

RELEVANCE WITHOUT IRREVERENCE

(How to Become All Things to All Men)

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A couple of years ago I was riding in the car with my sixteen-year-old daughter. She turned on the radio, and one of her favorite songs began to play.

“Listen to this, Dad,” she said with enthusiasm. “What do you think?”

I reacted without thinking. “I don’t know, honey. I can’t understand the . . .”

I stopped in mid-sentence. I was about to say, “I can’t understand the words.” I couldn’t believe it. I sounded just like my parents twenty years before! Popular music had left me behind.

I made up my mind that day to catch up with my daughter’s world. There’s still a generation gap; I just can’t “get into” everything that’s new. Yet, I’m trying, and the gap doesn’t take me by surprise anymore.

Many Christians have begun to realize that they are out of touch with current popular culture. Today’s music, videos, magazines, and books speak of things foreign to us. Of course, that’s not all bad; lots of these cultural expressions are evil, and we should avoid them. Nevertheless, as followers of Christ we have the responsibility of reaching people with the good news of Christ. In

many ways, this job requires us to understand where people are today and to work hard at presenting the Gospel in ways they can grasp.

OUR MISSION TO ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE

One passage of Scripture speaks plainly to the challenge that we face in reaching our world today. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, the Apostle Paul shared his attitudes and practices as one called to reach others for Christ. His commitment to this goal was so strong that he summarized his outlook in this way: “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (v. 22).

In a word, Paul’s heart was so controlled by a desire to see people come to Christ that he became like other people as much as possible. Paul knew that success in evangelism depended not on gimmicks or human ingenuity. He boldly proclaimed that men and women trust in Christ because of the grace of the sovereign God. He never watered down the Gospel; he never compromised to get people to make professions of faith.

Yet, this passage also makes it plain that Paul was committed to removing every unnecessary impediment to the Gospel. He tried his best to break down cultural barriers and open the way for all people to hear the good news. Paul became like others around him in every legitimate way he could so that some could be delivered from the judgment of God.

This practice was particularly vital to Paul’s missionary work. His travels throughout the Mediterranean world brought him in contact with all kinds of people. He met with Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, men and women, educated and uneducated. His ministry

extended to people whose cultural practices we would admire and to people whose ways we would despise. In all of this diversity, his strategy was to become like them so he could reach them.

Most of us do not travel from country to country spreading the Gospel. We do not have to worry so much about cultural changes from one geographical spot to another. Yet, we are not entirely removed from the challenges that Paul faced. The changes brought on by the movement of time even in one location make it necessary for us to become like others.

Just two nights ago I was passing through a small town in North Carolina. It was ten o'clock on Saturday evening, and the streets were absolutely deserted. No one was around except for a group of three or four men dressed in white shirts and ties. When we stopped at the traffic light, we saw that one of the men was up on a pedestal preaching the Gospel at the top of his voice. He called for repentance and faith in Christ, but no one heard. No one was there to listen.

I am confident this man was sincere. His message seemed orthodox. His words were cogent and powerful. In fact, he was following the kind of evangelistic strategy his denomination had endorsed for years. He was quite comfortable with it, but he failed to appropriate the attitude of the Apostle Paul.

Just a decade or two ago, people probably filled the streets of that town on Saturday night. But now everyone was at home watching television or out at the local restaurants and recreational halls. He was preaching the truth, but he was not reaching anyone with it. Following a practice that failed to account for changing times, he had failed to "become all things to all men."

Most of us do not go to the extreme of this brother in Christ. Few of us shout the Gospel on a deserted street corner. But all of

us are tempted to think of Christian outreach in particular ways because we have always done it that way. We have grown accustomed to one or two strategies for reaching the lost, and we're satisfied as long as we follow these well-worn paths. Yet, the paths of the past may not be the most effective paths for reaching people today.

How can we appropriate the attitude that Paul displayed in this passage? Paul gives us some wonderfully practical guidance in these matters.

RISE ABOVE PERSONAL PREFERENCES

In 1 Corinthians 9:20 the apostle tells us about his ability to rise above his own personal preferences:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.

To understand the impact of these words, we have to remember Paul's background. He was a Jew who had spent much of his life trying to earn his salvation by works of the law. Do this; don't do that. He had earned the respect of his fellow Jews and led the persecution of Christians.

After becoming a Christian, however, Paul despised this way of life: "I consider everything a loss" (Phil.3:7). To put the matter bluntly, the legalism of Judaism had set Paul on a road toward eternal judgment. As a result, he delighted in his new freedom in Christ. He rejoiced in leaving behind the ways of life that had bound him and others to self-righteousness.

