Meals in Pagan Temples and Apostolic Finances

How Effective Is Paul’s Argument in 1 Corinthians 9:1–23 in the Context of 1 Corinthians 8–10?

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The relationship between Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians regarding the consumption of meat in pagan cultic settings in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 and his defense of his right to apostolic support in 1 Corinthians 9 is most often described in terms of a simple comparison: In the same way Paul dispenses with his right to support, so the Corinthian believers should refrain from exercising their right to eat meat. A careful analysis of these two disparate themes, however, against the background of recent sociohistorical study reveals a more thoroughgoing connection that goes to the very heart of Paul’s Gospel.

Key Words: Paul, idol meat, finances, apostles, pagan temples, Corinth

This article seeks to establish the precise relationship of 1 Cor 9:1–23 to its broader context (1 Cor 8:1–11:1). There are a number of reasons why this is desirable. First, this section of 1 Corinthians has not always received the attention it deserves. The main topic it addresses—the propriety of eating meat that had previously been offered to idols—seems quirky, at least in the West.² The particular issue raised by 1 Corinthians 9—the right of apostles to financial support—fares little better. It, too, seems to have little

1. The term εἰδωλοθυτόν (cf. 1 Cor 8:1) refers broadly to any offering to an idol, but it is clear that the issue revolves more particularly around meat (κρέας; cf. 1 Cor 8:13). Cf. Wolfgang Schrage, Der Erste Brief an die Korinther (1 Kor 6,12–11,6) (EKKNT 7/2; Düsseldorf: Benzinger / Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995), 216, n. 15.

2. Western Christians should not, however, overlook the fact that this issue is of direct relevance to millions of Christians in Africa or Asia in our time, in whose cultures offerings of food to gods or deceased ancestors are a regular occurrence. Cf. e.g. Dachollom Datiri, “First Corinthians,” in Africa Bible Commentary (ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 1387; Khio-khng Yeo, Rhetorical Interaction in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10: A Formal Analysis With Preliminary Suggestions for a Chinese Cross-Cultural Hermeneutic (Biblical Interpretation Series 9; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 217–20.
relevance for the modern Western church. For many, then, this section of the letter holds only academic interest, if any at all.

Second, although 1 Corinthians 8 is usually discussed with careful consideration of 1 Corinthians 10 due to the clear thematic correspondence between those two chapters, its relationship to 1 Corinthians 9 has seldom been analyzed in detail. Scores of articles and monographs deal with one or the other of the topics in these passages (meat offered to idols/meals in pagan temples in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, Paul’s financial arrangements in 1 Corinthians 9), but few deal with both. This is entirely understandable because each topic is vast and can profitably be considered apart from the other on its own terms. Still, Paul draws a comparison between the two issues that is worthy of scrutiny in its own right. This is particularly the case in light of the fact that, as many scholars have noted, the transition from 1 Corinthians 8 to 1 Corinthians 9 is “choppy.”

This brings us to the third and perhaps most important reason for carefully examining the relationship between 1 Corinthians 9 and its broader context, particularly 1 Corinthians 8. Though the two issues addressed here could hardly be more dissimilar, Paul clearly intends to drive home the point he is making with regard to idol meat in 1 Corinthians 8 by illustrating it with reference to the issue of apostolic finances in 1 Corinthians 9. But the logic of Paul’s argument seems, at first glance, unconvincing, even mildly embarrassing. Broadly speaking, of course, all are agreed that Paul is drawing a contrast between the Corinthians’ consumption of meat that had been previously offered to idols and his own refusal to accept financial support from the Corinthians for his apostolic ministry. The general thrust of the comparison is also clear: Paul is encouraging the Corinthians not to make use of their self-asserted right to eat idol meat, and so he points by way of example to his own refusal to accept support from the Corinthians, even though as an apostle he had a right to it.

What is less clear, however, is whether this comparison can be considered rhetorically effective or even tactful. It calls to mind an out-of-touch politician who, seeking to identify with constituents who are going through hard economic times, asserts that he, too, is struggling, so much so that he was forced to give up his membership in the country club! Paul is no politician, of course, but the analogy illuminates the problem with the passage thus construed: when someone lauds his own virtue by pointing


4. Whether Paul actually acknowledges this right on the part of the Corinthian Christians or merely concedes the point here for the sake of argument is disputed.
out that he is not making use of a right that others don’t have in the first place, he opens himself to the charge that he is being insensitive, at best, and elitist, at worst.

