fit." (Lenski) And that was that, The dutiful slave was obligated to be faithful as a matter of course. This is how Paul sees his relationship to his Lord, and so must we, if we are serious about being all things to all men.

Resuming the thread of thought, Paul asks, "What pay do I get, then?" He answers, My pay "is the privilege of preaching the Good News without charging for it." In the light of contemporary attitudes, he sounds like a worthy candidate for psychoanalysis. But there is meaning to this madness, meaning Paul expresses in a paradox Luther was so fond of. Paul says, "I am a free man, nobody's slave; but I make myself everybody's slave in order to win as many as possible." Nobody's slave, yet everybody's slave. What sense does that make? Luther in his classic treatise on "Christian Liberty" put it this way: "A Christian man is a free lord over all things and subject to nobody. A Christian man is a ministering servant in all things and subject to everybody."

When Paul calls himself a free man, he means much more than just that as a Roman citizen he was born free. He has already indicated that he is also free of any obligation to any man because he hasn't accepted any favors from anyone. But the words carry much more weight than that. Paul was free also in the way that Luther was free when he broke away from the shackles of an organized ecclesiasticism headquartered at Rome. Paul means he is his own man. He had broken with the past. He left that in the dust when he picked himself up out of the dirt that day near Damascus. He had broken free from Judaism, free from Phariseism, free from his nationalism, free from the pull of opinion and the passion to be a success. It meant making enemies. It led to misunderstanding even on the part of fellow believers who mistrusted him. But this was something else again, – to be really free, wholly sure of himself, dependent on no one except his Lord.

Now the paradox. Paul says, "I make myself everybody's slave." Voluntarily I put myself in subjection to everybody else. His words are an echo of something Jesus said. "Whosoever shall be great among you shall be your minister, and whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all." In the world you scramble to the top by climbing up, in the kingdom you get to the top by climbing down. Christian freedom leads God's people to offer themselves to the world as voluntary slaves. Jesus makes us free to slave.

Paul does not just state the paradox and then leave us guessing as to what it means in a practical way. He adds the details of his self-imposed slavery. "While working with the Jews, I live like a Jew in order to win them; and even though I myself am not subject to the Law of Moses, I live as though I were, when working with those who are, in order to win them. In the same way, I live like a Gentile, outside the Jewish Law, in order to win Gentiles. This does not mean that I don't obey God's Law, for I am really under Christ's Law. Among the weak in faith I become weak like one of them in order to win them."

When Paul came to a new community, it was his custom to seek out the Jews there first. He lived among them in Jewish fashion and in the synagogue he used their forms of teaching to convert them. Having been a Jew by religion himself, this was easy for him. These Jews were people who were super-scrupulous about legal prescriptions. Everything had to be kosher. So Paul accommodated himself to them by carefully avoiding anything that would antagonize them. He didn't take friends out to dinner and then order ham with dill pickles.

He didn't agree with them, but he was sensitive about their wrong ideas. He showed patience and understanding without compromising and without being wishy-washy.

Then in his associations with Gentiles who were totally unfamiliar with the Sinai legal code, Paul likewise accommodated himself to them by conducting himself as if he, too, were without law. When, for instance, he came to Athens to preach, he tailored his sermon to fit the environment of the Acropolis. Timothy he circumcised. Titus he refused to circumcise. Not because he was inconsistent, but because to the Jews he was a Jew and to the Gentiles he was a Gentile.

Paul adds something at this point that is vital to the understanding of this entire matter. He says, "This does not mean that I don't obey God's law, for I am really under Christ's law." He means to say, "My position is different from that of both Jew and Gentile. I am not a subject of the Law in the sense that the Jews are. But neither am I in the position of being without the Law as is the case with Gentiles. With me it is rather a matter of being under Christ's ruling influence." And, oh my, what a difference that makes! The Gospel at one and the same time both frees a man from the Law, and yet puts him back under its ruling influence. The difference derives from your attitude toward the Law as a little-Christ. Apart from Christ, the law is a relentless master and a tyrant. With Christ in you, it becomes your beneficent friend and servant, keeping you out of trouble, guiding you on the happy paths of peace and right living. The difference is in *wanting* to comply to or in feeling that you've got to comply. The Gospel Christian delights to do God's will, freely, of his own volition, "not by constraint, but of a ready mind." (I Peter 5:2)

That explains why Paul can move so freely among both Jews and Gentiles. In perfect freedom he uses ceremonial regulations when he is among Jews, and in the same perfect freedom he ignores them when he is among Gentiles. He is not inconsistent. He is free in Christ. And he does it, he says, in order to win as many as possible for Jesus.

