1 Corinthians 9:19-23 A Model for Those Who Seek to Win Souls

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1 Corinthians 9:19-23
A Model for Those Who Seek to Win Souls

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Only since the Second World War, perhaps from the impetus of a growing missions awareness, has modern scholarship given 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 much attention. Scholars prior to this time generally viewed these verses as having no exegetical significance other than a simple statement of Paul's missionary technique. Little work was done to relate these verses to the context of the epistle. This is no doubt why even as late as 1953, Clarence Tucker Craig could say of chapter 9 as a whole, "It does not directly advance the discussion of the immediate issue."  

Recent scholars, however, have begun to recognize the significance of these verses. Chadwick goes so far as to use this passage in an attempt to understand Paul's method of dealing with all of the problems addressed in 1 Corinthians. He says Paul would agree with elements of the extreme position on a question and would then make recommendations and restrictions for the exceptional circumstances or people as the situation dictated. This is a promising advance in the study of the problem, but it would appear that in the application of his thesis Chadwick falls into the very trap he is trying to avoid—that of making Paul out to be an inconsistent relativist.

Caird takes a similar view by seeking to explain all of the Corinthian correspondence in light of 1 Corinthians 9:22. His excessive generalizing, however, makes most of his conclusions untenable. Nevertheless, both Chadwick and Caird point to the possibility that 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 may have more significance for the understanding of the Corinthian correspondence than previously thought.


Most scholars who have attempted to explain 9:19-23 in its context confine themselves to the larger context of 8:1-11:1. Some, such as Hurd, have taken the view that 9:19-23 is part of Paul's defense against accusations from the Corinthian congregation. Hurd suggests that 8:1-11:1 is not an answer to an actual question concerning meat offered to idols, but a defense against the accusation that Paul ate idol meat and is thus inconsistent. Chapter 9, he observes, refers not only to idol meat, but also to the question of the financial support of his ministry. Thus concerning 9:19-23 Hurd says, "Paul's insistence that a single policy guided his diverse actions clearly implies that some here have accused him of being without a single, consistent policy."

This explanation is attractive, but it does not properly reflect the didactic tone of the letter. Paul's primary intention is to answer questions posed to him and to deal with various problems which have been brought to his attention. There may have been some differences between Paul and the church at Corinth (as reflected in 1 Corinthians 1 and in 2 Corinthians), but the general tone of the first epistle, including 8:1-11:1, cannot be properly viewed as apologetic.

The majority of contemporary scholars would agree with Bornkamm, who fits 9:19-23 into the context of the whole of chapter 9. He suggests that in chapter 9 Paul is seeking to explain the correct understanding of ἐλευθερία ("freedom"), i.e., the renunciation of one's ἐξουσία ("right") for the sake of another. This discussion of "freedom" is in turn a part of the larger context of the abuse of "freedom" and "right" in regard to the weaker brother and the eating of idol meat (8:1-11:1). Bornkamm's analysis seems to be the most plausible explanation for the immediate context of these verses.

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7Hurd, Origin, p. 128.

Yet despite the consensus on the general interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, its full import has not been fathomed. There is still a need to understand better the details of this passage and to determine how this paragraph specifically functions in its immediate context and in the context of the entire letter.

The events which precipitated 1 Corinthians and Paul's approach to the church's problems in the initial part of the letter are fairly well understood. It seems that a basic cause of the Corinthian division was the misunderstanding and misuse of Christian ἔξουσία (or ἐλευθερία). This problem led some of the Corinthians to be totally self-centered and consequently to disregard morality, ethics, appearances, order, reverence, and each other's feelings. The theme of Christian right or freedom thus arises frequently as Paul addresses various circumstances and questions.

In chapter 5, for example, Paul deals with the problem of the man who has abused his freedom by blatantly ignoring Christian morality. In chapter 6, the self-centered Corinthians were taking each other to court and thus in their freedom were acting like unbelievers. Paul closes this section of the letter by demonstrating that, while a Christian is free to do whatever he wills (6:12), a Christian's will is no longer his own—he has been bought with a price (6:19-20). Therefore, the actions of a disciple must be tempered by what is best for Christ and his body (the church)—a significant observation and a foreshadowing of his points later in the epistle (see especially 9:19-23; 10:23-11:1; and 13:1ff.).

