

# “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?**

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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?**

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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?**

## 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?

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**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?

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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?**

## 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?

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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 "babbler" (*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 (*vss. 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?**

## 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?

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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?**

## 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?

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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 lighthouses 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 own 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?**

**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.

## Jesus' Helper

by OMAR REYES TORRES

I wanted to be a civil engineer, but God had other plans for my life. I had studied in Adventist schools until I entered the state university in Puerto Rico. I soon discovered the difference between Adventist education and public education. Several teachers were atheists and made it a point to undermine my faith.

When an exam fell on Sabbath, the teacher refused to allow me to take it another day, saying that if there was a God, He would understand why I needed to be in class that day. In this university the teachers are kings, and the classroom is their kingdom.

Eventually I transferred to Antillian Adventist University to finish my studies. As I compared the teachers and the school atmosphere, I realized that the Adventist school had something that the public schools could never have—a Christian atmosphere. While not everyone on campus is an Adventist, the teachers are very committed to their students. For them it's a calling; they believe in what they are doing.

I'm now teaching at this same university. It's a privilege to teach here where I can integrate Adventist beliefs into my class and no one forbids me to talk about God. I feel the atmosphere change when I invite God to come into the classroom.

In this school we don't strive to make Adventists of every student; instead we strive to draw them closer to God and to understand what God wants and who He is.

If I can help one student see the Lord in a different way, understand God in a more mature way, then I have done my job well. I wanted to be an engineer. But I wouldn't have had the influence I have now as a teacher in an Adventist school.

One day a student came to me and said, "You had a worship that changed my life. I was having problems with drugs, but your worship helped me to quit drugs. Thanks." Another boy told me that his mother had died. A worship talk on death helped him work through his feelings of grief and meant a lot to him. I know that God was speaking through me. And it changed this boy's life.

I don't think of myself as a teacher; Jesus is the Teacher, and I am His helper, preparing young people for eternity.

Your mission offerings help support Adventist education around the world. It's an investment we can never take for granted. Thank you for giving so that our children can learn in a Christian environment.

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