

A FEW THOUGHTS ON THE BOUNDS OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY¹

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY, IN MY OPINION, HAS BECOME AN EXCUSE FOR A NUMBER OF THINGS THAT HAVE INFECTED THE BODY OF CHRIST:

- 1) THE USE OF ANY KIND OF MUSIC, INCLUDING THE MOST WORLDLY KINDS IMAGINABLE.
- 2) A REPUDIATION OF ANY KIND OF BIBLICAL SEPARATION FROM UNBELIEVERS &/OR DISOBEDIENT BELIEVERS, UNBIBLICAL DENOMINATIONS, ECUMENICAL EVANGELISM, etc.
- 3) UNDER THE BANNER OF “*FREEDOM & LIBERTY*,” SELFISHNESS & AN UNWILLINGNESS TO PUT OTHERS AHEAD OF OURSELVES & OUR OWN DESIRES IS OFTEN MANIFESTED.
- 4) WE HEAR A LOT OF TALK ABOUT “*BEING A SERVANT*” & “*SERVANTHOOD*,” BUT WE’RE NOT SEEING A LOT OF IT WHERE IT COUNTS: IN REAL LIFE! TALK IS CHEAP!

THE COMMON REBUTTAL TO MY CONCERN:

THE BIBLE TEACHES THAT WE SHOULD “*BECOME ALL THINGS TO ALL MEN*” IN ORDER TO WIN THEM TO CHRIST! (I Cor. 9:22b)

MY ANSWER TO THAT IS SIMPLE:

Both the immediate context (I Cor. 8:1-11:1), as well as the theme of the entire book of 1 Corinthians—especially the first four chapters—which deals with “*Man’s wisdom vs. God’s wisdom*” e.g. I Cor. 1:17-2:16; 3:19-23; etc.) clearly demonstrate that Paul is not giving some sort of “*Carte Blanche*” for believers to do nearly anything to reach people for Christ. Paul is absolutely not saying that we are allowed to do anything and use any method to reach people for Christ² i.e. to do whatever they want to in regard to their behaviour and lifestyle). At the very beginning of this epistle he has repeatedly and earnestly contended in the most dogmatic terms that he did NOT do “*anything*” in order to reach people with the gospel. In fact he specifically states that he was not going to use worldly wisdom, that it was through the “*foolishness of preaching*” that men believe (I Cor. 1:21)

Os Guinness has made some good observations about some of the dangers in the currently popular “*become all things to all men*” philosophy that is driving much Christian thinking and methodology today:
(Dining with the Devil, pp. 27-29; 79)

Guinness: “*The problem is not that Christians have disappeared, but that the Christian faith has become so deformed.*”³

Guinness: “We should ask three simple questions: ‘*What is being said?*’ ‘*Is it true?*’ ‘*What should be done?*’”⁴

“Why was Israel judged in the reign of Hezekiah for fortifying their walls, stockpiling their weapons, and harnessing the water resources, ‘*but you did not look to the One who made it?*’ (Isaiah 22:11).

“Anyone who ponders such passages can only wonder at the contrast between the enduring realism of Scripture and our dismaying gullibility in the face of modernity.”⁵

¹ A brief excerpt from my longer paper “How to Get Disqualified from the Biggest Race of Your Life – The True Bounds of Christian Freedom”, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, West Indies, Nov-Dec. 2010. Note: British spelling used.

² See for example my brief 3 page study “*All Things to All Men-Toward a Truly Biblical Understanding of Liberty, Legalism & I Cor. 9:22*” which lists nearly thirty verses from just two New Testament passages refuting the idea that since believers are “under grace” they thus have the “liberty” to do almost anything.

³ Os Guinness, *Dining With the Devil* (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1993), p. 43

⁴ Guinness, p. 74

⁵ Guinness, p. 45

Likewise,

- “Asa was condemned for resorting to physicians rather than seeking the Lord’s guidance.”⁶ I Chron. 16:12
- “God was angry at David for succumbing to the devil’s temptation to rely on numbers!”⁷ I Chron. 21 & 27
- “Uzzah was killed and David judged for carrying the ark the wrong way to Jerusalem.”⁸ II Sam. 6:7

**SO WHAT ABOUT THE EXHORTATION IN I CORINTHIANS 9:22 THAT WE BECOME
“ALL THINGS TO ALL MEN”?**

“A.W. Tozer’s words have a tragic ring of truth about them: *‘It is scarcely possible in most places to get anyone to attend a meeting where the only attraction is God.’* But that must never be an excuse for conceding to man’s lack of spirituality. As Paul Bassett says, *‘One of the subtlest ways of flattering man is to communicate the gospel in a way he wants rather than the way he needs.’*” (Blanchard & Lucarini, p. 197)

Guinness makes some more good observations regarding the potential hazards and dangers of misinterpreting or misapplying that verse:

“As Martin Luther warned, many of our human efforts are like those of a drunken peasant who clammers back onto his donkey only to topple off on the other side. For example...

