

Being All Things to All Men

Rev. Daniel Kleyn

The two previous speeches (articles) reminded us of our calling to witness boldly by what we say to others as well as by how we live. Those speeches focused on the message, and on the messenger. We now direct our attention to one other factor in witnessing: the person to whom we witness. That person is anyone whom God in his providence places in our paths. While it is true that the most important thing in our witness to that person is the message (what we say by word or by life), the method is also significant – especially with a view to being effective in our witness. As we witness, we need to take into account the hearer, the listener, the person who is the object of our witnessing. Not everyone to whom we witness is the same. We need therefore to be all things to all men (1 Cor. 9:22).

To be all things to all men basically means that we seek to understand the person to whom we witness. We take the time to understand such things as his/her life, culture, circumstances, background, and religious beliefs. Taking such things into account, we then (as much as is possible and legitimate) adapt ourselves and adapt what we say to that person. We do this in order to avoid unnecessary offense and thus hopefully to increase that individual's receptivity to our witness.

For myself as a missionary in the Philippines, this includes the following. The most obvious is language – we work at learning and we strive to use the local language, Tagalog. But we also adapt ourselves to such things as their food (e.g., eating tripe or balut), their ways of communication (e.g., express appreciation for a dish, not verbally, but more indirectly by taking seconds), their view of time (e.g., a willingness to adapt to a “rubber clock” and thus to begin meetings later than the scheduled time), etc. That is, we show a willingness to enter into their lives and culture and ways. We strive to be

like Filipinos.

More significant than these types of things is the need to understand the religious background of Filipinos. We need to know what that background is, whether Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Baptist, or some other religion. This affects how we speak to them about certain things – e.g., the sacraments, the special gifts of the Spirit, or dispensationalism. It also affects what we speak about first – e.g., we do not immediately criticize them for their erroneous beliefs, but instead discuss what we might have in common and/or present the basic truths of the gospel.

But what about being all things to all men within the USA and Canada? Are there things that we need to be aware of and adapt to here? The answer is, yes. There are different cultures within our home countries. You will not always be witnessing to white, Dutch Americans. You will not always be witnessing to Christians. There are many different nationalities and religious backgrounds. Also, the experiences and circumstances of each individual you witness to differs greatly. Thus we need to ask ourselves, how must I be all things to an unbelieving neighbor? How to someone at work who curses, parties, and boasts of sin? How to a person who is divorced and remarried? How to a family member who never comes to church? How to an ungodly person who is a drunk or a homosexual? How to those from different races (Mexicans or African Americans)? How to those who serve other gods (Muslims or Hindus)?

1 Corinthians 9:19–23 guides us in our answers. Verse 22 mentions being “all things to all men.” Verse 19 indicates that this means being a “servant unto all.” That is, being “all things” means being “a servant.”

A servant gives up his rights and freedoms. He is at the mercy of his master. He cannot think about and be focused on himself. That’s what we must do in witnessing. We must forget about ourselves. If it helps our witness, we are willing to sacrifice our personal comforts, our plans for the

day, our own name and reputation, our personal opinions and/or preferences.

To help us in understanding the idea of being all things to all men, the apostle Paul gives us some examples. He mentions that he was a Jew to the Jews. If he was with Jews who wanted to keep the Old Testament feasts, Paul joined them in doing so. If he was with Jews who refused to eat unclean meat, he also refrained from doing so. If he was with Jews who still gathered for worship on the seventh day of the week, Paul worshiped with them in the synagogues on that day. Paul knew very well that Christ had come and had fulfilled the ceremonial laws, but during the period of transition from the Old to the New Testaments, he did not immediately condemn the Jews for not believing this – not by his words, nor by his actions.

Paul also mentions that he was a Gentile to the Gentiles (to those that were without the law). If they ate pork, he ate it too. If they ate meat sacrificed to idols, he also ate that meat. Paul did not live and behave as a Jew when he was with the Gentiles. Nor did he expect them to do so. He did not require that the Gentiles conform themselves to Jewish laws and practices.

Much more significant than the example of Paul is the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. He, more than anyone, became all things to all men. He, more than anyone, became a servant. He became a man in order to save men. He made himself poor for those who were poor. He even died for those who were dead. He became all things to us in order to accomplish our salvation. He became all things to us in order to fulfil and thus also to declare the gospel to us by his life and work. He became like us in all things, sin excepted.

