

When a person becomes a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, they are moved from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Jesus Christ. They become a new creation that no longer fits in a sinful, unregenerate, fallen world system whose ruler is Satan. They gain an eternal, heavenly perspective to go with their newly acquired heavenly citizenship. God made them anew, not to fit in this world, but to be shaped into the image of Christ. If that is what a believer is, and if that is what a believer should strive to be, then what did Paul mean when he said that he had “become all things to all men so that by all possible means he might save some”? Understanding that statement requires understanding exactly what Paul did (and did not do) and the reason he acted that way.

I. What exactly did Paul do in becoming all things to all men?

1. *He still was resisting conformity to the world (1 Corinthians 1–6; Romans 12:2)*
 - a. From this letter we know that Paul resisted the cultural tendencies which had crept into the church: the divisions (1:10–17), the elevation of human wisdom and oratory (11:8–2:16), the resulting jealousy and quarreling (ch. 3), pride (ch. 4), sexual immorality and the tolerance of such sin (ch. 5; 6:12–20), and demanding personal rights (6:1–11).
 - b. Instead Paul put into practice what he taught in Romans 12:2, not be conformed to this age’s fallen, sinful practice of living, but to be transformed by a renewed mind so that his life fit a God-pleasing pattern.
2. *He was renouncing personal rights (1 Cor 9:1–18).*

Paul went further than resisting conformity to a sinful world, he renounced rights that God had granted: he renounced the right to receive wages for his work (9:4, 7, 11, 12, etc.) and he renounced the right to take along a believing wife (9:5). He did not use any of these rights (9:15). Becoming all things to all men was giving up even God-given rights, unlike the world.
3. *He was forsaking privileges (1 Cor 9:19–21; 10).*
 - a. As a free person, Paul had many privileges, but Paul chose to make himself a slave to everyone (9:19). This meant giving up privileges and submitting to the needs of others, so long as it did not mean conforming to the world (see above).
 - b. In particular Paul submitted to Jewish cultural practices when with Jews; he followed aspects of the Mosaic law when he didn’t have to (like having Timothy circumcised), he abandoned OT ritual when with Gentiles, and he put himself on the level of those without power, position, wealth, or social standing (9:20–22a).

Becoming all things to all men was not joining in with sinful activity, but giving up comfort, privileges and even rights to be in a better position for God’s purposes.

II. Why did Paul strive to become all things to all men?

Paul explains, “so that by all possible means I might save some” (9:22b). The context explains it more fully.

1. *He sought to persuade as many as possible with the gospel (9:19).*
2. *He desired to fulfil the nature and purpose of the gospel (9:23a).*

The preposition indicates that Paul is giving the reason for his actions; it is because of the gospel. Among other things the gospel declares God’s love, righteousness, wisdom, and mercy (John 3:16; Romans 1:17; 8:33; 12:1). Paul became all things to all men because the gospel declares and leads to the glory of God; and God is worthy of that glory, even if by Paul’s efforts only “some” got saved.
3. *He wanted to share in the work and results of the gospel (9:23b–27).*

Paul wanted to be a fellow-sharer in the process, that is, being the necessary messenger (Romans 10:10–15), and a fellow-sharer in the results, that is, winning the prize and getting the crown. Paul was willing to give up personal rights and privileges to become a participant in the process of God saving people, and thereby enjoy as well the rewards of that effort. Paul looked heavenward.

Paul strove to remove unnecessary barriers to the gospel, by giving up personal rights and privileges, but not by conforming to the world. He strove to become the aroma of Christ, to some a fragrance of life and to others the stench of death (2 Corinthians 2:15–16). His personal benefit was not comfort or acceptance in this world, but the privilege of bringing glory to God and receiving an eternal reward.

For further reflection:

• In what ways are we rightly challenged to fit into the world around us? • In what ways should we fit for the sake of the gospel, but are personally uncomfortable? • Is there adaptation which as a follower of Jesus you should avoid? • How strong is the aroma of Christ in your life? • Review passages such as Ephesians 4:17–6:9 and Colossians 3:1–4:1 to see the contrast between conforming and becoming the aroma of Christ.