In chapter 7 there are questions about who is "free" to marry and who has control over sexual relations. Concerning meat offered to idols (chapters 8-10), the Corinthians were using their freedom to disregard the consciences of their weaker brothers. Other abuses of freedom led to women stepping out of their place of subjection (11:2-16) and caused many Christians to treat lightly the sacredness of the Lord's supper (11:17-34). Finally the exercise of self-centered freedom resulted in disruption of the worship services (chapters 12-14). Paul sought to deal with these problems in several different ways: by commandment and reference to scripture (chapters 7, 8-10, 11), by appeal to self-discipline (self-restriction of freedom) and humility (chapters 8-10), and by exhortation to exercise love (chapters 12-14).

Since, then, the abuse of ἐξουσία seems to be at the core of the Corinthian problem, one would expect the concept to be utilized often in this letter—and indeed it is. It is first alluded to in 6:12, as Paul concludes in the second section (chapters 5 and 6) by saying “all things are lawful (ἐξουσία), but not all things edify,” just prior to his attempt to answer their questions beginning with 7:1.⁶ The words ἐξουσία (and derivatives) and ἐξουθερία appear with increasing frequency in chapter 7 and are discussed at length as Paul introduces the problem of eating idol meat in chapter 8 (cf. 8:9). The words are used eight times in chapter 9 as Paul reaches a climax in his effort to get the Corinthians to see the proper attitude toward Christian freedom that he himself demonstrated.¹² The concept is alluded to again as he concludes this section (10:23-11:1) in a way similar to the conclusion of chapters 5 and 6 (6:12). He then uses other appeals (scripture, love, etc.) in the remainder of the letter in his attempt to change un-Christian thinking and actions.¹³

It is important to observe that the ninth chapter is the climax of Paul’s discussion on ἐξουσία.¹⁴ Furthermore, the paragraph marker γάρ in 9:19 would seem to indicate that in the verses which follow Paul is about to summarize his basic attitude toward the proper exercise of Christian ἐξουσία.¹⁵

Paul begins his summary by stating that he is “free” (in answer to his leading question in 9:1). But “Freedom is here thought of not as a right, but as renunciation of one’s right for the sake of another.”¹⁶ So even

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⁶This paragraph also seems to serve as a bridge to the next section.

¹¹In 7:4, 21, 22, 37, and 39. Admittedly, these are not all used in the precise meaning of Christian freedom, but the frequent use of these terms, instead of others (e.g., ἐγκράτεια or σωφροσύνη in vs. 37), suggests perhaps Paul has this problem on his mind.


¹³The actual words occur later in the epistle at 11:10; 12:13; and 15:24, though in different contexts. Cf. 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10.

¹⁴Chapter 9, then, contrary to Craig and others, furthers the immediate discussion. In chapter 8 Paul speaks of limiting one’s freedom on behalf of a weaker brother. In chapter 9 he demonstrates how he himself has limited his freedom.


¹⁶Bornkamm, Paul, p. 174. Ἐξουθερία here is not, as Schmithals (Gnosticism, pp. 218ff.) suggests, a Gnostic eschatological concept where man is set free from his “fleshy” body and the world to become a perfected “spiritual” person. For an overview of the question of Gnosticism and Corinth, see R. McL. Wilson, “Gnosis at Corinth,” in Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C.K. Barrett, M.D. Hooker and S.G. Wilson, eds. (London: SPCK, 1982), pp. 102-114.
though Paul was free from all men (as the Corinthians took themselves to be), he enslaved himself to all men in order that he might win "the more." Paul realized and tried to show the Corinthians that the route they were taking led to division. His way was Christ's way, and it led others to the Christian faith (cf. 11:1).

Paul gives further general examples of how he enslaved himself to all men. First, he says he became to the Jews a Jew. The book of Acts provides several examples of Paul's flexibility with the Jews (cf. 16:3; 18:18; and 21:23f.).