Perhaps that is all there is to it. While the charge of elitism might be harder to prove, evidence could be brought forward from other passages in the Corinthian correspondence or Galatians, not to mention Acts, to show that Paul was not overly concerned with the sensibilities of his audience. On the other hand, Paul’s approach might have nothing to do with his personality. 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 might simply be a weak argument, and it would perhaps not be the only one we could find in his correspondence. Before we draw either of these conclusions, however, it would be worth considering whether a more cogent explanation lies closer at hand. In what follows I want to examine the issues Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, on the one hand, and 1 Corinthians 9, on the other, and present an initial hypothesis as to why the comparison Paul draws between meat offered to idols and apostolic finances is rhetorically more effective than it initially seems to be.

**Approaching 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1**

While the basic issue under consideration in this section is not a matter of dispute—it is probable that Paul is answering a question that was raised by the Corinthians in their letter (cf. 1 Cor 7:1; 8:1) and certain that this question concerned the propriety of eating food that had previously been offered to idols—the precise nature of the problem is not entirely clear. This is due to the fact that Paul discusses this issue as it arises in three distinct situations: when idol meat was sold in the markets (1 Cor 8:1–13,

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6. Margaret M. Mitchell, “Concerning ΠΕΡΙ Δέ in 1 Corinthians,” *NovT* 31 (1989): 229–56, has argued convincingly that use of the περὶ δέ formula in 1 Cor, though it indicates that the topics thus introduced are readily known from the shared experience of Paul and the Corinthians, does not by itself prove that Paul is quoting from the Corinthians’ letter in 1 Cor 8:1, 4, which would point to the Corinthians’ letter as the source of the query concerning idol meat. So also John Fotopoulos, *Food Offered to Idols in Roman Corinth: A Social-Rhetorical Reconsideration of 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1* (WUNT 2/151; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 194.

7. Karl-Gustav Sandelin (“Drawing the Line: Paul on Idol Food and Idolatry in 1 Cor 8:1–11:1,” in *Neotestamentica et Philonica* [ed. David E. Aune et al.; NovTSup 106; Leiden: Brill, 2003], 108–25, esp. p. 113), identifies two points of consensus in the discussion: (1) Paul forbids the Corinthians to participate in “pagan, cultic occasions, implying ritual meals around the altar”. (2) Paul allows Christians to eat meat that might have been previously been offered to idols and was being sold in the marketplace. Even this is somewhat an oversimplification, however, because it ignores the position of a number of scholars who would take issue with the second point. Cf., e.g., Alex T. Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth: Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 108–9; and Eckhard Schnabel, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther* (HTA; Wuppertal: Brockhaus / Giessen: Brunnen, 2006), 432, 568, who argue that Paul enjoins Christians in Corinth to refrain from buying meat in the marketplace if they have any reason to believe it had been previously offered to an idol.
10:25), when meat was part of cultic meals in pagan temples (1 Cor 8:10, 10:21), and when idol meat was served at private dinners (1 Cor 10:27). Paul offers nuanced instructions with regard to each of these contexts, but they are not developed independently of each other, and this has led to some confusion about what his positions actually entail. Still, it seems clear enough that the major bone of contention between Paul and the Corinthians concerned the consumption of food that had been offered to idols in the context of cultic meals. On this assumption, the broad outline of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 may be delineated in a manner that highlights the basic coherence of Paul’s reasoning as follows:

1 Cor 8:1–13: Paul addresses the question of the consumption of meat offered to idols in the context of cultic meals at pagan temples (cf. 8:10: ἐν εἰδωλείῳ). Paul affirms in theory the theological reasoning of those who saw no problem in attending pagan feasts (8:4), but offers an initial reason for not doing so: out of deference to those whose consciences are weak (8:7). He lays down the principle that the exercise of one’s “rights” (ἐξουσία) should not be a stumbling block (πρόσκομμα) for the weak.

1 Cor 9:1–27: Paul offers a personal example of his own willingness to forgo his right to financial support for the sake of the Gospel.

1 Cor 10:1–22: Paul returns to the issue of meat offered to idols but now moves beyond his initial argumentation in 1 Corinthians 8 in that he now expressly forbids consumption of meat in cultic contexts because it amounts to participation in the table of demons (cf. 1 Cor 10:21: μετέχειν . . . τραπέζης διαμονίων).

1 Cor 10:23–11:1: Paul allows for the consumption of meat offered to idols in noncultic contexts. The Corinthians may eat meat bought at the marketplace or served to them in a private home without even inquiring as to its provenance. He enjoins them, however, to adhere even there to the principle of deferring to the spiritual needs of those with weak consciences.

