

*Balancing Mennonite Traditions
With
Becoming All Things to All Men.*

No doubt it might be better if someone could tell us how to do this, someone who isn't a part of our circles but then again we don't usually open ourselves to that, we can have others tell us privately and it is good to listen to those things from others privately but this title does imply the possibility of imbalance and I think we all know how easy that is, imbalance is a hallmark of the human experience, so it is easy to be over to the one side of the road or to the other, it is easy to emphasize one truth, one aspect of practice to such an extent as to leave another side of the picture largely ignored.

We plead for consistency and we tend to believe that we are at least more consistent in many ways in our faith and practice than what many other churches are but it is good for us to evaluate are we as consistent as we ought to be? Are we as balanced as what we think we are? And I think the answers to those questions, often when we answer those questions we may discover that we do not have quite the balance that we ought to.

Probably the only person who retained a complete balance would be our Lord Jesus Christ, all the rest of us need to struggle with staying focused and with all the distractions that we have and all the issues that we need to face within the church and in our evangelistic interests preserving the faith in the Mennonite tradition, all of those things tend to get us a little off course at times and so it is good for us to keep periodically asking and regularly asking: "Is this consistent or reasonable?" And yet not in a way that we are unstable or trying to change things all the while, I think that is another error we can fall into.

Now another thing about balance is that it is relative and rather much so. When we talk about balance in outlook and practice there is often some difference of ideas as to where balance is to be found and that is the reason why we have the differences in the different church groups who would be in the category of Mennonite traditions because they believe that the bal-

ance is found in a slightly different place than what we hold it to be found at.

So that is another thing that we need to keep in mind when we start talking balance, balance is not necessarily in these matters and not necessarily absolute but rather it is more relative.

Now this subject also implies value in Mennonite traditions.

It says balancing Mennonite traditions with becoming all things to all men but it does suggest even though there is value there it suggests that the preservation of the Conservative Mennonite tradition could become an end in itself and I think we could see where we believe that happens in various church groups. In other words we could see where the preservation of Mennonite tradition is a hindrance or can be a hindrance to the evangelical responsibility of the church, the evangelical witness of the church, the evangelistic efforts and the mission interests that we should have.

I think by this term Mennonite tradition as a definition that I believe that I'm putting forward this evening, by that term Mennonite tradition we mean the forms and practices held by Conservative Mennonites, we should mark this down that the things that Brother D... was talking about, it is very clear that many naming themselves Mennonites are not really holding Mennonite tradition as we are thinking about.

Getting back to the definition: The forms and practices held by Conservative Mennonites that were held for the last few hundred years including such things as our understanding in the practice of the two doctrines of separation and nonresistance, and such practises as our worship practices, particularly segregated seating and a-cappella singing, these I think would represent just a broad outline of the Mennonite tradition.

Now these Mennonite traditions also include a lifestyle and manner of living that in themselves are amoral; that is neither wrong nor right in themselves, and I could include with that the way in which we conduct our homes and families, it would include such things as the type and size of a housing what we consider adequate and necessary for our families, it would include the condition of our vehicles and maybe the kind of meals we make and the close ties we enjoy in family life and among our own people.

Because of these things as a group of Conservative people we tend to appear rather strange, to be a rather strange set of people to general society and it is so easy for them to get the impression that we are so close and so exclusive that "outsiders" are not welcome, but this is really not how the general attitude is of our church, we do not really hold this, we are a church that believes in evangelism, we believe in the saving of souls, we believe in helping people find and receive Jesus Christ.

We want people to be born again and not only in the Mennonite families. But as I said one of the complications that tends to be made in the minds of others looking on is that we are far too closed, they have the right to judge us as they care to and we must ever keep that in mind.

But this now is where we are "all things to all men" comes into the picture.

Mennonite tradition, it is balancing Mennonite tradition and not trying to decide how to downplay that necessarily or get rid of that so that we can be all things to all men. No, we want to be all things to all men and still retain these distinctives, that is the burden we sense here this evening.

Let's turn to first Corinthians 9 where Paul elaborates on the outlook of this "all things to all men" and see what we can learn by way of reaching other people.

I'd like to read just now verses 15 through 27 first Corinthians 9, the text is verse 22 where this phrase is found, "all things to all men."

"But I have used none of these things: neither have I written these things, that it should be so done unto me: for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void. ¹⁶For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! ¹⁷For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me. ¹⁸What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel. ¹⁹For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. ²⁰And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; ²¹To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. ²²To the

weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. ²³And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you. ²⁴Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. ²⁵And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. ²⁶I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: ²⁷But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." 1 Corinthians 9:15-27.

Now looking at our text in verse 22.

