

On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People From Isolated to Connected

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Isolated to Connected

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text: 1 Corinthians 9:1-27 (focus on 9:19-27)

Introduction

The Christian church in the West suffers from a bad case of rugged individualism. This has allowed the culture to influence the shape of its mission. Solitary souls hear the Gospel and privately receive its message of hope in the life to come. There's nothing particularly Christian about private immortality — the pagans believed in life after death and trembled. All of that spills over into the way we do *mission*. We're not prepared to argue with the statement that God saves the world one soul at a time. On the other hand, there is something painfully twisted about placing one's own salvation above all others. Is it more important to find my own salvation than the salvation of the lost human race? Or, more biblically, is my salvation and that of the world bound up together in a wonderfully mysterious way, as Paul once wrote:

³² For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. ³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:32-36).

This week's reading invites a fresh look at this aspect of mission. Paul issues a challenge to abandon personal preference and personal advantage, and in their place to put the rescue of all other human beings. Such an altered point of view feels dangerously risky and mysteriously unorthodox. Yet Paul tries it on for size — for himself — and finds it a good fit. In turn he recommends it for the whole church. While it might seem comfortable to hear Jesus tells us "the last shall be first, and the first shall be last" when it comes to serving each other *in the church*, how does it feel to apply the same standard in our mission *to the world*?

From Josemaria Escriva comes relevant guidance, as we begin our study. He was a priest who worked especially among the poor and the sick languishing in the slums and hospitals of Madrid:¹

A Christian has to be ready to share his life with everyone at all times, giving everyone the chance to come nearer to Christ Jesus. He has to sacrifice his own desires willingly for the sake of others, without separating people into watertight compartments, without pigeonholing them or putting tags on them as though they were merchandise or insect specimens. A Christian cannot afford to separate himself from others, because, if he did that, his life would be miserably selfish. He must become "all things to all men, in order to save all men."

And so we pose the question: Isolated or Connected?

This Week's Text in Context

Our study primarily concerns 1 Corinthians 9:19-27, a powerful piece of missionary prose driven by a deep commitment to the Gospel. In it we discover Paul's passion to reach lost people and his willingness to set aside his own privileges in doing so. It is, however, not an isolated piece of rhetoric about the mission, and we need to place the text in its wider context, beginning with a bit of background on the city of Corinth.

¹ Those who know his name recognize him as the founder of *Opus Dei*, a Catholic organization often maligned and the subject of black legends. However, several journalists working separately including CNN Vatican analyst John Allen Jr. say that these accusations are mere myths. His best known book is *The Way* which has sold more than 5 million copies in 50 languages. All in all his works have sold a total of 8 million copies.

Paul: Witness in Corinth

There could not be a more unlikely pairing of persons: Paul and the Corinthians. Nor was their relationship across the years anything but stormy and strident. Yet, Paul dearly loved these fiercely proud and deeply suspicious souls, with their preference for "nice things" and grand appearances. Pagan through and through, they embodied the full range of Greek culture and history with its emphasis on wisdom, eloquence, wealth and nobility. Sadly, much of this glorious Corinthian past no longer remained, thanks to the Roman destruction of the city in 146 B.C.E. Resettled by freedmen from Rome, Corinth became the capital of Achaia, a province in S. Greece, and supported a population of Romans, Greeks and Jews. As Horsley and Silberman observe:

Within just a few years, new Corinth's settlers' enormously profitable commerce at this crossroads of the nations had brought thousands more eager settlers from all over the Mediterranean and enormous personal wealth to a local ruling class of self-made women and men.²

Its recovery during the first 100 years after Rome's conquest was enviable, leading to some slanderous reports, likely from jealous Athens, that the Corinthians were licentious and immoral. In fact, the adjective "Corinthian" came to mean "a fornicator." Claims about temple prostitutes in Corinth were overstated, and in that regard the city had plenty of equals elsewhere in the Empire!

Paul seems to have chosen Corinth as headquarters for his mission to the west. The city was young, dynamic, and not hidebound by tradition, a mix of dislocated individuals without strong ethnic identities seeking to shed their former low status by achieving social honor and material success. Perhaps, after all, Paul was not intimidated by a big, bustling, cosmopolitan hub city, with no dominant religious or intellectual tradition, for Corinth shared many characteristics with Tarsus, his home town, and Syrian Antioch, his home church city. The heart of the city, the forum, was filled with temples and shrines to the emperor and various members of his family, built alongside temples to the older Greek gods such as Apollo. Apollo's son, Asklepios, the god of healing, had a shrine there as well as at Epidaurus, the ancient site of miracle healings, about 50 miles southeast.

The account of Paul's stay in Corinth is found in Acts 18:1-18. According to that account, after some initial success in the synagogue, but with considerable conflict, he decided to concentrate on the non-Jews, apparently with significant success. He settles in and stays for 18 months, working as a tentmaker and living with fellow tentmakers, Aquila and his wife Pricilla (Prisca in his letters), two of the Jews expelled from Rome by Emperor Claudius in a general expulsion. His success may have led to his being dragged before Gallio, the Roman proconsul, by the local Jews for heresy. Gallio dismisses the charge as a purely intra-Jewish affair. Soon afterwards Paul leaves, accompanied by Aquila and Pricilla, bound for Antioch, but on the way they stop over in Ephesus.

Two letters grow out of Paul's encounters with the Corinthians, bearing the names *1 Corinthians* and *2 Corinthians* respectively. One possible chronology of Paul's visit and letters looks like this:

52/53 Eighteen months in Corinth

53-56 Extended stay in Ephesus

53 Writes *1 Corinthians*

?? Makes a second visit to Corinth

56 Writes *2 Corinthians*, but sent it in two parts through courier Titus

56/57 Makes a third visit to Corinth

We learn a great deal about the Corinthians from Paul's first letter. Not many believers were rich (1:26), in keeping with the "steep social pyramid" found in the city.³ The frequency of Latin and Greek names reveals a predominantly Gentile audience. The exceptions are Aquila and Priscilla (16:19) and Apollos, who are Jewish, but share in the Hellenistic culture (3:6). Oddly, Paul makes no reference to conflict between these people

² *The Message and the Kingdom*. p. 163.

³ Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations 50 B.C. to A.D. 284*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, p. 89.

groups. Tensions grew out of the disparity between rich and poor. Court cases were largely filed by wealthy persons (see chapter 6). Homes large enough to accommodate meetings of the church were owned by the rich. In one interesting passage from 11:17-34), we hear about people with sufficient means arriving early to eat the best food, drink the best wine — all before the poor could join the gathering.

Prior to following the Christian Gospel, the Corinthians adhered to the idol temples and their rituals, including consumption of food offered to the pagan deities (chapter 8). While such idols were empty vanities (they really weren't genuine gods at all), some still regarded them that way, and this raised considerable controversy requiring Paul's advice.

As we have noted already, Paul's relationship with the Corinthians was stormy. Having spent eighteen months with them in the early 50's, he shaped the form and substance of their spiritual lives. Once left without apostolic oversight, they stumbled into peculiar difficulties, especially involving sexual ethics (5:9-11), as well as questions about marriage and divorce (7:12-16).