This simple outline underscores the thematic distinctiveness of 1 Corinthians 9 within the larger argument. How, then, should we characterize its rhetorical relationship to the section as a whole? This question has elicited various responses. An earlier generation of scholars, following Johannes Weiss, argued that 1 Cor 9:1–23 was a later interpolation. This thesis has

fallen out of fashion, however, and is, in my opinion, hardly tenable in light of recent rhetorical analyses of 1 Corinthians that confirm its unity. Others view the passage as a digression or excursus that is only loosely connected with the topic at hand. Recent study, however, has highlighted the close connection between 1 Cor 8:13 and Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 9, which builds on the argument of the preceding chapter quite well. Precisely how it does so is the subject of much discussion. Some scholars regard 1 Corinthians 9 as an exemplum by means of which Paul puts forward his own conduct as a model for the Corinthian believers to follow. Others view it as an apologia for Paul’s apostolic ministry. Many have argued that it is a combination of both.

The fact that able scholars arrive at different conclusions on this matter highlights the difficulties that are always attendant on attempts, despite their validity and importance, to categorize Paul’s argumentation according to ancient rhetorical taxonomies. In the present case, Schrage has shown that elements of both exempla and apologies are present. He points to the formal affinities of 1 Cor 9:1–3 with apologies (the first and foremost being, of course, the presence of the term ἀπολογία in 1 Cor 9:3) and of 1 Cor 9:4–23 with ancient exempla. Nevertheless, convincing arguments have been mustered to show that Paul’s argument does not fare well when viewed primarily as an apologia. Among these, two seem particularly weighty: (1) By conceding the presumed point of contention—that in refusing support from the Corinthians, Paul is not acting they way true apostles do—Paul makes matters worse. (2) Paul’s argument assumes that the Corinthians

would pay Paul (and indeed had made attempts do so\textsuperscript{20}), if only he would accept it, which would seem to imply that they recognize Paul’s apostolic authority, at least in principle.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, Willis’s conclusion that “the discussion of chap. 9 does not function as a defense, and [that] Paul is not really defending his conduct, but is arguing from it” is entirely justified.\textsuperscript{22} Regardless of its form, therefore, 1 Corinthians 9 seems to function within the larger unit of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 as an exemplum. Paul points to his own practice with regard to apostolic finances as an example of a principle he is urging the Corinthians to follow with regard to idol meal. This, rather agreeably, is in line with the larger rhetorical strategy of the letter as a whole (cf. 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1).\textsuperscript{23}

At this juncture, we turn to the question alluded to earlier, one that has only occasionally been asked, even by those whose particular aim is to examine the rhetoric of 1 Corinthians: Is Paul’s exemplum in 1 Corinthians 9 at all effective? For ancient rhetoricians, it seems, any example of virtuous behavior on the part of the privileged classes would serve to inspire the masses.\textsuperscript{24} That, at least, is the assumption that most ancient handbooks of rhetoric make in their discussion of the function of exempla or paradeigmata,\textsuperscript{25} and it seems to have been deemed self-evident until recent times.\textsuperscript{26} It is doubtful, however, that the plebian masses were ever overly impressed by such displays of highbrow virtue.

A more egalitarian rhetoric, which Paul seems to be striving for in the Corinthian correspondence,\textsuperscript{27} would have stressed the fact that, for an exemplum to be effective, the audience at which it is directed must be able to identify with it. In other words, its tertium comparationis must be understandable and fall within the realm of experience of its hearers or readers.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Peter Marshall (\textit{Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul’s Relations with the Corinthians} [WUNT 2/23; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987], 174) perceptively notes that Paul’s argument “only makes sense if he had received an offer or offers and refused to accept them.”
\item \textsuperscript{22} Willis, “Apologia,” 40 [my emphasis].
\item \textsuperscript{23} Mitchell, \textit{Paul}, 243; Schrage, \textit{Korinther}, 280.
\item \textsuperscript{24} See Kristoffel Demoen, (“A Paradigm for the Analysis of Paradigms: The Rhetorical exemplum in Ancient and Imperial Greek Theory,” \textit{Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric} 15 [1997], 141), who notes the ancient preference for native sons who were famous and honorable (ἔνδοξα) as examples. Cf. also Mitchell, \textit{Paul}, 42–46.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Quintilian, \textit{Inst.} 5.11; Anaximines, \textit{Rhet. Alex.} 32 Smit (“Disposition,” 9) unwittingly falls prey to Quintilian’s equestrian bias at this point in his otherwise fine analysis.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Cf. Horrell, \textit{Ethos}, 126–57. Horrell takes issue with the predominant view that the ethos of 1 Corinthians is one of “love-patriarchalism,” because Paul is “quite prepared to direct blunt and stern criticism toward the socially strong” so much so that he “can hardly be said to be adding religious legitimation to the hierarchy or institutions of society” (p. 155).
\end{itemize}
Modern scholars generally identify the point of comparison here in terms of ἐξουσία, “rights,” or more precisely as the responsibility to waive one’s right to certain privileges or freedoms in the interest of others’ spiritual needs.\(^{28}\) Paul does this with regard to apostolic support, and he urges the Corinthians to act similarly with regard to meals in cultic settings.

