

All Things are Yours

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In a classic text on cross-cultural ministry Paul stated his policy of becoming all things to all men so that by all means he might save some (1 Cor. 9:22). This is sometimes treated as a specialist approach for experts in cross-cultural encounter, but the Bible presents it as a model for all ministry. It is exemplified in the incarnational pattern of Jesus who, due to the Father's great love for the world, was sent as a true human being into a specific historical and cultural context to announce and effectuate salvation for the world.

Paul's readiness to live like a Jew among Jews and like a Gentile among Gentiles (1 Cor. 9:20-21) was also rooted in a fundamental principle spelled out earlier in his first letter to the Corinthians. There had been factionalism among the Corinthian believers; some sided with Paul, some with Apollos, some with Peter. Paul rebuked this in various ways in a discussion covering the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians, coming to a climax at the end of chapter three. There he completely turned the tables and said that rather than the apostles owning factions of the believers, the entire Body of Christ owned all of the apostles.

In a typically Pauline flight to the highest elevations and deepest recesses of theological thought, Paul then jumped from the Corinthian ownership of the apostles to the stunning affirmation that "all things are yours" (1 Cor. 3:21). That sounds hyperbolic, but Paul spelled it out so it could not be dismissed as a mere rhetorical flourish; the world is yours, life and death are yours, the present and the future are yours, so yes, indeed, I really mean that "all things are yours" (1 Cor. 3:22). This of course is through Christ the Lord (1 Cor. 3:23).

The commentarial tradition of the Church has not applied this Pauline emphasis on the possession of all things to cross-cultural situations, but it clearly is an underlying principle that allowed Paul in practice to become all things to all men. What many commentaries do point out is that in affirming this possession of all things by the disciples of Christ, Paul was adapting a truism of some of the philosophical schools of the time, which had particular relevance to the Corinthian context, where wisdom was a hot topic of discussion. The wise man among the Stoic philosophers was one who rose above all situations and problems by remaining in control of his thoughts and actions rather than being driven by external events.¹ Paul brought this Stoic concept into submission to Christ, where it was transformed into a larger and more profound theological truth that he affirmed to weak and immature Corinthian believers who were failing in some very basic aspects of spiritual life.

The possession of all things by the disciples of Christ was spelled out as a fundamental missiological concept by the Dutch missiologist Johan Herman Bavinck. He did not tie his exposition to Paul's teaching in 1 Cor. 3:31, but the relation of the two is unmistakable. Bavinck was concerned about syncretistic tendencies in the Roman Catholic theology and practice of accommodation wherein non-Christian practices are adopted by the Church. He wrote,

Here note that the term "accommodation" is really not appropriate as a description of what actually ought to take place. It points to an adaptation to customs and practices essentially foreign to the gospel. Such an adaptation can scarcely lead to anything other than a syncretistic entity, a conglomeration of customs that can never form an essential unity....We would, therefore prefer to use the term *possessio*, to take in possession. The Christian life does not accommodate or adapt

itself to heathen forms of life, but it takes the latter in possession and thereby makes them new....Within the framework of the non-Christian life, customs and practices serve idolatrous tendencies and drive a person away from God. The Christian life takes them in hand and turns them in an entirely different direction; they acquire an entirely different content. Even though in external form there is much that resembles past practices, in reality everything has become new. The old has in essence passed away and the new has come. Christ takes the life of a people in his hands, he renews and re-establishes the distorted and deteriorated; he fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it a new direction. Such is neither “adaptation,” nor accommodation; it is in essence the legitimate taking possession of something by him to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth.²

The profound implications of Paul’s teaching and of Bavinck’s concept of *possessio* need to be at the center of biblical discussions of cross-cultural ministry, especially with regard to other religious traditions. These insights point to a positive approach to other religious traditions rather than a blanket renunciation or repudiation of them. Rather than renouncing the Buddhist heritage, a Buddhist who comes to Christ needs to be oriented towards taking possession of that heritage. Clearly there is a necessary discerning and sifting process in taking possession of truths and practices from other faith traditions; Paul after all was rebuking false wisdom in the Corinthians, and Bavinck clearly calls for a reorientation towards Christ.

