

H. L. Ellison, "Paul and the Law – "All Things to All Men"," W. Ward Gasque & Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce*. Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970. Hbk. ISBN: 085364098X. pp.192-202.

CHAPTER XII

Paul and the Law – "All Things to All Men"

H. L. Ellison

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"I am no man's slave, but I have made myself a slave to all, in order to win the more for Christ. To the Jews I have made myself as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those who live under the law I have come as one under the law, in order to win those who are under the law — not that I myself am under the law. To those who live without the law I have come as one without the law, in order to win those who are without the law — not that I am really under no law in relation to God, for I am bound by the law of Christ. To those who are weak I have made myself weak, so as to win the weak; in fact, I have become all things to all people, in order that, one way or another, I may rescue some of them. But I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share its blessings with others" (1 Cor. 9:19-23, Bruce, *Expanded Paraphrase*).

I

For those unfamiliar with Paul the words "all things to all men" suggest an unprincipled, chameleon-like attitude, an adapting of one's words and actions to one's surroundings without any reference to one's real thoughts and principles. For those familiar with their original setting they often suggest the key to successful missionary activity and the secret of the church's advance among the diverse nations and cultures of the world.

G. Bornkamm in a recent study¹ makes it clear enough that Paul is not concerned merely with a missionary technique or with a modification of the changeless gospel. As he puts it, "To speak as if Paul Judaized it in one place and paganized it in another is wholly inaccurate" (*op. Cit.* p. 197). He sees rather a change of "stance" according to his hearers — not the gospel, but its presentation and the explanation of it are changed. It is subsidiary to his interpretation that since he finds no trace of this change of "stance" in the sermons reported in Acts, he queries the validity of Luke's picture.

This judgment hardly does justice to the outline sermons presented by Luke. There may not be the change of "stance" demanded by Bornkamm, but there are indubitably interesting and remarkable differences in approach in the addresses given in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13: 16-41), Derbe (Acts 14:15-17) and Athens (Acts 17:22-31). In addition, it may well be

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questioned whether this alleged change of "stance" has left many traces in the Pauline Epistles.

¹ "The Missionary Stance of Paul in 1 Corinthians and in Acts" in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, edited by L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (Nashville, 1966), pp. 194-207.

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More important, it is also questionable whether this interpretation really does justice to Paul himself. Quite apart from our interpretation of this passage in 1 Corinthians, it seems clear that Paul regarded his attitude and actions as both exceptional and demanding. It seems obvious that his words are in some way linked with his refusal to receive any payment for his activity, even though he is entitled to it. Were it relevant, a strong case could be made out for thinking that this refusal was particularly connected with Corinth; in part, at any rate, it may be seen as his method of refusing to let himself be identified with any of the diverse factions there. In his letter he passes on to the athlete and his training, thereby suggesting, at the very least, that being all things to all men did not come naturally to him or to others. We may question whether the mental and spiritual agility demanded by Bornkamm really satisfies the claim made by Paul.

A closer investigation of the passage will show that Paul is thinking of a relatively narrow area, though its effects may be very far-reaching. He is clearly concerned with the Law and with its claims and effects on four groups of persons: the Jew, those under the law — it must not be too readily assumed that these two groups are completely synonymous — those outside the law, the weak.

The last named, the weak (cf. 1 Cor. 8:11; Rom. 14:2), seem clearly enough to be converts who adopted a rigorist attitude, even though they did not accept the Mosaic Law as a whole. It is quite likely that some of them had been sincere "God-fearers" before their conversion to Christianity; if so, they will have observed the Noachic commandments² carefully, while they were on the fringe of the Synagogue. If that is so, those "under the law", looked on as a class alongside the Jew, may well represent those Gentiles who had not become proselytes — in which case they would have been regarded as Jews — but who tried to keep the law, not confining themselves to the Noachic commandments; after their acceptance of Jesus as Messiah they will have adopted the views of the Judaizers.

II

When the Christian is faced by a Jew today, he is seeking contact with an unknown. Beyond the fact that he is presumably of Jewish birth, the name Jew means nothing definite. Not even in the State of Israel have the law-makers been able to define who is a Jew. In the days of Paul, however, for a man to be known as a Jew meant that he kept the law. However widely Jews differed they all kept the law. The various sects

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within it varied in their interpretation of certain commandments, but in their actions they were remarkably alike.