The Corinthians' ability to resolve conflict was meager. "Carping and contentious,"⁴ they were given to judging Paul (4:3) and choosing sides when it came to their favorite "preachers" (chapter 3). On the matter of spiritual gifts, they tended to exalt the individual over the body (chapter 12), and needed the gentle but firm reminder that *agapē*-style love must replace self-seeking approval (chapter 13). Accustomed to the ecstatic practices of the pagan mysteries, they preferred the more demonstrative gifts ("tongues") over the durative ones ("prophecy") (chapter 14). Proud of their "wisdom" (*sophia*) and "eloquence," the Corinthians tended to criticize those who didn't measure up to these worldly standards, forcing Paul to remind them that the "foolish things" associated with preaching the Gospel of the cross must supplant the worldly-wise things associated with Greek life and culture (1:20, 27).

Deeply influenced by a Hellenistic worldview, they struggled with the idea that eternal life means the resurrection of the body. They thought that life in the body belonged to the present world but didn't follow a person into the future one. "The dead are not raised" (15:12-13) seemed to be the backdrop for 1 Corinthians 15, and Paul had to set the record straight by offering an amazing exposition on *resurrection*, starting with that of Jesus. To be "steadfast and unmovable" (15:58) was a persistent challenge for the Corinthians who easily got off message.

"Totally self-centered and consequently [who] disregard morality, ethics, appearances, order, reverence and each others' feelings,"⁵ the Corinthians required solid models of mission — something Paul supplied by writing his first letter to them. This week's reading from 1 Corinthians 9 contains both direct teaching and illustrative material drawn from the apostle's own missionary experience. To a self-absorbed Christian community like Corinth, Paul's words hit the mark. Our study will examine his strategy and also glean insights for our own situation. Mission is not about finding clues within the Gospel to meet our own needs; mission is about "becoming all things to all so that we might by all means win some" (9:22). That text lies at the center of 1 Corinthians 9. How will Paul support this missionary principle?

The Outline of 1 Corinthians

As indicated above, our chosen text falls within the folds of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The letter has numerous features of *deliberative rhetoric*, borrowing commonly recognized speech divisions in use during Paul's time. Just a reminder of what this kind of rhetoric attempts to do. It uses the characteristic topics (*topoi*) of *honor* and *advantage*. A *deliberative speech* is an "embellished" statement of facts, with great vivacity, to persuade the audience of the honor and advantage that will accrue to them if they choose to initiate a particular

⁴ J. Paul Sampley, *1 Corinthians*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume X, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, p. 780.

⁵ Kenneth V. Neller, "1 Corinthians 9:19-23 A Model for Those Who Seek to Win Souls," *Restoration Quarterly*, Vol.29/No. 3 (1987), p. 131.

mode of action for the future. Or, what disadvantage might follow from another course of action. One possible analysis of 1 Corinthians as a piece of rhetoric follows here:

1. *Exordium* (1:1-9): The opening of a speech, which was intended to get the audience's attention, and to establish the speaker's "ethos" (character) as one to whom they should listen. The speaker often emphasized the positive aspects of the relationship between him/herself and the audience. Paul often uses the opening and the thanksgiving sections of his letters to point out his standing as an apostle / servant of God, and to express his positive feelings toward the hearers.
2. *Propositio* (1:10): This is a statement of the central topic, the issue which is at stake in Paul's view. At times, it also indicates the separate divisions of Paul's argument in the *Probatio* (see below).
3. *Narratio* (1:11-17): Often a retelling of the "background" events within which the speech is taking place. Paul often includes a piece of autobiography at this point, reminding his churches of those events which he wants to address, or upon which he wants to draw in his argument.
4. *Probatio* (1:18-16:12): This is the main presentation or argument, as Paul tries to move his hearers from where they are to where he wants them to be. Along with "ethos" and "pathos," this is where Paul uses "logos," those logical, scriptural, and theological forms of persuasion which require such careful attention and energy for us to follow.
5. *Peroratio* (16:13-24): The closing section of a speech, in which one often finds a summary of the preceding argument, along with frequent attempt to draw deeply on the emotions of the hearers.

But *1 Corinthians* is not just a *speech*, it is also a *letter*, and Paul keeps close to the familiar epistolary sections when he writes to his churches. Most letters written in the ancient world followed a standard format, but one which is slightly different from today. The New Testament letters of Paul follow the standard expectations of their day. Although there are some variations in individual letters, the basic structure of ancient letters can be outlined as follows:

I) Letter Beginning	II) Letter Body	III) Letter Conclusion
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sender(s): From whom 2. Recipient(s): To whom 3. Formulaic Greeting 4. Thanksgiving (or Blessing) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Initial Exhortation 2. Thesis Statement 3. Theological Discussions 4. Ethical Admonitions 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Practical Matters 2. Individual Greetings 3. Personal Postscript 4. Doxology (or Prayer)

- In most of his letters, Paul is *not the only author*, but one or more *co-authors* are mentioned.
- These letters are *not addressed to all the people* in the respective cities, but only to small groups of *Christian* believers.
- Paul's standard "Formulaic Greeting" *combines* a variation of the usual Greek greeting (*chaire* - "Grace") and the common Jewish greeting (*shalom* - "Peace").
- All of the letters written by or attributed to Paul contain the standard three main sections, but not all Pauline letters structure the *subsections* exactly as listed above:
 - sometimes a subsection is omitted, (e.g. in the opening of *Galatians* there is no thanksgiving; at the end of *1 Thessalonians*, no personal greetings).
 - sometimes the order of subsections is changed (esp. the endings of many of Paul's letters).
 - sometimes letters have more than one section of the same type (e.g. two "thanksgivings" in *1 & 2 Thessalonians*).
 - often the theological, ethical, and practical concerns are complexly intertwined (esp. in the long letters), so the verse divisions in the "Letter Body" sections below are only approximate suggestions.

Applied to *1 Corinthians*, the outline might look like this:

Letter Beginning (1:1-9)

Senders (1:1)

Recipients (1:2)

Greeting (1:3)

Thanksgiving/Blessing (1:4-9)

Letter Body (1:10-15:58)

Initial Exhortation: Unity (1:10-17)

Thesis Statement: The Cross (1:18)

Theological Discussion: True Wisdom in Jesus Christ (1:19-4:21)

Ethical Admonition: Problems and Questions (5:1-15:58)

Letter Conclusion (16:1-24)

Practical Matters: Collection, Travel, Warnings (16:1-14)

Individual Greetings (16:15-20)

Personal Postscript (16:21-24)

Prayer/Doxology (16:23-24)

From this discussion we see that *rhetorically* chapter 9 belongs to the *probatio*, in which Paul moves his hearers from where they are to where he wants them to be. Here is "ethos," "pathos," and "logos," those logical, scriptural, and theological forms of persuasion. Within the *letter* chapter 9 falls within the *body*, specifically part of the *ethical admonition* where problems and questions frame the discussion.

