

Compelled and free (1 Corinthians 9:16-23)

Can Paul literally be any identity?

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The Apostle Paul likes hyperbole.

Writing to the church in Corinth, he waxes eloquent about the great lengths he's willing to go to "win as many as possible" (NIV). His motive is "the sake of the gospel," which involves "shar[ing] in its blessings."

The hyperbole comes in his summary: "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."

At what point does the gospel conflict with Paul's claim to "become all things"? If the gospel is the good news and includes blessings, what "things" ought we not become? What things might we become that would be inherently *not* gospel?

I'm struck by the claims of freedom Paul makes in these passages. He's both "compelled" and "free." The free will debates have been going in Christian circles for millennia. Is a sovereign God in control? Or are we creatures free?

In contemporary times, science seems to show the limits of our freedom. Our social histories, locations, genes, brain structures, and more constrain what is possible. Some suggest that science has shown free will to be an illusion.

Paul's description of being both free and compelled seems to help. His sense of being compelled suggests that various factors exert influence, and he feels a strong sense of inexorability. On the other hand, he also knows first-hand his sense of

freely choosing; what he does is voluntary.

Some believe that it is compatible to think we are entirely determined by external forces and simultaneously entirely free to choose what we want among live options. Such contradiction fails to satisfy.

Perhaps Paul's feeling both compelled and free can be captured by the notion of "limited freedom." He is genuinely free to choose among options. But those options are not infinite; various factors and forces constrain what is truly possible. They are limited options.

To "win as many as possible," Paul freely chooses to "become" any number of identities. His motive: the blessedness of the gospel, freely offered.

But he cannot literally become "all things to all people." His history, location, education, biology, neurology, and much more limit the identities he can take on. His freedom is limited.

In an age that struggles with the power of identity—that labors to make sense of identity politics—Paul's words may be especially helpful. Is he but one identity? No. Can he literally be any identity? No.

But for the sake of gospel—the blessedness made possible by Christ—he freely chooses to identify with those who need good news. For the sake of the gospel, Paul chooses to be for others so that they might be among those who enjoy blessings.