**17** Grosheide states well Paul's relation to the law: "Paul is free to compromise with Judaism in order to avoid dividing the Jewish church, but only if it is to his advantage in the spiritual realm (cf. 2 Cor. 10:2)." This is consistent with the interest of Paul in winning the Jews (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19).}

Ernst Haenchen. The Acts of the Apostles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), pp. 478-482 and 542-546, along with many others, supports Bornkamm's rejection of the authenticity of these passages in Acts because of their apparent contradiction with Paul's thinking in 1 Cor. 7:17ff. and Galatians. On the other hand, G. Ory, "Quelle était l'origine de Paul?" Cahiers du Cercle Ernest Renan 69 (1971):10-19, solves the problem by rejecting the authenticity of 1 Cor. 9:19-23. Another approach to this and other Pauline "contradictions" is represented by John Lowe, "An Examination of Attempts to Detect Developments in St. Paul's Theology," Journal of Theological Studies 42 (1941):140-142. He admits there are verbal contradictions in Paul, but he almost nonchalantly attributes them to changes in Paul's mood at different times, circumstances, etc. No "change of mood," however, could account for the alleged contradiction between 1 Cor. 7 and 1 Cor. 9. In a similar vein, J.W. McGarvey, New Commentary on Acts of the Apostles (1892: repr., Delight, AR: Gospel Light, n.d.), 2:206-209, seeks to reconcile Paul's actions in Acts 21:23-26 with his epistles penned both before and after that event by suggesting that Paul became aware of his (alleged) inconsistency in Acts 21 through progressive revelation. This view, too, is less than satisfactory.

from the ceremonial law through the work of Christ but he does not consider it a sin to observe the law, provided this was not done to acquire righteousness.\textsuperscript{218}

Paul’s relation to the law leads to a question regarding the next example in verse 20b. Why does he mention that “to those under the law I became as under the law?” Are not “Jews” and “those under the law” the same? To most scholars, it seems obvious that they are.\textsuperscript{19} Why then would the same group be mentioned twice? By way of explanation, some have suggested that 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 forms a chiasmus.\textsuperscript{20} If Paul consciously constructed a chiasmus, perhaps he needed a group to contrast with “those without the law” in verse 21, that is, τοῖς ὑπὸ νόμον versus τοῖς ἀνόμοις. This is possible, but to suggest that Paul mentions “those under the law” merely to maintain chiastic structure is less than satisfactory. A more feasible possibility is that, in order to make his application as broad as possible, Paul intends for “those under the law” to refer not only to Jews, but to proselytes, God-fearers, and all who accepted (at least in part) the requirements of the Mosaic law.\textsuperscript{21} Hence, “those under the law” would be closely akin to but not identical with “the Jews.”

If the first two examples of Paul’s self-enslavement essentially form one major group, then the second major group mentioned are “those without the law.” When contrasted with verse 20, it seems necessary to conclude that these are Gentiles. Again, Acts provides examples of how Paul adapted himself to facilitate the reception of the gospel in order that his Gentile hearers might be “won.” One of the most notable instances is

\textsuperscript{18} Grosheide, \textit{Corinthians}, p. 212.

\textsuperscript{19} A few scholars, such as Conzelmann, \textit{1 Corinthians}, p. 160, claim the two terms are synonymously parallel; most, including C.K. Barrett, \textit{A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians} (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), p. 212, make this an assumption.


Acts 17. Paul, however, makes it clear that he is not “lawless,” but “in” the law of Christ. What is this law of Christ? Dodd suggests that it is the whole new covenant, based on the διαταγή of Jesus. While in a general sense this suggestion is true, it appears that in this context Paul has something more specific in mind. He is sure to tell the Corinthians that his freedom does not make him “without law” (as some of them seem to be),

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23 Robertson and Plummer, Corinthians, p. 192.