Unity of 1 Corinthians 8-10

A single set of themes unify the chapters which precede and follow 1 Corinthians 9. Though scholars have questioned the unity of this section within the letter, we believe there are good grounds for maintaining the integrity of the three chapters,⁶ and we proceed from that assumption. The *units* of the chapter break out this way:

9:1-3. Four rhetorical questions and two direct statements.

9:4-14. Twelve rhetorical questions and ten illustrations of Paul's main point in the section.

9:15-18. Change in style, away from questions and toward the Gospel.

9:19-23. Sets forth the principle for Paul's practice.

9:24-27. Use of analogy to reinforce living as a Christian.

Though 9:1 begins a new section, it continues the theme of 8:13 in which Paul refuses to use his *rights* if doing so would cause another human being to "fall." That statement comes at the end of a chapter-long discussion about whether a Christian should eat food from the market which had been previously offered to pagan idols. Though idols are "nothing" — since they are false parodies of the one true God — not everyone sees them that way, and it would be wrong for a Christian to presume on his own *rights* by disregarding a "weaker brother's conscience." As we have noted above, the Corinthians tended to act in *selfish ways* when they imagined that they were clearly "in the right" about something. Paul argues in similar ways when he opens 1 Corinthians 9 and poses the four questions. Therefore, a clear unity exists between 9:1 and what precedes it.

How about what follows in chapter 10? In that section, Paul draws on the history of Israel to give some negative examples of how *not to act* in relationship to other, weaker human beings who do not have the same knowledge of the truth as we have. He warns in 10:12 that Christians who think that "they stand firm" should

⁶ Contributors to the discussion include: J. Weiss, *Earliest Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1959), I, pp. 323-32; J. Hering, *The First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (London: Epworth, 1962), p. 75; W. Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), pp. 92f, 334; C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1968); H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), p. 151; G. Agrell, *Work, Toil and Sustenance: An Examination of the View of Work in the New Testament* (Lund: Verbum-Haken Ohlssons, 1976), pp. 106ff; D. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), pp. 4ff; R. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp. 59-62.

be careful or their over-confidence will make them careless and liable to “fall.” Once again, the focus is on avoiding ways of acting which are self-serving and negligent of others.

What Paul seems to be doing in 1 Corinthians 9 is to work out the implications at both ends of this section and apply them to the larger question of Christian mission. Put concisely, though it might be tempting to live our lives smugly confident that the Gospel is *for us* and *our benefit*, yet to do so exalts our *rights* and our *freedom* above our mission to *the whole world*. We are called to share in God’s project to restore His lost creation, including those weaker souls “who do not have this knowledge” (8:7).

Paul will appeal to his own experience throughout chapter 9, showing how at every turn, he seeks to weigh the respective importance of what he has the *right to do* and what he is *free to do* with the *overriding obligation* he feels, under the Gospel, to “become all things to all people.”

Am I Not Free? (9:1-3)

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ² If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. ³ This is my defense to those who would examine me.

Paul uses the word “free” within the first of his questions. The Greek word is *eleutheros* which also appears in 9:19, 10:29 and 12:13 of this letter. Freedom in Christ belonged to the heart and soul of Paul’s Gospel, and he frequently wrote about being *free* and having *freedom* (elsewhere, see Romans 5:15ff; 6:7, 18, 20, 22f; 7:3; 8:2, 21; 1 Corinthians 2:12; 7:21f, 27, 32, 39; 2 Corinthians 3:17; 6:11; 8:3; 9:9; 11:7; Galatians 2:4; 3:28; 4:22f, 26, 30f; 5:1, 13; Ephesians 6:8; Colossians 3:11; 1 Tim. 6:14; Philemon 1:14). He yields no ground on that matter in this case, but affirms it through the rhetorical question, “Am I not free?” Parallel to Paul’s freedom is his *authority* as an apostle, usually expressed with the Greek word *exousia* which also has the related meaning of “right” (in *1 Corinthians* we find the word in 8:9; 9:4-6, 12-18; 10:23). Beyond freedom and rights lies the personal visitation of “Jesus our Lord” whose glory blinded Paul on the road to Damascus. If the Corinthians have any doubts about what Paul claims for himself, all they need to do is look at themselves as “my workmanship in the Lord” (*to ergon...en kuriō*) — they are the Master’s work through the life of Paul, the flesh and blood proof that Paul’s freedom and authority are genuine.

The claim to being an apostle is rooted here in the *existence* of the Corinthian church — the proof is in the pudding! Paul calls his church, “the seal of my apostleship,” using the Greek word *ophragis*: an engraved object used to make a mark denoting ownership, approval, or closure of something (normally done by pressing into heated wax and usually attached to a document or letter).

Was Paul’s claim in dispute? Scholars are divided in their opinion of what Paul means in 9:3 when he writes about “those who would examine me” and his making a “defense.” While it might appear that Paul is alluding to an actual “case” challenging his claim to being an apostle and having such authority, nothing in chapter 9 even remotely suggests that his authority is in question. What Paul is doing here is simply offering what some have called a “mock defense” used as a rhetorical device.⁷ Clearly the answer to each question in his *apologia* is “Yes!” No one can seriously challenge the assertions Paul makes — and he knows this. His strategy is to firmly assert the fact of his authority — his rights and freedoms as an apostle — so that he can proceed to make a radical and shocking concession in what follows.

Don’t We Have the Right? (9:4-14)

⁴ Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵ Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? ⁸ Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say

⁷ Sampley, p. 904; Wendell Willis, “An Apostolic Apologia? The Form and Function of 1 Corinthians 9,” JSNT 24 (1985), pp. 33-48.

the same? ⁹ For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹² If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. ¹³ Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

Using the Greek word *exousia* ("authority, right"), Paul begins the second section of this chapter, once more asking a series of rhetorical questions (twelve in all). His choices of privilege run the gamut: eat, drink, marriage, material support from the churches for his labors. In the ancient world, itinerant teachers ordinarily took lodging with one of their pupils, and everybody expected to pay for the instruction received. While it was true that men like Socrates and Plato made it a point *not to accept fees* for their educational services, theirs was the exception. Persons who did not charge for their services were eyed warily by the public as offering something without much value. As we might say, "You get what you pay for." For Paul to spend a whole paragraph offering arguments for a ministry stipend is actually overkill. Nobody in Corinth would have questioned his *right (exousia)* to receive such payment for services rendered. That is why these twelve questions are viewed *rhetorically* — the answers are easily forthcoming.

Paul reinforces, however, that such compensation is his *right* by saturating the text with the same Greek word: *exousia*. The emphasis falls on "right to control or govern" something. Using examples from agriculture, animal husbandry, the military, and temple service, Paul sanctions the practice of accepting payment by also appealing to Hebrew Scripture. Citing Deuteronomy 25:4, he identifies the practice of oxen drawn round in a circle, trampling the harvested grain so as to separate the grain from the stalks and the chaff. This practice, known as *dush* ("to tread, trample, break, tear, shred"), rewarded the oxen by allowing them to feed from any grain which broke free and came within their reach. If a husbandman wished to deny this feeding, he would need to muzzle the oxen, covering their mouths so that they could not eat while threshing. Torah forbade this, according to the *Deuteronomy* passage.

