

1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-23

EXEGESIS PAPER

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INTRODUCTION

“I have become all things to all *men*, that I might save some.”¹ This one sentence found in 1 Corinthians 9:22b has been the mantra or banner under which many New Evangelical and even liberal organizations have marched by, in the area of evangelism and missions. “What ever it takes to get people saved.” “What ever it takes to bring people in.” Is that really what Paul was saying here in this passage? Many have been convinced that it is, others have doubts, but their doubts are steeped more in tradition rather than a clear understanding of the text.

Some from the traditional Fundamental school would say dogmatically, “we cannot do whatever it takes!” and then out of the same breath talk about not compromising the Gospel by allowing women to wear pants, and changing certain music traditions, etc. Is this what Paul had in mind in this passage? One cannot understand this text simply by tradition or by the pragmatic process of evaluating “what works.”

The purpose of this paper is to exegete the text of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 in its literary, historical context with the goal of understanding the author’s intended meaning. What did Paul intend for the believer, living in Corinth in 50 CE to understand from this passage? Secondly, what are some legitimate applications of this text to the day in which we live?

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The epistle of 1 Corinthians was written by arguably the greatest missionary the church has ever seen, the apostle Paul. According to the opening salutation of the letter, Paul was an “apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God” (1:1). Throughout one’s study of this letter it is essential to remember that Paul came to Corinth, sent by God for the purpose of preaching the Gospel (1:17). He did not come with eloquent speech (2:1) not because he was incapable of such

speech, but because he was determined not to empty the cross of Christ of its power (1:17). However a “consequence” to this choice for Paul was that many of the people of Corinth had begun, since his departure, to divert their loyalties from Paul (more importantly the Gospel he preached) to others, simply because they were impressed with the eloquence of their teaching (Greco-Roman rhetoric).

Paul addresses this letter to “the church of God which is at Corinth.” This letter was directed to a particular group of believers living in the city of Corinth in the late 50s CE. Although this was one group of believers they would most likely have met in several small groups, “house churches.” As a general rule a letter like this would have been read during a gathering of all the people, if there were facilities to do this, or more likely it would have been passed around to be read in each of the “house churches.”

The city of Corinth lies on the isthmus connecting the Greek mainland to the Peloponnese. This location placed it directly in the path of major trading routes from Rome and near two major ports. This Roman city was repopulated by Julius Caesar around 44 C.E. with freedmen, tradesmen and retired Roman military soldiers. With the great influx of trade items from all over the world and the skilled people who were sent there to repopulate the city, it became known throughout the Mediterranean for its many goods, especially its bronze. These people were allowed to establish a new living and prosper in their new home. This competitive rise to power and wealth of these groups along with the location of the city, gave rise to a reputation that was infamous for loose living and incredibly immoral lifestyles tied to vast poly-religious and cultic practices. It is in the letters of first and second Corinthians that Paul

¹ *New King James Version* of 1 Corinthians 9:22b. All scripture quotations are the author’s own translation unless otherwise noted.

addresses the many issues that arise within a church located in a city like this, and made up of people saved from this type of life.

Right from the start of his letter Paul reveals that he has been made aware of strife and divisions within this local body of believers (1:11). He then proceeds throughout the letter to address the issues behind the strife taking no group's side, but revealing that each is wrong to some degree or another. When Paul gets to the section this paper addresses (9:19-23) he picks up a subject that would have been viewed by those aristocrats of the church as offensive and demeaning. These rich landowners in the church would have seen themselves as better than most anyone else and would not have been willing to lower themselves for the benefit of anyone. However, in this paragraph Paul demonstrates how he subordinates himself and his needs to others. He shows that the spreading of the Gospel should take priority over one's personal position in society or one's "felt needs."²

PARAGRAPH LIMITS

When approaching the text it is important to establish the beginning and ending limits to the paragraph being exegeted. This helps narrow the focus of the study to one subject/theme and provides a boundary for one's exegetical analysis. The paragraph this paper is addressing begins with verse 19 because: There is a thematic change from verses 1-18 where Paul discusses compensation for those who preach the Gospel to his approach in sharing the Gospel in verse 19. Furthermore the paragraph ends with verse 23 because: Verse 24 begins with Οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι ("Do you not know that...") a common discourse marker utilized by Paul in 1 Corinthians indicating the beginning of a new subject.

² IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament; 1994 InterVarsity Press (The Essential IVP Reference Collection CD-ROM)
Dictionary of Paul and His Letters; 1993 InterVarsity Press (The Essential IVP Reference Collection CD-ROM)

EXEGETICAL OBSERVATIONS AND APPLICATIONS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-23

In this pericope Paul is attempting to explain his behavior in various social settings and why they may appear to be inconsistent. In verse 18 he concluded his statements regarding his financial independence from the Corinthian church, now he begins explaining what he has chosen to do with that freedom.

9:19: For though I am free from all I have enslaved myself to all that I might gain many

The γὰρ that begins verse 19 is best explained as an explanatory or inferential “for.”³ Paul now argues that even though he has chosen to be free from any financial obligation to all of them, he has in turn chosen to enslave himself to all for the purpose of gaining or winning many. The word used for “many” (πλείονας) carries with it the idea of “as many as possible.”⁴ As will be seen throughout this paragraph, Paul has a driving passion to win as many people as possible to Christ by the Gospel.

Right from the start of this section there is a challenge for every believer. Every Christian ought to evaluate their life to see how high a priority, winning people to Christ is in their life? Is it high enough that they would be willing to enslave themselves and their freedoms to those whom they are trying to win? Paul proceeds in the following three verses to give specific examples of what he means by this introductory statement.

9:20 and I become to the Jews like a Jew, that I might gain Jews to those under the Law like under the Law, I am not under the Law, that I might gain those under the Law.

Paul begins his specific examples with those of his own ethnic background, the Jews. Here he states, in two different ways, that there are times when he chooses to conduct himself like those Jews who are still living according to the Law. He makes it clear, that “he himself is

³ Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. NICNT Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987 (pg. 425).

⁴ BDAG; extracted from Bible Works 5.0

not under the Law”, but that this is a choice submission, again for the purpose of winning as many Jews as possible to Christ. It is important to see that Paul did not consent to the Jewish Law under some type of moral obligation. He was free from the Law (Romans 6:14). Hodge has a very helpful comment regarding this matter:

“There are two things, therefore, to be carefully observed in all cases of concession to the opinions and practices of others: first, that the point conceded be a matter of indifference; for Paul never yielded in the smallest measure to any thing which was in itself wrong...And secondly, that the concession does not involve any admission that what is in fact indifferent is a matter of obligation.”⁵

It is difficult to be dogmatic about what exactly Paul means by this. However, it is very likely, that he was referring at least to the food customs. Not only would he have been careful not to eat “ham and beans” around those Jews he was trying to win to Christ by the Gospel, but he would have been very conscience of eating those things that had been offered to idols. Later, in 10:25-27, he clearly teaches that there is nothing wrong with this. But knowing that eating food that had been offered to idols would be a great offence to other Jews, he would restrict his freedom when he was with them, so as not to close the door on the Gospel. This is consistent with the remainder of this teaching on the subject in 10:28,29.

One example of this type of concession in Paul’s ministry is that of circumcision. With Timothy, Paul chose to have him circumcised for the sake of the Jews (Acts 16:3), but Paul did not have Titus circumcised due to it being seen as only done out of compulsion (Galatians 2:3). Paul consented to the Jewish customs in order to reach them with the Gospel more effectively, but not out of compulsion and never with the impression that to do so was out of obligation. In both cases, as is the point here in this verse, Paul made his choice for the purpose of “gaining” as many as possible to Christ.

⁵ Hodge, Charles. *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. New York, NY: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860 (pg. 164).

9:21 to those without law like without law, not being without law of God but subject to the law of Christ, that I might gain those without the law.

Here Paul turns his attention to another group of people he would have had frequent contact with and probably would have made up the majority of the converts in Corinth. This group of people he identifies as “those without law” referring to Gentiles, those who are not tied in any way to the Mosaic Law. Paul would have made accommodations to minister to this group of people just as he would have to minister to the Jews.

Paul seems here to be using a play on words with ἄνομος⁶ meaning “without law” or “lawless”.⁷ In a paraphrase he is saying that ‘to those without the law he was without the law, but not lawless toward God because he was still subject to the law of Christ...’ Paul’s qualifying statement is extremely important for these Corinthians to understand. These are the people who have the saying, “all things are lawful for me” (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23). Paul is clarifying that although he may accommodate himself to those Gentiles who are not obligated in any way to the Mosaic law, he has a limit, that being the law of Christ.