We hear today repeatedly about our "permissive" society and of the problems it creates. For this we must in large measure thank the journalist who can judge contemporary behaviour only in a contemporary frame of reference. Although it was adumbrated by Alexander the Great and

² The Noachic commandments were the minimum expected of Gentiles, if they were to have social contacts with Jews, or, at least in theory, live in Jewish settlements. They were the prohibition of (i) blasphemy (ii) idolatry, (iii) sexual immorality, (iv) murder, (v) robbery, (vi) eating part of a living animal; and finally there was (vii) the injunction to do justice.

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his Hellenistic successors, the concept of a unitary society was created by "the Great Church", when it had risen to a position of power. It was developed and probably perverted by humanism. Today the concept is collapsing, with the result that we are returning to the permissive society which existed before Catholic Christianity, and which in many parts of the world had never ceased. The great difference is the wide spread fragmentation and individualization of society which lessens the demand for group conformity.

In the Mediterranean world in which Paul lived, subject to the all-overriding interests of the Roman state, each ethnic and cultic group was permitted and even expected to live according to its traditions. It was not only the Jew who lived so far as possible in his own quarter or municipal district. Today it is not our new permissive society but rather the age-old one of India which will best convey the true flavour of the society of which Paul formed part. The rules and customs of one's ethnic and cultic group could be as determinative as one's caste loyalty in modern India.

The principle that the commandments had been given that men might *live*³ by the doing of them led to a wide relaxation of rules of dress, etc. for Jewish travellers journeying through hostile areas. Once, however, they had arrived where there was a Jewish community, they were expected to revert to the accepted norms. That Paul was readily permitted to speak in a strange synagogue and even invited to do so (Acts 13:15) suggests that Paul proclaimed his Jewishness and even his rabbinic standing by his dress.⁴

If in Corinth Paul moved to the house of Titius Justus, a God-fearer, next door to the synagogue (Acts 18:7), it is not likely to have been intended as a deliberate challenge to those who had refused to accept his message. It is far more likely that the God-fearers, who were from then on to be the main target for Paul's words, found that their semi-Judaism was rendered easier, if they lived in or near the Jewish district of the town. This easily comprehensible centripetal force was powerfully reinforced by the wish to avoid seeing idol-figures, whenever they went out of doors, and to be able to avoid continual insult, when they observed the Sabbath. We cannot affirm it with certainty, but in a large commercial and industrial centre like Corinth it is highly probable that the tentmaker's business of "Aquila & Paul" was in the Jewish quarter.

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All this adds up to the certainty that most of Paul's activity in Corinth, and indeed in any other larger centre of population, was carried out in close proximity to the local Jewish community, and was more often than not watched closely by Jewish critics and enemies. For him the antinomy so often observable in Jewish missions today was not possible. Even in Israel no contradiction is felt, if the Christian worker has bacon for his breakfast, while seeing to it that the food placed before his guests at other meals meets normal Jewish dietary requirements. There were really only two possibilities open to Paul. Either he did not observe the law at all, or he was strict in its observance at all times. A casual example of the latter is his keeping of the Day of Atonement under conditions when it might not have been expected. Yet Luke

³ Cf. Lev. 18:5; Sifra 86b; Abodah Zarah 27b, etc.

⁴ The average Jew in the Diaspora dressed very much like his neighbours, but he was marked out by his wearing tassels or fringes (*siḥîṭ*) on his outer garments, cf. Num. 15:38 ff., Deut. 22:12, Matt. 9:20. See Strack-Billerbeck, IV, 1, Excursus 12.

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reports it in such a way as to show that he saw nothing remarkable in it (Acts 27:9).⁵ Incidentally, if Acts were really from the end of the first or even from the first half of the second century, would this have been taken for granted? Indeed, would it have even been understood in churches which had become mainly Gentile?

III

It would be interesting, if we could discover the real religious outlook of the Jewish Hellenizers who helped to precipitate Judea into a life and death struggle in the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Certainly they will not have been simply the worldly apostates presented to us in 1 Maccabees. Fundamentally they may well have been descendants of those who did not accept Ezra's basic concepts.

Be that as it may, they lost the day and their views perished with them. Long before Paul's day being a Jew, as has already been said, had become synonymous with keeping the Law. Sadducee and Pharisee, Qumran Covenanter and Zealot varied widely in their interpretation of how this or that commandment was to be carried out, but they all agreed that the law was supreme and had to be rigorously applied. In fact, so wide was the area of agreement, that the outsider might have failed for a long time to notice the disagreements. It follows that if Paul wished to be accepted by Jews as a Jew, he was hedged in by a multitude of things which he had either to observe or avoid. Two outstanding matters will have been the observance of the Sabbath and the dietary laws, though in neither would the Pharisaic exaggerations have been considered binding on him; he may, however, have let himself be so bound, for by upbringing he was a Pharisee and a descendant of Pharisees.

