

“All Things *to All Men*”: Paul Preaches *to the World*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Acts 11:19–26, 13:16–42, 17:18–34.*

Memory Text: “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (*1 Corinthians 9:22, NKJV*).

Key Thought: The apostle Paul, seeking to bring the gospel to the world, gives us an example of how we need to learn to adapt the way we present our message, depending on the context and culture in which we are witnessing.

Adventist missionary pioneers quickly learned that they needed to present our present truth message in as culturally relevant a way as possible. Today the Global Mission initiative of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church sponsors study centers around the world that explore ways to build bridges to people of other religions and cultures. Before we can effectively communicate with other people, we need to understand their culture and ways of thinking.

This week we explore what it means to adapt our message to people in different circumstances. And we do so by looking at the various ways in which the apostle Paul, a firm and uncompromising believer in truth, tailored the message of Jesus for specific audiences. What can we learn from Paul that will better enable us to reach people with present truth?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 12.*

Paul Encouraged for Mission

After Paul's Damascus road experience, some of the apostles were not convinced that he was a true disciple (*see Acts 9:26*). Perhaps they feared he was sent as a spy to infiltrate the church and cause further problems. At that time, Barnabas stood up for Paul and defended him (*vss. 27, 28*).

Barnabas was "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (*Acts 11:24, NIV*), and he was a tremendous help to Paul as he began his ministry.

Read Acts 11:19–24. How did the church begin in Antioch? How successful were the missionary endeavors?

The leaders of the church in Jerusalem heard about the new group of believers in Antioch—one of the three leading cities of the Roman Empire at that time. Immediately they sent the highly respected Barnabas to help establish and build up the church.

Read Acts 11:25, 26. Why do you think Barnabas chose Paul to help him?

Acts is full of surprising events: Saul, the persecutor, becomes Paul, the missionary; the gospel of salvation becomes good news for all, not just for the Jews; and now Paul ministers to a church established indirectly as a result of his persecution.

For a year Barnabas and Paul taught the people. As the church grew in strength, it developed a spirit of compassion and ministered to others. The new church members sent financial help to their brothers and sisters in Judea, who were suffering from a severe famine (*Acts 11:28–30*). Thus, they were not going to hoard their own blessings; when a need came, they were ready to help.

The church in Jerusalem, hearing about Antioch, sent Barnabas to work with it. And Barnabas, knowing about Paul's calling, brought Paul to help. And that church, hearing about the needs in Jerusalem, sent aid to it.

What lesson can we learn about helping others with the things that we ourselves have been blessed?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Corinthians 9:22*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Indicate to the class some of the ways in which Paul adapted the Christian message to the contemporary culture.

Feel: The importance of adapting the presentation of the message without changing the message itself.

Do: Figure out some ways to do the same thing in presenting the Advent message to people.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. “All Things to All People” (*1 Cor. 9:22*)

A How do you do that?

B Read Paul’s sermon in Acts 13:13–41 and his sermon in Acts 17:16–31. What’s the difference?

C What happened in the new church in Antioch in Syria that had never happened before in the young Christian church?

II. Keeping the Message Intact (*1 Tim. 4:16*)

A You heard someone present the Adventist message in an entirely different way than you learned it, and you didn’t like it! What made you feel that way?

B Discuss this question with the class: “Why is it important to keep the Advent message intact even if you present it in a unique way?”

III. Dealing With Athenian Philosophers

Case Study: Your friend is a secular person indifferent to religion and says “It’s fine for those who like it, but I can take it or leave it.” What do you say to this contemporary “Athenian philosopher”?

► **Summary:** If people don’t understand what’s being said, they won’t listen. Paul set an example of how to communicate Christianity in different settings and gave us some good ideas on how to make the Advent message understandable.

All Things to All People

“I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (*1 Cor. 9:22, NIV*).

What does Paul mean when he says that he has “become all things to all [people]”? We can be confident that whatever his meaning, the apostle is not advocating compromise. He is not talking about changing the gospel, the doctrines, the ethics, or any of the truth of God’s Word. He is talking about making these things as attractive and understandable as possible for different cultures.

