



‘All Things to All Men.’ A Strategy for Pastoral Failure or a Necessity for Pastoral Faithfulness?

The Revd Dr Derek J. Tidball of Mutley Baptist Church, Plymouth, and formerly a lecturer at London Bible College, initiates an occasional series on topics in Pastoral Theology. His article well illustrates the shakiness of our customary division between ‘Ministry’ and ‘Theology’!

Of all Paul’s statements, that found in I Corinthians 9:19-23 must assume a high place on the list of those which cause us some embarrassment. His boast that he is ‘all things to all men’ is often used today as a term of brotherly abuse. This stance, one suspects, as also did Paul’s contemporaries, must result in the person who adopts it being a fence-sitter, vacillating, unprincipled, opportunist, wavering and wishy-washy in their doctrine. Just the sort of qualities, we might think, for a church bureaucrat, a Bishop, Moderator or Superintendent, but not the makings of a *real* preacher of God’s word.

Yet, Paul’s principle deserves more serious attention, not only because it is there in Scripture but also because there is an urgent need for the church to live by it, given her present weak situation.

Traditionally we have reconciled ourselves to the statement by relating it to evangelism and even scholars such as Henry Chadwick¹, who sees its significance for Paul’s work as a pastor of young converts, still speak of it as if it applies exclusively to mission and apologetics. The reference to evangelism seems obvious in view of Paul’s statement that the purpose of this strategy is ‘so that by all possible means I might save some’ (v.22). We are relieved that this should be the case for we find flexibility acceptable when working on the frontiers of the church. But once the fish is caught and joins the church any elasticity we have shown quickly becomes brittle, and rigid cultural norms are imposed. A careful reading of I Corinthians 9:19-23 in context however suggests that it is as much a statement about Paul’s pastoral practice as his evangelistic technique.

Is Paul Speaking only of Evangelism?

H. L. Ellison² interprets these verses narrowly and argues that Paul is only dealing with four specific groups, namely, the Jews, god-fearers, pagans and the weak. He suggests that the issue Paul is dealing with is akin to the Indian caste system and that Paul would not have been able to modify his behaviour towards the law, as is commonly thought, even if he wanted to. All that Paul is claiming therefore is that he would place Gentile believers on the same level as Jewish believers and on a higher level than Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. But such a theoretical interpretation of Paul’s words seems unsatisfactory, especially in view of Paul’s claim that he ‘became’ like one under the law or one not under the law as the situation demanded.

Rather, with Chadwick, we need a much wider understanding of Paul’s meaning. Chadwick demonstrates how I Corinthians itself together with the letter to the Colossians, illustrates the

working out of Paul’s principle. Referring to Paul’s dealing with the issues of asceticism and marriage (ch. 7), libertinism (ch. 6) and speaking in tongues (ch. 14) he shows how Paul begins by seeming to accept unhesitatingly the fundamental position of those whom he is going to correct but combines that acceptance with an ability to make practical recommendations to his opponents which leads them away from their faulty foundations. So, in I Corinthians 7, Paul begins by recommending the single state (v.7, v.26 and, if not considered a quotation from his readers, also v.1) but nonetheless is able to propound that marriage is equally a God-given choice and one which if entered into imposes certain obligations which are ill-suited to the asceticism proposed. Similarly, in I Corinthians 6:12 he endorses the licentious principle that ‘everything is permissible for me’ but ends by concluding with strong language commanding them to ‘flee from sexual immorality’ (v.18).

In Chadwick’s words, ‘Paul’s genius as an apologist (or rather pastor) is his astonishing ability to reduce to an apparent vanishing point the gulf between himself and his converts and yet to “gain” them for the Christian gospel.’³

Chadwick’s emphasis is on Paul’s elasticity of mind and perhaps he somewhat overstates the case. There is a danger that it could be read as saying that the situation determined the essence of the gospel itself. Gordon Fee⁴ wisely qualifies the picture somewhat by stressing that Paul is not talking about a change in the gospel itself but in his own stance, that is, in his own behaviour and life as he preaches the gospel. It has much more to do with the cultural situation in which Paul finds himself, his accommodation to his social setting and how he relates to people than it has to do with his beliefs and understanding of the gospel.

The above interpretation means that we cannot escape the uncomfortableness of these verses by confining them to the work of evangelism. They related to Paul’s pastoral ministry as much as to his evangelistic strategy.

The Crux of Grace

There is another reason why pastors must take Paul’s words seriously and try to work out its implications for today. It is a more fundamental reason. It is that it has to do with the nature of the gospel itself. Bornkamm has pointed out that these verses do not speak of a mere technique, for the simple reason that, in verse 23, Paul concludes his argument with the words, ‘I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessings.’ Bornkamm comments, ‘The freedom of his service is not a

matter of his discretion; it is a matter of his obedience to the gospel, so much so that his own eternal salvation is at stake.⁵ Paul's position is inherent in the gospel itself because the gospel is one which brings freedom (Gal. 5:1). To take any other stance would be to negate grace by imposing man-made obligations and cultural regulations on his converts and so to imply that salvation was by works. If he did this, Paul's pastoral actions would be denying the message he had preached.

