

“Being All Things to All” (1 Cor 9:19-23): Its Implications for the Nigerian Christian

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Apart from Jesus Christ, St. Paul is the next *dramatis personae* of the NT about whom we have most information. He is being pictured also as an enigmatic figure that remained a puzzle for his contemporaries. Even today, he is being viewed through different lenses; either as the Saint, theologian, Missionary, teacher, the arrogant Apostle claimant, the Heretic and the like. Anyway, he is all of these and even more. This passage provides us with the best way to describe Paul: “being all things to all”.

The backdrop of this passage is that Paul was accused in Corinth of being a slave, not free at all. His accusers held that he has no will of his own but deceitfully tailors his behavior to “win” and curry favor in order to profit from as many people as possible. He was accused of being inconsistent – a Jew to Jews, a Greek to Greeks, a fool to the foolish, and as such he should not be trusted. Paul was accused of being a flatterer who simply intends to please people (1 Cor 10,33) for his egoistic interest. He therefore defends himself in 1 Cor 9,19-23 clarifying his stand regarding the allegations. He tried to make his opponents understand. The literary thrust and exegesis of the passage clearly reveal his incentive. All his actions were purely motivated by the love of Christ and the gospel.

The theological relevance of this passage to the Christian vocation cannot be overemphasized. Jesus set the pace which Paul and all Christians are to follow. Paul really walked in the footsteps of the master. The passage has some important implications for the church in Nigeria. The question of “being all things to all people” is very crucial in order to succeed in facing the challenges of the 21st century in evangelization. The Nigerian Christians, especially priests and religious have to concretize this principle in their various missions.

1. Exegetical Analysis

1.1 Text Translation

1 Corinthians 9:19 For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. **20** To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. **21** To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. **22** To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all that I might by all means save some. **23** I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

1.2 The Literary Thrust

The section starts with Paul’s assertion of his self assumed slavery in v. 19. A close look at the structure of this passage shows that v.19 corresponds to v.22b. The two verses form an *inclusion* to the passage with the words “with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all” (v. 19) and “I have become all things to all, that I might by all means....” (v. 22). This shows the importance of the word all to the understanding of the passage. It makes explicit the fact that the apostle’s mission was to “all” without exception. No one is excluded from it. He used a more neutral and inclusive word *pasin* “all” instead of *anthropos*. Again, the phrase “that I might win more of them” (v.19) corresponds with “that I might by all means save some” in v. 22b.

In v. 19, the apostle announces his main idea of missionary adaptation. Then he gives four qualifications which are also elaborated as follows: Jews, “those under the Law”, those outside the Law, and the weak (vv. 20-22). The repetition of “those under the Law” after “Jews” is somehow surprising (these seem to be basically the same group!) But he added: “though I myself am not under the Law”. The apostle made a similar correction in the clause “though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law” (v. 21). The two phrases are parenthetical statements. The fourth specification: “the weak” shows that he has not lost sight of the topic of the whole section (cf. Chap.8).

There are seven purpose clauses¹: the first five have the missionary incentive, *kerdainō* “to gain, win”. The sixth has a more theological verb, *sōzō* “to save”. There is a sudden shift in the seventh clause and the missionary aim is made even more explicit in v. 23a “I do it all for the sake of the gospel”. In 23b he reflects on his own participation in the blessings of the gospel.

1.3 Detailed Exegesis

Paul qualifies himself as *eleutheros*, “free”. In what does this freedom lie? He worked for his livelihood. Apart from preaching the good news, he engaged in tent making. He did not depend on others for this. So Paul was “not subject to the constraints of the financially dependent”.² Paul is free also as an apostle. This is manifest in his behavior towards those outside the law. What does the apostle mean when he says, “I have made myself a slave”? When the apostle enslaves himself, he is not acting because he is compelled by anyone but it is a self-inflicted slavery. The enslavement is to no other than to Christ (cf. 1 Cor 7,22; Gal 1,10; Phil 1,1; Rom 1,1). Therefore rather than demonstrating weakness or subordination, he depicts strength and authority. Actually after the episode on the way to Damascus Paul became the slave of Christ. By accepting Christ and the gospel he also entered into the Logic of Christ. This is in line with the attitude of Christ who “emptied himself” (Phil 2,3-8) and “though he was rich he became poor in order to enrich us”. It also hinges on his freedom since Paul did not depend on people for his livelihood. He worked for his living.