Paul modeled this approach by using different methods to reach different people.

For example, in attempting to reach Jews, Paul would arrive in a city, visit the synagogue, and teach (*see, for example, Acts 9:19–22, 13:14–16*).

Read Acts 13:16–42. In his sermon, where does Paul’s short overview of biblical history begin and end? To what authority does he appeal to prove that Jesus is the Messiah? What does this tell you about Paul’s approach to Jewish people?

Read Acts 14:8–18. How does the way Paul talks to the pagans—who did not believe the Old Testament—differ from his speeches to the Jews?

Paul makes no appeal to Scripture as an authority (he does allude to the Old Testament in verse 15, but in the way he might quote a poet, not as an authority). Rather, he appeals to the natural world and the evidence that nature gives of a Creator God. And he points out the futility of worshipping idols.

How far should we be willing to go in trying to reach people in their own culture? How can we avoid the dangers of going too far; that is, of compromising truth in our attempts to spread it?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Jesus said that the truth would set us free. As Christians, we have found that the truth Jesus presented to us and the world did indeed set us free. But that doesn't mean all our problems go away, and one of those problems arises from friends, relatives, or business associates who don't like or appreciate our new lifestyle and worldview.

How did Paul overcome similar barriers in a culture in which much of his message was completely alien to many of his hearers? What can we learn from his experience?

Based on this, ask the class members to describe a situation in which they had to stand up for their faith in an unfriendly environment. How did it go? What did they learn? What mistakes did they make? What might they do differently next time?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. “All Things to All People” (*Review 1 Cor. 9:22 with your class.*)

From what we can glean about Paul's career elsewhere in the New Testament, a tendency to compromise was not one of his vices/virtues. It is quite clear that Paul did not advocate any compromise on essentials and that smooth social interaction was not his primary interest. “Everything that Paul did, his ready adaptation to the particular society in which he found himself and his willingness to be tolerant and patient toward all men, had but one objective—the saving of those who would believe his message.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 734.

Consider This: What do passages such as Acts 9:19–22 or Acts 13:14–16 say to us about how this approach looks when put into action?

II. Witness to the Athenians (*Review Acts 17:18–33 with your class.*)

Consider This: The following commentary explains why Paul's approach to the Athenians differs so much from examples of his preaching and

CONTINUED 

A Witness to the Philosophers

One of Paul’s most well-known missionary endeavors occurred in Athens, home of some of the world’s greatest philosophers of antiquity, such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. And yet, how interesting: Even with all the philosophy and all its appeals to reason and logic, the city was still “wholly given to idolatry” (*Acts 17:16*). What a testimony to how, in the end, philosophy cannot answer basic human needs.

Read Acts 17:18–34. What approach did Paul take in trying to reach these people? What does he not use? How successful were his efforts?

Epicureans taught that happiness comes from living a good life with modest pleasures. The Stoics, on the other hand, urged people to be content with what they had. Together, Stoic and Epicurean philosophers heard Paul in the marketplace and started to argue with him, calling him a “babbling” (*Acts 17:18, NIV*).

Despite ridiculing Paul, these philosophers invited him to speak at a meeting of the Areopagus—a group of philosophers that assessed new teachings—on what we know as Mars’ Hill.

In his speech, Paul shapes his message to his pagan audience (*vs. 22–25*) by connecting with their culture. He refers to a statue they had built to the unknown god and identifies Him as the Creator God.

At no stage does Paul refer to the Scriptures, as he would with a Jewish audience. Rather, he again points to the natural world with which they are familiar and connects it to the supernatural. And though Paul did not use the Scriptures, his message to them was, clearly, very scriptural.

In what ways do the things of nature speak to your heart about God? How could you better cultivate an appreciation of our Creator through the things of nature?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

teaching recorded elsewhere; it is one of the few times that Paul does not quote Scripture and, in fact, refers to other literature of the day.

“By quoting from their own literature, Paul illustrated his policy of becoming ‘all things to all men’ (1 Cor. 9:22). They would recognize that they were not dealing with an uneducated Jew . . . , but with a man possessed of a culture like their own, and familiar with the thoughts of their poets.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 354.