A major misunderstanding of Paul has to do with 1 Cor. 9:21. W.L. Knox feels that it is impossible to conceive of Paul adapting his message and lifestyle to a Gentile audience since Paul “throughout his life” practiced Judaism and expected his Jewish converts to do so: St. Paul and the Church of Jerusalem (Cambridge: University Press, 1925), p. 122, n. 54. He goes on to state: “The only objection that can be brought against this view is the language of 1 Cor. ix. 21, where S. Paul seems to imply that when dealing with the Gentiles he behaved as if not bound by the Law. . . . this interpretation is impossible.” Knox justifies this view by saying that if Paul did accommodate the Gentiles that (1) it would be morally dishonest and (2) it would be impossible to conceal from the Jews and he would lose his influence with them. Paul is, therefore, Knox says, “not entirely consistent with his own thinking.” (H.C. Ellison, “Paul and the Law--” “All Things to All Men” in Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce, W.W. Gasque and R.P. Martin, eds. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], pp. 195-202, reconciles this apparent conflict by concluding that Paul must have outwardly continued to observe the law fully; becoming “all things to all men” was merely an attitude, not affecting his actions.)

An extensive rebuttal could be made, but it must suffice to say that Paul clearly did not feel bound by the law (Gal. 3-5; Rom. 7:1-7), and he was not morally dishonest to observe it for the sake of custom or in order to win others to Christ; cf. Jean Héring, The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, trans. from 2nd ed. by A.W. Heathcote and P.J. Alcock (London: Epworth, 1962). pp. 81-82. Barrett, Corinthians, p. 211, in fact says that Paul was prepared to abandon the law altogether if it would further the cause of the gospel. He correctly states: “It is impossible to understand Paul if this fact is not grasped.” Furthermore, Paul did not have to worry about offending the Jews with his actions; his message did that (cf. Acts 13:46-47; 18:6; 28:28). Knox’s indictment of Paul as inconsistent cannot stand.

W.D. Davies, Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology (New York: Harper & Row, 1948), pp. 70-74, holds a view similar to Knox. In this instance, Davies, too, does Paul’s thinking an injustice.

but “in” the law of Christ. This law, Paul explains, is a restrictive law which does not allow total anarchy (cf. 6:19-20; 9:24-27; and then 10:31-11:1, esp. 11:1). Thus this mention of the law of Christ may have more to do with the context of self-enslavement and self-discipline for the sake of the gospel and the church than a mere general reference to the new covenant.

The final group Paul mentions is “the weak” in 9:22a. Because of the ambiguity of the phrase, this group has understandably received the majority of attention by commentators. Just who are the weak whom Paul is trying to “win”? The majority of scholars quickly refer to the weak brother of chapter 8 (where the word ἀσθενής is used five times).25 Yet some writers notice a discrepancy here. Κέρδασιν has been identified as a technical missionary term meaning “to win an unbeliever to your faith.”26 Giving further elucidation, Daube notes that this usage did not originate in Christian circles, but was adopted by Paul from the Jews, who used it in describing their efforts to “win” proselytes.27 Grosheide and others therefore ask: If in verses 20-21 κέρδασιν refers in its typical sense to non-Christians Paul is seeking to “win” (convert), how can ἀσθενής refer to Christians who are already “won”?28 The question is answered in light of Daube’s observation that κέρδασιν can refer either to the winning of unbelievers to a faith in God or to the winning back of the believing who have strayed away (cf. Matt. 18:15).29 “Those who are weak” could, therefore, refer to the weak brother in chapter 8.


29Rabbinic Judaism, pp. 359-361.
But does Paul become weak in such a way that he is, as the weak brother supposedly is, without “knowledge” (8:7)? Is his conscience actually defiled by those who are “strong”? It would appear that in 8:13 he contrasts himself with the weak brother; how then in 9:22 can he become as the brother of chapter 8 is? While the generally accepted explanation for “the weak” in 9:22 is possible, these questions suggest that further consideration of the problem would be beneficial.

Paul mentions three main groups in the context of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23: Jews (including proselytes and God-fearers?), Gentiles, and “the weak.” It may be that observing other contexts in 1 Corinthians where the first two groups are mentioned will elucidate the third. Jews and Greeks are mentioned together in 1 Corinthians only three other times: (a) In 10:32, which is a summary of chapters 8-10, there are (as in 9:20-22) also three groups referred to—Jews, Greeks, and the church. Could it be that Paul associates “the weak” with those who are in the church? Further investigation seems to substantiate this postulate. (b) In 1:22-23a, Paul says, “The Jews . . . and the Greeks . . . but we (the church) . . .” and in 1:23b-24 it is “to the Jews . . . to the Greeks . . . but to those who are called (the church) . . .” (c) Then again in 12:13 the three groups appear, though not as clearly: “we were all baptized into one body (the church), whether Jew or Greek.” It would seem, therefore, that if every time Jews or Greeks were mentioned together there is always a third group, and that Paul identifies himself with that group (the church) each of the three times, then the fourth time (9:20-22) he could also be referring to the Jews, Greeks, and the church, though in different terminology.

