

First Epistle to the Corinthians

17 – Essay Three: Freedom and Responsibility (3.3) – Full Identification in Mission

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

1. Outlines

a. *ESV Study Bible*

- i. Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter (7:1–11:1)
 1. Marriage, divorce, and unchangeable circumstances (7:1–24)
 2. The betrothed and widows (7:25–40)
 3. Food offered to idols (8:1–11:1)

b. *Reading the New Testament Series*

- i. The Limits of Christian Freedom (8:1-11:1)
 1. **A.** Two issues, (1) and (2) (8:1- 13)
 2. **B.** The example of Paul (apostolic freedom and slavery) (9:1- 23)
 3. **B'.** The examples of Paul and Israel (necessity of self- control) (9:24- 10:13)
 4. **A'.** Two issues, (2) and (1) (10:14- 11:1)

c. *Kenneth E. Bailey*¹

- i. Freedom and Responsibility (8:1-11:1)
 1. Food Offered to Idols: Freedom and Responsibility (8:1-13)
 - a. Christians must surrender personal rights for the sake of others
 2. Paul's Personal Freedom and Responsibility (9:1-18)
 - a. Paul defends his apostolic authority and rights
 - b. Paul refuses to exercise his apostolic rights (refuses support)
 - i. So that only Christ can have a claim on him
 - ii. To illustrate the free nature of the gospel
 3. Freedom in Mission: Full Identification (9:19-27)
 4. Old Covenant Sacraments and Idolatry: Partial Identification (10:1-13)
 5. New Covenant Sacraments and Idolatry: No Identification (10:14-22)
 6. Food Offered to Idols: Freedom and Responsibility – A Final Word (10:23- 11:1)

2. Rhetoric (9:19-27)

- a. Two subsections, each in ring-composition form
 - i. How Paul himself has chosen to live
 - ii. Why Paul chooses to live as he does

Table 1: Bailey, location 2952

1 Corinthians 9:19-27 (ESV)		Rhetoric
A-1	19 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.	All people
2	20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.	Jew

¹ Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, loc. 2632

1 Corinthians 9:19-27 (ESV)		Rhetoric
3	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.	Law (Jew)
4	21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside [or, <i>without</i>] the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.	No Law (Gentile)
5	22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.	Weak (Gentile)
6	I have become all things [<i>To all people</i>] to all people, [<i>I have become all things</i>] that by all means I might save some.	All people
B-7	23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. [or, <i>that a partner of it I may become</i>]	The gospel Become a partner (teammate?)
8	24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.	Parable of The runner
9	25 Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.	Discipline
10	They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.	The prize
11	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,	Parables of The runner The boxer
12	lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.	Preaching Not disqualified

3. First thoughts

- a. How do you read it? What do you think Paul is communicating?
- b. How does this relate to the issue of “food offered to idols?”
- c. How does this relate to the issue of freedom and rights?
- d. What applications might be derived from this passage?
- e. What assumptions might we be reading into this passage?

The range of interpretations that has been suggested by commentators is remarkable, moving from an understanding of Paul as being totally selfless—perhaps in a psychologically unhealthy manner indicative of a loss of identity—to the contention that Paul was an opportunist in his dealings with potential converts. Careful reading of the text, however, indicates that such extreme interpretations are stereotyped, falling short of full comprehension of the subtlety of Paul's methods of mission and ministry.²

² *Understanding the Bible Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, entry in section 25 (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

4. I had some questions this week
 - a. Since, as the previous part of this essay showed, gospel and grace are absolutely free – you can't merit it, and you can't return the favor – why discipleship and spiritual disciplines?
 - i. To express gratitude? But why then is discipline exhorted and commanded?
 - ii. To draw closer to Jesus, to maintain a relationship with him? And if I don't, then what?
 - iii. To test myself to see if I am really committed to Jesus and a follower? For what purpose?
 - iv. To be better equipped to witness and evangelize? For whose benefit?
 - b. None of the usual responses seemed to adequately address the dilemma

5. Passage A in detail (9:19-22)

- a. Christmas, Easter, Halloween (All-Hallow's Eve)... Phrases, "by Jove," "thank my lucky stars" ...
- b. Should Christians identify with non-Christian culture, and if so, to what extent?
- c. This is the first of three parts dealing with Paul's response. Although we will examine each separately, all three must be considered together when seeking counsel on how to engage the culture.
- d. This essay is essential to the proper development of a theology for mission
- e. The topic of The Law forms the center of this half's chiasm
- f. This is a continuation of Paul's apostolic position and authority

