

Was Paul a Pragmatist?

Would the apostle have employed "any" means to save some?

"To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." 1 Corinthians 9:22, KJV

These days, pastors and churches will seemingly stoop to anything to build a crowd. Rock-'n'-roll, the culture's dominant music, is fast becoming "the" staple of so-called praise and worship. In their attempt to "connect" with their audience, I've heard pastors use lewd language in their preaching. One church featured an Elvis impersonator, while another, in a Halloween-themed "sanctuary" with a haunted house, featured a Michael Jackson Thriller dance. Pastors even advertise sex-sermons on billboards in ways that offend non-Christians who are tired of the permissiveness of our sex-crazed culture. American "churchianity" is addicted to the unprincipled principle of, "just do it to just get it."

All of the aforementioned, and more, seek justification from a statement in the Bible where Paul wrote, **"I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some"** (1 Corinthians 9:22b). Contortedly, contemporaries interpret this verse to provide apostolic endorsement to do anything to reach anyone. Such a ministry motif is pragmatism, a belief that legitimates any practice so long as it achieves the presumed result of saving some. To the pragmatist, the end justifies the means.

Yet no matter how it is slanted, pragmatism is liberalism. While liberals depart from orthodox belief, pragmatists depart from orthodox behavior. According to pragmatism, even if it's wrong, it's right, so long as it works. Pragmatists will do anything to attract everyone, and churches are full of this philosophy of doing business now-a-days. Noble ends supposedly justify ignoble means. A pragmatist possesses no "set-in-stone" convictions. They will do whatever it takes to win--even cheat. If it does it, do it.

If idols will attract a crowd, then carve the wood, mold the gold, and hew the rocks. The Israelite king Jeroboam was a pragmatist. In defiance of Yahweh's choice of Jerusalem to be the place where the nation was to worship Him, and because it was inconvenient for Israelites to make their mandated pilgrimages to the Holy City, the pragmatic king defied the will of God and created handy **"high places"** (praise and worship centers) all over the land, especially in Bethel and Dan (See 1 Kings 12:28-30.). By his example, Jeroboam was known in history as the king who **"who did sin, and who made Israel to sin"** (1 Kings 14:15).

Bored with the "traditional" worship of Yahweh at Jerusalem (i.e., ho-hum . . . same-o' same-o'), and for the experience of innovatively worshipping Baal (i.e., thrills and chills, smells and bells), one might even envision apostate Israelites from the southern-most town of Beersheba by-passing Jerusalem (approximately 50 miles to the north) and journeying all the way to Dan (approximately 150 miles to the north) to observe the idolatrous spectacle. Besides, Baal promised them prosperity that was not dependent upon their behavior (See Deuteronomy 28:1 ff.). Against this backdrop, we turn now to address the issue of what Paul meant when he

confessed, "**I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some.**" Was he a situational pragmatist who, like Jeroboam, would have built "**high places**" in order to get people "saved"?

To understand this issue from Paul's perspective, the context is the key (Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-9:27.). In these chapters, Paul is not addressing the subject of methods. One missiologist wisely observes: "These classic words [i.e., "I have become all things to all men"] are often used by missionaries to justify diverse methods of reaching people for Christ. But that is certainly a misinterpretation." [1] In the flow of these chapters, Paul is discussing *mores* (the folkways and customs of a culture), not *methods*. For example, in Lithuania, it was considered rude for a speaker to stand before an audience with his hand in his pocket, or a man to whistle in public places (Personally, I too find this annoying.). So when I preached, I kept my hands out of my pockets! It was no "issue" to me, but it was to the Lithuanians. So I accommodated myself to the custom.

Accordingly, the apostle grouped people as to whether, or not, they were "**Jews,**" "**under the Law,**" "**without the law**" and "**weak**" (1 Corinthians 9:20-22). Paradoxically, though Paul considered himself "**free from all**" these groups, he also considered himself a "**slave to all**" these groups (1 Corinthians 9:19). While he did not allow diverse mores to intimidate him, the apostle did, in his ministry, accommodate his outward behavior to the cultural consensus. Presumably, that is why he allowed Timothy to be circumcised (Acts 16:3). As one scholar summarized: "Contextually, then, what Paul meant by becoming 'all things to all men' was doing all things possible to avoid prohibitions, strictures, and offenses peculiar to a culture." [2]

To save some, Paul politely submitted to and served the customs of others. He became "**all things to all men.**" But, to evangelize the unevangelized, the apostle uncompromisingly employed one method--preaching. He employed this method in synagogues, churches, and at Mars Hill. And with this one method the apostle preached one message. As he stated to the Corinthians: "**For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified**" (1 Corinthians 2:2, KJV). While the places and the people to whom he ministered varied, his method and his message remained consistent. Yet in doing so, Paul served people, for as he wrote, "**For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake**" (Emphasis mine, 2 Corinthians 4:5, KJV). It is at this juncture that contemporary Christendom had better beware: Different methods may evoke different messages (See Galatians 1:6-10.).

As to the question, "Was Paul a Pragmatist?" John Makujina summarizes:

Becoming 'all things to all men' does not refer to an offensive strategy of inventiveness, creativity, persuasiveness, or accommodation to new modes of evangelism that key in on the latest public novelty. Paul's references here are purely preventative. He simply wished to eliminate any nonessential barriers that would hinder his proclamation of the gospel. [3]

No, Paul was not a pragmatist. He did not employ fleshly or worldly means to attain "so-called"

spiritual ends. In fact, he recognized the "**flesh**" to be in mortal combat against the "**Spirit**" (Galatians 5:19-21). Unlike many of today's churches, he most certainly would abhor any fleshly method employed to make a crowd. To win the world, the church cannot afford to become like the world. "Fleshly tactics" will not win spiritual battles. If those tactics are used, the church then fights on the devil's "turf" and will surely be defeated.

A story is told of Amy Carmichael (1867-1951), missionary to India, how one of her helpers by the name of,

Saral came one day to her with an idea for drawing the women to hear the Gospel. She would teach them to knit with some pink wool she had been given, "and they will love me more and like to listen when I talk about Jesus.

Amy could not say yes to that. She explained that the Gospel needed no such frills. It was the power of God unto salvation. Saral protested that there was nothing in the Bible which bore upon pink wool and knitting needles. Indeed there was—Zechariah 4:6, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts." There was no need for tricks which might open houses—houses were open. No need for methods to humanize and fill bare and empty lives—"these women have a full day's work." To try to help God with pink fancywork was, she felt, *plain unbelief*. [4]

There we have it: All the pragmatic "pink fancywork" going on in the contemporary church evidences *unbelief*!

Endnotes

[1] David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991): 177.

[2] John Makujina, *Measuring the Music: Another Look at the Contemporary Music Debate* (Willow Street, Pennsylvania: Old Paths Publications, 2002): 22.

[3] Ibid. 23-24.

[4] Emphasis Added, Elisabeth Elliot, *A Chance To Die: The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1987):126.