I think what we can see here is the working principle of Paul's ministry, Paul was not a Mennonite I guess as we would understand it, we don't think of him that way but when we think about being all things to all men we are certainly taking this from his words and we want to try and find out the meaning of that as we think of ourselves within the Mennonite tradition.

We see in Paul here the working principle of his ministry and I think it is to be the secret of success for us as well as we are relate to others.

Now he is saying that I accommodate, I made myself, I made all things to all men. I would paraphrase that by saying that what Paul here is saying is that: I accommodate myself to others in order to bring them to Christ. I have chosen to be a servant to others in order to save them and that is also stated in first Corinthians 10:33: "Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved."

Now Paul's comments; All things to all men.

What does he mean by this? I said it suggested he is going to accommodate himself but let's think about this.

First under this category for a demonstration of this concept: How did Paul show that he believed this concept of "all things to all men"?

Well let's take the three instances that he gives here in verses 20 through 22 he says first of all: And unto the Jews I became a Jew that I might gain the Jews.

To the Jews, now we know that Paul himself was a Jew, but after his conversion he had to say he had to become a Jew as he says here. Notice:

“To the Jews I became a Jew” became as Jew, by a distinct act or a conscious effort on his part he chose to identify with the Jews so he could reach them and he did that, he chose to accommodate the Jewish observances when it would not in any way violate salvation through Christ, and so while he taught and fought vigorously against the Jewish circumcision as being a necessary part of salvation he didn't have a problem having Timothy circumcised so that he would be better accepted by both the believing and unbelieving Jews, you can read about that in Acts 16:3.

Also Paul willingly took the Nazarite vow there in the temple so that it would, as it says, settle down the prejudice of many thousands of Jews who believed and many other believers, and that you can read in Acts 18:21-26.

Now the next category he talks about here are: *Those that are under the law.*

Again this phrase describes the Jews not now by their race but by their religion and he says that to those who are under the law he became as one under the law so that he might gain them.

Now how are we to understand that?

He was not under the law in the same sense as though she were seeking to gain, he acted as though under the law, he did not keep anything of the law as in necessity to salvation again, as people said you must, as they did in Galatians, his reply essentially was: I will not, but if respecting certain aspects and ceremonies by practice would not violate the Bible principle and help them reach and redeem them he would do it.

The next category he says are: *Those without law.*

And here too he accommodated himself. These are Gentiles now that are in the picture, he accommodated himself, those who were religious but not religious just like the Jews, they did not know or care about the law of Moses and so when preaching on Mars Hill he did not talk in the same vein of thought as when he preaching in the synagogue, Acts 17:22-23, and I think this is a point for us in our Mennonite tradition that we need to fit our message to the people we are trying to reach, individual or group it doesn't matter, whether it is an individual family or group, and when I say fit our message I do not mean to say that we change our message but many times individuals have been turned from us because somebody did not catch the

spirit, the spirit and burden of the individual which they were trying to reach.

So on Mars Hill he didn't talk in the same vein of thought as he preached in the synagogue but he appealed to those Gentiles by talking of their gods and their altars and their poets, he knew about those, he showed that he was knowledgeable where they were at and what was important to them.

And again it is good, and I'm not saying we need to study all the false religions, but when we meet somebody who is holding another religion and yet he questioning whether it is really the truth it would be good for us to look into what those people believe and then endeavour to show the fallacy of it.

And he said to them you have an altar to an unknown God and I want to show you who that God is. And that is really the call that we have, he shows that he was knowledgeable where they were at and what was important to them and he sought to reach them at that point.

Galatians 2:4-5, just go over there and see what we have, he says:

“And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: ⁵To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.”

So he is there saying that we are not about to give space where somebody was putting forth error, but again notice he did not himself become lawless as he was ministering to those who were without law, he remains not under Old Testament law but under the law to Christ as he says.

He stayed by Christian principles while seeking to connect with those that were without law and so it is for us.

That is why when we think about balancing Mennonite tradition with being all things to all men it is not a matter of us taking a smoke if someone offers a smoke because we don't want to offend them or taking a social drink because that is the accepted thing there. No, we can really kindly refuse those things and I say we can do it politely and kindly we need not be rough and abrasive, but the point is that we rather know something about, that we try to learn whom we are talking to and where they are coming from.

Now the third category here is: *Those that are weak.*

He defines the weak at another place to those who are weak that I might gain the weak, he defines the weak in such places as 1 Corinthians chapter 8 and chapter 10, I won't take time to turn to these but they were about Christians with an overly scrupulous conscience as I would understand it, overly sensitive, almost everything and anything bothered them, they were just so sensitive that they believed that anything they did might have been wrong. People who took idols and the meat offered to idols so seriously, way too seriously, they were people with conscience problems or scruples over the observance of various special days as well.

