

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “BECOME ALL THINGS TO ALL MEN”?

Below is an email response concerning Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 9:22
“I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.”
By Greg Lundstedt 03/2011

I've got a few thoughts concerning 1 Corinthians chapter 9 which I hope will be helpful.

Be aware that there are many false teachers and deceived brethren that are using this passage as an excuse to do certain things within the church to try to win the lost.

To understand this passage **you must understand its context**. Paul begins his argument in this passage back in the beginning of chapter 8. In chapter 8 he is responding to a question the Corinthians had concerning things sacrificed to idols. And he will make the point that although he has the liberty in Christ to eat these things, he in no way would want this liberty to wound the conscience of someone who is weak in the faith and thus sin against them and cause them to stumble. Then in chapter 9, he begins to make the point that being an apostle he has liberty or is free to eat and drink, to take along a believing wife, to make his living off the gospel. But with that said you will find he is very aware of not using his freedom to stumble anybody or hinder the gospel. He then makes the point in 9:19, that although he is free, he has limited himself or enslaved himself concerning certain rights, that he might win more. So then, the context is really about **limiting genuine liberty in Christ rather than pressing one's rights**. Yet we will see his limiting of his genuine rights is not in the context of compromise or sin.

One other **crucial point** you must understand before you get to those verses is that **the context Paul is speaking of is not in the church gathering or the assembly of the church**, but rather in the context of evangelizing the lost in the world, (such as the Corinthians before they were saved) and in not stumbling a weak brother. The reason why this point is crucial is because most of the people who use these verses out of context apply them to the methods in which they try to win the lost in the church gathering, not out in the world.

Another point I think it would be important to note is that Paul, in verses 19 through 23, never says **Paul became something he wasn't before or was not personally familiar with**. He was a Jew, and he was also raised in a Gentile context in Tarsus. He certainly understood what it was like to be weak in the faith concerning food and drink, having been a Jew. Paul never tries to become a Roman soldier to win Roman soldiers, because he never was one. Paul never became a beggar to win beggars. In the context of truly having been a Jew and lived among Gentiles, he was simply limiting his rightful freedom in Christ, so as not to cause a stumbling block for the gospel. In the context of trusting Christ, Paul wisely understood from personal experience how to relate to each people group, **without sinning or compromising**. He would limit his freedom in Christ so as not to place a stumbling block in the way of the gospel.

What type of examples might we see today, good and bad? Today, **sinful men have flipped this passage on its head**. They do not see it as **limiting** one's Christian liberty so as to win people to Christ, but they see it as **becoming like sinful people so as to win people to Christ**. Some erroneously say that, because of this passage, we need to have tattoos and earrings to win those who have tattoos and earrings, we need to use vulgar language because that's what those who don't know Christ do. In essence they are speaking of **compromise in order to win people to Christ**. This passage does not justify sin or compromise; **it is simply speaking of limiting one's liberty in Christ so as not to create a stumbling block**. The issue is limiting one's rights, not pressing one's rights. Paul did not become worldly in order to win the world, for that would be sin. (See James 4)

Now let's use some modern-day examples on the positive side. Say you used to be a fireman. God can use your personal understanding of being a fireman to maybe identify with fireman and thus share the gospel with them. Yet this identification would not be in the context of the sinful or worldly things those firemen did apart from Christ. Maybe before you came to Christ you were in a legalistic church that saw watching TV as evil. Suppose you were going to have someone over from such a church. Yes, you have the freedom to watch TV, but why do it if it would cause the person to stumble? You don't need to.

For example, I went to San Jose State University and there is a very real possibility that because of this genuine experience I will be able to relate to someone from there in a way that no one else could. Again, not in the context of compromise. Another example, I used to be a pilot and the Lord has enabled me to have opportunities to speak to people in aviation because of that past experience. I became a pilot to those who were pilots, yet without compromise or sin. But I have never attempted to be someone I am not to try to win someone to Christ.

Now there's one other caution I must lay forth: when Paul says he became a Jew he did not become a Jew in the sense that he identified with their unbelieving rituals and traditions. He became a Jew in the context of the Word of God as it related to actually being a Jew. We need to clearly recognize that Paul limited his rights in Christ so as to win Jews. He did not compromise, identifying with the perversions of Scripture that the Jews held forth. There is no room for someone saying, "I became a Catholic to win Catholics." This would involve compromise and sin. There is no room for someone saying, "I became a Muslim to the Muslims." This too would involve compromise and sin.

Yet if I had been a Catholic beforehand and understood they did not eat meat on certain days, I certainly could limit my freedom in Christ and not eat meat on that day if I was with them and was sharing the gospel.

Now as we look at our passage let me go through it briefly:

¹⁹ *For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more.* (1 Cor. 9:19) Note, concerning unbelievers, he's going to clarify what he means by "all" in pointing out the two people groups which all people identified with at this time in history: Jews and Gentiles. Here Paul is saying that although he was free, he limited his freedom in Christ to win the more.

²⁰ *And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law;* (1 Cor. 9:20)

Here we see that Paul voluntarily limited his freedom in Christ in the context of Jews, yet still recognizing he was not under the law.

²¹ *to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law.* (1 Cor. 9:21) Here Paul identified with the Gentiles (those not under the law), but notice that he does not say he was lawless. "though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ..."

This is crucial, for interpretation! Although Paul limited his freedom, he never compromised; he was never in disobedience to God's standards in Christ, as revealed in His Word.

²² *To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak;* (1 Cor. 9:22a) Now here we have an interesting statement as the apostle Paul is referring back to the weak in the faith mentioned in chapter 8 and lays forth the real possibility that they might not be saved. Therefore, he limits his freedom to win them, or, as we saw in Chapter 8, not to stumble them. And then we have his conclusion in the end of verse 22, *I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.* (1 Cor. 9:22b)

Now it's important to remember that all men at this time were in two groups: Jews and Gentiles, and Paul has already related how he relates to each group, that is the context in which I believe he now states the phrase "all men."

In essence what we see is that Paul limited his freedom in Christ so as to not stumble anyone yet rather win them to Christ.

And thus we have the rest of his conclusion ²³ *And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it.* (1 Cor. 9:23) He's saying that all these things he has spoken of, he does for the sake of the gospel; that is his focus in this context.

So then, from all that we've seen, I do not believe in any way, shape or form this passage justifies the current evangelical churches interpretation: that we need to be **like** the world to **win** the world in the context of the church gathering.

The context of this passage is not the gathering of the church. It does not speak of becoming something you were not previously. It does not speak of compromise, but condescension for the sake of not stumbling anyone. It does not speak of sinning for the sake of winning people to Christ.

I would encourage you that if the leadership of your church is taking this verse and twisting it to justify the way they function in the church, you need to get out because they are not dividing the Word rightly, and worse yet, they are twisting it.