There is another kind of people Paul is concerned about beside Jews and Greeks, namely the weak. "Among the weak in faith I become weak like one of them, in order to win them." This is a verse of special significance to Christian teachers and pastors. Teachers do not have much contact with Jews and Gentiles, but they do with weak Christians. Paul has in mind those who are easily offended by further advanced Christians who sometimes act without a sympathetic understanding of or regard for the weaknesses of others. Paul condescends to them by entering into their difficulties in an effort to help them become stronger Christians. And is that not precisely your function as teachers of lambs and as diplomats in dealing with sensitive, sometimes unobjective parents?

Paul doesn't say, "So that I might *save* some," but rather, "So that I might *gain* some." "Gain" is broader in scope than "save." Paul is not content just to save some. He wants those who have been saved also to gain, – to gain greater strength, gain in knowledge and gain in faith. That must ever be our ultimate purpose and goal too. Whether it be pupil or parent, insider or outsider, fellow faculty member or Mrs. Gracie Obnoxious, we want to gain them all so that all may gain.

Now comes our theme phrase. Paul offers it as a summary of all that he has said on this subject. "So I become all things to all men, that I may save some of them by any means possible." Now, remember, the only way any Christian can effectively become all things to all men is by voluntarily becoming a slave-steward to all men. Called servants are just that – servants. They do not occupy top rungs on the ecclesiastical ladder from which vantagepoint they can assume a superior, condescending posture toward others. In fact they are not even on the bottom rungs. They are standing aside, steadying the ladder for the benefit of others, even for those who sometimes climb all over them verbally.

Being all things to all men is like walking a tightrope in the presence of an overflow audience. In endeavoring to accommodate ourselves to everybody's viewpoint, we must be careful not to slip and fall by descending to the level of merely trying to be men-pleasers or to the level of connivance with their false religious notions or their sinful practices. Paul is not advocating that we become gossipy with the gossips, or cocktailers, with the cocktail set, or that we tell people what they want to hear, or that we avoid stepping on toes for the sake of preserving a false peace, or that we kow-tow to Mr. Belligerent Board Member.

In working out this principle in his own life, Paul took his Lord as his example. Jesus could dine with Pharisees and publicans, associate with harlots, yet without receiving a stain or leaving a false impression. What Paul is describing is nothing other than the practical wisdom of a Christ-like kind of love which is both strong and considerate at the same time. That is what makes following him like walking a tight rope. On the one hand there is the danger of yielding too much to love, which then makes us softies and ceases to be love. On the other hand there is the danger that we may forget the dictates of wisdom, and that will land us in the folly of inconsistency and double-talk.

One thing Paul will not allow us to forget about being all things to all men is the purpose behind it. Six times in just four verses Paul states and restates that purpose. "In order to win them." The art of being all things to all men is something in which we make progress only when we pursue that same purpose with a passion.

## II

Let that suffice in the way of an interpretive study of the context in which theme words occur. It remains for us to make some applications of the theme concept to the lives of public servants of the Word, particularly to teachers in our Christian day schools. Perhaps I should forewarn you that if you do not appreciate having your toes stepped on, this is the point at which you should sit on your feet.

John Henry Cardinal Newman of "Lead Kindly Light" fame once observed, "The general principles of any study you may learn by books at home, but the detail, the color, the tone, the air, the life in it, you must catch all these from those in whom it already lives!" The art of being all things to all men was alive in Jesus, and it was alive in Paul. We can catch it from them, and catch it we must, until we are completely captivated by it.

