

Q. In 1 Corinthians 9:22, Paul says, "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." Does this mean that we should use any means of evangelizing to win people to Christ?

A. The context of the verse in question says,

For though I was free from all, I brought myself under bondage to all, that I might gain the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became as weak, that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.

1 Corinthians 9:19-22

World English Bible, WEB—used throughout unless otherwise noted

We live in an age when there are now churches that meet in bars and pubs. There are strippers for Jesus, and those who advocate pornography for Christ. Some few preachers now use foul language to appeal to the common man. Less extreme, but now ubiquitous, are Christian coffeehouses with preachers who seem more like stand-up comics, Jesus rock concerts, Christian meetings that resemble three-ring circuses with all of their derring-do and acrobatics, and Christian automobile racing. All of this is done with the aim of reaching people with the message of the Gospel. Is this what Paul meant when he said that he had become all things to all men?

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, "You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its flavor, with what will it be salted? It is then good for nothing, but to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men" (Matthew 5:13). What Jesus means by this is that we—the salt—

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must retain our distinctive saltiness. If we become like everyone around us, we will become worthless.

Immediately after this, Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city located on a hill can't be hidden. Neither do you light a lamp, and put it under a measuring basket, but on a stand; and it shines to all who are in the house. Even so, let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16). It is evident that if we are the light of the world, a lamp on a stand, a city on a hill, we are not down the hill with the world. We are apart from it and reach the world with our light—the Gospel. Those who respond to it then come up the hill to us, who are different from the world.

Yet some will complain that we can't reach sinners by being so aloof. In response, I say to these people that you are confusing your job with God's. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up in the last day" (John 6:44). It is God's job to do the drawing. Our job is to preach the simple message of the Gospel—no frills, no thrills, no chills, no entertainment, no food, no alcohol, no naked women to draw them in. God will do the drawing when we speak His message.

But, you may argue, Jesus ate with sinners. Jesus was accused of eating with sinners by the self-righteous Pharisees, who considered themselves not sinners. Thus, when Jesus ate in the homes of tax collectors (who were considered particularly abhorrent because they collected taxes for the Roman occupying forces), the Pharisees accused him of eating with sinners (Mark 2:14-16). So, when Jesus hobnobbed with ordinary people, eating in their homes, he was eating with sinners. And He really was, because, of course, everyone is a sinner—even the Pharisees, although they would not have admitted it. And, as Jesus explained, "Those who are healthy have no need for a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Mark 2:17).

Jesus went into the homes of ordinary people, He walked the streets of villages and cities, He gathered crowds in the countryside. Prostitutes heard His message but He did not go into brothels to preach. He never used stunts, entertainment, food, or drinks to attract people. Yes, He did work miracles. But this was a demonstration of the power of God and therefore a legitimate tool of evangelism. But the entertainment being offered today is not a demonstration of the power of God. I know of no one today who is using true miracles from God in a public ministry.

When we use anything other than the Word of God or true miracles from God in evangelism, we run the real risk of creating many false converts. Even Jesus experienced something of the kind. He fed the multitudes, not to set an example of how to evangelize, but for two reasons. He did these miracles because He had compassion on these people who had no food, and He did it also as a symbolic way of teaching that He will supply all of the spiritual food we could ever want.

After one instance of feeding a multitude, He went to the other side of the sea. The people followed him. Why? "Jesus answered them, 'Most certainly I tell you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled'" (John 6:26). After Jesus then gave them some hard sayings, John tells us, "From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (John 6:66). They were false disciples who were following Jesus because they wanted the food. Eating has its place in the assembly of God's elect, in the Lord's Supper or Love Feasts, but I know of no place it is used in the Bible as an evangelistic tool. Neither are any of the other things I mentioned in this article legitimate tools of evangelism. They are, instead, distractions from the Gospel message and flashy lures that will attract counterfeit converts.

What is Paul saying in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23? He is saying that he is denying himself in order to serve those who are weak. The passage is very specific and focused. He is saying that although he has liberty in Christ, he can approach the Gospel from the viewpoint of the Law of Moses for the sake of the Jews (that is, showing Christ foreshadowed and prophesied in the Old Testament, explaining that the law itself speaks of the coming of the Seed and the ending of the law, and so forth—see, for example, Acts 28:23 and Galatians 3:16-29). And he is saying that although he is "in-lawed" (*ennomos*) to Christ, he can preach the Gospel in a way that the lawless Gentiles can understand (see, for example, Acts 17:23-31). These two sets of people, Jews and Gentiles, encompass all humans on the face of the earth with the exception of believers who are, as they are considered in Christ, neither physical Jews nor Gentiles but a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15).

Both of these sets of people, the Jews and the Gentiles, are in a weak position. So, Paul approached them from their weak position. He didn't tell the Jews, "throw out the law!" and thus offend them all. He painstakingly taught them from the law that Jesus was the Christ. He didn't announce to the Gentiles, "Now listen you ignorant, blind

heathens!" He carefully taught them the Gospel. This is how he became all things (under the law and not under the law) to all men (Jews and Gentiles).

Evangelism today is the same. We can certainly bring out of our treasure "new and old things" (Matthew 13:52) to reach people from their worldview. And we should avoid insulting or humiliating people whenever possible. When we remember the proverbial saying, "There but for the grace of God, go I," we will not point accusing fingers. We must lovingly accept people where they are. But we don't have to go there with them. Neither should we entertain them to attract them or keep their interest.

If someone is not interested in the pure Gospel message, that person has not been prepared by the Holy Spirit. Nothing we can add to the Gospel will change that. Only God can change that person's mind, and when and if He does, then that person will become interested. Paul did not have chariot races at his evangelistic meetings or invite gladiators to give demonstrations and then testify about Christ. Paul did not say, I become as the world to win the world.

A shepherd can get everyone's sheep and even a few wolves to come if he puts out the right attractions. But if he wants God's sheep, His elect, to come, all he has to do is speak God's words—the Gospel—and they will recognize God's voice in that message (John 10:4). But if he sings the siren song of the world or bangs pots and pans and puts out strange food in order to get all of the sheep for miles around, he will get them but they will not be God's sheep, and he may actually drive God's sheep away.

So we see that, contrary to the way it is often misapplied, 1 Corinthians 9:22 in no way sanctions the use of entertainment, slumming in bars, using foul language, and so forth to win people for Christ.

When I came to you, brothers, I didn't come with excellence of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you, except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. My speech and my preaching were not in persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith wouldn't stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

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