

2. “All Things to All Men”: Paul Preaches to the World (3Q 2008—Agents of Hope)

Biblical material: Acts 11:19–26, 13:16–42, 17:18–34.

Quotes

- Everyone ought to worship God according to his own inclinations, and not to be constrained by force. *Flavius Josephus*
- I believe that everything is right which God has given us. *Vladimir Putin*
- Men create gods after their own image, not only with regard to their form but with regard to their mode of life. *Aristotle*
- I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use. *Galileo Galilei*

Questions

Is it always good to be “all things to all men”? Can this concept be misunderstood—and what would this mean for the message about God and his truth? When Paul spoke at the Areopagus, was he successful? What are the dangers of “contextualization”? How can we best speak for God?

Discussion

Paul was truly transparent when he spoke about his own life-history. Despite the possibilities of misconception, Paul explains in detail his past life, and how God intervened to re-direct him in a completely opposite direction. He also used all kinds of ways to communicate the gospel. However, he found that it was better to keep it simple rather than to use a great deal of “academic illustrations.” Not that this was wrong—but not as direct as he wishes. So after experimenting with a number of approaches, he settled on the most direct—time was short, and the message needed to be presented as efficiently as possible. That’s not to say that there is only one way. Jesus’ methods show us that. But he too spoke clearly and simply to all, telling the truth in the best possible way.

While we want to be “all things to all people” in a way, that’s not to be so generic that people don’t hear what were saying, or become confused when we use the words or concepts of others to make our points. We need to say it clearly!

Comment 1

“So it was with the most intense desire that I seized upon the sacred writings of your Spirit and especially the Apostle Paul. Those difficult passages where at times he seemed to me to contradict himself, and where the text of his discourse seemed to be at variance with the testimonies of the law and the prophets melted away. I saw those pure writings as having one single aspect, and I learned to exult with joy. I made a beginning, and whatever truths I had read in those other works I here found to be uttered along with the praise of your grace, so that whosoever sees may not glory, as if he had not received not merely what he sees but also his very ability to see.

“All this those writings of the Platonists do not have. Their pages do not have this face of piety, the tears of confession, your sacrifice, a troubled spirit, a contrite and a humbled heart, the salvation of your people, the city that is like a bride, the pledge of the spirit, the cup of our redemption. In those books no one sings: ‘Shall not my soul be

subject to God? For he is my God and my savior, my protector. I shall be moved no more.’ In them no man hears him calling to us: ‘Come unto me, all you that labor.’ They scorn to learn of him because he is meek and humble of heart. ‘For you have hid these things from the wise and prudent, and have revealed them to little ones.’” *Augustine*.

Comment 2

“‘Oh, Athenians,’ he said, ‘I see that you are very religious,’ and then he goes on to explain how very religious they were. He said, ‘Why, as I passed through your city, I found representations of all the gods I’ve ever heard of, that’s how religious you are. I even found an altar to the unknown God. (Now, that’s being very, very religious!) Now, it so happens, I know this unknown God, and I’ve come to tell you about Him.’

“Now, there’s one skillful introduction to a public presentation! He complimented them. He turned their idolatry into a compliment. Isn’t that the only way to go? And then he gave this speech. He quoted the right authors, the philosophers and the poets; and he won a few at the end, didn’t he?

“But some of them said, ‘Well, that’s very interesting. We’ll give that study and see you here another day.’ Which is what often happens after deeply philosophical and theological presentations.

“And Paul said, ‘I did win a few, but I don’t think that’s the best way.’

“Though Ellen White says, ‘Look at him meet philosophy with philosophy, and logic with logic.’ She expresses admiration for Paul in this Mars Hill presentation.

“But good as it was, Paul says, ‘I’m not going to do it that way again. From now on I’ll preach nothing but Christ and Him crucified.’ (1 Corinthians 2:2). What does he mean when he says ‘I’ll preach Christ and Him crucified?’ A narrower message, or a more focused message?--using different methods. He doesn’t quote poets and philosophers much any more.” A Graham Maxwell, *Picture of God in All 66*, tape “Acts.”

Ellen White Comments

Says the apostle: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself.” Only as we contemplate the great plan of redemption can we have a just appreciation of the character of God. {5T 739}

Christ came to preach the gospel to the poor. He reached the people where they were. He brought plain, simple truth to their comprehension. How simple his language! Even the poorest, the unlearned and ignorant, could understand him. Not one needed go to a dictionary to obtain the meaning of the high-sounding titles or words that fell from the lips of the greatest Teacher the world ever knew. While the priests, the rulers, and the expounders of the law were considering themselves as the only teachers of the people, he told these learned rabbis that they were both ignorant of the Scriptures and of the power of God. {RH, July 19, 1887}

Christ’s words contain nothing that is nonessential. The Sermon on the Mount is a wonderful production, yet so simple that a child can study it without misunderstanding. The mount of beatitudes is a symbol of the spiritual elevation on which Christ ever stood. Every word He uttered came from God, and He spoke with the authority of heaven. “The words that I speak unto you,” He said, “they are spirit, and they are life.” John 6:63.--CT 439. {VSS 87-8}