He goes further to express the reasons for his actions. Why did he enslave himself? He was propelled by the desire to gain all for Christ and his gospel. It is the love for Christ that urges him (2 Cor 5,14). Therefore, his self-enslavement is not a sort of self-immolation. Rather, it is carefully circumscribed and qualified. Although he is not under the law he makes himself like one under the law. This implies that when he is among them he behaves as a Jew both socially and religiously.³ Thus he says in Gal 4:12 *become as I am for I have become as you are*. His aim is to save as many as possible for the gospel and not to increase his popularity or that of any faction in the church. In as much as his self-enslavement brings personal recompense, his reward is neither material nor financial but evangelical and eschatological.

What does he mean by saying that he is not under the law? He practiced Jewish culture as a Jew without teaching that the law is a way of salvation. His interest was not to prevent the Jews from their practice of the law but to educate their overconfidence in the law as a means of salvation (cf. Phil 3,2). The Jewish Christians can continue to keep the law provided they realize that the law will not save them, rather salvation is found in Christ. Why did he not say “to the Greeks”, but rather, “to those outside the law”? It makes a sharp contrast between the Jews who have the law and the Gentiles who do not. Those outside the law refer primarily to the Gentiles, but there could also be an allusion to the lawless, strong in Corinth who taught that *all things are lawful* (cf. 6,12; 10,23). However, the apostle established that freedom from the law is not lawlessness. He is not *anomos Theou outside the law of God* but he is *ennomos Christou* “under the law of Christ”. With this note the apostle wants to express that the point of reference now is not in relation to

¹ Cf. J. LAMBRECHT, “1 Corinthians”, in *The International Bible Commentary* (Minnesota 1998) 1618.

² MURPHY-O'CONNOR, “The First Letter to the Corinthians”, 807.

³ J. MURPHY-O'CONNOR, “The First Letter to the Corinthians”, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 807.

the Mosaic Law but in relation to Christ. It means that he is in the law of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 9,21b; Gal 6,2). At this point, therefore, Christ is the centre of attention, no longer the law. The law is not a basic criterion for becoming a Christian. Gentiles can become Christians without first becoming Jews and observing the Torah. But they can abstain from food sacrificed to idols in order to avoid scandalizing the Jews (1 Cor 8,13 cf. Acts 21,17-21). When the apostle claims to be *in the law of Christ*, he does not refer to a new code of precepts but to the law of love exemplified by Christ (Gal 6,2).

I became weak: In 1 Cor 8,13 Paul submits himself to the conscience of the weak, to win them (cf. 1 Cor 10,23-11; 8,9-12). When he talks about the “weak”, he refers to those who are weak in conscience, knowledge or faith.

2. Implications for the Nigerian Christian

2.1 Jesus as the Model

It is impossible to “be all things to all” without love which is the hinge around which the other Christian virtues rotate. St. Vincent the Paul described this virtue as “a noble lady that should be respected”. It means that it has the pride of place in the activities of a Christian. Jesus was the first to demonstrate this supernatural love to people, therefore, the first “to be all things to all”. There is no doubt that Paul learnt this from what he knew about the life and works of Jesus Christ his master. Paul was able to make this assertion in 1 Cor 9,22 because Christ first showed him the example. The life of Christ from birth to death was characterized by “being all things to all”. Even the incarnation itself is a very strong aspect of this. God decided to speak to human beings in a language that they can understand (cf. Heb 1,1). He accepted to become a human in order to teach that it is possible to meet God in humanity. He took the human nature in everything but sin. His whole life from the cradle to the grave was characterized by “being all things to all people”.