“The weak,” then, appear to be part of the church. They would represent more than merely the weak brother of chapter 8, however. Just as Paul is generalizing in 9:19-21, so he also would seem to be generalizing in 9:22. “The weak” would be all of those who, because of lack of “knowledge” or of apparent spiritual maturity, have sensitive consciences and are subject to offense. That Paul identifies himself with these instead of those who supposedly do have knowledge (but not love—cf. 8:1-3) and are “strong” is a clear indication of two things: first, that he considers the weak worthy of “winning”—perhaps more so than winning the strong; and second, that the weak are closer to true Christianity than the strong (cf. 11:1). Hence: “to the weak I became weak.”

Could Paul actually be referring to himself, an apostle and a member of the Lord’s church, as weak? In 4:10 he does. Paul is speaking sarcastically here, but he is seriously affirming that he is a “fool” and “weak” for Christ (cf. 1:25, 27).
That Paul conducted himself in a manner considered "weak" by others is further substantiated by the answer to another question: Why is there no ὃς before ἀσθενής in 9:22 in keeping with the parallelism of the preceding lines? It could be because Paul actually became "weak" (at least, according to the pejorative definition of some Corinthian Christians). To the Jews and Greeks he was adapting, becoming as or like a Jew or Greek, while in fact not being either under the law or without the law. But to the weak brother, though having every right to be considered strong, he actually became weak; he is proud of this weakness because he believes it in keeping with Christ's will (cf. 9:23 and 11:1).

There is, however, a distinction between the weakness of Paul and the weakness of the brother in chapter 8. The weakness of the latter is due to a lack of knowledge and spiritual maturity. Paul's weakness, on the other hand, is self-created because of spiritual maturity. He is weak because he has voluntarily enslaved himself by the limitation of his ἐξουσία in order to avoid offending weak Christians and to help them grow in Christ. Toward the same end, he expects all mature believers in the church—as imitators of Christ—to become weak.

In this light, it is possible to understand the work κερδαινω better. When used in verses 19-21, it may rightly be taken in its traditional missionary sense. But there is the obvious tension when explaining how one can win people that are already Christians (vs. 22) and who have not strayed away. This would suggest that κερδαινω as Paul uses it here must be understood to have an even wider application than previously thought. Perhaps it means not only to win one outside Christ to Christ and one who has strayed from Christ back to Christ, but also to win one in Christ.

30 ος is found in CDG Koine sy and a few other MSS, but it is omitted in the oldest and best MSS, including p46 B. Some scholars note the absence of ὃς but fail to account for it adequately; Cf. Conzelmann, Corinthians, p. 161; and, most recently, M.J. Joseph. "A Leap into the 'Slavery of Paul' from an Indian Angle," Indian Journal of Theology 26 (1977):73-85, esp. 77-78.

(nominally) to a closer walk with Christ.\textsuperscript{32} This would give added depth to its meaning in Matthew 18:15, where an erring brother is restored.\textsuperscript{33}