What is meant by the “law of Christ” is not completely clear. Paul states in Romans 10:4 that “Christ is the end of the law,” and that “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law” in Galatians 3:13. The only other place where “the law of Christ” is mentioned is Galatians 6:2, where Paul is discussing the bearing of one another’s burdens. It seems clear that Paul is speaking of his moral obligations to Christ as the fulfillment of the Law. His behavior and the limits of his accommodation would be based on his relationship with Christ.⁸ Again as in the case of his accommodating his social behavior toward the Jews, his purpose is to gain as many Gentiles as possible to Christ.

⁶ BDAG; extracted from Bible Works 5.0

⁷ Witherington III, Ben. *Conflict & Community In Corinth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995 (pg. 213)

9:22 I became to the weak weak, that I might gain the weak to all I became all that certainly I might save some.

Paul gives his third and final example of those people he has chosen to accommodate himself socially toward in order to “gain”. By the use of the word σῶζω Paul makes it clear that he has been specifically referring to “gaining” or “winning” lost people from these “categories” to Christ. Throughout this entire passage he has been speaking of his method of evangelism and ministering to the unsaved who come from different backgrounds. This makes it clear that by “weak” in this passage Paul cannot be referring to the weak brother of chapter 10, as though he were referring to “winning” them back or something. He is clearly speaking of someone who is unsaved. Thiselton states, “In this context **the weak** may mean those whose options for life and conduct were severely restricted because of their dependence on the *wishes of patrons, employers, or slave owners*”⁹ (emphasis in original). In other words as Fee states, “thus it is probably a more purely sociological category than a socio-religious one.”¹⁰

Paul had chosen in Corinth to be free from any financial obligations to the Corinthian

where appropriate. Witherington says it this way, “He does not stay that he became an idolator to idolators or an adulterer to adulterers. But in matters that he did not see as ethically or theologically essential or implied by the Gospel, Paul believed in flexibility.”¹¹

Again his purpose is singular, not only in his social accommodation toward the “weak” but to everyone – to gain all the more, specifically to save as many as possible. Paul’s summary statement at the end of this verse is meant to clarify that the three categories of people he has listed, although quite encompassing, are not meant to be exhaustive. He is willing to make personal adjustments in non-essential areas so as to accommodate himself to anyone socially for the purpose of sharing the Gospel and winning them to Christ.

20:23 And I am doing all of this for the sake of the Gospel that a partner with it I may be.

Paul concludes this paragraph by clearly stating his singularity of purpose, he has chosen to do all that he has outlined in the previous four verses “for the sake of the Gospel.” Every choice he makes in every social setting has as its driving motive, the furtherance of the Gospel. He is driven to see the Gospel reach all people, of all ethnic, social, economic and religious backgrounds. Any person of any state in life that Paul comes into contact with will be considered, if unsaved, as someone to be won by the Gospel.

His ultimate hope is that he may “partner” with the Gospel. Paul sees as his reward the privilege and opportunity to partner with the Gospel in seeing people won to Christ. This very fact precludes Paul from compromising the message of the Gospel. He must be faithful to the message even in circumstances, where he may choose to change his method, so that his witness of the Gospel might be most effective. No where in this paragraph has Paul been speaking about adjusting or compromising the Gospel in anyway. The Gospel must stay clear, and he must stay

¹⁰ Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. NICNT Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987 (pg. 431).

¹¹ Witherington III, Ben. *Conflict & Community In Corinth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995 (pg. 213)

subject to the ‘law of Christ.’ However, he may choose for the sake of the Gospel and for the increased opportunity to partner with it, to modify his method and approach to sharing the same Gospel message for different social settings.

CONCLUSION

Is Paul advocating a “do whatever it takes” mentality to win the lost to Christ? Is he staunchly holding on to his “religious” traditions unwilling to compromise any of them to win others to Christ? The understanding of the text as outlined in this paper, reveals that Paul had neither attitude in mind. As he makes clear in verse 23 he is in no way advocating a modification to the Gospel or compromise of the truth central to the Gospel. To do this would forfeit his privilege of being a partner with it while seeing others come to Christ by it. However, he is speaking about modification and accommodation, but of what?

In this passage Paul is outlining a wonderful picture of how a believer in Christ ought to approach the ministry of evangelism. Paul gives three clear examples of how he modifies his behavior and accommodates himself in different social settings all for the sole purpose of ministering the Gospel and winning as many people as possible to Christ. He also outlines the truth that he is not under any obligation to do the things he does, thereby avoiding the label of legalism as though there is some action that would be perceived as necessary for salvation (19,20). At the same time he clarifies that there is a limit to his accommodation and that limit is found within his relationship to Christ and his subjection to Him (21). He concludes his series of examples by showing that he does not avoid the “social outcasts” but lowers himself to their social level, again when it serves the purpose of winning as many as possible to Christ by means of the Gospel.