Though this is unobjectionable as far as it goes, it does not, in my view, go far enough. It begs the important question of why Paul chose the topic of his apostolic rights as the tertium comparationis in the first place. As we noted above, this is unlikely to have generated empathy among his hearers, because they didn’t enjoy these rights. Why, we might ask, didn’t Paul instead refer to his own praxis with regard to eating idol meat? One frequent answer to this question is that he couldn’t because he himself had “avoided food that had even the most tenuous connection with idolatrous rite [sic].”\(^{29}\) That argument is, however, unconvincing. If Paul had wanted to ban the consumption of food offered to idols in any context, as is often presumed, his own example of abstinence would likely have left a positive impression on the Corinthian believers. Conversely, if he had eaten idol food in the past, but now wanted to enforce the ruling of the Jerusalem council (cf. Acts 15:29),\(^{30}\) he could have appealed to his willingness to submit to the apostolic directive. This would have been a notable, even remarkable example of his own adherence to the principle he was seeking to impress on the Corinthians: that the unity of the church is more important than the exercise of individual rights. Either of these rhetorical strategies would have been more effective than the route Paul actually chose—unless, of course, there is a more subtle point of comparison below the surface of the text that we have not yet been able to identify.

**The Issue of Idol Food at Corinth**

As noted above, the major issue of contention in Corinth was whether it was acceptable for believers to participate in meals in which offerings were made to pagan gods. Paul allows for the exercise of one’s rights and preferences outside of this narrow context (when shopping at the meat market, for instance, or when it is served at a friend’s home), except where a fellow believer’s weak conscience might be negatively affected. He is, however, quite clear about the fact that participation in meals that actually involved offerings to pagan gods were off limits for followers of Christ. That, in Paul’s mind, would be tantamount to idolatry and should be strictly avoided (1 Cor 10:15–22).

But what exactly constitutes “dining in an idol’s temple” (1 Cor 8:10: ἐν εἰδωλεῖω κατακείμενον)? Although the phrase, strictly speaking, denotes a meal within the precincts of a pagan temple, it probably should be

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construed within the context of the controversy in Corinth to refer more broadly to any number of settings in which meals had cultic significance. These include the following:

1. **Cultic celebrations in pagan temples.** Excavations in all major cities of the Eastern Roman Empire, including Corinth, confirm that the temples to the various gods were the scene of regular offerings to those gods. Furthermore, meals were a customary part of many, if not most, of these rites.31 In Corinth, for example, ceremonial meals played a central role in the worship of Demeter and Core, reminding the worshipers that the produce of the earth was Demeter’s gift.32

2. **Meals held in dining facilities adjacent to pagan temples.** Archaeological evidence uncovered in Corinth reveals that both the temple of Asclepius and that of Demeter and Core had extensive dining facilities.33 Some have argued that meals served in these dining facilities were convivial occasions with few or no cultic connotations.34 They were, in fact, the venue for all manner of weddings, birthdays, and other celebrations. But it does not follow that such occasions were free of cultic influences. Indeed, “an objective separation between social dining in temples and meals involving religious rites was extremely unlikely.”35 This reasoning falls prey to the modern Western bifurcation between the cultic and the civic spheres that simply did not apply in antiquity.

3. **Meetings of the collegia.** Whether their purpose was expressly religious or not, the many private associations, including guilds and burial societies, had a patron god, and their meetings generally involved sacrifices to that patron. There was, in reality, no such thing as a completely secular *collegium*. In fact, many *collegia* took their names from a deity or deities, and their clubhouses often bore the name of a divinity. Even when this was not the case, they often held their meetings in temples.36 Particular mention should be made of the guilds. To our way of thinking, professional associations of this sort would be nonreligious, but that was simply not the case in antiquity.37 Indeed, as Harland has amply shown for Asia Minor, “associations and guilds were among the more prevalent local social

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37. Andrew D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers (First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 74 n. 65, cites an example of a guild that honored Zeus Hypsistos and met in a temple (P. Lond. 2710).
settings in which one might encounter such sacrificial foods or meats.”

There is no reason to think the situation would be markedly different on the western side of Aegean Sea.