And in chapter 8 of first Corinthians he makes it clear whether you eat meat or not eat meat that will not ever commend you to God or condemn you, that comes out very clearly here in the eighth chapter first Corinthians, it won't commend or condemn, but verse eight, but meat commendeth us not to God for neither if we eat meat are we better or if we eat not are we the worse.

And again in first Corinthians 10:32: "Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God:" and so looking at this he states: when you go into the market and you want to buy food don't enquire at all about the source of the food, don't enquire about the food, buy it and eat, no fuss made, but if someone steps up to you and says this was offered to idols then refrain from it. 1 Cor. 10: 25-28, and again it wasn't that he became weak so as to encourage the weak to continue and be more deeply ingrained in their over-scrupulousness but rather to help them, rather to not be an offence to them and back away.

Now let's think some more about how we might apply this.

Did you notice I didn't give you a lot of illustrations of how this concept of Paul's is applied, but this is an example in everyday life and I am not really planning to go into a lot of ways and things that we can do to accommodate but rather to give you some principles to guide us as we in our Mennonite traditions seek to reach those around us.

First of all our accommodation must remain within the bounds of the gospel.

Our accommodation must remain within the bounds of the gospel and this is seen in both verse 16, (1 Cor.9:16) it is seen in both verse 16 and

verse 23, he says verse 16: “¹⁶For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!”

The gospel is the good news that there is salvation through Jesus Christ by faith in Him through God's grace we can be saved. Ye must be born again, John 3:7, is the gospel message and what people should be taught that when being born again is that there is a change in us. So we must remain within the bounds of the gospel.

Paul was determined to be true to the gospel by presenting it in its purity, we need to have that same burden as we relate to others.

And also in verse 23 by partaking of it and he says: “²³And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.” 1 Cor.9:23

You see those that he was trying to redeem he wanted to be a partaker with them.

By that statement he means that he wanted to demonstrate the gospel in his own life. He had it clear that the gospel that saves us is the gospel that we need to be saved by ourselves and therefore his burden was that he avoided any inconsistent behaviour as he talks about it here in verse 27. (1 Cor.9:27).

Perhaps that is one of the greatest problems in this matter of balancing Mennonite tradition and sharing the gospel with others, perhaps one of the greatest problems is that too often the folks that we are trying to reach see too much discrepancy between our lives and practice and the gospel that we are trying to present.

You see it is possible that it is more because of our inconsistencies that bad things are said of us than what it is about the whole concept of a separate way of life.

So we do not want to keep nor do we not want to tolerate that which is sinful as we seek to reach people, nor do we want to keep back anything essential, any essential truth just because it is unpopular, No, we can't do that. And Paul does not, he is not just teaching here what many have taken from it such as is expressed in that phrase: “When in Rome do as the Romans do.” He is not teaching that because what that does suggest is that or it has come to be interpreted as compliance with those around you even

when you know what they are doing is wrong because you want to be a friend to them.

Rather we are to strive to be as Demetrius was of whom John declared in his third epistle that he had a good report of all men and of the Truth itself. 3 John 1:12.

That is really what we want, we want to strive for that in our Mennonite tradition and as we live it out that we will have a good report of those around so that they will pay attention and notice as they did with the Apostles: “that we have been with Jesus” they will see that and want to learn more about that. A good report of all men and of the Truth itself.

You say that if we have a good report of all men maybe we won't have a good report of the Truth?

Well maybe that is a tight rope to walk but on the other hand it is a possibility because that is how the example is that Demetrius sets for us.

We are not to try as someone has said to please everybody by differing with nobody, we are not supposed to try that. No, we need to honour truth in an attitude and in a way that it will be honourable in the sight of men and pleasing in the sight of God.

Loving our neighbours does not mean joining them in their wrongdoing.

Secondly being all things to all men calls for servanthood.

We see that in verse 19: “For though I be free from all men, and yet I have made myself servant to all, that I might gain the more.” 1 Cor.9:19.

The servanthood idea, being a servant, he lived in this servant heart and mentality, that was the attitude with which he served. See how Paul says it? I have made myself a servant, I made myself a servant, I became as a servant, I made myself as a servant to all that I might gain the more.

And this shows that servanthood was a deliberate decision on his part, a deliberate decision with the express purpose of touching other people's lives for good without any self-pity.

So let's try to identify that servant heart just a bit further.

Now I think again that this point of being all things to all men on the positive side, to be all things to all men in the Mennonite tradition, we need to keep ever aware of ourselves, the word I want is that we do not come across as having all the answers, that we do not come across as being somewhere at a much higher level on the plain of spirituality than others.