Why do you think Paul took this approach? How might we need to do something similar in our attempts to reach out to those who don’t have a biblical background at all? What good is quoting the Bible to people who don’t pay any heed or attention to it?

III. The Sticking Point *(Review Acts 17:34 with your class.)*

Paul was able to convince his hearers that his “philosophy” was at least worthy of consideration, up until the point at which he had to bring up (so to speak) the resurrection of the dead.

It is instructive to note that even though Paul was quite willing to adapt his message to his audience, he was not willing to omit important pieces of information to make the parts that remained more palatable. How important that we learn to do the same thing; that is, to approach people where they are but not to stop there. We need to bring them along to where they need to be.

Consider This: Acts 17:34 shows us very clearly that the “all things to all people” approach does not justify any effort to alter the truth either actively or passively.

IV. Building Churches and the Church *(Review Rom. 15:18–23 with your class and compare with 1 Cor. 3:6–14.)*

Consider This: Paul is quite specific in this passage in regard to his method of spreading the message. Two things stand out: He avoided extraneous matters, speaking only of Christ and His qualities and accomplishments, and he avoided going to places where someone else had already preached Christ.

■ *What does this say to us today about, for example, our relationship to other Christian churches or efforts to convince other Christians of our distinctive doctrines?*

CONTINUED 

The Message on Mars' Hill

Read again Acts 17:18–34. Look through Paul's discourse. Where do you find these basic doctrines: Creation, Redemption, and judgment? In what ways does it sound like our Adventist message?

Paul not only knew pagan literature; he quoted parts of it from memory. First, he quotes a Cretan poet who wrote, “‘In Him we live and move and have our being’ ” (vs. 28, *NIV*). And second, the pagan Cleanthes, whose love poem to the god Zeus contained the line “‘We are his offspring’ ” (vs. 28, *NIV*). In each case, Paul takes something from their culture and connects it to the truth he wants to teach them.

“With hand outstretched toward the temple crowded with idols, Paul poured out the burden of his soul, and exposed the fallacies of the religion of the Athenians,” writes Ellen G. White. “The wisest of his hearers were astonished as they listened to his reasoning. He showed himself familiar with their works of art, their literature, and their religion.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 237.

Ellen White adds: “Paul’s words contain a treasure of knowledge for the church. . . . Had his oration been a direct attack upon their gods and the great men of the city, he would have been in danger of meeting the fate of Socrates. But with a tact born of divine love, he carefully drew their minds away from heathen deities, by revealing to them the true God, who was to them unknown.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 241.

Paul understood that before we can lead people to where we want them to be we must first meet them where they are. That means focusing on their needs, their interests—and shaping our message in a way that connects with them. This does not mean watering down the message. It is just an issue of communication—talking to people in terms and in language they can understand.

What was the one aspect of Paul’s teaching that caused the most dissent in this environment? Why? What should this tell us about the limits of trying to explain rationally all that we believe?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

In the light of his other writings, it is probably reasonable to assume that Paul is describing his form of evangelism and ministry, not prescribing it for all others in all times and places.

V. Becoming an Example *(Review 1 Thess. 1:6–8 with your class.)*

Consider This: Being a witness to God is not just telling people about Him but giving evidence that you yourself have experienced God.

“The Thessalonian believers were true missionaries. Their hearts burned with zeal for their Saviour, who had delivered them from a fear of ‘the wrath to come.’”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 256.

■ *Nowhere is it suggested that the Thessalonians were such good examples because they were perfect. In his letters to them, Paul makes his share of corrections and suggestions. But the Thessalonians were growing, learning, and sharing their faith.*

► STEP 3—Practice

Thought Questions:

1 Most of us have probably heard or been told that we should not study non-Christian philosophies and religions because it is better to become familiar with what we know is true rather than with what we know not to be true. Do you agree?

2 What does the fact that Paul is able to find material to support his points in classical Greek literature suggest to you?