After this extended explanation of his *exousia*—which was not in dispute—Paul foreshadows his forthcoming remarks by giving an advance notice: "If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (9:12). We have a better idea why he seems to overdo the arguments. Fully settled on his *right to receive compensation for his service in the Gospel* and in full agreement with his audience about that *right*, Paul *declines to use that right!* That's the shocker! Who would expect that anyone with such a firm claim on privilege would ever fail to take advantage of it? The Greek word translated "endure" is *stegō* which means "to cover up, keep hidden, keep secret." That is, though the rights and privileges belong to Paul, both by custom and by Torah, he has decided to act as if they don't exist for him at all. Indeed he tries to act in ways which *conceal those rights* from those whom he is trying to reach. What he wants to avoid is placing an "obstacle" (Greek: *egkopē*) in the path of the "gospel of Christ." With regard to his own privileges, Paul is no "name-dropper"!

How would this be an obstacle to the Gospel? No doubt, among those in Paul's audience would be the poor and the peasant who lacked means to pay for his services. There might also be those who thought Paul had a profit motive, though compensation of this sort was customary.⁸ Making a claim for "maintenance" — even for the sake of the Gospel — was not worth the hindrance this might place before those who would otherwise embrace the Good News. That is, Paul's own standing as an apostle and his reputation as a well-compensated teacher could become obstacles to hearing the Gospel aright.

⁸ G. Dautzenberg, "Der Verzicht auf die apostolische Unterhaltsrecht. Eine exegetische Untersuchung zu 1 Kor 9 [The Renunciation of the Apostolic Maintenance Right: An Exegetical Investigation of 1 Cor. 9]," *Biblica* 50 (1979), p. 218; G. Agrell, p. 110.

This reminds me of a pastor who made it a point to remind the congregation that he lived in a house which cost a certain amount of money. He left little to the imagination about its value and what that said about his social standing in the community. Painfully, I later sat with two dear Christians who were struggling to make ends meet, and who found the constant reminders of their pastor's real estate valuation a true stumbling block. Whatever he tried to tell them about the Gospel got garbled by his claim to financial privilege.

“These verses establish his [Paul's] right to support solely so that he can show that he really has given up something — in order not to be an ‘obstacle’ (*egkopē*) in the way of the gospel.”⁹

I Have Not Used These Rights (9:15-18)

¹⁵ But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. ¹⁶ For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

In furtherance of his argument, Paul repeats the essence of 9:12 in 9:15, emphatically asserting, “I have made no use of any of these...” The word “rights” does not appear in the Greek text but is supplied by the translators to fill out the sense. Literally, he does not make use of “these *things*” (Greek: *toutōn*), referring to the list of each *exousia* detailed in 9:4-14. The notion, “make use of,” is from *chraomai*, a verb meaning “to make use of, indulge in.” Paul uses the perfect tense of the verb, emphasizing that he is not making it his final purpose to exploit his rights, but instead not to use them at all. We might say that Paul “had a good thing going” for himself, traveling around preaching, gaining a following, establishing local “Jesus chapters” who would in turn give him money for his services. In response, Paul is saying that’s not his purpose at all.

He makes clear that his written arguments in 1 Corinthians 9 are *not intended* to “bring about” (*genētai*) such a state of affairs (“thusly” from *houtōs*) as might be expected in the case of an itinerant teacher. Again, Paul is not making an argument for his rights, rather he is showing how he refuses to make use of them. Paul has never taken payments from the Corinthians and he will not alter that precedent.

To draw further attention to the radical ethic Paul adopts (not taking money for his work), he constructs what scholars refer to as an *anacoluthon*.¹⁰ Simply defined, Paul messes up the grammar of 9:15b, leading some students of this passage to rework the syntax in an attempt to make better sense out of the passage. Ironically, that seems to undo what Paul intended in the first place! How does the anacoluthon work? Usually, writers who accidentally leave out words, badly arrange a sentence, change structures in a sentence or otherwise carelessly misuse words commit anacoluthon. However, in other cases, the whole matter is quite intentional, drawing attention to the text and using the malformed sentence as a rhetorical device. Nor should we discount the role of strong emotion in breaking up the smooth reading of a passage.

Emotion seems to be present in 9:15b where Paul becomes excited over the prospect of foregoing his privileges in the Gospel so that he might more effectively advance the Gospel. His intensity is evident as his words stumble around such themes as “boasting” and “dying.” We are not clear from the passage whether Paul *wants to boast* but is somehow kept from it, or *doesn't want to boast* lest his achievements in the Gospel be seen as something he chose to do on his own rather than as commissions from God. Because the grammar is imperfectly formed, we are not sure. Yet, what he tells us in 9:16 seems to clarify the meaning: people boast when they have decided to do something and then succeed at it, as we might say, patting themselves on the back.

⁹ Willis, p. 36.

¹⁰ The origin of this word is Greek and literally means the absence of a sequence or “following”, so as to get off the path of the normal sentence, leaving something out.

But when Paul preaches the Gospel, he tells his audience, it isn't to get a pat on the back or to advance his career as an apostle. It isn't about Paul's choices at all, but about God's command to him. "I don't really have a choice in the matter," Paul in effect is saying. Having accepted the original apostolic commission to preach the Gospel, Paul gave up his choices to the perfect will of God, thus placing himself "under necessity." The Greek word *anagkē* means "necessity, constraint, sense of duty" and is commonly associated with certain painful difficulties such as labor and toil. Obviously a sharp contrast is drawn between 1) the life of a successful itinerant teacher well-compensated for his work and seeking to advance his profession, and 2) the life of someone who has accepted a supreme duty which he must discharge in spite of the monumental inconveniences he thereby faces. There is a world of difference between "necessity" and "right"; between "duty" and "freedom."

"Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel" is more than a fine piece of cleverly written rhetoric, though its rhetorical force is undoubtedly felt by Paul's audience. The word "woe" belongs to the vocabulary of *judgment* and *destruction*. The Greek word is *ouai* and transliterates the Hebrew words *hōy* and *'ōy*. We know this term from the Hebrew *hoy vay* and the Yiddish *oy vey*, a Jewish expression of frustration but also of excitement. The emotion present in this statement may explain the anacoluthon used previously. Paul seems to be saying that if he refuses to preach the Gospel or if he fails to preach it aright, he falls under God's judgment. That is why he cannot boast about his preaching the Gospel since he does so with the full knowledge that God will one day judge him for his failure to do so. This may strike us as severe and quite out of character for someone living in the age of grace. But Paul's rhetorical strategy requires him to write in such terms, throwing the emphasis on his work as something he does "unto the Lord" and not for the reward of human beings (see Colossians 3:23 where Paul urges service "for the Lord" and "not for men").

