

The Case for Torah

A Study of 1 Corinthians 7-10

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1 Corinthians Introduction

The book of First Corinthians contains difficult passage upon difficult passage. What does it mean to escape judgment as through fire (3:15)? Should we pronounce judgment (4:5) or not (5:3,12)? What does it mean to hand someone over to Satan and yet still his spirit is saved (5:5)? How will we judge angels (6:3)? Are all things truly lawful (6:12;10:23)? Which is better, to be married or single (chapter 7)? How is an unbelieving husband made holy through his believing wife (7:14)? Is it okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols (chapters 8 and 10)? In what sense do we become all things to all people (9:22)? Can a man pray or prophesy with his head covered, and can a woman pray or prophesy with her head uncovered (11:4-5)? How is man the glory of God, but woman the glory of man (11:7)? What do the “angels” have to do with head coverings (11:10)? If we eat the Lord’s supper in an unworthy manner, might we get sick and die (11:30)? And we have not even begun to raise the controversial questions regarding spiritual gifts, prophesy, and speaking in tongues (chapters 12-14) and baptism for the dead (15:29)!

First Corinthians is a book of the Bible full of controversy, which has led to confusion about its teachings and application. As New Testament scholars Ciampa and Rosner explain:

[First Corinthians] is, in fact, one of Paul’s most difficult letters. Many factors weigh against a confident and appropriate reading of this ancient text. It is far removed from our world in terms of language, geography, economics, social customs and religious practice. It talks with little or no explanation of human wisdom, law courts, prostitution, meat markets and pagan worship, not to mention head coverings and baptism for the dead. It apparently treats an assortment of topics in no particular order. It carries forward a conversation, but what the other parties were saying is no longer available. (1)

With all this in mind, how are we to approach this complex letter? It is part of the inspired Word of God, and useful for teaching and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16-17), but like all Scripture, we must rightly interpret it, using appropriate hermeneutics (the study of how to interpret the Bible).

To begin, we must understand the genre. First Corinthians is a letter. In short, we are reading someone else’s mail. But that’s not all! We do not have all the correspondence between Paul and the Corinthian church. You see, First Corinthians, unlike its name implies, is not actually the first letter Paul wrote to this church. He wrote them a “previous letter” (5:9), and they replied back to him in another letter with questions and concerns (7:1). The book of First Corinthians is then Paul’s second letter to the church, in response to their letter. We have neither Paul’s first letter nor the Corinthians’ response and must do our best to put the pieces together as we read the Corinthians’ mail. Add to this that the contextual issues are two thousand years removed from us, and we can begin to grasp the difficulty of interpretation.

Good hermeneutics also takes into consideration the audience: Who were the Corinthians and what was

Paul's relationship to them? In Acts 18, we learn that Paul first came to Corinth on his second missionary journey, and he spent eighteen months there. It was not a quick visit but rather one in which he would have established relationships and truly known the people. In writing this letter then, he was familiar with many of the faces, personalities, character traits, strengths, and weaknesses of this church body. The church was located in the city of Corinth, a Roman colony known for its commerce and wealth (Fee, 2). It was full of religious diversity and accompanying sexual immorality. Corinthians scholar Gordon Fee explains,

The religious expression of Corinth was as diverse as its population. Pausanias describes at least 26 sacred places (not all were temples) devoted to the “gods many” (the Roman-Greek pantheon) and “lords many” (the mystery cults) mentioned by Paul in the present letter (8:5). (3)

He goes on to say, “Paul's Corinth was at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world” (ibid). It is not surprising then that Paul had to address many issues such as worldly philosophies, sexual immorality, idolatry, and pride.

Understanding the difficulties of the letter, as well as the genre and audience, will help us as we tackle two main sections of First Corinthians. In this article, we will first unpack 1 Corinthians 7 so that we can rightly understand what Paul says about circumcision and its application to the Corinthians, and then to us today. Second, we will study chapters eight through ten, with the framework that these chapters are a unit and contain a central theme of a willingness to give up our rights for the sake of the gospel.

