

Taste test: A pastoral call

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [October 23, 2002](#) issue

"I have become all things to all people," Paul wrote to the Corinthians, apparently not foreseeing how we would regard his wry boast. Today his efforts to ingratiate himself with very different people sound inauthentic, phony—and impossible. "You can't be all things to all people," is how one of my seminary professors put it.

But Paul, the devout Jew who remarkably became a missionary to the gentiles, didn't see it that way. As he met gentiles and sampled their customs, their food, their drink, he remained entirely himself. More himself than ever. Peter, too, delicately refused to try the crawfish and andouille sausage until he had a dream about unclean animals being brought down from heaven on a tablecloth. Then he knew that it was OK to eat with the gentiles, that he could sit down with them and still be Peter, a very Jewish Christian. "The Spirit told me to go with them, and not to make a distinction between them and us," he said.

Just like Jesus, who was completely himself even in the company of sinners, Peter and Paul took on some of the qualities of those they served. Evangelism, it turns out, is a two-way street.

A real relationship changes you. Unfortunately, we Christians often manifest a desire to reach all people without a willingness to "become all things" in the process. We want folks to "taste and see that the Lord is good," while they want us to taste what *they* have and find out who they are.

When young, pastors may be tempted to prove that they're still worldly. They may swear and smoke and generally try hard to be "ordinary" until at last they realize that they are, in spite of their best efforts, still pastors. But far more often, I think, they have to be coaxed out of false pieties as people insist on being met in their own world.

Fresh out of seminary, assigned to my first church, I met all sorts of interesting characters, people who on Sunday mornings dressed in Sunday clothes and wore Sunday expressions on their faces, but come Monday were gloriously themselves

again.

Bud and Amber Shirah, for example, were in their middle '60s. A more conventional country couple you never saw. He still had the gait of someone who rode horses, while she was all round, with a big round sweet face. She baked pies and sang softly in the choir. After one Sunday service, they filed out with the crowd, and Bud said to me, "Like to get to know you. Have you over sometime. How about this week?"

I said sure, and went out to their place a few days later. At first I thought I'd turned down the wrong drive. A motorcycle came tearing up beside me and a fat man all in black leather screeched to a stop and took off his helmet. I could just barely tell that behind the tinted sunglasses was Bud. Bud?

"Bet you never knew you had a hog in the church, did you?" he said. "How's that grab you?" It was just fine, and when I asked about his machine, he proudly described it in detail. He then showed me his garage, where parts and pans and plugs lay all around. Over by the workbench was a picture of silver-haired Amber in her riding gear.

She came on out and said hello in that sweet choir voice. "Why don't you ride your bikes over to church sometime?" I asked. "Well, we just might, if you keep talking like that," she said. "Be careful what you wish for."

"No, honey, no," Bud said, "we've got to be respectable people now. We've found the Lord. We don't want to shock those fine, upstanding people by arriving that way. They might have a committee meeting about it." Then he said, "I bet you're thirsty. Let's go inside, and I'll have you try something."

A breeze blew through their small house. Bud went into the kitchen and brought out two small wineglasses and a bottle of his own wine, made just that summer. "Bud," I said, "it's 10:30 in the morning." "That just means the day's a-wasting," he said, and poured me a glass.

Now, you can file what happened next under peer pressure or pastoral ministry, but that first glass of wine went down like paint thinner. Bud poured other varieties of grape, and they had not mellowed either. Over the next hour we tried raspberry, blackberry, elderberry, cherry, black currant and dandelion wine. He kept asking how I liked them. What could I say except, "This is a first for me"?

“You’re a different sort of Methodist preacher,” he said, in what I hoped was a compliment.

At last he poured a thick glass of something dark red. “This is my favorite. Not everybody goes for this,” he said.

The bouquet—no, the smell—was indescribable. It was like old lawn clippings and gasoline and a V-8 cocktail. “That’s tomato wine,” he said. “Go ahead.”

If I live to be 90, I’ll still be choking at the thought of it. But by the time it reached my gullet, I was all things to all people and had entered Bud’s circle.

It was just past noon, and my work day was done. My head was spinning from how Bud had sized me up and decided he could trust me, and from that time on we had a strong, special relationship.

Every day, ministry offers the privilege of becoming all things to all people. And I have never been more myself.