Jesus identified with different categories of people. He associated so much with the poor, the lowly, the sick, the sinners, those at the fringe of the society; those rejected by the society, etc., and even ate with them. However, he also interacted with the rich, the learned, and the important people of his time. We can recall the episode when at the age of twelve he sat among the learned and the teachers of the law asking questions and responding to their questions. There are many instances where lawyers, the rich, the Pharisees and other important, high placed members of the society came and interrogated him. He is also seen with the top Roman and Jewish officials of the time, particularly during his trial, passion and death. Jesus the master set the pace in which Paul and all Christians should follow.

2.2 Paul an Imitator of Christ

Paul’s vocation was his commission from Christ to preach the gospel. He wrote, “woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” (1 Cor 9,16). This vocation of Paul can rightly be interpreted in this context as “being all things to all”. It points to Paul’s missionary adaptation to specific situations. We recall that Paul’s missionary work took him throughout the Mediterranean world and brought him in contact with all kinds of people, nationalities, customs and characters. He met with Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, men and women, educated and uneducated. His ministry extended to people of diverse cultural practices, both good and bad. In all of this diversity, his strategy was to become like them so as to reach out to them.

When he came to Athens he went through the shrines in Areopagus. Seeing the one dedicated to an unknown god, Paul simply took advantage of such inscription and dedication and told the Athenians: “it is about the unknown god that I have come to speak. What you worship as unknown this I proclaim to you...” (Acts 17,23-26). From talking about this unknown god, Paul went ahead to evangelize them. The apostle came to their level using images and ideas with which they were familiar – moving from the known to the unknown.

Other examples of his positive attitude towards the Jewish laws and practices can be seen in Acts 16; 18 and 21. In 1 Cor 9, 19-23, Paul's intention was not just to make a self defense, but he presents a paradigm that the Corinthians and by extension all Christians should imitate. The apostle had respect for other people's culture.

2.3 Implications for the Church in Nigeria

Evangelization is an important prerequisite of Christianity. Thus all Christians have the obligation to preach the good news. It is not an issue that is solely reserved for the clergy, religious and catechists as some people erroneously think. Most Christians particularly Catholics have started to express their fears regarding the future of the church. If one observes what is happening to the Church in Europe and America, one cannot but express such fears regarding the African church in general and particularly the Church in Nigeria. In those continents, many churches are empty today even on Sundays and the few that are attended are filled only with the elderly. One of the adverse effects is lack of vocation to the priesthood and religious life. Most seminaries, convents and monasteries have become empty and are used for other purposes. Some reasons for this state of affairs include⁴: *inadequate appreciation of the signs of the times, out-dated methodology, clerical triumphalism, hypocrisy and Pharisaism and greater devotion to structures*. We can summarize the reasons enumerated above as "not being all things to all people". There is an urgent call for *a change in methodology, Inculturation and contextualization, radical review of structures, humility on the part of leadership, and being authentic witnesses of the gospel*.⁵ These all revolve around "being all things to all people". In order "to be all things to all people, Christians should be authentic witnesses of the Gospel. It means applying love which is the axis on which the gospel principles rotate, in our dealings with people. To be able to adequately reach out to people with the good news of Christ there is an urgent need to understand and appreciate the signs of the times. This task requires us to realize where people are today and to work hard at presenting the Gospel in ways they can grasp.

This implies giving up one's own cultural preferences for the cause of Christ. It entails bridging generation gap: the ability to adapt to the younger generation's inclinations, for instance, to music, art, literature, entertainment, or communication, as a means of reaching out to them with the Gospel. For instance, some music, videos, magazines, and books speak of things that are somehow strange to the older generation. There is need to know what they are first before discarding them as being mundane or immoral. Certainly, it does not mean accepting all things as valid at first sight.