This gets to the heart of the matter. It is not that Paul is vacillating or uncertain at all. It is rather that he is so certain about the doctrine of grace that all else is secondary and subject to discussion in the light of grace. In F. F. Bruce's words, 'His "inconsistency" as some thought it (*cf.* II Cor. 1:7ff.), was subject to a higher consistency – the more effective discharge of his apostolic commission.'⁶

Implications for Today

Experience suggests that evangelicals have, for the most part, long since forgotten Paul's principle and even disdain the idea of being 'all things to all men that I might by all means save some.' Whereas a commitment to the preaching of grace and of the gradual realisation of its implications in the life of believers should mean that the flexibility Paul demonstrates should be highly prized among us. How has this situation come about?

"Instead of becoming all things to all men we expect all men to become one thing, that is, just like us. Our converts have to fit into our mould – to learn our language, adopt our culture and become clones of believers who have been in the church for a good time."

One reason is undoubtedly that the evangelical has frequently found himself forced to defend the Biblical truth in the face of those who were prepared to give everything away for the sake of dialogue or out of a commitment to liberalism. The mindset of those who see themselves as called upon to defend orthodoxy does not fit easily with Paul's large-heartedness. It causes us to draw the boundaries clearly and to distance ourselves from those we fear are not authentically Biblical. Paul's principle doesn't appeal easily to our psychology.

A second reason is simply that over time the churches to which we belong have become a subculture within a wider culture and are no longer related to mainline culture as once they were. The separation is far from complete and mainline culture is still, for good historical reasons, in touch with our subculture and will continue to be so for some time to come. But, even so, the distance between the mainline culture and the religious subculture should not be underestimated. Like any subculture we have our own mores, traditions, customs, language and even dress. In inviting people to become disciples of Jesus we are often in practice inviting them to become members of our subculture. And it is precisely here that Paul's statement needs to be heard afresh.

One only has to travel overseas to realise just how much of what we do and expect in our church services and life is culturally conditioned. The growing number of people being converted who have no previous connection with the church also pose the

questions strongly for us. Do they have to dress in a certain way? Does it mean worship at 11.00 and 6.30? Do they have to have a leather-bound Bible? Have they got to learn to like certain types of church music and choirs which seem very foreign to them? Can they worship without flowers at the front of the church? Have they got to break off all their previous contacts? Or, as someone said to me recently, 'Is the only way to become a Christian to read the Bible?' She was commenting on how book-orientated the church seems to be in contrast to wider society.

If we are honest we find ourselves in a situation parallel to Paul whereby we struggle with reconciling two cultures in Christ. The culture of the church is akin to Judaism. It is rich in tradition and discipline and accepts the various patterns which operate among us, knowing that they were, at least, begun for good reason even if we have now forgotten what it was. The other culture is more akin to the Gentiles. It has no background in the scriptures and often seems anarchic, thoughtless and too free by half.

How are we to cope? We often do so by turning Paul on his head. Instead of becoming all things to all men we expect all men to become one thing, that is, just like us. Our converts have to fit into our mould – to learn our language, adopt our culture and become clones of the believers who have been in the church for a good time. But Paul would have us think again. We should minimise the cultural issues, listen sensitively to what people say, agree with as much as possible and never impose, directly or indirectly, blatantly or subtly, religious culture on them.

As pastors, that is the exciting challenge we face today, if we are seeing first generation converts coming into the church and blowing the cobwebs away. Trying to cause them to live in harmony with the older saints who see their ways of doing things threatened is not easy, at least if we reject the short-cut of imposing a particular religious culture on them. But it is a commitment we must have if we are to be true to scripture. Not a little of the growth of the 'house church movement' is due to the fact that they have shaken free from a religious culture which characterises so many of our denominational churches and which suggests they are frozen in time.

So it is a pastoral necessity that we learn again to become 'all things to all men' not only for the sake of their initial response to the gospel but also for the sake of their nurture and growth in the gospel. We need to adopt something of J. D. G. Dunn's startling conclusion that 'In short Paul's attitude to Jewish tradition was plain: faith in Christ could not and must not be made to depend on the observance of certain traditions. If inherited tradition hindered the liberty of Christ and the worship of God they should be abandoned.'⁷ Can we boast the same commitment?

Notes:

1. Henry Chadwick, 'All things to all men' (I Cor. 9:22), *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954/55) pp. 261-275.
2. H. L. Ellison, 'Paul and the Law – "All things to all men"', *Apostolic History and the Gospel*, W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (eds.), Exeter, 1970, pp. 195-202.
3. *Op. Cit.* p. 275.
4. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, (NICNT) Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 432.
5. Günther Bornkamm, 'The Missionary stance of Paul in I Corinthians 9 and in Acts', in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (eds.), Nashville, 1966, p. 197f.
6. F. F. Bruce, *I and II Corinthians*, (NCB), Grand Rapids, 1971, p. 88
7. J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, London, 1977, p. 65.