Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

All Things to All Men

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Galatians 1:10; Galatians 5:11
Code: B110902

by John MacArthur

The notion that the church must become like the world to win the world has taken evangelicalism by storm. Virtually every modern worldly attraction has a “Christian” counterpart. We have Christian motorcycle gangs, Christian bodybuilding teams, Christian dance clubs, Christian amusement parks, and I even read about a Christian nudist colony.

Where did Christians ever get the idea we could win the world by imitating it? Is there a shred of biblical justification for that kind of thinking? Many church marketing specialists affirm that there is, and they have convinced a myriad of pastors. Ironically, they usually cite the apostle Paul as someone who advocated adapting the gospel to the tastes of the audience. One has written, “Paul provided what I feel is perhaps the single most insightful perspective on marketing communications, the principle we call *contextualization* (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). Paul . . . was willing to shape his communications according to their needs in order to receive the response he sought.” “The first marketeer was Paul,” another echoes.

After all, the apostle *did* write, “I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it” (1 Corinthians 9:22, 23). Is that a mandate for pragmatism in ministry? Was the apostle Paul suggesting that the gospel message can be made to appeal to people by accommodating their relish for certain amusements or by pampering their pet vices? How far do you suppose he would have been willing to go with the principle of “contextualization”?

The Great Non-Negotiable

This much is very clear: the apostle Paul was no people-pleaser. He wrote, “Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10). Paul did not amend or abridge his message to make people happy. He was utterly unwilling to try to remove the offense from the gospel (Galatians 5:11). He did not use methodology that catered to the lusts of his listeners. He certainly did not follow the pragmatic philosophy of modern market-driven ministers.

What made Paul effective was not marketing savvy, but a stubborn devotion to the truth. He was Christ's ambassador, not His press secretary. Truth was something to be declared, not negotiated. Paul was not ashamed of the gospel (Romans 1:16). He willingly suffered for the truth's sake (2 Corinthians 11:23–28). He did not back down in the face of opposition or rejection. He did not compromise with unbelievers or make friends with the enemies of God.

Paul's message was *always* non-negotiable. In the same chapter where he spoke of becoming all things to all men, Paul wrote, "I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16). His ministry was in response to a divine mandate. God had called him and commissioned him. Paul preached the gospel exactly as he had received it directly from the Lord, and he always delivered that message "as of first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3). He was not a salesman or marketer, but a divine emissary. He certainly was *not* "willing to shape his communications" to accommodate his listeners or produce a desirable response. The fact that he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19), beaten, imprisoned, and finally killed for the truth's sake ought to demonstrate that he didn't adapt the message to make it pleasing to his hearers! And the personal suffering he bore because of his ministry did *not* indicate that something was wrong with his approach, but that everything had been right!

So what did Paul mean when he wrote, "I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel"? As always, the context makes his meaning clear. We'll be taking a look at what Paul *really* meant over the course of the next several days. I hope you stick around.

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