Paul concludes this paragraph in verse 23 by giving the reason for his actions of self-enslavement. He says he does all things \textit{διὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον}. In the wake of the preceding discussion, it would seem that he does these things “for the gospel’s sake”—in order that it might be more effective. But he follows this statement with verse 23b: “in order that I might be a participant in it.”\textsuperscript{34} It thus seems more probable that Paul does these things because of the gospel.\textsuperscript{35} In other words, the gospel demands he do these things—become all things to all men—because his own salvation depends on it. As Bornkamm rightly observes, Paul’s statements in 9:19-22 “cannot properly be regarded as a thing he might or might not exercise at will, but as obedience to the word committed to him.”\textsuperscript{36} Thus, it is not “a matter of his discretion; it is a matter of his obedience to the gospel, so much so that his own eternal salvation is at stake.”\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{32}Such an understanding further broadens the definition given by Daube, \textit{Rabbinic Judaism}, pp. 359-361. Thus, while 1 Cor. 9:19-27 has rightly been called “Paul’s classical formulation of the maxim which characterized his whole missionary approach” (Bornkamm, “Missionary,” p. 194; cf. Eichholz, \textit{Tradition}, pp. 114-120), and an adaptation of Jewish proselytizing practice (contrast Walter Schmithals, \textit{Paul and Jesus} trans. D.M. Barton, \textit{Studies in Biblical Theology} 46 [Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson 1965], p. 57; and Ory, \textit{Cahiers du Cercle Ernest Renan} 69 [1971]:10-19), the passage is much more than a mere statement of missionary technique. Its context in the discussion of eating meat offered to idols points this out. I Cor. 9:19-23 is indissolubly connected with every facet of church life and practice and is applicable to every human relationship within the church and without: cf. Wendland, \textit{Korinther}, p. 68; Bornkamm, “Missionary,” pp. 195-198; and Richardson, \textit{NTS} 26 (1980):350-351.

\textsuperscript{33}It is interesting to note Paul’s attitude of humility and self-abasement for the good of others here in 9:19-23. Daube, \textit{Rabbinic Judaism}, pp. 349ff., notes that where \textit{κεφαλαίω} is used elsewhere in the New Testament (Matt. 18:15; 1 Pet. 3:1) it is used in a context of expressing humility in order to facilitate conversion (or restoration). Cf. Gal. 6:1.

\textsuperscript{34}To be a participant in the gospel would seem to be a participant in the resurrection and the life thereafter. Cf. 1 Cor. 15:1ff.

\textsuperscript{35}Although this is the interpretation preferred here, it does not mean that the preceding meaning of facilitating the gospel’s acceptance is excluded. The translation “on account of the gospel” is ambiguous enough to allow both interpretations.


\textsuperscript{37}Bornkamm, “Missionary,” pp. 197-198. Cf. Robertson and Plummer, \textit{Corinthians}, p. 193. Self-enslavement, or self-abasement, for the sake of the unity of the church, for the sake of the saving power of the gospel, is a theme found often in the teachings of Jesus and in Paul’s epistles (cf. Mark 8:34; 9:35; 10:42-45; Rom. 12:10, 16; Phil. 2:3-11; 3:3-15; etc.).
If, then, this attitude was necessary for Paul to be saved and for others to be saved (vs. 22b), it is easy to see why he earnestly pleads with the Corinthians to adopt the same attitude. It also sheds some light upon the meaning and purpose of the following passages.

Verses 24-27 begin with οὐκ ὁδηγεῖτε, which would seem to refer back to the immediately preceding discussion. Apparently, Paul is urging the Corinthians to exercise the same self-discipline he exercises: to become all things to all men, which would include becoming weak. They need to do this in order to receive an incorruptible crown, salvation. If Paul, an apostle and their father in the faith, must have this attitude to avoid becoming "disqualified" and to obtain salvation (9:23, 27), they must, too.

Many commentators would interpret the γάρ in 10:1 as harking back to the problem in chapter 8, taking its antecedent to be farther back than the γάρ in 9:19. To a great extent, this is true. Paul, in this context, is specifically warning about the danger of becoming idolaters. In the Corinthians' case, this would come about by the indiscriminate consumption of meat offered to idols. But 10:1ff. would also seem to have a more immediate antecedent and a wider application. The Corinthian church was plagued by the problem of the abuse of freedom. Could 10:1ff. be interpreted in such a sense? It can if one understands that in its Old Testament context (Exod. 12-17, 32; Num. 11, 14, 16, 20-21) the Israelites had just been freed from Egypt but became careless and thankless for their freedom and thus began to grumble and participate in idolatry. In other words, an improper attitude toward their newfound freedom and toward their calling led them to sin. Consequently, most of them died. Likewise, Paul admonishes the Corinthians to be careful in their exercise of freedom. If they continue to abuse it then they, like their fathers in the wilderness, will die. "So then (concluding and applying this illustration), the one who thinks he stands (because he is free), let him beware lest he fall (through abuse of freedom)" (10:12). There is a clear link, therefore, between 9:24-27 (and what precedes it in ch. 9) with 10:1ff. In both instances, Paul is illustrating and advocating self-discipline and circumspection lest one's freedom (and, more importantly, one's salvation) is taken for granted and lost.