The contrast in 9:17 is between "my own will" (*hekōn*) and "not my own will" (*akōn*). As an itinerant teacher Paul could *freely* enter into a contract with his students and agree on compensation for his instruction of them. Nobody would have thought badly of him for doing so, unless, of course, they couldn't afford to pay him. Paul denies that his arrangements with the Corinthians — or anyone else — were based on such contracts. Having surrendered his life to the risen Jesus, Paul became the apostle to the Gentiles and remained under divine appointment. He had given up his "will" in the spirit of his Savior who once prayed, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Matthew 26:39, 42; Luke 22:42).

Yet, Paul maintains, a certain economy still exists even when the will has been surrendered to God. He describes this economy by using the Greek word *oikonomia*, usually translated as "stewardship." The main thought behind the word is "a task involving management and organization; commission, responsibility." When Paul accepted his original commission from Jesus Christ, he thereby became a manager within the household of God. Along with that role came the responsibility to preach the Gospel. We might say, "It comes with the job." No additional compensation is expected, and, in fact, further payment would be entirely inappropriate.

This remind me of the parking valet for a hospital where my daughter was having surgery. Late one night, after visiting hours, our car had been moved to a different location and needed to be brought up to an unlocked entrance. A fine young man fetched the car, scraped off the snow and made certain it was ready for our return home. As we were about to leave, I offered him a tip for his kind treatment of us at so late an hour. He thanked me, but politely refused, saying that he was not allowed to accept compensation for a service freely offered by the hospital. Paul is saying much the same thing: he cannot charge for such a service as the Gospel, since it is freely offered by God.

Does this mean that Paul's missionary work lacked rewards? Hardly, he tells his audience. "I have reward enough in simply knowing that I can preach the gospel 'free of charge' and not demand my rights as an apostle for services rendered." Once more, we see the sharp contrasts, this time between "free of charge" (*adapanos*) and "reward" (*misthos*). Without pressing the argument too far, we might note that *adapanos* underscores the

gracious offer made by the Gospel, as well as the *manner* in which it is made. If salvation is “free” — not based on human work or effort, but only on faith — should not the *manner* in which it is proclaimed model the salvation which it offers? Free salvation requires free proclamation of salvation.

This reminds me of an experience Susan and I had one year when vacationing in Michigan. We were enjoying the moderate climate of Mackinaw Island one afternoon when a group of young people passed us on the street. They were carrying bottles of cold water which they freely offered to whoever passed by. Attached to the bottles was a simple explanation of the Gospel, along with the connection between “free water” and “free gift” of salvation. The manner of their witness paralleled the content of the Gospel they preached. So with it is with Paul in 9:18.

Though Free From All, I Make Myself a Slave to All (9:19-23)

¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

What does it mean for Paul to be “free from all”? Having examined our text in its wider context, we are in a position to venture an answer to this question. Clearly, Paul does not charge for his preaching and teaching work among the Corinthians — he has no formal tutoring contracts with his students which require a certain stipend for the instruction received. No monetary obligations bind Paul to his audience so that they cannot say after the instruction is over, “We have paid Paul and have no further connections with him by contract.” Precisely because they have *not* paid Paul, they remain connected to him and he to them by bonds much stronger and nobler than money can buy. The Lord Himself is Paul’s “exceeding great reward” (see parallels in Genesis 15 between God and Yahweh) who has released Paul from such fiduciary obligations to his missionary audience. Paul is bound to them by the pure love of Christ expressed to the Corinthians through him. He would write in a later epistle to the Corinthians:

¹⁴ **For the love of Christ controls us**, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

Set free from monetary obligations as an ordinary itinerant teacher of students, Paul makes himself “a servant to all.” The verb form, *douloō*, appears in the aorist tense, emphasizing the decisive nature of Paul’s relationship to his missionary audience. This use of a *verb* rather than a *noun*(*doulos*) throws the focus on the *actions* of the one who is the slave of Christ. We can hardly miss the irony of this unique relationship. Since the Corinthians do not pay Paul for his teaching services, whatever work he performs for them in preaching and teaching the Gospel takes the form of a slave’s labor for his master. The spotlight is off of Paul and onto the Master who has placed him in this unique service to his audience. Bound to Christ, Paul is free from all. Bound to Christ Jesus, Paul is “slave to all.” This reminds us of Jesus’ own instruction to the disciples:

And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and **servant of all**" (Mark 9:35).

The commissioning of Paul has relieved him of ordinary human obligations and placed him under new orders from the Lord of heaven and earth whose slave he has freely become!

What sort of inner purpose drew Paul to make himself “a slave to all”? His reasons are transparent in the words “in order that I might win the more...” The Greek word “win” is *kerdainō* which has an intrinsic monetary nuance of “gain, profit” and the extended meaning of “win, win over.” Several categories of this word appear throughout the New Testament:

1. Jesus questions the profit of “gaining the whole world” and losing one’s real life (Matthew 16:26; Mark 8:36; Luke 9:25).
2. A brother whose fault you point out and he accepts your correction is *gained* (Matthew 18:15).

3. Someone may realize a *gain* made on a wise investment (Matthew 25:16-17, 20-22).
4. Injury and loss can be *gained* (or “incurred”) (Acts 27:21).
5. Paul counts his human achievements losses so that he might *gain* Christ (Philippians 3:8).
6. Profit from commercial transactions is *gain* (James 4:13).
7. Wives may *win* their unbelieving husbands by loving submission to them (1 Peter 3:1).

Some scholars point out that the Greek word *kerdainō* also had a technical meaning among the Jews, namely, “to win an unbeliever *to* your faith.”¹¹ It could also apply to winning back those who had wandered *from* the faith. “Winning” in both senses has a restorative quality about it. Paul’s choice of words doesn’t suggest that he is personally gaining people into his movement as devotees or followers. Rather, he uses the idea of “gain” to be consistent with the word picture he has been painting involving the non-payment of tuition by his students, receiving in place of fees a much higher and more wonderful “gain,” namely, human beings for the kingdom of God. If the Gospel “pays,” it does so in a *non-selfish* way. Truly, Paul wants to see “more” people become part of Christ’s church, but not as personal gains or statistical achievements.

Slaves serve at the pleasure of their masters. Paul, the *voluntary slave* to his missionary audience, thereby serves “more” different kinds of people. Had he simply accepted the traditional teacher-student relationship as practiced in the ancient world, he would have been bound by monetary payment to those who could pay. Everyone else would have been left out, including the poor. Within Jewish communities, paying for the education of women was forbidden by the rabbis. Absent the fee, Paul was “free” to teach women, and many other kinds of people otherwise denied that privilege.¹²

In 9:20-22a, Paul enumerates “the more” different kinds of people he will be able to “gain” by adopting the strategy of *becoming* “a slave to all.”