This list confirms Cheung’s assessment when, after reviewing the evidence, he speaks of the “almost ubiquitous use of idol food in Greco-Roman social contexts.” It should serve to remind us of the difficulties that the Corinthian believers faced if they were inclined to follow Paul’s injunction to flee from idolatry by not taking part in meals that included offerings to pagan deities. All sorts of social situations at all levels of society entailed the expectation that they would participate in these meals. The meetings of the various associations, for instance, provided the one social setting in which most people could hope to participate in the giving and receiving of honors so important to status enhancement in antiquity. Thus, the social consequences of nonparticipation in public meals could be quite high. It represented a significant hindrance to everyday social relations since sharing a meal, particularly a celebratory one, was a way of breeding friendship, and refusing to do so was cause for offence. It could easily lead to the stigmatization of Christians as “conspicuous outcasts who held outlandish, antisocial, perverse religious beliefs.”

The consequences of nonparticipation were not merely social in nature. The potential economic costs were also quite high. For instance, refusal to participate in the meetings of the guilds would have likely entailed negative economic consequences for members of the trades. Further, given the structure of Greco-Roman society, in which advancement depended on frequent displays of fealty to benefactors in public settings, refusal to attend public celebrations might mean an abrupt end to any aspirations of improving one’s lot in life. Public officials, for instance, would risk losing their positions if they did not participate in such meals. This may have been more than just a theoretical possibility, if the Erastus described in Romans 16:23 as the city manager (ὁ οἰκονόμος τῆς πόλεως) of Corinth is the same one who is mentioned as an aedile in an inscription found in Corinth. In that case, adhering to Paul’s teaching had the potential of causing financial hardship not only for Erastus, but by extension for the entire congregation,

41. Ibid., 43; Cheung, Idol Food, 35–36.
42. Garland, Corinthians, 357.
43. Schnabel, Korinther, 430.
44. Harland, Dynamics, 148.
45. Gooch, Dangerous Food, 41.
46. For a defense of this position cf. Newton, Deity, 113. For a thorough discussion, see Andrew D. Clarke, Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1–6 (AGJU 18; Leiden: Brill, 1993), 46–56.
which probably relied to some extent on his benevolence. One can readily understand the reluctance of the Christians in Corinth to risk such costly alienation.\(^{47}\)

**Paul’s Waiving of His Right to Financial Support**

(1 Corinthians 9:1–23)

We turn now to Paul’s *exemplum* in 1 Corinthians 9. The transition from 1 Corinthians 8 is abrupt, albeit not to the extent that those who view 1 Cor 9:1–23 as a digression generally suppose. There is, to be sure, a marked shift in style, from the carefully reasoned argumentation of 1 Corinthians 8 to the staccato rhythm of the short, asyndetic rhetorical questions in 1 Cor 9:1. Paul, however, has already skillfully prepared his readers for a change of topics by switching from direct address in the second person that characterizes his style in 1 Cor 8:9–12 to the first-person singular in 1 Cor 8:13. In doing so, Paul lends the argument of 1 Corinthians 8 pathetic force by claiming with a certain amount of rhetorical bravado that, were he to find himself in a situation similar to one the Corinthians are facing, he would refrain from eating meat, forever if need be, if that were necessary to avoid harming a brother with a weak conscience.

On the most basic level (and this has too often been overlooked in the discussion) the argument of 1 Cor 9:1–23, with its focus on Paul’s own praxis with regard to his right to financial support from the Corinthians, serves to substantiate that bold assertion. In other words, Paul views his course of action with regard to the issue of financial support as proof of the credibility of the claim he makes in 1 Cor 8:13. The Corinthians can be sure that Paul would act as he insists he would because on another issue where the same principle was involved, he had, in fact, pursued a course of action that proved his commitment to that principle. This, of course, lends no small amount of force to the injunctions he finally articulates in 1 Cor 10.

On another level, as we have seen, Paul obviously sees his approach to apostolic finances as a model for the Christ followers in Corinth with regard to the issue of idol meat, and it is to the implicit connection that Paul draws between these divergent topics that we now turn. It would, perhaps, be helpful at the outset to clarify Paul’s convictions with regard to financial support because there is some confusion at precisely this point. Paul is often portrayed, on the basis of Acts 18:3, as the “tentmaking missionary” who supported himself on his missionary journeys. While this is certainly one side of the story, his letters testify to the fact that he was not averse to accepting financial assistance from his churches, particularly the church in Philippi. In fact, the Pauline epistles yield a coherent picture of Paul’s position, one that even Acts, when read carefully, does not contradict. Put succinctly, Paul refused to accept support from a church that he was in the process of founding, but he had no hesitations about accepting support from churches he had previously founded once he had moved.

on to other missionary venues (cf. Phil 4:15–16).\textsuperscript{48} Even in Corinth, where Luke portrays Paul plying his trade—it was likely leatherworking, rather than tentmaking\textsuperscript{49}—in the workshop of Aquila and Priscilla, this seems to have been Paul’s means of supporting himself during the initial phase of ministry. At some later point, he began to accept support from the churches in Macedonia, a fact he in no way tried to conceal from the Corinthian church (cf. 2 Cor 11:9).