But now he is concerned with what they view as conduct too "wishy-washy" for an apostle, and especially for an apostle who would deny them the "right" to attend the cultic meals with their pagan friends. Indeed, Paul's own conduct delineated here could well have been used against him. Paul thus takes the occasion of this defense to explain his conduct, an explanation that rests solely on the cause of evangelism, not his right to do as he pleases.³

- g. We may have often heard about this passage that Paul said, "To the Jews I became a Jew and to the Gentiles I became a Gentile." He never said that.⁴
 - i. I became a slave to all people
 - ii. I became a Jew
 - iii. For Jews I lived under the Torah
 - iv. For Gentiles I lived outside the Torah
 - v. I became weak
 - vi. I became all thing to all people
- h. One's lifestyle can be altered, but one's identity cannot be changed – Paul can at least partially live as a Gentile, but cannot become a Gentile
- i. Bailey makes an important point about cross-cultural ministry –

Only when we are deeply rooted in our own culture can we risk reaching out across a cultural chasm to people on the other side. A bridge must be securely anchored at each end. Only then can the bridge be completed and only then is travel across that bridge possible.⁵

- j. v.19, 22b – Paul is free from outside efforts to control his ministry

³ *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle*, entry at 1 Cor. 9:19-23.

⁴ Bailey, location 2966.

⁵ Bailey, location 2976.

- i. Lit., Paul writes, “For being free... I enslaved myself to all.”⁶
- ii. Paul is explaining where his consistency lies – it is not in outward behavior, but in his desire to gain the gospel a hearing by all – his mission
- iii. He is under no obligation to outside interests – he can go to the Jews or Gentiles and neither group has grounds for restricting him
- k. v.20a, 22a – Paul declares his methods
 - i. With Jews, he was (not just acted like) a faithful Jew
 - ii. However, he could not be a Gentile – so he became *weak*

To put it in more contemporary terms, when he was among Jews he was kosher; when he was among Gentiles he was non-kosher—precisely because, as with circumcision, neither mattered to God (cf. 7:19; 8:8). But such conduct tends to matter a great deal to the religious—on either side!—so that inconsistency in such matters ranks among the greatest of evils... The difference, therefore, between his own behavior and that of his social companions is not in the behavior itself, which will be identical to the observer, but in the reasons for it. The latter abstain because they are “under the law”; it is a matter of religious obligation. Paul abstains because he loves those under the law and wants to win them to Christ. Despite appearances, the differences are as night and day.⁷

- iii. More on becoming *weak*⁸
 1. Christians more often than not are very willing to “serve the weak.” Most often this describes how we do missions. But it is a different thing to serve the weak vs. becoming weak to win the weak.
 2. Paul’s theology of mission is based on the theology of incarnation, following Jesus’ pattern of entering into and identifying with humanity. Jesus emptied himself of his strength, in order to identify with the weakness of humanity.
 3. Jesus’ instruction to his disciples, when they went out on mission, was to take nothing with them, to become “in need of those they sought to serve.”⁹

D. T. Niles of Sri Lanka wrote, “To serve from a position of power is not true service but beneficence... We run schools, hospitals, orphanages, agricultural farms, etc. But what we do not adequately realize is that these institutions are not only avenues of Christian service but are also sources of secular strength. Because of them, we can offer patronage, control employment, and sometimes make money. The result is that the rest of the community learn to look on the Church with jealousy, sometimes with fear, and sometimes even with suspicion.”¹⁰

- 4. Paul rejects the position of strength in his theology of mission
- l. v.20b, 21 – Paul explains his actions and caveats

⁶ *UBC*, 1 Cor. 9:19.

⁷ *NICNT*, 1 Cor. 9:20.

⁸ Bailey, locations 2982-3005.

⁹ Bailey, location 2991.

¹⁰ Bailey, location 2995.

- i. Paul has no problems with conforming to the Torah, as long as it is not claimed as a means to obtain God's favor, to obtain a right standing (righteousness) with him
- ii. Paul's living outside of the Torah is not the same as living without God's law
- iii. God's law is the law (mind) of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16)
 - 1. Paul does not explicitly state what this law is, but it is probably love (1 Cor. 12:31-14:1)

6. Passage B in detail (9:23-27)

- a. The center of this chiasm is the pair, discipline-prize
- b. The Isthmian Games took place every two years, so Corinthians were familiar with athletes, athletic events, and the preparations. Tents were need to house all the visitors, so that would have kept Paul, Priscilla and Aquila busy.
- c. v.23, 27b – The gospel preaching
 - i. What is Paul's intent here by the phrase "the gospel?"

