

I Am Become All Things To All Men ...

"For though I was free from all men, I brought myself under bondage to all, that I might gain the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, not being myself under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law, to them that are without the law, as without law, not being without law to God, but under law to Christ, that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might gain the weak: I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the gospel's sake, that I may be a joint partaker thereof" (1 Cor. 9:17-23).

Years ago an adage arose which said "whoever is in the middle of the road will get run over." Compromise and hypocrisy is condemned by God. Yet in the cited passage from Paul to the Corinthians, *"I am become all things to all men,"* we must not perceive that Paul is advocating either compromise or hypocrisy. Paul condemned Peter's hypocritical behavior; first he ate with Gentiles, then he refused to do so when brethren came from Jerusalem whom he feared would not approve (Gal. 2:11-14). Did Paul allow in himself what he condemned in others?

We must not construe Paul's words to allow for himself what he refused in others. Still, what did the apostle mean if he did not condemn Peter for the same things he allowed in himself?

First, consider that while some may see some subtle difference when he says that *"to the Jews I became as a Jew,"* then *"to them that are under the law, as under the law,"* there likely is no difference in meaning in these two phrases. Some see "Jew" to be a declaration of natural heritage; *"under the law"* being a reference to his religion. Peter, at the Jerusalem conference, said, *"And he made no distinction between us (Jews, jm) and them (Gentiles, jm), cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why make ye trial of God that ye should put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"* (Acts 15:9f). These words did, in essence, state the law to have been abrogated, for circumcision, and distinction between clean and unclean foods were very much part of the law. To fail to circumcise one's son resulted in that one being expelled from the nation (Gen. 17:14). To declare part of the law as null and void was to indict the whole law as being null and void.

It was Paul, however, who developed this theme to its fullest extent; having extensive arguments on this in Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians, and, if he authored Hebrews, that whole epistle is devoted

to the truth that the law was abolished or taken away. Yet, despite the truth the whole law was removed did not mean that to maintain any part of it was wrong. The whole object lay in the reason why one practiced it. We are not bound to practice circumcision, yet Paul reminds us "*Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but a new creature*" (Gal. 6:14). The law commanded tithing. We cannot command brethren to tithe; yet should any wish to give a tenth, or more, there is nothing wrong with his decision.

The action of Peter was different from Paul. While Peter observed the restrictions on clean and unclean meats with fellow Jews, he refused to eat with Gentiles lest he offend his Jewish brethren. On the other hand, Paul would abstain from unclean meats while eating with Jewish brethren, but he did not refuse to mingle nor eat what was set before him when he was with Gentiles. Paul would not knowingly give offense to any person, Jew or Gentile, by either offending their conscience by flaunting his liberties while in their presence.

Paul's aim was his passion; he would forgo any personal liberty he had that he might save those he was teaching. He was free, but he became the bondservant of all in his overriding desire to save the lost. Do we share the same attitude Paul did; or do we have the spirit, "I have the right to do this, and will do it, not matter how others are affected by it"?

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