In the Corinthian correspondence Paul gives a number of different reasons for his approach to financial support. Among them are his intention to offer the Gospel free of charge, probably in line with Jesus tradition (1 Cor 9:18; cf. Matt 10:8), his wish not to be a burden to anyone (2 Cor 11:9; cf. 1 Thess 2:9), and his desire to model parental love to the churches (2 Cor 12:14–15). None of these, however, seems to be Paul’s primary motive as he spells it out in this passage. According to 1 Cor 9:12, the first and arguably most important reason he gives for making no use of his right to apostolic support in Corinth is that he feared it would be an obstacle to the Corinthians’ reception of the Gospel (ινα μη τινα ἐγκοπὴν δῶμεν τῶ εὐαγγέλιῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ).\textsuperscript{50} This is substantiated by the fact that it builds an initial point of comparison with his concern for the effect that the Corinthians’ behavior would have on believers with weak consciences (cf. 1 Cor 8:9).

What was it, then, about accepting support that Paul viewed as a potential hindrance to the Gospel? Various answers have proposed to this question. According to some scholars, Paul wanted to distance himself from profit-hungry itinerant preachers,\textsuperscript{51} whether these are understood to be “palästinische Wandercharismatiker”\textsuperscript{52} or more generally as “vagabundierende charmatisiche Bettler.”\textsuperscript{53} Theissen posits a conflict between different types of missionaries in Corinth, with Paul promoting a model for urban missionary activity over against an approach that might have worked in rural areas.\textsuperscript{54} Betz has argued that Paul was expressing his approval of Stoic-Cynic traditions, it being well-known that the Cynics accepted no fees but instead supported themselves by begging.\textsuperscript{55} Similarly, Hock interprets Paul’s course of action against the background of Cynic discussions regarding the ideal means of support, noting that one strict Cynic tradition viewed self-support through artisan labor as the best

\textsuperscript{49} Hock, Social Context, 21.
\textsuperscript{50} So also Phua, Idolatry, 192.
\textsuperscript{52} So Schrage, Korinther, 283.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
option. According to Hock, Paul is consciously identifying himself with this tradition.\(^{56}\) Marshall, on the other hand, puts forward the thesis that Paul is intentionally distancing himself from ancient conceptions of friendship and patronage, which would have afforded Paul with the financial means necessary to carry out his ministry, but also obligated him in ways that were at cross purposes with the exercise of his apostolic authority.\(^{57}\)

Of these theories, Marshall’s is most convincing,\(^{58}\) because it best fits the picture that recent study has painted of the complex systems of benefaction that characterized Roman imperial society\(^{59}\) and provided the backdrop for the conflicts in the church at Corinth.\(^{60}\) Marshall, however, does not go far enough. His thesis can, to be sure, plausibly demonstrate why Paul did not opt for the comfortable life of a client dependent on the largesse of a benefactor. It has only gained strength from recent studies of 1 Cor 2:1–5 against the background of ancient rhetorical conventions that demonstrate the extent to which Paul consciously avoided assuming the demeanor of a Sophist rhetorician, in spite of all of the economic benefits the ascription of such elevated social status could bring.\(^{61}\) Marshall’s thesis does not, however, adequately explain the actual course of action Paul pursued in Corinth. This involved deliberately choosing a low-status position from which to preach the gospel. Taking up the trade of leatherworker seems to have been an intentional part of a larger strategy, for in identifying with the artisan class, Paul exposed himself to economic hardship and a dramatic loss of social status in Corinthian society.\(^{62}\) As an itinerant, Paul could expect only subsistence wages, and his peristasis catalogs “include hardships that were largely due to his life as an artisan.”\(^{63}\) Further, he

58. It seems unlikely that itinerant Jewish preachers were so commonplace outside of Palestine at this early stage in the history of the Jesus movement or that, given their low status, they could have gained a foothold in the prestige-conscious and largely Gentile church in Corinth. It also seems unlikely that the category of “Cynic philosopher” was open to Paul, and there is no evidence that he sought to portray himself in that light. Cf. Stanley K. Stowers, “Social Status, Public Speaking, and Private Teaching: The Circumstances of Paul’s Preaching Activity,” *NovT* 26 (1984): 59–82.
would have known that the artisan class was the object of contempt on the part of elites, because the trades were regarded as slavish occupations, and it was considered humiliating for a free man to take up a trade. Artisans were thus “frequently reviled or abused, often victimized, seldom if ever invited to dinner, never accorded status.”  