That will mean learning to forget about making a name for ourselves in favor of making God's name great in us. Forget, then, about popularity, prestige and power, and throw yourselves without reservation into this glorious slavery of free men who voluntarily become slaves to all men. Learn to let your heart become one that loves with Jesus-love. Let your hand be a Jesus-hand. Muzzle your mouth to the point that it speaks only Jesus-words. Following Christ is not just a matter of walking at His side. It is more a matter of letting Him fill your shoes, of letting your skin become His skin, your mouth His mouth until everything you say is warmed and colored by His Spirit. You cannot be anything to any man until you can say with conviction, "It is no longer I that live, but Christ that liveth in me." Then you can put the Jesus-touch on everything, and that is precisely the same as being all things to all men.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to our being all things to all men is our inhibitions. We don't always talk freely and easily about the Lord we love. In fact sometimes we feel a bit squeamish in the presence of those whom we tend to label as Pentecostal types. They may not have all their theology quite straight, but they have gotten rid of some of the hang-ups we haven't. We try to compartmentalize our lives too much. We give Jesus His opportunity in devotional exercises, worship services, Bible class, catechism class, and discipline time. But then we shelve Him for the day while we get on with the things at hand. And when we do bring Him down off the shelf, do we just devotionalize and intellectualize, or do we talk Jesus-talk so people can sense we are involved with Him in an on-going love affair?

We share a common cultural, religious background, – most of us do, one with a German, Lutheran, Midwestern flavor. German Lutherans, as you well know, do not have a reputation like Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons. Some Lutherans may be proud of that, but I'm not. I'm ashamed of it. For what doth it profit a Lutheran if he be letter-perfect doctrinally, but dull in spirit? The Gospel was not meant to be encased in provincial shells to be put on display at certain selected times for certain selected people in a depersonalized way. If that were the case, the Lord would do better computerizing the Good News instead of using living letters for the accomplishment of His purposes. But machines can't be all things to all men. Only Spirit-filled Christians can.

If St. Paul were reincarnated today, and you met him as a stranger sitting on a park bench or in the waiting room at an airport, how long do you suppose the conversation would go on between the two of you before he brought up the subject of your Savior? When you meet a stranger and strike up a conversation, how long is it before you bring your Lord into the conversation? That's one small part of being all things to all men. You have not fulfilled your obligation in this respect when your hours have been put in in the classroom for the day. Perhaps God wants you to think of the attendant who washes your windshield or the clerk who checks you out at the supermarket as your pupil too. Jesus does not intend for you to confine your witness to the classroom. He shoves you out into the world to testify to it without becoming part of it. You can't be all things to all men and at the same time a Little Linus who hides behind the security blanket of a classroom, a congregation or a Synod. You cannot turn witness on and off to suit the occasion. If Jesus doesn't get through you to others out of the classroom, is He getting through you to others in it?

Yet it is true that of the "all men" Paul is talking about, the most important are the ones who are sitting at your feet every day. They *are* the ones especially for whom your life is meant to be a mirror of the Savior's. What does being all things to all men mean in terms of your relationship to them? They are so different from each other in personality and ability and in so many other ways. They are as different as Jews and Gentiles. Some are easy to love, and some are not. Some have minds like sponges, and some like blocks of wood. Some warm your heart while others raise your blood pressure. Loving the loveable ones is not much of a challenge. But what about the ones who are always frustrating you, upsetting your schedule, instigating little conspiracies or hampering your progress in a myriad of other ways? Are you their master or their minister? A slave driver or a slave-steward? Are they problem children or children with a problem? When we are earnestly striving to be all things to all men, the answers to such questions are not difficult to determine. God loves those who are absolutely unlovable. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly," not for the goodly, but for the ungodly, the no-goods. Christian teachers are teachers who learn their methodology from Christ. They may agonize through a thousand deaths for one renegade, recalcitrant student, not for any inner satisfaction for themselves, not because it's fun to see who wins the tug of war, but because that child has a soul redeemed by Jesus and a life that needs reshaping with the gentle fingers of love.

