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**“WOULD you like to explain Paul’s statement as contained in 1 Cor. 9:22, “I am become all things to all men that I may by all means save some” (R.V.)”**

I have been in many discussion groups when this passage of scripture has been quoted and I know that it has given rise to many opinions and that much controversy has ensued from it. In a previous edition of the S.S. I have said that I believe that the best interpreter of God is God’s word itself. I see no valid reason why my opinion on any subject should be better than His revealed word, and so it is to that word that we shall turn in order to try to answer this question.

#### **The Context**

The apostle Paul lived in exciting but difficult days. The christian religion was projected into the midst of Jewish legalism and Roman and Greek paganism. The doctrine of the church was being taught and formulated as people were being converted. There were converts from Judaism; Jewish proselytes; converts from pagan religions. There were some who were strong, others who were weak. There were fanatics, ascetics, zealots, idol worshippers, temple worshippers, men worshippers. It would seem that much of the N.T. teaching was given not only for them but because of them. These things must be borne in mind if we are to appreciate our subject properly.

In the context, the apostle argues from the standpoint of four relationships which are undoubtedly very important to him. They are: –

- 1 His freedom due to his relationship with Christ.
- 2 His relationship with the Jews.
- 3 His relationship with the Gentiles.
- 4 His relationship with his weak brethren.

The great theme which permeates all of these relationships is the gospel. Everything that he does is for the sake of the gospel. We would do well if we were to view the gospel with the same degree of urgency that Paul did. However, I think we shall go a long way to answering our question if we examine these relationships in some detail.

### Paul's Freedom

The first part of the ninth chapter of the first letter to Corinth is used by Paul to assert his freedom and to prove his right to certain privileges. Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife? Have we not, Barnabas and I, power to forbear working? His right to maintenance in the gospel he equates with apostleship. "Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? He is asserting that, like the other apostles, he is not compelled to labour. But having proved this right he abandons it, "Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:12).

So this brings us to Paul's relationship with Christ. "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant of all, that I might gain the more" (v. 19). Yes, Paul. A truly great and fundamental principle of relationship with Christ. What a lesson for us. Even though he had claims on all he became the servant of all so that he might gain souls for Christ. Paul became all things to all men? Yes; he became the servant of all even though he was an apostle.

### Paul and the Jews

The Jews rested in the Law. They lived under the law. Paul knew that he had to gain them because he himself had written to Rome, "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and that all the world become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight" (Rom. 3:19,20). Paul knew that they had to meet the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus, but he met them on their own ground whenever he could.

Paul and other apostles met them in their synagogues (See Acts 13:14,15). He entered the temple to take part in purification ceremonies (See Acts 21:26,27). There are two other incidents also which indicate his approach to the Jews and the law. One concerns Timothy, and the other Titus. Both concern the vexed question of circumcision. In the case of Timothy, Paul had him circumcised in order to signify symbolic holiness (See Acts 16:3). In the case of Titus, Paul resisted circumcision because it would have indicated on that occasion that circumcision was necessary for salvation and would have been reported so by the false brethren (See Gal. 2:1-4). These incidents illustrate Paul's dealings. If he could co-operate without violating any essential principle then he would do so. If it involved violation of the Gospel then he stood firm on what he taught. We can only view this aright if we keep in mind what he wrote to Corinth. "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God" (1 Cor. 7:19). Paul became all things to all men? Yes, he acknowledged the Jews and the law and only ceased to co-operate when the gospel was threatened.

### Paul and his weak brethren

Paul knew that many of his brethren were weak and did not understand the liberty which had been opened out to them in Christ Jesus. He also knew that many interpreted liberty as licence and had no concern for weaker brethren. Sometimes our christian liberty tells us that we can indulge ourselves in certain things - but our love for those whom our indulgence might harm tells us that we ought to abstain. So in the case of eating meat offered to idols Paul became weak as the brethren were weak who objected to this practice. He knew that one way or the other it didn't matter; his christian liberty taught him this. But in the statement that illuminates his christian love he says, "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend (1 Cor. 8:13). Paul became all things to all men? Yes, to the weak he became as weak. He didn't want to offend those for whom Christ died.

### **And So**

So, Paul became all things to all men that he might by all means save some. You will notice that he doesn't say, "that by any means" he might save some. Paul understood that he should refrain from hurting the conscience of another if he possibly could, but he also knew full well that he could not do this when it meant acting against his own conscience. The golden rule is that we are not to yield to the scruples of others if this involves doing something wrong which will be an offence to God.

What should this teach us? I believe that in the case of the gospel, if the gospel is maintained in its purity and integrity then we can and ought to support it. It means that if we are not violating fundamental principles then we can co-operate. The church of the Lord groans from its self-inflicted wounds. Perhaps we ought to learn how to apply the balm.