The account of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem and his appearance before tribunals both Jewish and non-Jewish is instructive. The original charge by Jews from Asia (Acts 21 :28) was that Paul taught against the people, i.e.

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the Jews, the law and the temple, and that he had brought a Gentile into the Temple. Before Felix the last point was pressed, but the former were summed up in the accusation that he was a ringleader of the Nazarenes (Acts 24:5 f.). In other words, he was accused of an offence against a specific law, which was also accepted by the Romans as valid, and of views against which at the time there was no authoritative ruling by the Jewish authorities. This was not made until the rabbinic meeting in Yabneh (Jamnia) about A.D. 90.⁶ The farce before the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:6-10) was possible only because Paul's accusers had no specific charge against him; for the Pharisees in it he might be a bad Pharisee, but a Pharisee he still was.

In Acts 26:5 the RSV is probably correct in translating the aorist ἔζησα by "I have lived", instead of by the past tense as in AV, RV, NEB. Not merely would there have been little point in stressing to King Agrippa what he had done, if he no longer did it, but in addition it hardly brings out the force of the καὶ νῦν that follows, which implies not a contradiction but rather an

⁵ Cf. Strack-Billerbeck, *ad bc.*, F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London, 1951), *ad loc.*; W. M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen* (London, 1895), p. 322.

⁶ See the articles *Birkat ha-Minim* and *Minim* in *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion* (edd. R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and G. Wigoder, London, 1967).

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intensification. So we are justified in thinking that throughout his missionary activity Paul lived in a way that would have called for no adverse comment from a Pharisee who might have met him however much he would have rejected his teaching.

This is borne out, even if negatively and indirectly, by Jewish tradition. Elisha ben Abuyah (c. A.D. 90-150) was one of the great rabbis of his time, and he has left his name in *Pirke Aboth* 4.20. He was excommunicated and is almost always referred to as *Aher* (The Other One). There was never any danger in tradition's keeping his memory green, for it told also of how he had deliberately profaned the Sabbath. In other words, his false teaching had been sterilized and rendered harmless, not so much by his excommunication but rather by his notorious breach of the law. With Paul, however, his memory had to be forgotten, for there were no stories that could be told about him that would neutralize his teaching. As Joseph Klausner has put it:

From all that has been said above in the chapters treating the teaching of Paul and its consequences, the fact has become clear that the Jews could not have taken any attitude towards Paul and his teaching except a negative one. So in his time, and so after his time, up to the present day.

The Jews also rejected Jesus; yet he is mentioned a number of times in Talmud and Midrash — and not always unfavourably. But Paul is mentioned clearly not even once in either of the two Talmuds or any early Midrash. Only hints about him can be found in the Talmud.⁷

If this is so, and there are very few authorities today that would doubt it, then Paul's being all things to all men can have no reference to any

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modifications of outward living as he moved in different circles. Above all, it cannot suggest any compromises with the customs he found in the various centres in which he founded churches. Equally obviously, however, a varying "stance" towards the law can hardly be intended. For the Jew a man's "stance" over against the law was of little or no interest. Either he kept it or he did not. The only excuse for failing to keep it was, as has been indicated earlier, danger to life. Failure to accept the standards of the Pharisees or of Qumran might place a barrier in the way of full social fellowship, but the relative laxity of the law was not taken seriously, so long as there was no intention of not keeping the commandment in question.

The diaspora Jews of Paul's day were, in fact, little interested in what his converts did. They considered that if they were Jews they were under obligation to keep the law; if they were Gentiles, then they were not. Indeed they expected no more of the latter than that they should keep the Noachic commandments — so did Paul, but not because the Synagogue had formulated them in this way. If the converts wanted to do more, they should become Jews, take on themselves "the yoke of the Torah" and so do the thing properly. Their objection was that Paul placed the Gentile believer in the Messiah on the same level as the Jewish believer in him and higher than the Jew who did not believe, in spite of the fact that he was not asking him to accept the obligations that came on the Jew in virtue of Sinai.

⁷ J. Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul* (London, 1942), p. 600.