Why did Paul intentionally take this path of “downward mobility”? Evidence from 1 Cor 1:17–2:5 points to the conclusion that he believed the “proclamation of the cross” (ὁ λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ; 1 Cor 1:18) demanded it, pure and simple. The cross of Christ, which stands in diametric opposition to ancient concepts of status, honor, and prestige, is the divinely ordained means by which God, in his wisdom, determined to deconstruct the wisdom of the world. This determination was not the result of some whimsical choice on God’s part. Rather, it followed naturally from a heilsgeschichtliches principle that Paul finds revealed in Scripture, whereby God “chooses to work through means which the world finds weak, foolish, and unimpressive so that there can be no question in the end as to who has accomplished the result.” Indeed, by effecting salvation through the cross, God transforms it from a symbol of foolishness and weakness into a symbol of unexpected wisdom and strength. This was the heart of the Gospel that Paul was convinced that he had been sent to preach (1 Cor 1:17). It demanded not only that the message Paul proclaimed be singularly focused on the cross (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2), but also that the demeanor of those who proclaim the Gospel underscore the message, so that “your faith might not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor 2:5). Though Paul does not explicitly say as much, his decision to identify with the artisan class and endure the hardships and loss of status that such a decision entailed seems to be part and parcel to this fundamental conviction concerning the ministry of the Gospel. Although he thereby exposed himself to the preten- tious scorn from the professional rhetoricians in Corinth and embarrassed his fledgling church in the process, he did not compromise on what for

64. Ibid., 36.

65. Thiselton, Corinthians, 153–4, for a defense of this translation.


67. The most plausible interpretation of Paul’s enigmatic statement in 1Cor 4:6 that the Corinthians should “learn not to go beyond the things that are written” (ἵνα ἐν ὑμῖν μάθητε τὸ μὴ ἐγγραπτὸν αὐτὸ τοῦ γέγραπτος) is, in my opinion, that the “things that are written” are the quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures in 1 Cor 1:19 (Isa 29:10), 1:31 (Jer 9:22–23), 2:9 (disputed origin), 2:16 (Isa 40:13), 3:19 (Job 5:12), and 3:20 (Ps 93:11 LXX). Cf. Morna Hooker, “ ‘Beyond the Things Which Are Written’: An Examination of I Cor VI.6,” NTS 10 (1963–64): 127–32; Richard B. Hays, First Corinthians (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 69; Ciampa and Rosner, Corinthians, 176. All of these quotations with one exception are introduced by means of γέγραπτος, and all hammer home the basic point that God’s ways are inscrutable to human beings left to their own devices and that his actions subvert human assessments of what is wise and good.

68. Litfin, Theology, 193–94.

69. Litfin (ibid., 195–96) points out that even the verbs Paul uses to denote his public speaking (κηρύσσω, κηρύσσω, καταγγέλλω, and μαρτυρέω) would have been repugnant to the
him was a nonnegotiable principle. To be sure, accepting support from the church would have attenuated the derision he endured and ameliorated the shame the church felt, but that course of action would have been a stumbling block to the reception of the gospel because it conveyed a wrong understanding of the gospel itself. It carried all the connotations of power, status, and prestige that Paul took such great pains to avoid and thereby paradoxically emptied the cross of its power (1 Cor 1:18), so he refused to pursue it.

The Point of Comparison between 1 Corinthians 8 and 1 Corinthians 9

With the background information on meals with pagan cultic connotations that has been amassed in recent archaeological research, on the one hand, and a clearer understanding of the strategy behind Paul’s unwillingness to accept direct financial support from the Corinthians, on the other, we are now in a position to comprehend better Paul’s choice of himself as an exemplum in 1 Corinthians 9, as well as its applicability to the issue of meals in pagan cultic contexts and Paul’s teaching on it in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. The conventional interpretation, as we noted above, understands the point of comparison between these two very different topics to lie in the area of the proper use of rights and Christian freedom: Just as Paul did not exercise his right to support, the Corinthians should not exercise their theoretical right to participate in meals that had connections to idol worship. This, as we noted further, is unobjectionable as far as it goes, but I maintain that it is possible to delimit the tertium comparationis more precisely and in a way that lends sharper focus to Paul’s argument. For sociohistorical analysis of the issues of idol meat and apostolic finances, respectively, that was surveyed above reveals the extent to which the implicit comparison that Paul draws goes beyond the simple question of rights and authority. It exposes deeper tensions inherent within the system of benefaction and competition for honor and prestige that lay at the heart of Corinthian society and posed a serious ethical challenge to the new believers who claimed a higher allegiance to Christ.