Application Question:

In many parts of the world, pastors and church members are departing from the traditions and habits that have defined church for centuries, creating megachurches, seekers’ churches, etc. While these have been wildly suc-

CONTINUED 

Paul's Method of Church Planting

Read Romans 15:18–23. How could he claim that “I have fully preached the gospel of Christ” (*vs. 19, NIV*), when obviously most of the population were still not Christians? What does the answer tell us about how we are to determine what success is?

Paul chose to start new congregations in strategic cities throughout the region. He chose places that were major transport hubs—on major Roman roads or seaports—and that were important commercial, trading, or administrative centers. He thus established strategic light-houses throughout the area, planning that the new groups of believers would take the good news to the areas surrounding these centers. Although Paul's work was finished, the task of outreach had only begun for the new believers.

On his second missionary journey, Paul, with the help of Timothy and Silas, established a Christian church in Thessalonica, the largest city in Macedonia. It was located at the crossroads of two important Roman highways and was the major seaport for the entire region. A strongly established group of believers in this city would provide a center from which other church plants could grow throughout that area.

This is exactly what happened. Paul says, “You became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere” (*1 Thess. 1:7, 8, NIV*).

This church was a model for others. Interestingly enough, the Greek word for church (*ekklesia*) was not a specifically Christian word. It was used for any gathering of people in various settings. However, the Christian *ekklesia* was called to specific functions—not just to worship together but to reach out to their communities with the good news that they themselves had received.

The church did not exist solely to feed its own members. What is your attitude? Do you go to church seeking only to get your own needs met, or do you go hoping to give even more than you receive?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

cessful, at least in the sense of drawing big crowds, they also have drawn their share of criticism. How do we determine which church traditions are based upon principle and which are merely a matter of habit or taste?

Witnessing

How can Paul's methods teach us how to reach out to the larger community in a multicultural, multiethnic society?

Consider This: What aspects of Adventism do you think might particularly appeal to the non-Adventists you know? What parts might that person find objectionable? How can we help smooth out these potentially objectionable aspects of our faith without compromising it?

► **STEP 4—Apply**

Consider This: Ask class members to describe ways in which they have engaged or could engage segments of society that they are unfamiliar with. Offer the following suggestions for bringing God's message to a world where many people might not share our traditions and assumptions.

Try This:

- 1 Is there another culture or subculture that you are curious about? Learn about it.
- 2 Some of the divisions in our larger society are mirrored in the church. Try crossing these divides occasionally. Example: Why not visit a church that is primarily of another ethnic background?
- 3 Develop a friendship with someone whose religious beliefs and/or lifestyle differs from your own.

Invite a class member to close with prayer.

Further Study: “Thus [Paul] varied his manner of labor, shaping his message to the circumstances under which he was placed.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 118.

“There are some who will not be convinced by any presentation of the truth. The laborer for God should, nevertheless, study carefully the best method, in order that he may not arouse prejudice or stir up combativeness in his hearers.”—Ellen G. White, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 25, 1890.

“They [God’s workmen] are not to be one-idea men, stereotyped in their manner of working, unable to see that their advocacy of truth must vary with the class of people among whom they work and the circumstances they have to meet.”—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 119.

“By cheerful, patient kindness and Christian courtesy, he won the hearts of the people, quieted their prejudices, and endeavored to teach them the truth without exciting their combativeness. All this he did because he loved the souls of men, and desired to bring them to Christ that they might be saved.”—Ellen G. White, *Sketches From the Life of Paul*, p. 162.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How would you best communicate what we as Adventists believe to an atheist university student? A person from another religion? Someone who believes the Bible but is not an Adventist? A former Adventist? Someone who seems totally indifferent to the whole question of faith or God?
- 2 No matter how different our approaches might be, what are some of the common things that must always accompany our witness to others? That is, what things should always be front and center of our witness, regardless of the circumstances?
- 3 How mission centered is your local church? What can you do to help your church get more involved in outreach to your local community?

Summary: Communication does not take place if the listener cannot understand what is being said. Paul provides many examples of how in our witness we must translate the good news into terms that people can understand.