

14th September 2023 All things to all men... 1 Corinthians 9:22

Many thanks to Brother Ken, for the good introduction.

He made the point that this verse could be misunderstood, and does not mean that in being all things to all men, that there becomes a tolerance or a glorying in sin. Take for example a situation where there is a crowd of men in the marketplace, and you want the opportunity to mention the Faith and attempt to introduce a deeper subject, it is not necessary to laugh at dirty jokes to fit in and ingratiate oneself with the group or tolerate filthy speaking. Being all things to all men, does not mean compromising on the way of life that Christ Jesus has demanded to be followed.

Brother Ken also gave the example of where Paul took Timothy and had him circumcised – even though it was not necessary, in order to enable Timothy to freely converse and convince the ultra-judgemental Jews, whereas with Titus, no such inconvenient operation was required, as the circumstances were different.

Brother Ken has touched on the heart of the matter here, because the Apostle Paul is not teaching us to be all things to all men, in any circumstance, and to attempt to fit in as it were with the crowd, in order to be liked or popular, and to then use that as a springboard for preaching. No, he is not advising that at all. Instead, he is speaking about specific circumstances. The Christian Faith was rapidly expanding in unusual circumstances, where the Gentiles were being preached to, and were invited to the Gospel, and where the Mosaic constitution of things had been fulfilled. The Jews were still offended by the Gentiles, yet Jewish converts were expected to not only fellowship Gentiles but to be as one with them. Of course, to those steeped in the traditions in which they had been brought up, this would have been very difficult. There would have been great social barriers to break through, to even begin to be heard. It was in this context that Paul is speaking of being all things to all men.

In the context of our day, there are still social barriers. For example, attempting to preach to a Muslim, a basic understanding of what they believe is necessary if we wish to engage with them, and show respect for their religious commitment – even if we do not agree with it. A certain degree of empathy is required. We can use the example of the Lord Jesus at this point.

Jesus sat with the publicans and sinners. He spoke with the doctors and lawyers in Solomon's porch. He communed with lepers and dined with Pharisees. How did so many different classes of people find him so approachable? He listened, and did not condemn, and judge, but would proffer very wise powerful and thoughtful words, which would leave the listener something to think about. Take the instance when he went to Samaria – of all places. The Jews would not go there lest they be made ritually unclean. But Jesus visited and stayed there three days. He took time to rest by the well of Jacob, and speak to a woman there – who he knew was living in sin. Instead of being prejudiced and judgemental, he showed compassion, understanding, and mercy, and offered her the Living Water. Jesus did this *by all means that he might save some*.

Another example though not so powerful of that as the Lord Jesus is that of Joseph. Joseph proved to be a helpful son to his father, running errands. But he learned that relating dreams to envious older brothers was perhaps not the best way to win their friendship. This lesson of being able to judge the circumstance and show prudence stayed with him. Sold into slavery, he quickly built a reputation of being an efficient household manager. Did Joseph really care for managing provisions, and the household staff, wouldn't he rather be back home talking of spiritual things with his family? But *all things to all men*, he adapted without compromise to the situation, and let the Spirit of Christ shine through his behaviour. Next thrown into prison, he was not down for long, using the same principles of living he became the gaolers principle administrator, having full respect from the prisoners! That is surely some feat!

After a few years, he found himself as number two in power in the Kingdom, with all of Egypt bowing down to him. Finally when his brothers came to visit, he acted as a rough stranger to them to test them, but then switching to compassionate and loving brother once again. Such a man, able to use wisdom and prudence to behave with decorum, and yet empathise with others, enabled him to be called the Saviour of the World, and be a type of the Christ to come. All things to all men that he might save some.

Empathy for others refers to the ability to understand and share the feelings and perspectives of other people. It involves imagining oneself in someone else's situation, feeling what they are feeling, and responding with care and concern. It was of God that Rehoboam did not behave in this way. The advice given to him was *If thou wilt be a servant unto this people this day, and wilt serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be thy servants for ever.* (1 Kings 12:7) How useful this advice to lead by example, to show kindness, to be a servant, Jesus condescended and stooped down to get on the level of those who did not understand, had poor upbringings, who had lived with prejudice and poverty, and he dealt with their fears and understood their misgivings. He still does.

Although Paul in his exhortation in the verse for our consideration relates to a specific situation, nevertheless the thoughtfulness of the behaviour required still applies.

Within the Ecclesia, there will be all types of people, just as there were in the Corinthian Ecclesia. So the advice of Paul to the Romans is to be heeded: Romans 14:19 *Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.* The Apostle goes on to teach how it is necessary to be mindful of the sensitivities of others – even if we ourselves have no problem with the custom. Brother Ken mentioned this point. So verse 21: *It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbles, or is offended, or is made weak.*

Some may say, oh that is being hypocritical... but of course it is not, it not our conscience that is being affected, if we try not to cause offence, instead if we are forceful in our liberty, and brush off the protests of others, we may well be causing their conscience to be affected and indeed sin. Then that person's fall becomes our responsibility. Our fault. How much easier and better to allow our freedom to choose to be limited, and accept the other person's point of view, and just put up with it. Then instead of causing a breach, an opportunity may present itself, to expound the Word and gain that brother or sister, or gain the confidence of the unbeliever to hear the Word of God.

Brother Terry