Careful nuancing of this truth is essential in a number of directions. First, the missionary movement is still emerging from the shadow of colonialism, and nothing stirs anti-Christian emotions quite as much as a triumphalistic or domineering attitude. Can a Christian disciple of Jesus take possession of another faith tradition without straying into this offensive mindset? It is a delicate procedure to be undertaken with deep humility, yet Paul did not shirk from stating this truth into a complex situation in Corinth. Cross-cultural workers will rarely have the insight, sensitivity or humility to successfully negotiate this terrain even with guidance from local believers, yet they must not draw back from the implications of Paul’s teaching. J. H. Bavinck recognized the inadequacy of the cross-cultural worker as well; “the newly formed church is usually a better judge in such matters than we [missionaries] are” (ibid. pg. 177).

It is not possible for every part of the Body of Christ to take possession of every aspect of life; rather, some parts of the Body will more particularly be related to different aspects of God’s profoundly diverse world. It is particularly those who come to faith from Buddhist families who must wrestle with the meaning of *possessio* in Buddhist contexts, while people from Hindu and Muslim and post-modern contexts seek to apply this insight in their particular worlds. Cross-cultural workers will of course join as servants in the engagement of these issues in the various contexts.

It must be affirmed again that there can be no facile embracing of anything and everything taught or practiced in other religious traditions. All is brought under Christ, and a sifting and filtering is necessary. Yet teaching new disciples of Jesus in other faith traditions that “all things are yours” and that it is your responsibility in Christ to take possession of your religio-cultural heritage challenges some assumed paradigms. Primarily challenged is the necessity of “conversion to Christianity.” If Buddhists who turn to Christ are taught that Buddha is theirs, are they really called to renounce Buddhism? Obviously they are called to discern and sift much that is unbiblical among the many traditions that are currently called Buddhism, but if they take possession of that heritage, how or why can or should they also renounce it? The same applies to the other major faith traditions, all of which are as much about culture as they are about theology, and all of which are multi-cultural as well as multi-theological.

The problem of neo-imperialist triumphalism is trumped by a missiology which rejects “conversion

to Christianity” as an essential aspect of the gospel. The new disciple of Jesus is under a mandate from Christ and the New Testament to live within (take possession of) their birth community and religio-cultural heritage. This kind of surrender to the Lordship of Christ leading to possessio of one’s heritage in conformity to Christ can be viewed from another angle as well. To the birth community of the new disciple, be it Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or other, it is not a rejection of the old or transfer to the new, but rather citizens of the original community taking possession of the truth of the Gospel. Thus hegemonic religious imperialism is avoided and the interpenetration of the Gospel among all civilizations and faiths is accomplished.

It is surely obvious, but will be stated here in closing, that this is not a simple process. J. H. Bavinck recognized this as well: “It is naturally much easier to speak theoretically of taking possession, than it is to give practical advice. The question of possessio leads to the greatest problems throughout the entire world” (ibid. pg. 179). Redefining the problems and complexities of cross-cultural encounter and contextualization in terms of possessio rather than of conversion and repudiation seems a helpful first step towards affirming in a fresh way the multi-cultural nature of the gospel and of its call for all peoples to surrender to Christ within their own heritage.

“The nations will walk by the light of the Lamb, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into the eternal city” (Rev. 21:24).

Endnotes

See the documentation referred to by Conzelmann in support of his summary that According to the Stoic principle, "All things belong to the wise man," i.e., he is lord over all that comes to him from without (Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, tr. James W. Leitch, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975, pg. 80).

An Introduction to the Science of Missions, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1960, pp. 178-179. Bavinck's use of "Christian" and "non-Christian" in this paragraph indicates that he wrote in the mid-twentieth century. In the current clash of civilizations era these terms carry many misleading connotations, and most people do not like to be identified by what they are not (non-Christians). It is preferable to refer to disciples of Christ (or bhaktas [devotees] of Christ in Hindu contexts) rather than "Christians" since spiritual commitment is not necessarily perceived in the term "Christian" but is definitely indicated in the alternate terms.