Now they don't necessarily take that just because of our distinctives, sometimes we get a notion that our plain suits are a hindrance and yet we don't expect our sisters to change their attire and I don't mean that we can't witness to people in our everyday clothes but we should not think about these distinctives as being really a hindrance to our declaring the gospel but rather the attitudes that they sense behind the distinctives is what makes the difference of whether they will be open to receive what we have to say.

Don't think of yourselves and don't come across as having arrived. When we come across as having arrived at the ultimate in personal convictions, the ultimate in church life, the ultimate in understanding and dedication, I think we have been acted on by Satan and are in spiritual pride.

Let's remember how Jesus said it once in Luke 18, it says He spake this parable unto those. And it was the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, the one who prayed: Thank God I am not as other men are, even as this publican, and he went on to name a whole group of other things that he did, and Jesus said, or the Scripture says that He spake this parable unto those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others.

And as I would understand and see that if that is among us that is one of the things that can very quickly turn people off when they sense that in us.

Now we should not always be questioning whether this distinctive or that of our faith whether we should drop it. No, not at all, there should be a stability there but we can easily come across with such an attitude of superiority and because we have that attitude they are able to pick it up very easily so that they rather are not helped to be saved but are turned away.

I give you this illustration; Many years ago one person made this observation he said: "I like a lot of things about your church." (I don't remember the exact words) but then he went on to say this: "One of the things that gives him a lot of problems is when he is hearing people pray in our church, (and he referred to the young men of that particular church,) when I hear them pray he says their prayers sound so much like the Pharisees prayer!"

And it gave me pause and I just thought we need to observe that a little. Certainly we ought to thank God for our godly heritage and all the things that we have but this person was seeking and liking what he saw but did see something that he didn't like and he did notice when he heard these prayers in a more intense way that too many of them sounded that they are not glad that they are not like some other men are. And certainly we can be glad for our redemption but what we have to keep in mind there is that even though we are saved and saved for many years and walking in the way of Holiness we are still saved by grace, you see and we never get to where God owed it to us, or we never get to the place that we are better just because of who we are.

And we need to keep that straight.

Then we should identify with other individuals as we think of our servanthood responsibilities.

Seek to put yourself where they are and in their shoes, and this is often quite hard. We live with our own biases and prejudices and we view life from a certain perspective that tends to limit our ability to know exactly how others feel but what we ought to be trying to find out when we are seeking to help someone, to reach another person with the gospel is to try to ascertain what are they telling themselves, what are they telling themselves?

So identify with the other individual's outlook and see, and that can go a long way when people sense that we are understanding where they are at and where they are coming from and many times it takes more listening at first than talking in order to learn that.

Again it isn't the Mennonite tradition that is hurting but it is more our attitude about ourselves and about our church. You see that may either make or break that issue.

To identify requires that we pay attention to comments and reactions, that we are alert in reaching an other individual with the gospel, perhaps listening is more than half of the task for us, learn to empathise and enter in to how and what they are feeling.

And learn compassion, you see that is the other thing, people can sense if we are really are as caring as we ought to be for them.

We can see how another person ought to change but do they sense in us a genuine interests that we really want them to change? And certainly people

need Christ above all things and we need to emphasise their need of Christ above anything else, but if they don't sense in us an interested, caring, understanding heart we will hardly be able to reach them with the gospel. So it is important to check our attitude toward the one in need.

We need to examine our own actions and reactions and ask ourselves: "Am I truly representing our church to them and the Lord Jesus Christ to them in a way that is digestible to them in a way in which they can receive it?"

Now let's come to conclusion.

I want us to notice that particularly here as we come over to verse 22, what he says, what I wanted to point out right now that all these that he is doing he says, starting at verse 19:

"....that I might gain the more."

And again in verse 20: "...that I might gain the Jews;that I might gain them that are under the law;.." verse 21: "... that I might gain them that are without law."

Verse 22: "...that I might gain the weak:" you see, "...I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." 1 Cor.9:19-22.

One more thing that I wanted point out there is this: That we cannot save them all, Paul is saying here that I am made all things to all men and want to do what I'm doing so that I might gain all men but he says that I want to save some.

So he didn't have his sights on saving them all.

And I think that is the other truth that we need to recognise, as there are interested persons they will not all stay interested because they will not all want it, you see.

So let's not be apologetic about our Mennonite tradition but neither should we put that forth as first and foremost.

Let us put forward the Scriptures and realise that the Mennonite traditions that we hold dear have to do with our belief on how separation ought to be practised, and non-resistance, those things are Bible truths and that is part of the gospel message that we need to share with them.

By all means save some and by all means please some people for their good to the edification is the burden of this message.

So may the Lord help us to try and keep learning what that balance ought to be.

*Extracts of a message by Brother David.
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