Being ‘all things to all people’ can be a prelude to good communication or to surprisingly, self-subversion and shabby compromise. For a start, many ‘seeker-friendly’ churches have quite deliberately subordinated both worship and discipleship to evangelism, and evangelism to entertainment, and in the process subverted the traditional defining features of the church.

“Further, they are blind to the dangers in the current stress on ‘felt needs.’ Their efforts might lead to one of the mightiest spiritual harvests in Christian history, but they might also lead to a bumper crop of Western ‘rice Christians’ that makes a mockery of the gospel and of the seriousness of the hour. What does it say of the church when Newsweek can note that *‘the least demanding churches are now in greatest demand’* Or when one church can advertise: *‘Instead of me fitting a religion I found a religion to fit me’?*”⁹

“THE CHURCH-GROWTH MOVEMENT HAS TWO COMMON FLAWS...

“On the one hand it employs a lopsided application of a biblical principle. Known technically as ‘*contextualization*,’ or more simply as ‘*relevance*,’ this principle is indispensable to communication and obviously rooted in Scripture. The supreme pattern of the ‘*contextualization*’ and ‘*relevance*’ is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. **Such passages as 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 capture its full dynamic perfectly,** climaxing in Paul’s summary: *‘I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.’*

“Thus the record of Scripture and Christian history is equally clear: the principle of identification is basic to communication and is covered well today in such notions as ‘*contextualization*’ and ‘*relevance*,’ as well as in such church-growth principles as ‘*niche marketing*,’ ‘*audience-driven*,’ ‘*seeker-friendly*,’ ‘*full-service churches*,’ and the ‘*homogeneous unit principle*.’ The latter is otherwise known as ‘*the birds of a feather*’ principle...”

“**But Scripture and history are also clear: Without maintaining critical tension, the principle of identification is a recipe for compromise and capitulation.** It is no accident that the charge of being ‘all things to all people’ has become a popular synonym for compromise. **If the process of becoming ‘all things to all people’ is to remain faithful to Christ, it has to climax in clear persuasion and profound conversion.** Joining people where they are is only the first step in the process, not the last. **Unless it resists this danger, the mega-church and church-growth movement will prove to be a gigantic exercise in cultural adjustment and surrender... it is amazing to witness the lemming-like rush of church leaders who forget theology in the charge after the latest insights of sociology—regardless of**

⁶ ibid

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid

⁹ Guinness, pp. 79-80

where the ideas come from or where they lead to. Carelessly handled, innovation and adaption become a form of corruption, capitulation, and idolatry... Many super-churches are simply artificially inflated local churches with charismatically inflated super-pastors that will not be able to survive their super-growth.”^{10 11}

A couple of quotes by Les Ollila are worth repeating in regard to the subject:

“You will always be relevant if you speak eternal truth.”¹²

“God owns me, and I am not free to choose my own way.”¹³

“**The text of Psalm 23** in one modern version of the Bible has 442 letters of the alphabet. Before they were assembled by the printer, these letters were neutral. They were complete and perfect, but they meant nothing, they had no message. But in Psalm 23 they have grouped together to form an expressive composition. Now they are saying something, and the order in which they have been composed precisely determines what they are saying. **If you take those same 442 characters and arrange them differently, instead of spelling out a message of assurance, comfort and faith for the Christian believer...they could convey a message of hate, greed or violence.** Compose them in some other way and they could form a shopping list... **Benjamin Franklin once claimed that with twenty-six lead soldiers he could conquer the world...** Franklin’s point was that when assembled together in the right numbers and in the right order, they had power to change men’s lives. Once assembled, the soldiers would no longer be neutral—**nor are musical notes and tones when assembled into an expressive composition.**”¹⁴ We would do well to keep that in mind when determining what kind of music we use in church services! -mwe

¹⁰ Guinness, pp. 27-29

¹¹ Guinness, pp. 28-29; 79-80

¹² Judi Coats, *A Man Among Them: The Les Ollila Story*, privately published, 2004, p. 101

¹³ Coats, *ibid*, p. 159

¹⁴ John Blanchard & Dan Lucarini, *Can We Rock the Gospel* (Evangelical Press: Darlington, England, 2006), p. 201