Different types of audience should be borne in mind in evangelization/mission. The teacher/preacher should be able to encounter different types of audience and be able to speak to them in the language they can understand. One should be able to encounter various types of audience. It is important for instance to come down to the level of children – they really do not need high theology. In this regard, *children's mass* should be very much encouraged. It was so interesting watching Pope Benedict XVI in one of his encounters with Children. This great intellectual and theologian so much descended to their level in a very fascinating way. Certainly, his "language" changes when he addresses the Cardinals, Bishops, Priests or Religious. It may then become necessary to apply "high theology". On the same note, it is counterproductive to use high grammar in addressing an illiterate community. It is quite commendable that apart from using the vernacular, some churches in Nigeria use the *pigeon* English in order to reach out to their non-elite communities. It has been observed too that some Catholics (particularly the younger generation are drifting away) to Pentecostal churches. Is it possible that the church is not giving the right response to their questions? More attention should be paid to the youth and children since they are the future of the church.

⁴ G. Ehusani, *Challenges for the Church in the 21st Century: A Memorandum* (Lagos 2003) 7-9.

⁵ Ehusani, *Challenges for the Church*, 12-15.

To become all things to all people, all Christians particularly priests and religious should shun materialism. Some priests and religious do not like to work in rural and poor areas. The general belief is that the Bishop or the superior sends those he/she hates to difficult or poor areas. Some priests and religious who find themselves in very poor parishes do not identify with the people but go out of their way to ride very expensive cars and put on flamboyant wears and shoes – some live in affluence while more than 95 percent of their parishioners live in abject poverty. Some priests and religious neglect the poor members of their parish in pursuit of the rich and the affluent. They do this to the point of exchanging their “prophetic right” for money and affluence from the rich. They thus become their puppets and can no longer tell them the truth even when they go contrary to the authentic teachings of the church. The conscience of the rich should be trained so as to be sensitive to needs of the poor. There is also need to sensitize both rich individuals and churches to support the poorer ones.

Christians after the example of this great apostle should be committed to removing every unnecessary impediment to the gospel. It is necessary to break down all barriers: cultural, social, gender, class, etc. and open the way for all people to hear the good news. Those who have already heard it should be encouraged to become stronger. This implies becoming one like those among whom we are working in every legitimate way we can so that they could be converted to Christ or become better Christians. Even if one does not travel from one country to another to spread the Gospel, one may not totally escape working outside his/her immediate culture and geographical area. Therefore we are not entirely removed from the sort of challenges that Paul faced. The changes brought on by the movement of time even in one location makes it necessary for us to become like others. It becomes crucial to identify with the people in a spirit of solidarity. This entails learning their language, accepting their food and drink (even when it is not the type we are used to), sometimes dressing like them (as far as it is modest), accepting the good aspects of their cultures and helping to Christianize the bad components. This certainly calls for a lot of sacrifices and self denial – being able to rise above personal preferences. Mission and evangelization become difficult and inefficient if there is a language barrier. Sometimes, interpreters are not accurate. At other times it is not their fault because certain concepts are better explained in the original language and any attempt to translate them water down the idea. It is as well important to enter into the world of the other. On the same note, it is important that the Nigerian Christians overcome the tribal bias and prejudices.

However, the preaching must not necessarily be oral. More than simply the oral preaching of the gospel, Christians are required to live a life of authentic witnessing. They should live in such a way that their very lives become an eloquent sermon to all around them. Pope John Paul II noted that rather than needing more teachers, the modern man and woman need authentic witnesses to the love of God in Christ. This implies that they need people who are readily available to “be all things to them”.

In some areas where there are clear evidence of conflicts and divisions, a good Christian, especially the leader, should try as much as possible to be neutral. This helps him/her to see things more objectively and thus be able to resolve conflicts. It is important to be conscious of the fact that “being all things to all people” is just as “to love unconditionally and selflessly”. Therefore it is not without its difficulties and hardships. Awareness of this fact right from the on-set will lessen the effect of the stress stemming from the negative reactions of people to one’s positive and well meaning gestures of love.