These examples clearly show that when we witness, it is not about us – our name, opinions, or preferences. The important thing on our minds is the person to whom we are witnessing. As servants, we forget about ourselves and do everything we can to win others to the faith. We avoid driving them away. We strive to build a rapport with them. We seek to establish a friendship and a connection. We

show that we care about them. We work to create an atmosphere that is friendly and thus conducive to their being interested in the truth.

We do well to examine ourselves in this regard. If it is true of us that we come across as considering ourselves better than others, or holier than others, or more knowledgeable than others, then we fail to be all things to all men. If we give the impression that we are always right, that we are right with regard to everything, and that we have nothing to learn, then again we fail to be all things to all men. And if ever we give the impression that we are absolutely sure that we are going to heaven but not so sure about that as regards those to whom we witness, once again we fail to be all things to all men.

However, the idea of being all things to all men needs to be clarified. If we take and apply the language of the text to our lives, what does it really mean? Does it mean being a drunk to a drunk, a partier to a person who parties, a drug-user to a drug-user? Does it mean being a movie-goer to a movie-goer, or a Sabbath-breaker to a Sabbath-breaker? Does it mean being one who curses and swears to someone who curses and swears? Does it mean that we should join an unbeliever in his worldly activities in order to establish common ground and thus have an opportunity to witness?

At times, we might be tempted to think along such lines. One might be inclined to say, "If I'm invited to a party with an unbeliever, then I should probably go. By saying yes, I won't offend or upset him. And that will give me an opportunity to witness." Or someone else might say, "It's okay to be a friend to an unbeliever. It's even okay to be a boyfriend or girlfriend. Being all things to all men means I can be and should be. And that will give me so many opportunities to witness to him/her."

I trust that we are all wise enough to know this is wrong. For one thing, it is contrary to the theme text for our YP Convention – "That ye may be blameless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:15). It is also clearly contrary to the fact that our own lives must be a witness to others. Besides, do we really

think it will work to lead a drunk or adulterer or Sabbath-breaker or a cursing and swearing unbeliever to Christ and to the church by joining him in his sinful activities? The answer is obvious.

Being all things to all men does not mean being absolutely all things to all men. It refers, rather, to being all things that are lawful.

We may not be like those to whom we witness as regards what is wrong or immoral or forbidden. When it comes to godly living, there may never be any caving in or compromise. Never may we say, "I will go along to the party with others from school or work or college so that I can witness to them if they do wrong." Never may we say, "I will be a friend to an unbeliever and date him/her for a while because then I will have opportunity to witness." Never may we say, "I will try to be like them in every possible way. I will look like them, act like them, and speak like them, so that then they will be receptive to my witness."

Being all things means being willing to be like and to adapt to others with regard to the adiaphora – the things indifferent. These are things concerning which there is no direct command given in scripture. These are the things concerning which there is no right or wrong.

In this connection, we do well to be careful not to be too quick to judge things as wrong. That is always a temptation whenever people cross our paths who are different from us. What we need often to remind ourselves concerning others is this, "What they do or think or say is not necessarily wrong, it might simply be different."

This is perhaps our greatest struggle in witnessing – we are quick to judge. If someone's worship style is different, we consider it to be dead wrong. If someone is unemployed, we immediately judge him to be lazy. If someone is an Arminian, we right away figure it is a waste of time to try to convince him otherwise. If a person is of a different nationality or skin color, we are quick to think that God is less likely to save that person, and in sinful pride we consider ourselves more lovable in the eyes

of God and thus more savable.

Instead, we need humbly and patiently to seek to understand those we meet. We need to be sensitive to their struggles, their current beliefs, and their possible reactions to what we might say. We need to let them know they are important to us. We need to make ourselves approachable and thus to create an atmosphere in which they are interested in what we say to them concerning God and the gospel of his grace in Christ.

God has given us a wonderful gospel to bring to others. God is pleased to use us and our witness to gain others to Christ. The apostle Paul spoke of his goals (1 Cor. 9:23): “That I might gain the more” and “that I might by all means save some.” He mentions these goals five times – once in each verse. He was zealous and passionate about winning others over to the faith. May we be motivated by this as well, with a view to the salvation of the elect. And may God bless our efforts and use our faithful witness to draw his chosen ones to the church and thus to Jesus Christ.

*Rev. Daniel Kleyn is a missionary to the Philippines

Originally Published in:

Vol 76 No 10 October 2017