



ALL THINGS

TO ALL PEOPLE

by Emily Wong

So though I am not a slave of any man, I have made myself the slave of everyone so as to win as many as I could. I made myself a Jew to the Jews, to win the Jews; that is, I who am not a subject of the Law made myself a subject of the Law. To those who have no Law, I was free of the Law myself (though not free from God's law, being under the law of Christ) to win those who have no Law. For the weak I made myself weak. I made myself all things to all people in order to save some at any cost; and I still do this, for the sake of the gospel to have a share in its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:19-22)

An obvious conclusion to be drawn from the above words of Paul to the Christian community at Corinth seems to be that the evangelizer should adapt to those whom he seeks to evangelize. But what does "adaptation" involve; how can this requisite for evangelization be met in the concrete; and what are the practical implications of Paul's teaching?

According to the general interpretation of this passage, Paul was advocating here a method for evangelization. The evangelizer should make of himself a kindred spirit to those he sees as the recipients of his message. An authentic evangelizer in such circumstances, far from stubbornly clinging to his own point of view would reach out to embrace

the viewpoint of those to be evangelized. He would preach and teach his faith-message in the language of and according to the perspectives of his listeners and not merely from his own point of view.

Let us ask a further question. Is the full meaning and intent of these words merely to introduce a new and perhaps ideal method for going about the work of evangelizing people, or is there something more at stake here? Is Paul not going beyond methodology to a consideration of the basic rights of the evangelizer and the reason why these rights may be surrendered?

The passage we have quoted is taken from a much larger section introduced in chapter eight by a discussion regarding the eating of meat that has been offered to idols. Paul is concerned here with offering practical guidelines to the community in their daily practice of the Christian faith. He explains to the Corinthians that the eating of meat sacrificed to idols should of itself raise no problems for the Christian conscience. He adds, however, certain qualifying remarks. If the eating of such meat is equated with idol worship, or if the eating of such meat would be the cause of others falling away from the faith, then, such a practice is to be avoided. The governing principles for all Christian activity is for Paul, the glory of God and fraternal charity.

At first glance, 1 Corinthians 9 seems to be out of context with both chapter eight and subsequent chapters, as Paul here focuses on problems centered about the fundamental rights enjoyed by the evangelizer with no reference to the question of eating meat sacrificed to idols. But if we examine the passage more carefully, it is not difficult for us to see how Paul in chapter eight is really proposing himself as an example in order to explain further the points he made in the previous chapter - that in all things our lives should conform to the fundamental criterion of praising God and loving others. As a disciple of Christ, he is entitled to enjoy certain rights and privileges, which include material remuneration and the right to be provided for by the community (9:1-14). But in order to preach the gospel more effectively, Paul surrenders these rights. He is strongly conscious of the fact that evangelization itself is already a privilege as well as duty with its own form of remuneration. (9:15-18)

Paul takes this opportunity to explain his own method of evangelizing. In order to preach the gospel more effectively, he is not only willing to give up his rights as an evangelizer, but also he chooses this dynamic method to facilitate the reception by the people of the promise of redemption. (cf. 9:19-23). However, this passage still

strikes the readers as a sudden diversion from the main thought of the previous chapter and we are at a loss to find any direct connection with what has been said before. Because of this we must ask ourselves whether or not there is an additional message here, other than Paul's obvious desire to introduce a way of evangelizing.

Gunther Bornkamm in his book Paul, feels that 1 Cor. 9:19-23 contains a deeper meaning that is to be understood in the context of Christian freedom. What Paul is talking about in 1 Cor. 8:1-11:1 is not the enjoyment of rights and privileges but a readiness to forgo these rights and privileges for the sake of charity.

In fact, as Christians, we are not bound by any person or thing, yet at the same time we are charged to act in accordance with the spirit of self-sacrifice in serving others (Jn 15:12; Mk 10:43-45, etc. In the words of Martin Luther "A Christian is a free lord over all things and subject to no one. A Christian is a person at the disposal of all things and subject to everyone.").

In other words, Christians are "controlled" only by Christ: "We are under the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). "Being controlled" by Christ means to accept his gospel as the criterion of one's whole life, thereby taking into account effective evangelization as the motive of behaviour.

Paul was keenly aware of himself as a servant of Christ, and, as such, he was left no choice other than in accepting the gospel of Christ to carry out the mission he had received to proclaim it everywhere. In order to promulgate the gospel effectively, he not only surrendered his own rights and privileges as an apostle but became a Jew for the Jews, a Gentile for the Gentiles and even "weak" for those who were "weak".

We must understand the three categories of people mentioned in the passage as not unrelated groups. In fact, they belonged to the same community even though they represented very definite and different religious points of view. These are the people among whom Paul lived and worked. There were the hardline Jewish Christians, who maintained that in addition to accepting the Christian faith, all must also conform to the law of Moses - Gentile Christians had to be circumcised in order to be saved. There were Corinthian Christians who thought that once baptized into Christ, they were not bound by any laws or traditions; therefore, "everything was allowed" (1 Cor. 10:23). Finally there were the "weak", those who were members of the community, but whose faith was marked by a certain tremulousness and wavering attitude. This hesitancy did not stop them, however, from judging and criticizing those of

stronger faith who were able to discern clearly right from wrong and what were the imperatives of Christian living.

Of course, Paul did not identify himself completely with any one of the three groups, nor did he accept in toto their religious attitudes and points of view. According to Paul, the requirements set up by these groups were not sine qua non conditions for salvation. The gospel transcends all human points of view. Its all-embracing nature demolishes the walls separating person from person and group from group. As a result, there no longer existed the old distinctions between Jew and Gentile. But Paul did not ignore their divergent points of view. He was very conscious of the fact that within each viewpoint there was an authentic value which must be respected and acknowledged, and it is precisely here where the gospel encounters human beings, becoming for them a point of departure for deepening and broadening their spiritual lives. As an evangelizer, Paul adopted the attitude of always being present to those who held differing opinions, not that he fully acquiesced in their opinions but he did respect them and acknowledge the values inherent within them. Because of this attitude of giving genuine respect, Paul could accept the differences without demanding of the evangelized that they change their fundamental identities in order to become Christians. He believed freedom to be the fruit of faith in Christ, and one need not change one's identity and circumstances in order to experience this freedom. Therefore, Gentiles need not be circumcised on being baptized into Christ, and Jews need not abrogate the symbol that identified them as a covenant people when they were converted into the Christian faith. Each could live out the gospel according to his own particular circumstances (1 Cor. 7:17-24). This was the principle of adaptation which Paul pursued that allowed him to become "all things to all men" and to spread the gospel in such a way so as to develop among a diversity of people the one spirit of the gospel.

I myself think Bornkamm's explanation of 1 Cor. 9:19-23 has much to offer the modern evangelizer in understanding his or her role better. As evangelizers, paying special attention to the needs of those to be evangelized, their only concern should be how to pass on the gospel more effectively to others. As there is only one gospel of Christ, there is also only one authentic method of evangelization, i.e. to allow the gospel to become rooted in the culture of its recipients where it can grow and bear fruit. Operating on this assumption there can be no distinction between local and foreign evangelizers; nor can there be any distinction between the local and foreign evangelized. The only role open to all evangelizers is the one that requires of them, as it did of Paul, to be servants of Christ, and dedicated instruments of God.