1. “The Jews.” This is the most obvious group listed, and refers to ethnic Israelites, Paul’s own kinsmen by blood, culture and faith.
2. “Those under Torah.” While this certainly includes ethnic Jews, a wider audience is likely in view, namely, proselytes and also God-fearers—those who honored Torah, attended synagogue, and adopted some ethical elements of Jewish life.
3. “Those not under Torah.” Gentiles are in view, the large and specially targeted audience of Paul’s mission.
4. “The weak.” The Greek word used here is *asthenēs* which, in its basic sense, means “without strength.” In classical usage, it applied to whatever was “weak, feeble, poor, or insignificant.” Paul speaks about the “weaker brother” in chapter 8 whose conscience fellow Christians must tenderly regard and protect (8:7, 9, 10). However, earlier in the letter, he refers to several classes of people who are commonly passed over within aristocratic society, including the “weak:”

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is **weak** in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

In 4:10 Paul refers to the apostles as “weak” because of the adversities they undergo into order to bring the Gospel to the world. Comparing the church to a human body, he calls some parts “weak” but highly indispensable (12:22). The Corinthians saw Paul as “weak” due to some physical infirmity (2 Corinthians

¹¹ Heinrich Schlier, “Kerdos,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittel, ed.; trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 3:673; David Daube, “Kerdainō as a Missionary Term,” *Harvard Theological Review* 40 (1947): 109-120; *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone Press, 1956), pp. 352-361; “Jewish Missionary Maxims in Paul,” *Studia Theologica* 1 (1948): 158-169; *Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 336-351.

¹² In a fascinating text, 1 Timothy 2:11-12, Paul refuses women the right to teach but at the same time grants them the right to learn, suggesting that he approves the teaching of women. Some have argued that perhaps Paul’s denial to teaching privileges stemmed from the largely illiterate condition of women, at least within certain strata of society which was now joining the churches. Once taught, might they then teach?

10:10). He admonished the church to “help the weak” (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Christ found “the weak” and died for them as "sinners," persons *unable to save themselves* (Romans 5:6). In this last instance, “weak” and “ungodly” appear together in apposition.

⁶ For while we were **still weak**, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person— though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus heals the “sick,” and the writers often use the same Greek word *asthenēs* (“weak”) to identify these persons. Those who are in need of the healing and restorative work of God are called “the weak” using this Greek word. We might say that the “weak” are those who, when they come under the hearing of the Gospel and consider its claims have *nothing to lose and everything to gain*.

From Paul’s perspective, he has also *counted himself* to be “weak.” His weakness is self-created because of spiritual maturity. He is weak because he has voluntarily enslaved himself by the self-limitation of his *rights (exousia)* in order to “gain” a wider hearing for the Gospel and in order to restore any within the church who have fallen away due to their own weakness.

To summarize: Paul "makes himself servant to all" when he "becomes as..." That is, "for the sake the Gospel" — to advance its cause, to serve its mission, and to take up its purpose — Paul places himself in the servant's role as Jew, God-fearer, Gentile, and any other person who stands in significant need. Mission for Paul is not about conquest but about servanthood; not about a "notch in our belt" but about "newborns in God's kingdom." Something called "the Law of Christ" (9:21) — the law of love — overrides every other consideration. According to Paul's earlier writings, this "Law" places the burdens of others on the shoulders of the witness: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ," Paul writes the Galatian church (Galatians 6:2). The Law of Christ is the Law of the Spirit who gives life: "For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2). James, in his letter, makes similar references, but calls this "law" the "law of liberty": "But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing" (James 1:25). "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³ For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:12). Mission to others brings blessing and mercy.

As Paul ends this section (9:19-23), he reminds his audience that ministry "for the sake of the Gospel" is absolutely essential if we are to "share in its blessings." What does he mean? At this point, Paul makes the principle of "all things to all people" deeply personal. Mission is not just something that he *does* but belongs to the essential character of who he *is*. Being a Christian cannot be separated from being on a mission from God. The idea of being a Christian is intrinsically about the mission. Consider what God did in order to rescue the world from sin and death. He *became a human being*. Let's examine Paul's perspective in 9:19-23 in light of that. What might God say about His own mission? He would say, "I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the human beings, I became a human being..." That is what we mean when we speak about the *incarnation of Jesus Christ* — his putting on of human flesh and blood so that he might also say, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some..." And so when Paul writes as he does, he is doing nothing less than re-embodiment what God Himself did on His mission to save the human race. A good comparable text is Philippians 2:5-16

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to

work for his good pleasure. ¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or questioning, ¹⁵ that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, ¹⁶ holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain (Philippians 2:5-16).

The first paragraph of that passage is commonly read by itself and used to demonstrate the incarnation of Jesus. It is a good foundation for understanding Paul's assertions in 9:19-23. Notice the words which beautifully describe the mission of Jesus: "made himself nothing," "taking the form of a servant," and "being born in the likeness of men." You can almost hear Paul's voice when he later tells us "I became all things to all people..." We also hear about the "blessings" (as we do in 9:23) when Paul explains how God "highly exalted Jesus," "giving him the name above every name," and having "every knee bow and every tongue confess Jesus is Lord." All of that more than adequately explains what God did in Jesus by becoming a human being. But Paul doesn't let the *first paragraph* stand alone as just a bit of theology. He goes on to begin the *next paragraph* with the word "Therefore," a translation of the Greek word *hoste* which means "so that, with the result that, in order that, accordingly." "Therefore" is not simply the outcome of an argument which Paul concludes, but rather it is the conjunction introducing a *purpose clause*. God achieved His mission through Jesus *so that* we might implement that mission.

How does Paul characterize that *mission*? He uses this language: "Work *out* your own salvation..." That is **not** the same as saying "Work *for* your own salvation" — something Paul would never say in light of other texts (Ephesians 2:8-9 and most of *Galatians* and *Romans*!). The word *katergazomai* has the meaning "implement," and has to do with our fulfilling the mission of God in Jesus. What God was for Israel through Jesus the Messiah, we are to be for the world. "God works in you," Paul tells the Philippians in 2:13 precisely so that He might "will and work His good pleasure." Through faithful obedience to Jesus Christ (2:14), we are to become *for the world* what God in Christ is *for us*. Using powerful "mission" language, Paul tells his readers at Philippi:

1. "Be blameless"
2. "Be innocent"
3. "Be children of God without blemish"

And do these things "in the midst of a crooked generation," shining as lights in the world. Be the light of the world, reflecting God's light back into the world, like an angled mirror reflecting the character of Jesus so that others might see it and believe the Gospel. Which is just another way saying what Paul said in 9:23, "I do it all for the sake of the Gospel...sharing in its blessings."

Images of Winning (9:24-27)

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

This matter of "sharing...blessings" with those whom Paul wins now gets further elaboration in the closing section, 9:24-27. In so many words, Paul is telling his audience, "I can't separate winning others to Christ from my own salvation." This is an especially challenging assertion since it may suggest that Paul is tying his own salvation with some new kind of works righteousness. We know this cannot be the case from Paul's own teaching elsewhere, but there remains a deeper and more mysterious truth in Paul's understanding of mission. Somehow when Paul proclaims the Gospel — becoming all things to all — he is in a real sense re-enacting the process by which God brought salvation to the world in Jesus Christ. That is, God wasn't just saving Paul or Peter or Barnabas: He was bringing salvation to "as many as" responded to their message. Paul's own salvation isn't just about Paul. Peter's salvation isn't just about Peter. That is why Paul, in 9:23, is so adamant about saying "share with them" when he connects his mission-audience with himself. The Greek word used there, *sugkoinōnos*, refers to "sharing in a matter of joint concern." Salvation is not a private concern; salvation is a

joint concern. Salvation is not about saving *me*, but about God rescuing the lost human race of which I am a part.