Relevance without Irreverence

Does becoming all things to all people also mean joining them in their sinful and unchristian acts in order to win them for Christ? For instance, are we supposed “to be proud with the proud”? Where should the demarcating line be drawn? What are the limits of our flexibility and adaptability? We have to draw a line at sin. Christ as well as the apostle makes this aspect clear. When Paul says in 1 Thess 5,21 “test everything but hold unto what is good”, it does not include testing sin. Most of the Gentile practices were not morally

neutral. In fact, many of them were horribly evil. Drunkenness, immorality, infanticide, and perversions of all sorts were the order of the day in many Gentile communities Paul visited. Paul had to be careful; there were limits on how far he would go. Therefore, he could not become like the Gentiles in every way. The Gentiles were those "outside the law", and about himself he said "I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law."

Care should be taken not to be a source of scandal to people under the guise of being all things to them. When Pope John Paul II danced with the youth during the world youth day, it was purely with the intention to win them over for Christ. He danced in a modest, religious way. The moral guidance of the revelation of Scripture always sets limits on how far Paul would go in becoming like the people around him. That should be the guide of the Christians too in reaching out to people. He worked hard at breaking down unnecessary barriers, but he was not eager to compromise his commitment to Christ. His yardstick was "the law of Christ."

Jesus' interaction with sinners was with the intention of changing and converting them. That was exactly Paul's objective too. It was not written anywhere that Christ committed sin with people or allowed them to commit sin in order to win them. One should be very careful in undertaking certain sensitive 'apostolic services' so as not to be easily led astray. Even well-meaning attempts to reach others may result in their reaching us! It is not a question of "if you cannot change them you join them". St. Anselm vividly puts it that "the slightest sin can never be justified even if by committing it the whole world would be saved". Accommodation must end where biblical precepts and principles begin.

Where then should we draw the line? Not 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, groups, and churches. We must be relevant without becoming irreverent. Care should be taken not to expose ourselves to danger.

Some people have understood this passage as revealing Paul's deceit. The passage in no way suggests hiding one's own identity in order to trick others. "Being all things to all people" does not imply deception. Neither was he schizophrenic. Contrary to the detractors' contention, Paul never said, "I told Jews I am Jewish and I told gentiles I am gentile and I would tell anybody anything if it would make them believe in Jesus". Rather than practicing deceit, he simply utilized good teaching techniques.⁶ It means that Paul adapted his behavior and expressions. No matter the people that he encountered, whether they were Jews, gentiles, weak, strong or whatever, the purpose was that they would not be hindered by feelings of inferiority or superiority. He was able to meet and speak to all people no matter their position. He always actually was what he appeared to be-on the same level with the person to whom he spoke.

Conclusion

The Christian vocation which is love can be summarized as "being all things to all" in order to win them for Christ. It is the supernatural and unconditional love of God and neighbor that provides the Christian with the thrust to become all things to all people. Christ took the lead; Paul learnt from him and urges the Christian to follow. The relevance of "being all things to all", particularly in the Nigerian context, cannot

⁶ D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (Salem 1992) 336-341.

be overemphasized neither can it be exhausted in this essay. The Christian seeking to attain this ideal should be flexible and ready to adapt to situations. The Christian must be readily available and willing to attend to people who might need his/her attention. Since the Christian life is a life of sacrifice and renunciation, the Christian must be prepared to accept the difficulties and sufferings that come in the course of “being all things to all” just as Christ and Paul (2 Cor 11,23-28). It means that the Christian must die to self. It may apparently seem to be a sort of humiliation or stupidity on the part of the Christian who struggles “to be all things to all”. This, however, does not reduce one’s dignity before God. God’s logic is completely different from human logic.