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38 Cf. the occurrence of the phrase in 3:16; 5:6, 6:2, 15, 16, 19.
The urgency and necessity for all Christians to become all things to all men can further be seen as Paul concludes his arguments of chapters 8-10, beginning at 10:23. After making a practical application and admonition regarding idolatry in 10:14-22, he reiterates the slogan of 6:12, saying that technically all things are lawful, but not all are for the best (10:23). He states in 10:24-30 that a Christian should not be concerned with himself (self-centered), but should seek the other's good (true αὐτή; cf. 8:1-3). Paul thus urges the Corinthians to become pleasing to all men, in order that others might be saved (vss. 32-33). But, again, this self-depreciation and self-accommodation is not just so the gospel might be spread; it is at the core of Christianity. To be Christian is to be all things to all men. This is the reason Paul says, "Be imitators of me, as I imitate Christ" (11:1).40

Chapter 9, therefore, far from being a mere excursus in the section 8:1-11:1, represents the essence of Paul's thinking in regard to Christian εἰσοδοχία and ἐλευθερία as he applied it to his own life and as he sought to inspire the Corinthian church to an imitation of his practice. Chapters 8-10 are linked to the preceding chapters by virtue of their "abuse of freedom" theme and the slogans in 6:12 and 10:23. Chapter 11 has been introduced by the concepts of "eating," "drinking," and the Lord's supper in chapters 8 and 10. Chapters 12-14 and their emphasis on self-control, respect for one another, and, above all, love are but approaching the basic problem from a slightly different perspective alluded to previously (cf. 8:1-3).41

40 Paul thus understands his actions of becoming all things to all men (seeking the other's good) to be in accord with the life of Christ. It would be interesting to consider in what ways Christ sought not his own good, but the good of others by becoming all things to all men. For a starting place of Paul's understanding, cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 2:5-11, Cf. also Caird, Interpretation 13 (1939):390. It should also be noted that this interpretation differs somewhat from Daube's. Whereas Daube emphasizes that Paul's actions were outgrowths of his rabbinic training, it seems more correct to say that Paul became all things to all men not because Hillel said to, but because Jesus himself did just that.

41 In a sense, one might say that chapter 9 widens the immediate question of meat offered to idols (chapters 8 and 10) into the general principle of self-enslavement as a part of Christian conduct, similar to the way chapter 13 widens the discussion of the use of spiritual gifts (chapters 12 and 14) into the general principle of love and its application in Christian conduct.
In summary, the basis for most of the Corinthians’ problems is the abuse of Christian εὐγνωμονία and εὐθερία. Paul, after relating the proper exercise of Christian freedom in a variety of circumstances, brings to a climax his discussion of “right” and “freedom” in chapter 9. The passage 9:19-23 is his attitude in a nutshell.

Paul says that though he is free (and has rights) he enslaved himself to all men in order to win them. To “win” (κερδαίνω) seems to refer here to more than just a missionary concept; it refers to bringing anyone, believer or non-believer, closer to the way of Christ than he was before.

As examples, Paul here mentions three groups: Jews, Gentiles, and “the weak.” Paul became like a Jew and like a Gentile in order to win them, but he became weak. It has been shown that it is highly probable that the weakness advocated by Paul in this epistle is not something to be held in contempt, but the weakness of mature Christians who have become weak by voluntarily surrendering some of their εὐγνωμονία in order to accommodate those who are truly weak (cf. 1:25, 27; 4:10; 8:7-12; 12:22). Paul presents weakness as something to be desired as a characteristic of a Christlike life.42

Paul acts in this way not as a mere missionary technique, but because he believes it to be part of being a Christian and thus necessary to being saved. For this reason he urges the Corinthians to take care how they exercise their freedom. He thus encourages them to exercise self-discipline as he does and to follow him as he follows Christ.