When Paul engages in mission, he is participating in the *joint concern* of God for the world — the concern which saved Paul. The same "plan of salvation" applies equally both to Paul and to the world. Failing to have this important perspective has led countless Christians to adopt a highly privatized understanding of "being saved." They imagine that the Gospel is some kind of formula which when followed will allow individuals to enter the kingdom of God and ultimately "go to heaven" when they die. Such "Lone Ranger" Christianity leads to a sharp "us" and "them" view of the world, and it does considerable damage to the true nature of mission. Jesus called "Twelve" but it was the isolated "One" who turned out to be "a devil" (John 6:70). Christians who strut around claiming to be God's favorites sometimes convey the attitude, "I don't know about *you*, but *I* know where *I'm* going when *I* die!" It is just this sort of isolationist understanding of salvation which Paul consistently counteracts in his letters by using the plural pronoun "we/our" when identifying the people of God who are being saved by Jesus Christ. While the question of salvation is a *personal* matter, insofar as individuals make real choices to follow Jesus, it does not *remain a private matter* since the *whole world* stands in need of God's rescue. Through this last section (9:24-27) Paul is telling his audience, "I will not rest in the blessings of my own salvation as long as I know that there are others who have yet to find theirs." A similar idea appears in his letter to the Romans when he wrote:

I am speaking the truth in Christ- I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit- ² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh (Romans 9:1-3).

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved (Romans 10:1).

That is, "If the loss of my salvation would mean the salvation of my fellow Jews, I would lose it!" Granted, this gives some of us the theological "shakes." Paul means to use hyperbole to communicate how deeply he sees the connection of his own salvation with that of his fellow Jews. He could just as well have said this about the Corinthians Gentiles.

To reinforce this "collective" understanding of salvation, Paul uses a series images taken from the field of athletics. The Corinthians would have been familiar with the Athenian and Isthmian games.¹³ The Isthmus of Corinth was no more than eight miles from the city. Knowing how much the Greeks valued athletics, Paul adopts this imagery to drive home his point. Those who participated in these events required discipline and self-control.¹⁴ To "master the self" in all of its dimensions belonged to the life of the athlete. The games were analogous to *war*, and the preparations required of a soldier paralleled those of the fit competitor in the games.

The idea of "mastery" permeates this section (9:24-27). Twice Paul uses the word "all": "all the runners run" (9:24); athletes exercise self-control "in all things" (9:25). In the "race," he does not run "aimlessly;" in the "boxing match," he does not "beat the air." He then rigorously writes about how he "punishes his body" even "enslaves it" so as to avoid disqualification (9:27).

Why does Paul make self-control so crucial in his explanation of mission? He tells us in 9:27b:

So that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

Mission is not just about "proclaiming to others," though preaching the Gospel certainly involves that activity. We do not merely *proclaim* the message: we *are* the message. Athletes are not just *braggarts* about their

¹³ Sampley, p. 909. The Isthmian Games or Isthmia were one of the Panhellenic Games of Ancient Greece, and were named after the *isthmus of Corinth*, where they were held. As with the Nemean Games, the Isthmian Games were held both the year before and the year after the Olympic Games (the second and fourth years of an Olympiad), while the Pythian Games were held in the third year of the Olympiad cycle.

¹⁴ S. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, pp. 45-52.

achievements: they are *embodiments* of their achievements. Christians don't just *tell* others about Jesus, they *live the Jesus life* as living incarnations of what it means for God to "become flesh and live among us." Contrary to the popular saying, "Do as I say, not as I do," the mission-bearing Christian is keenly aware that his own actions will either "adorn the Gospel" (Titus 2:10) or be the cause of its shame and reproach (1 Timothy 6:1). Just as the athlete distinguishes himself by training, so the one who brings the Gospel to the world must "show himself approved, a workman without shame" (2 Timothy 2:15).

When Paul writes "be disqualified," he uses the Greek word *adokimos*, "one who fails the test, is false, disreputable." This word carries the nuance of being "defective" or "corrupt" (see Romans 1:28). This word appears in other Pauline texts where the matter of one's own salvation is under investigation. He boldly calls upon his audience to "examine themselves" to make certain they are "in the faith," else they might "fail the test" (see 2 Corinthians 13:5-7; also, 2 Timothy 3:8; Titus 1:16; Hebrews 6:8). This is tough talk — this language of "not being qualified" — and it is intended to spur on those who claim to be the followers of Jesus to *prove their faith* through a fully qualified life, one which includes being on a mission from God — not only in words but in actions as well.

While this week's reading ends at 9:27, Paul continues his line of reasoning into chapter 10 (10:1-13), where he provides additional illustrations taken from the history of Israel. He reminds the Corinthians how *all* the Israelites shared in a common Exodus from Egypt (10:1-2), a common food and drink in the wilderness (10:3-4), and then proceeded to allow their own personal desires to rob them of the blessings of God (10:5-10). Offering detailed reminders of actual events in Israel's past, Paul makes it clear that "God was not pleased with *some of them*," with the implication that God may not be pleased with *some of us* (10:5). Using a series of examples, Paul repeats the phrase "as they did" (10:6) in different variations: "as some of them were" (10:7), or "as some of them did" (10:8, 9, 10).

The lack of self-control robbed Israel of their missional success: they "set their hearts on evil things" (10:6), were "idolaters" (10:7), committed "sexual immorality" (10:8), "tested the Lord" (10:9), and "complained" (10:10). Twice Paul reminds the Corinthians: "these things occurred as examples" (10:6, 11). He uses the Greek words *tupoi* (10:6) and *tupikōs* to describe how the history of Israel functions for us. This word group has a number of related meanings:

1. a blow
2. the effect of a blow: the print or impress of a seal which is pressed into wax; a footprint
3. what is wrought out of metal; figures worked in relief; image, statue, figurine
4. form of something
5. general form or character
6. outline, sketch, draft

These meanings each contribute in their own way to what Paul intends by using these words. Perhaps he reinforces the sense of "permanence" in these *types* when he also adds that the history of Israel has been "written down" as "an instruction" (from the Greek *nouthesia*) — something which confronts ("strikes") our minds in order to change our ways of thinking.

The life of Israel has left a *permanent impress* on the soil of history, reminding all who would be the people of God. But the life of Israel has also been powerfully impressed on our *minds* so as to change *the way we think* about mission. Paul encourages the Christ followers in his audience to avoid the missteps of Israel's past, not only because it led to Israel's judgment in the wilderness, but because it puts at risk the mission of God. When Israel fell in the wilderness, God's *reputation* was likewise at risk. Recall our study of Ezekiel 36 in which the exile of Israel to Babylon held up to *shame* both Yahweh and His name. We learned from that text how God's purposes through a restored Israel would lead to a restoration of His name in the world.