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IV

There is little point in asking what Paul's attitude towards the modern convert from Judaism would be. We can hardly believe that he would condemn the orthodox Jew for continuing in his orthodox practices after he had found his Messiah. After all, the orthodox Jew keeps the Torah less because he hopes for salvation thereby and more because he considers it his obligation inherited from his ancestors from Sinai on. It is most likely that he would demand from the one who has never known orthodoxy that he seek it because he has found the God of his fathers through Jesus. But in the historical setting of the first century to deny the law in practice was to deny that one was a Jew. As has always been the case with — in Jewry, not one's theory about the Torah but one's practical relationship to it was the important point. So out of no soteriological theory, but from the sheer logic of historic fact Paul continued to live as he always had, only with a new power and motive behind his living. When he told a Jew that he had found the long-promised Messiah, he appeared to his hearer as a Jew telling of a Jewish discovery. If it were not for the centuries' old church prejudice which demands that a Jewish convert must renounce all that smacks of Judaism, there would be no difficulty here.

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But what happened when Paul met Gentiles, no matter whether they were attracted to the law, or whether they kept the Noachic commandments as a sort of entrance fee for attendance at synagogue worship, or whether they were uninterested in the whole Jewish way of life? Let us remember here that we constantly influence others more by our lives than by our doctrines. How could a man who carefully kept the law in its externals fail to influence others in favour of its being kept?

We have earlier seen that there is probably some link between Paul's unwillingness to receive financial help from the Corinthians and his attitude towards those he wished to win. Paul had to feel free to react to each person and group empirically, one might almost say existentially. His hearers were to react neither to his outward manner of life nor to his followers' customs, but to the proclamation that God's King and Saviour had come. If they accepted it, then the power of Christ's Spirit would enable them to analyse and appreciate Paul's manner of life aright. He was not presenting himself to them as an example, though that might come later, e.g. 1 Corinthians 4:16, but as a herald. But on the other hand, there had to be something in the quality of Paul's life that would suggest to his hearer that here he was seeing the actualization of his own dreams and best aspirations.

While we shall probably agree that Paul was correct in not trying to create pale patterns of himself among his converts, we may not realize how difficult it is to achieve this goal, until we remember how outstanding Christian leaders have at all times been copied and imitated. Paul knew that if he was to achieve his desired end, it would call for the strictest self— discipline of every part of his personality to create the harmony of the whole that was needed. We shall understand this best, if we ponder on the impact made on us by Christians whom we come to know. Some impress us by their harmonious unity which makes agreement and understanding so easy, and causes our points of difference to fade into insignificance. Others strike us by their salient points, and these are all too often matters on which we disagree. When their names are mentioned, we think at once of their peculiarities; when they are discussed, it is normally the points in which they differ from the majority that become the subject of conversation.

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Over many centuries the church has appealed to the memory of Paul and has laid on the convert from Judaism the yoke of refraining from keeping the traditional law. When he has not conformed completely to his Gentile environment, he has been suspected of Judaizing, or of merely nominal conformity to the dominant religion. Yet the facts of Paul's continuing conformity to the practices of traditional Judaism are there plainly on the face of Scripture, for those willing to find them. The contortions of many commentators faced with Paul's acceptance of the suggestion made by James that he should associate himself with the men who had taken a Nazirite vow (Acts 21:23, 24) would be ludicrous, if they

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were not often tragic. Let a recent example suffice: "It is an extraordinary action for the Paul of the Epistles to perform; but it is not wholly incredible (cf. 1 Cor. 8:19 f.), if his reception by James, and probably the acceptance of the offerings of the Gentile churches, depended on it."⁸

Why is it that so many have been blind to the true facts for so long? The obvious answer seems to be that Paul's principle, as laid down by himself, has seldom been taken very seriously, above all as it is displayed in his letters and in the account by his friend and companion Luke.

Paul's personal practices derived from his Jewish background had so little importance for him, that if he referred to them at all, it was almost by accident. For Luke these matters were as incidental as the clothes the apostle might be wearing at any given moment. Paul so fits into the scenes in which we find him, that he seems to act as though they had always been familiar to him.

When Jesus the Messiah introduces himself to men, he always comes with the shock of the unexpected. He is never quite what we have been led to expect, and he always challenges our conceptions of what he should be like. Yet there is also something familiar about him. He is the second man, the true man, the one we always felt ought to be possible. When Paul says, "I have become all things to all men," he is really saying that he is so at Christ's disposal that there is nothing in his own peculiarities and practices that could be used to erect a barrier between his Lord and those to whom he would reveal himself. When all is said and done, how many, when they first hear of Jesus of Nazareth, are really conscious that they are being introduced to an observant Jew from Palestine? Even so Paul claims that his life has taken on the pattern willed by his Lord for *him*. Because this pattern was not forced on him from outside but moulded him from within, his own peculiarities ceased to impose themselves on others when he spoke to them about his Lord.

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⁸⁸ G. W. H. Lampe in Peake's *Commentary on the Bible*² (ed. by H. H. Rowley and M. Black, London, 1962) *ad loc.*