

Boast not: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

by [Ray Rhoads](#) in the [January 24, 2006](#) issue

Several decades ago, when I was filling out my application for seminary admission, I came to a question that asked me to provide biblical justification for my calling. I knew I wanted to attend seminary, but found it difficult to state why. Then I remembered my Wesley Foundation pastor preaching on 1 Corinthians 9:16b, and I wrote, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.” The text expressed the urgency I felt and even a tinge of divine necessity—although I think I knew even then that I was going a bit too far. These days I read the context more carefully before quoting a verse or two.

Passages from Paul’s Corinthian correspondence are often scattered across the lectionary without regard to their contexts. Much of what Paul writes addresses problems and concerns in the Corinthian congregation, such as the problem of eating foods that have been offered to idols in sacrificial worship and are now offered by a host to an unsuspecting Christian guest, one who might be offended.

In the midst of his concern with the food issue, Paul uses a sometimes convoluted logic to apply his thinking to another concern: he proposes that he be paid a congregational stipend! Here context is key. If we read carefully, we see that Paul is actually *denouncing* stipends, and for the same reason given in the case of meat consumption—that the strong should limit their freedom in order to avoid causing “scandal” for the weaker members.

Without the context, the reader will not realize that the principle on which Paul decides the issue is derived from the passage about eating food offered to idols (1 Cor. 8:1-13). The whole discussion about giving up one’s right has not been included in the lectionary selection.

That’s why the discussion about becoming all things to all people is almost unintelligible without its context: the logic of the argument is derived from Paul’s understanding of gospel liberty. (It even seems to include a dominical warrant supporting just what Paul rejects.) Grasping the full implications of his argument may be hard not only for strict biblicists but also for those who take the Bible

seriously and study it critically. Paul challenges us to the core.

What is this gospel liberty that Paul invites us to mime? More than once he describes the Christian's status by juxtaposing the words freedom and slavery. "For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ" (1 Cor. 7:22). Paul expresses his slavery in the Lord both by renouncing any rights (*exousia*) he has and by submitting himself to social and cultural conventions of those he hopes to win to Christ. So, in a rather strange statement, he says he became a Jew to win Jews. At times Paul boasts of his religious and ethnic heritage (2 Cor. 11:22ff.; Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:4b-6); at other times, as here, he seems to be saying that this heritage has been superseded by being in Christ. Even being "under the law" has become secondary.

In fact, in several examples—to both those "under" and those "outside" the law—Paul declares that he is not without the law (*anomos*) and thereby lawless (perhaps like some in Corinth?); on the contrary, he is "in-lawed" (*ennomos*) to God through the law of Christ. Then he repeats and adds variations of "all" that underscore the universality of his actions.

A close reading of the penultimate verse, 1 Corinthians 9:22, catches us by surprise. For one thing, the grammar is different—all three previous examples were introduced by the comparative Greek particle *hos*, but here Paul says very directly, "To the weak I became weak." Surely this refers to his earlier remarks about refusing the usual stipend proffered to philosophers by the rich.

But Paul is doing more than making reference to what he has said earlier. This is Paul the theologian sharing a pastoral insight. To become weak—not simply to appear weak—is to adopt a cruciform pattern of existence. Quoting an ancient Christian hymn in Philippians 2:5-8, Paul describes Jesus' mode of existence as a self-emptying and calls Christians to embrace this lifestyle. 1 Corinthians 9:22 attests to congruence between Paul's words and lifestyle.

Here is the touchstone of Christian existence—at least as explicated by Paul. Faith perceives the divinity of the man Jesus precisely in his humanness. The cruciform existence of Jesus' living and dying contradicted both the traditional Jewish messianic expectation and the Greeks' concept of a supernatural savior. It is only Jesus in his utter humanity as a real person who can empty himself and become

nothing. So there are no grounds for boasting, for how could one who lives the life of the cross find anything to boast about?

Why do we boast? Is it not to secure our being in the world? Boasting is one way that we try to overcome the limits the world sets for us. But for those who live in the new age of death and resurrection, the one inaugurated by the cross, such boasting is not only excluded, it is not necessary. Old answers are no longer sufficient for the new age. Thus Paul's repeated use of "all" is not as improbable as it might at first seem.

If we can hold to the question about who we are and what our destiny is—perennial human questions—and if we refuse to accept answers from the world, we will discover that the question is not one we ask, but one that is asked of us. That's what preaching does; it puts us in question. We can answer only with our entire being, and that may mean shaping our lives to conform to the cross.