Despite these feelings, Paul affirmed his willingness to rise above any cultural preferences. He said, “I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law)” (1 Cor. 9:20). In other words, he did not permit his own attitudes toward certain lifestyles — even the lifestyle of his unbelieving past — to hinder him in reaching the lost among the Jews. He took control of his dislikes and adapted them for the sake of the Gospel.

Many believers sincerely rejoice in the wonderful deliverance they have found in Christ. They delight in their new lives and despise their old ways of living. After being believers for a number of years, they adopt the cultural inclinations of Christians around them, and have only disgust for people who dress, talk, or act as they did before coming to Christ. I understand these feelings; I have many of them myself. Yet, this was not the attitude of the apostle Paul.

I have a friend who told me about a time when his well-intended inflexibility nearly ruined his Christian testimony before his family. All through his non-Christian life his family had gotten together on Thanksgiving Day. They ate their turkey as fast as they could and ran to the television to watch football the rest of the day. As a young Christian, he was disgusted with this family tradition.

“I felt the day should be spent in thanksgiving to God, not watching football,” he told me. As a result, this young man decided not to visit his parents on Thanksgiving Day. He told them that they were too pagan for his new life. He did not want his own children corrupted any more by his parents’ customs. “It nearly broke their hearts,” he confessed.

The next year my friend consulted his pastor before announcing he would not return home for a second year. Happily, his pastor gave him some wise counsel: “If you want to spend a day in thanksgiving, do it on Saturday. Go and be a witness to your

parents on Thursday.” Following this advice proved difficult for the young man, but he spent the entire afternoon of Thanksgiving Day watching football with his father and mother. Late that evening, however, his parents asked him about his change of heart, and he had a wonderful opportunity to explain the Gospel to them.

I’m not suggesting, of course, that we should give up every Christian practice for the sake of others. Yet, all of us need to learn from the apostle’s attitude. He knew his personal comfort zone did not include the customs of his pre-Christian life, but he was willing to set his comfort aside in order to win others to Christ.

Ask yourself this question: How have I gone outside my Christian comfort zone to meet unbelievers where they are?

DRAW THE LINE AT SIN

What are the limits of our flexibility? Where should we draw the line? The apostle made this aspect of his practice clear as well:

To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law (1 Cor. 9:21).

When Paul visited with Gentiles, he behaved like one. Paul is known as the apostle to the Gentiles. The major portion of his ministry was devoted to calling the nations of the world to faith in Christ. The Gentile nations were “those not having the law.” They did not know the details of biblical revelation; they did not understand many of the practices Paul and other Jewish Christians knew so well. This aspect of his ministry required Paul to learn how other people thought and lived. As he became acquainted with their ways of life, he adopted them as his own so that he could win them.

Even so, there were limits to how far Paul would go. He had to be careful. Gentile practices were not morally neutral. In fact, many of them were horribly evil. Drunkenness, immorality, infanticide, and perversions of all sorts ruled the day in many Gentile communities Paul visited.

For this reason, he could not become like the Gentiles in every way. Notice how he put it. The Gentiles were “those not having the law.” But Paul said of himself, “I am not free from God’s law, but am under Christ’s law.”

The moral guidance of the revelation of Scripture always set limits on how far Paul would go in becoming like the people around him. He worked hard at breaking down unnecessary barriers, but he was not about to compromise his commitment to Christ. He was constrained by “Christ’s law.”

A number of years ago, one of my church members gained the conviction that he should reach out to the homosexual community in our area. Unknown to me, he had practiced this lifestyle before making a profession of faith. He gave every evidence of spiritual strength; he was even a candidate for elder in our church. As far as we could tell, his desire was a legitimate calling from God. Unfortunately, however, while trying to break down the cultural barriers that often separate Christians from this community, he found himself caught up in temptation and sin. After a couple of weeks, he left the Christian faith.

The story of that friend should remind us all to be careful as we reach out to those not under the law. The temptations of the world can be very powerful. Even well-meaning attempts to reach others may result in their reaching us!

Where should we draw the line? We shouldn’t draw it where

our personal comforts are violated, but where the revelation of Scripture is violated. We are not free from moral constraints as we reach out to the world, so we must be careful not to fall prey to temptation. We are not without the law of God, but under the law of God.

The challenge of evangelizing a changing world means that we must examine how we reach out as individuals, families, and churches. We must become relevant without becoming irreverent.

Take a look at the community around you. How should you give up your own cultural preferences for the cause of Christ? How can you adapt the unbelieving world's inclinations in music, art, literature, entertainment, or communication as a means of reaching them with the Gospel?

Now take another look and don't go too far. Remember that the inevitable danger is that relevance will turn into irreverence toward the moral guidance of Scripture. Be sure you know where to draw the line.

Only as we walk down this road will we be able to "become all things to all men" for the sake of Christ.