The point Paul wants to press home is this: he had demonstrated his willingness to dispense with high status and economic security, indeed to suffer serious social and economic consequences for the sake of the Gospel. The believers in Corinth should be prepared to do no less in their situation. Paul had quite consciously opted for his course of action by refusing to take orators of his day, because they carry connotations that represent the very antithesis of ars rhetorica. These sophists understood their task to be one of teasing out the persuasive possibilities of any subject, awing their hearers by means of their deft employment of various topoi and stylistic devices. Paul, on the other hand, understood his calling to be that of announcing with utmost simplicity a message that had been entrusted to him. He thought of himself, in other words, as a herald (κῆρυξ) or witness (μάρτυς) and consciously distanced himself from the high-status category of rhetorician. On Paul’s embarrassing the church, see Johannes Munck, Paul and the Salvation of Mankind (Richmond: John Knox, 1959), 158–59.
the comfortable path that would have been open to him in the context of ancient society. He could have presented himself in accordance with the established conventions of a Hellenistic rhetorician and enjoyed both the prestige and the substantial economic rewards attendant on that position. Instead, he chose to identify himself with the low-status itinerant artisan class and endure the serious economic hardships and loss of honor that such a life entailed. In the same way, Paul expected the Corinthian Christians to risk their own prestige and economic security by keeping their distance from the many social situations in which offerings were made to the various gods and which played such an important role in the system of benefaction that was the key to “getting ahead” in Corinth. The consequences of such a stance were, as Paul knew, potentially quite serious, but to his mind the Gospel demanded it. Compromise with idols was not an option, because it could have devastating effects on the nascent community of Christ followers in Corinth.

If my thesis is correct, it has important implications for our understanding of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 and indeed for the letter as a whole. First of all, it underscores how thoroughly Paul’s theology of the cross, which he definitively articulates in 1 Cor 1:17–2:5, permeates his thinking throughout the letter. While I agree in large part with Margaret Mitchell’s assessment that 1 Corinthians is designed to restore unity in the Corinthian church, it is perhaps important to stress more strongly than her rhetorical-critical approach allows for that the unity Paul is seeking to reestablish is unalterably cruciform in nature. In other words, Paul’s injunction to dispense with rights and privileges that could prove to be a hindrance to the Gospel is not simply the best way to restore unity. It is a demand that follows from the very Gospel that Paul preached, one that he himself had sought to live in obedience to and one that he expected the Corinthians to accede to, as well. Though it would go beyond the scope of this article to argue for definitive links between the Jesus tradition and Paul here, it is perhaps not farfetched to characterize 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 as an attempt by Paul to contextualize the radical vision of Jesus in Corinth, calling on the believers there to take up their cross for the sake of the Gospel by refusing to compromise in their loyalty to Christ, even at the cost of social integration and economic security. It is, in other words, nothing less than a call to a truly “Christian identity [that] can be understood only as an act of identification with the crucified Christ.”

70. Cf. Mitchell, Paul, 1 and passim.
THE APPLICABILITY OF PAUL’S INJUNCTION TODAY

It remains the case, of course, that the topics Paul addresses in 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 are far removed from the day-to-day experience of most Western Christians. Still, conventional interpretations have succeeded in underscoring its general applicability to the issue of rights and responsibilities with respect to the “weaker brother” (cf. 1 Cor 8:11), and this has undeniably generated helpful theological reflection with reference to various familial, congregational, national, and even global ethical problems that test the limits of the laissez-faire ideology of the West. Yet even that does not go far enough. If my thesis is correct, 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 challenges not only cherished notions of Western individualism, but any and all systems that stipulate conformity to societal conventions and norms as a means to secure economic security and social status. While these will seldom require the worship of idols (in the West, at least), they may well demand compromising one’s allegiance to Christ in more subtle ways, and though they may not explicitly impose a regimen of dependence on the benefaction of rich and powerful elites, the pressure to conform in order to win their approval may be all the more beguiling for being subtle. The work of identifying these proclivities and equipping Christians to rise above them must be left to the theologians and pastors in their particular cultural contexts, but the challenge will everywhere be the same: the establishment of ethical norms that proceed from and exemplify the Gospel of the crucified Christ.