This passage has powerful and practical implications for at least two areas of ministry today. The first is the area of missions. For a person to choose to move to another country and into another culture, demands that one learn and understand the people and culture to whom he is seeking to minister. Historically, it has been all too common for Americans to take the truth of the Gospel to another land and in evangelizing the people of that culture they attempt to Americanize them. It is not the job of a missionary to change the culture within which they are ministering, but to give the Gospel and see the people change by it to become more like Christ. No culture, morally speaking is superior to another, but the Gospel is superior to all. The missionary must learn how to most effectively minister the Gospel to the people to which he is ministering. It may mean not doing something that is common back “home”, or it may mean do something that would be considered strange and maybe even offensive back “home.” All within the bounds of the Gospel and the “law of Christ.” A simple, but apt example; it would be considered offensive to the believers and confusing to the lost for a missionary to display a Nativity Scene at Christmas in Mexico. In Mexico, Nativity Scenes are without exception associated with the Catholic faith, seeing that 98% of the people are Catholic, those who are unsaved coming into the missionary’s church would be confused by the presence of a Nativity Scene and it would lessen the effect of the Gospel.

Secondly, many American churches are still “doing ministry” like it was in the 1950’s. The culture around them has changed, and they are still trying to reach the culture the same way they were 50 years ago. There is no question that many of the changes that have taken place within the culture are not ones that the church can emulate. In fact to do so would violate the principle of “being subject to the law of Christ” Paul gives in this passage. In its presentation of the Gospel the church today must stay faithful to Christ and those things that are non-negotiable.

However, there are many things that churches today consider as non-negotiable that are nowhere to be found in Scripture, but are more tied up in tradition. The American church of the 21st century must wrestle with its traditions, Scripture and the culture around it. It must look for ways in which it can change to become a more effective witness of the Gospel of Christ, while never compromising the Gospel itself, for the ultimate goal of seeing as many as possible come to salvation.

APPENDIX 1 – Block Diagram

I Corinthians 9:19 – 23

Color Key:
Red = Finite verbs
Bright Green = Infinitives
Blue = Participles
Dark Green = Conjunctions
Bright Blue = Prepositions
Purple = Relative Pronouns

<p>19 Ἐλεύθερος γὰρ ὢν ἐκ πάντων πᾶσιν ἑμαυτὸν ἐδούλωσα, ἵνα τοὺς πλείονας κερδήσω·</p> <p>For though I am free from all I have enslaved myself to all, that I may gain many</p>	<p>“many” = as many as possible</p>
<p>20 καὶ ἐγενόμην τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ὡς Ἰουδαῖος, ἵνα Ἰουδαίους κερδήσω· τοῖς ὑπὸ νόμον ὡς ὑπὸ νόμον, μὴ ὢν αὐτὸς ὑπὸ νόμον, ἵνα τοὺς ὑπὸ νόμον κερδήσω·</p> <p>and I became to the Jews like a Jew, that I might gain Jews to those under the Law like under the Law, I am not under the Law, that I might gain those under the Law.</p>	<p>“Law” = Rabbinical Law. Paul was still subject to the Law (i.e. 10 commandments), but not the Rabbinical perversion of the Law.</p>
<p>21 τοῖς ἀνόμοις ὡς ἄνομος, μὴ ὢν ἄνομος θεοῦ ἀλλ’ ἔννομος Χριστοῦ, ἵνα κερδαίνω τοὺς ἀνόμους·</p> <p>to those without law like without law, not being without law of God but subject to the law of Christ, that I might gain those without the law</p>	<p>Gentiles Paul had a boundary determining how far he would go to win someone...the Law of God.</p>
<p>22 ἐγενόμην τοῖς ἀσθενέσιν ἀσθενής, ἵνα τοὺς ἀσθενεῖς κερδήσω· τοῖς πᾶσιν γέγονα πάντα, ἵνα πάντως τινὰς σώσω.</p> <p>I became to the weak weak, that I might gain the weak to all I became all, that certainly I might save some.</p>	<p>He would restrain his liberty/freedoms</p>
<p>23 πάντα δὲ ποιῶ διὰ τὸ Εὐαγγέλιον, ἵνα συγκοινωνῶς αὐτοῦ γένωμαι.</p> <p>And I am doing all of this for the sake of the Gospel, that a partner with it I may be.</p>	<p>Paul’s driving desire to was partner with the Gospel to see people of all backgrounds saved.</p>

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