That is why Paul further warns the Corinthians in 10:12, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." Only by the faithfulness of God (10:13) can followers of Jesus remain true to the mission and offer a consistent testimony to the world — resisting the temptations which once defeated Israel.

Concluding Thoughts

Connection or isolation? These words which belong to the title of this week's study apply in a variety of ways to the mission God has given us. Paul could not disconnect the fact of his own salvation from that of those around him. He had "no right" to claim personal salvation *if he failed to become all things to all other human beings*. He could not live his own life in isolation from the mission he had from God to the world.

But, secondly, Paul could not isolate his "preaching" of the Gospel from his "living" of the Gospel. Such isolation would be a huge *disconnect*. "Having proclaimed to *others*," he wrote, "I would be disqualified *myself*." A life in which words and actions fail to coincide is a life lived "aimlessly" like a boxer "beating the *air*" but never his *opponent*! Truth must intersect with life or it is *empty*. Life must intersect with truth or it is *blind*.¹⁵

Mission must be wholistic. Mission must be incarnational. If, in Jesus, the "word became flesh and pitched his tent among us" (John 1:14), then in us, the word must also become flesh, else having preached to others, we have failed to take our own message to heart — and life.

Although St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) is credited with the following quotations, they are found nowhere in his writings. Still, they reflect the spirit of his life and work. We offer them in illustration of this week's study:

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.”

“While you are proclaiming peace with your lips, be careful to have it even more fully in your heart.”

“It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.”

Among my favorite "mission statements" is this one (it didn't originate from St. Francis either!):

“Preach the Gospel at all times, and, when necessary, use words.”

The implication is apparent. Mission is largely an embodied enterprise where words merely clarify and offer a personal signature affixed to the Gospel letter sent through *our* lives.

In much the same way, Paul would later tell the Corinthians about *their* lives:

2 You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. 3 And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Corinthians 3:2-3).

When Paul tells the Corinthians that he "becomes all things to all people," he is not merely offering a missionary technique, but he is declaring that doing so is part of *being a Christian*. There is no disconnect here! The Corinthians are urged to take care how they use their freedom and lay claim to their rights. Instead, they are to exercise self-discipline, and he urges them to follow him as he follows Christ (11:1), as persons on a mission from God, in self-giving service to the world. What does this mean for us? A few key points break through the surface of this week's text:

1. Our mission is to all kinds of people.
2. In our mission, we must rise above personal preferences.
3. Though incarnating our message, we still need to draw the line at sin.
4. We are to *be relevant without being irreverent*.¹⁶

¹⁵ I confess purloining Immanuel Kant's little statements about "concepts" and "perceptions" in framing this remark.

¹⁶ Richard Pratt offered these helpful applications in his article from *IIIM Magazine Online*, Volume I, March 1-7, 1999.

To sit side by side in these pews is to become for one another a Jew, a Gentile, a widower, a divorcé, cancer-carrier, cancer survivor, wealthy, poor, whatever. We sit together fully ourselves, children of God, vessels of grace, tellers of the gospel story through word and deed, compassion and persistent, stubborn hope, so that some might be saved. It happens when we stand around a person at the baptism font, or look into someone eyes over a mutually-held communion tray, or say (and really mean it), “The peace of Christ be with you.” To do that is to be vulnerable enough, accessible and humble enough to be all things to all people, so that they (along with us) might be saved.

This is the obligation, the necessity we bear as members of the church and followers of Christ. Elie Wiesel said, “Let two beings become one and the world is no longer the same. Let two human creatures accept one another and creation will now have meaning, the meaning they will have imposed upon it.”¹⁷ That is a profound statement, but the apostle Paul would have us go even farther. Our sitting-together, praying-together, becoming all things to all people cannot be accomplished through our own strength and abilities. It only becomes fully possible through grace – a freely-given grace that saves, that heals, redeems, and brings us true salvation.

And it is precisely here, in congregations like First Church of the Nazarene, Lemont, and thousands others around the world, where something of the world to come is glimpsed in the midst of the world that is. As Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas constantly says, “The world cannot know it is the world without the church being an alternative to the world and its solutions.”¹⁸ As Jesus said, “You are the light of the world; let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your God in heaven” (Matthew 5:14,16).

God is. God is for us. How then must we live? We answer that question in our private, individual lives – in our mutual, pew-sitting, city-dwelling lives – in our nation-building, global village, now and for future generations’ lives. We live under Christ’s law. We live by Christ’s love. We live, seeking to be all things to all people, so that the salvation blessings of the gospel might be faithfully proclaimed now and always.¹⁹

Glory to God. Amen.

¹⁷ *Souls on Fire*.

¹⁸ Quoted by William Willimon in *Theology Today*, October, 1995.

¹⁹ Randall K. Bush, “All Things to All People,” Sermon, February 15, 2009.

Digger Deeper: *On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Isolated to Connected*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *On a Mission from God: Becoming a Missional People — From Isolated to Connected*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Our reading this week comes from 1 Corinthians 9:1-27, with special attention to 9:19-27. Carefully read the entire chapter and then make an outline, labeling the following main sections: 9:1-3; 9:4-14; 9:15-18; 9:19-23; 9:24-27.
2. What single theme unites all of these sections? What does that theme have to do with being *on a mission from God*?
3. Paul claims two distinct privileges in 9:1 and 9:4. What are they? In the verses which follow each claim, how does Paul substantiate his claim to these privileges? Why do you think he does so?
4. Pretend you are Paul and complete the following statement in at least five different ways: "I have the right to..." Do you think that anybody in Corinth would object to Paul using any of these *rights*?
5. What unexpected statements does Paul make in 9:12b and 9:15? Having listed all of his rights previously, what makes this statement particularly effective? How might the Corinthians have reacted to it? How do you react to it? What impact does Paul's decision have on his mission for God?
6. Why does Paul say, "Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel!" in 9:16b?
7. How does Paul view being "rewarded" for pursuing his mission for God?
8. According to 9:19, what does Paul do with his *freedom*? Do you find this surprising?
9. In 9:20-23, Paul makes a series of statements which have the formula, "To the *x* I become a *y*." Explain what he means by each one. In 9:22b what rationale does Paul offer for this series of statements?
10. Paul offers several supporting illustrations for the discipline required while on a mission for God. Briefly list them and then suggest why they are appropriate. Why do you think Paul used athletic metaphors?
11. What crucial concern does Paul voice in 9:27b? In what ways does Paul see his own salvation somehow bound up with the mission he has undertaken? How might this connection be misunderstood?
12. Skim 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 which follows this week's reading. Why does Paul tell the story of Israel *after* he writes chapter 9? Hint: Pay attention to 10:6 and 10:11. What role does the Old Testament have in shaping the way we undertake our mission in the New Testament?
13. How might we become isolated in our practice of the Christian faith? How can we become more connected?