For a teacher, being all things to all men *also* means something in terms of understanding and accepting criticism. And you do get plenty of that, don't you, and not always of the constructive variety? But do you always understand what prompts it? Do you realize that much of it is an evidence of someone else's insecurity rather than of your own incompetence? When your reaction to criticism is defensive in nature, all that you and the critic are saying is, "We are both insecure." You cannot fit Paul into a picture like that, can you? In 9:3, Paul says, "When people criticize me, this is how I defend myself." If you are ever touchy about criticism, you might do well to reread how Paul defended himself. His defense ends with those words about being all things to all men. When people come to you with criticisms, petty or otherwise, fight back the tendency to go on the defensive. Learn from Paul that while you might be right, you may be wrong to insist on it. "We haven't made use of this right," he says. "Instead, we have endured everything in order not to put any obstacle in the way of the Good News about Christ." How's that for a defense? The last obstacle I should ever put in the Gospel's way is *me*.

Finally, for a teacher, being all things to all men also means something in terms of professional competence. When God puts His claim on us, He is claiming all that is up. He puts His demands on the best that is in us. Remember Paul's purpose. He restates it six times in four verses. "I make myself everybody's slave in order to win as many as possible." Think of all the education God put into the production of that one slave. Are His expectations of you any less? Has He lowered His standards or raised them? If God was willing to give the best He had for us, we cannot be satisfied just with things "good enough" for others. He who does not cultivate mediocrity in others should not tolerate it in himself. That means improving our competency as teachers. Enhancing one's professional competency is thus also part of the art of learning to be all things to all men. Mediocrity may be acceptable in the plumber's union, but never in the communion of those who plumb the Scriptures "in order to win as many as possible."

Summing up, we could say that to be all things to all men means to let the Good News live in your whole being. It means letting the power of the Spirit transform you into a personification of the Gospel. It means dying to self, smothering the “I” in me so that I can say, humbly and gratefully, but never proudly, “It is no longer I that live, but Christ that liveth in me.”

By now you may well be wondering, what ever became of the second part of the theme, the part about being in the world, but not of it. In a sense, all that we have said has been flavored by those words. I wish to conclude with a little paragraph I have cherished for many years, one that will add a little more of the flavor of what Jesus means when He reminds us that we are in, but not of, the world. It is entitled, “Others May, But You Cannot.” It’s author is anonymous, probably because anonymity is characteristic of those who are *in* the world, but not of it.

### **Others May, But You Cannot**

If God has called you to be really like Jesus, He will draw you into a life of crucifixion and humility, and put upon you such demands of obedience that you will not be able to follow other people or measure yourself by other Christians, and in many ways He will seem to let other good people do things which He will not let you do.

Seemingly religious and useful men may push themselves, pull wires, and work schemes to carry out their plans, but you cannot do it; and if you attempt it, you will meet with such failure and rebuke from the Lord as to make you sorely repentant.

Others may boast of themselves, of their work, of their success, of their writings, but the Holy Spirit will not allow you to do any such things, and if you begin it, He will lead you into some deep mortification that will make you despise yourself and all your good works.

Others may be allowed to succeed in making money, or may have a legacy left to them, but it is likely God will keep you poor, because He wants you to have something far better than gold, namely, a helpless dependence on Him, that He may have the privilege of supplying your needs day by day out of an unseen treasury.

The Lord may let others be honored and put forward, and keep you in hidden obscurity, because He wants to produce some choice, fragrant fruit for His coming glory, which can only be produced in the shade. He may let others do work for Him and get the credit for it, but He will make you work and toil on without knowing how much you are doing; and then to make your work still more precious, He may let others get the credit for the work which you have done, and thus make your reward ten times greater when Jesus comes.

The Holy Spirit will put a strict watch over you, with jealous love, and will rebuke you for little words and feelings, or for wasting your time; which other Christians never seem distressed over. So make up your mind that God is an infinite Sovereign; and has the right to do as He pleases with His own. He may not explain to you a thousand things which puzzle your reason in His dealings with you, but if you absolutely sell yourself to be His love-slave He will wrap you up in a jealous love, and bestow upon you many blessings which come only to those who are in the inner circle.

Settle it forever, then, that you are to deal directly with the Holy Spirit, and that He is to have the privilege of tying your tongue, or chaining your hand, or closing your eyes, in ways that He does not seem to use with others. Now when you are so possessed with the living God that you are, in your secret heart, pleased and delighted over this particular, personal, private, jealous guardianship and management of the Holy Spirit over your life, you will have found the vestibule of heaven.