... By "the gospel" Paul is not referring to its content as such, but to the proclaimed gospel as God's saving power at work in the world (cf. Rom. 1:16). Thus he means "for the sake of *the progress of the gospel*."¹¹

- ii. 23b reads, "... that I may share with them in its blessings"
 - 1. Alternately it can be read, "that a partner of it I may become"¹²
 - 2. The word "blessings" does not appear in the Greek
 - 3. In other words, the progress of the gospel is already taking place, apart from any human effort

Paul does not argue that he "must become all things to all people" so that the gospel *can receive a hearing and be accepted*. For him, God, through the gospel, was already at work across cultural lines and he wanted to become *its partner*. The gospel train was moving and he could jump on or get left behind.¹³

- iii. What about being "disqualified?"
 - 1. Typically this is interpreted to mean, "not saved" or "lost" – but is that the best interpretation?
 - 2. Nowhere in this passage does Paul write of his own salvation
 - 3. He writes only of the salvation of others
 - 4. This passage is dealing with fitness for performing mission work
 - 5. Thus this disqualification probably has nothing to do with personal salvation and everything to do with whether or not one is prepared for mission work
- iv. Mission, not salvation, is the subject of this passage – with this in mind, the rest of this passage clears up rather nicely
- d. v.24, 25, 26-27a
 - i. This is a metaphor – don't press details too literally
 - ii. Mission work is hard – preparing for it and performing it – both take tremendous discipline and energy

¹¹ NICNT, 1 Cor. 9:23.

¹² Bailey, location 3027.

¹³ Bailey, location 3031.

With the Isthmian Games sponsored by the city of Corinth, the citizens of that city could not help being fully aware of the time commitments and energy required to complete in those games. Paul builds on that awareness and tells his readers that the same level of discipline is required to cross cultural lines in the name of Christ...

Paul is not talking about ascetic disciplines, he is discussing the high commitment required if one is to successfully cross cultural barriers in the name of Christ. He is discussing *mission*...

He warns his readers that the task of “all things to all people” takes enormous energy. He is discussing the cost of *crosscultural, incarnational mission*...

Language, culture, history, art, literature, politics, worldview, music, civil unrest and war—all must be experienced, comprehended and embraced if one is to effectively enter into another culture.¹⁴

- iii. The prize here is not salvation – it is the opportunity and privilege of becoming partners with the gospel mission and the fruit of mission work – the salvation of as many as possible
 - e. When this passage is read with the underlying assumption that prize=salvation, we end up with host of problems
 - i. Works-based salvation – I might lose my salvation if I don’t discipline myself
 - ii. Loss of assurance, increase in guilt –how much discipline is enough?
 - iii. Inappropriate asceticism – the more I sacrifice and beat myself up, the better
 - iv. Coercive methods – authority figures dictating what “appropriate” discipleship is; parishioners conditioned to accept berating for not living up to “ideals”
 - f. When read with missions as the underlying theme, the problems disappear
7. Back to my dilemma
- a. Discipleship and spiritual disciplines aren’t about me. It’s not spiritual self-improvement to express gratitude, to keep in Jesus’ good graces, to prove that I really belong, or even to be a better evangelist and witness (at least not in the usual way of thinking about it).
 - b. Spiritual disciplines are about learning and finding ways to partner with God’s Spirit in the work of the gospel that is already happening.
 - c. Spiritual disciplines are less about an individual’s personal spiritual condition and more about how to benefit others.
 - d. You don’t have to participate – you *can* be a spectator. Your salvation isn’t the issue. But you might lose out on the greater joy and satisfaction of going beyond the minimum call.
 - e. Spiritual disciplines include more than just the usual prayer, Bible study, and church attendance. It can and should include learning about anthropology, psychology, sociology, history, literature, music, arts, language, mythology, sciences, pop culture, etc. Anything that will help you integrate better with the people you have been sent to.
8. To ponder
- a. How do you read this passage now?
 - b. How might it change the way you approach missions and evangelism?

¹⁴ Bailey, locations 3043, 3048, 3065, 3069.