1 Corinthians 7

Remain As You Are

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul writes some puzzling verses about circumcision, and these verses lead many to believe that God no longer cares whether his followers are circumcised or not. If we as new covenant believers in Christ no longer are called to walk in obedience to the Torah, then this passage is not problematic – circumcision is simply another law that has been set aside or abolished for believers today. But if Christians are still to obey the Torah, how can that be reconciled with this passage?

Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God (1 Corinthians 7:18-19).

Let's consider these verses in context to determine if circumcision, and therefore at least a part of the law, has been set aside.

The Issue of Marriage: Remain As You Are

Recall from the introduction that the Corinthians were struggling with an over-realized eschatology. Because of this they were focusing on what they considered to be spiritual matters while neglecting physical or earthly matters. One of the ways this negatively affected them was their treatment of marriage. They were living as if marriage no longer mattered because it is tied to this earth and these current bodies. This resulted in many difficulties within the marriages in the Corinthian church. In chapter seven, Paul addresses these marriage issues.

He opens in verse 1 by listing the Corinthians' question: whether or not it is good for a man to have sexual relations with a woman. He then answers this question in verses 2 through 16, and his theme throughout is that believers should remain as they already are. Paul addresses several different situations in which believers might find themselves. If they are already married, they should continue in that marriage and not neglect the needs of their spouse (2-5). Paul affirms that marriage is good and sexual relations with one's spouse are good and should not be withheld. Paul explains that he was called by God to live unmarried, but not all have this same call, and an unmarried status should not be forced upon anyone (6). To widowers and widows, Paul encourages them to remain single, but they are free to remarry if they cannot exercise sexual self-control – it is not wrong to be married (8-9). Again, he addresses those who are already married and encourages them not to separate from each other (10-11). He follows this with some instruction about marriage to an unbeliever and what to do if the unbelieving spouse chooses to leave (12-16). Finally in verse 17, Paul gives a summary statement of the overall theme: “Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.” This idea will be repeated in verses 20 and 24, and is specifically relevant to the main issue he is addressing: marriage. The Corinthian believers must not desert their marriage partners for a more “spiritual” experience.

Any Social Status: Remain As You Are

While the pressing issue in the Corinthian church was marriage, Paul applies the principle of verse 17 to any social status. Corinthians scholar Gordon E. Fee explains:

Paul's intent is not to lay down a rule that one may not change; rather, by thus hallowing one's situation in life, he is trying to help the Corinthian believers see that their social status is ultimately irrelevant as such, in the sense that they can live out their Christian life in any of the various options; therefore their desire to change is equally irrelevant—because it has nothing to do with genuine spirituality as their slogan would apparently infer (v. 1b). (344)

According to Fee, Paul is not saying that a person is “stuck” in a particular social status; rather, the idea is that social status has no bearing on one's salvation and Christian walk. In Christ, it does not matter if you are married or unmarried, and the same is true of any other social situation you might find yourself in – circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free – as Paul will cover in the verses to come. Social status does not make you more or less spiritual, so we do not have to seek to change our social status to become a better Christian. Fee continues:

It is not change per se that he is against, but change as a Christian; that is, becoming a believer does not require one to seek change of status. That is to give significance to one's social setting. Paul's point is that God's call, which comes to people where they are as his gracious gift, totally eliminates social setting as having any kind of religious significance (ibid).

Simply put, we do not have to change our social status as a Christian.

While the specific issue the Corinthians were struggling with was marriage, Paul goes on to show that this principle applies to any social status. The first application is to the circumcised and the uncircumcised:

Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called (7:18-20).

What does Paul mean by circumcised and uncircumcised? We know he is addressing social statuses, and "circumcised" represented the social status of being an ethnic Jew, while uncircumcised referred to being an ethnic Gentile. Fee comments:

Thus he argues, "Was anyone already circumcised when they were called?" That is, were you a Jew when you came to faith in Christ? If so, then "he should not become uncircumcised."... So also: "Was anyone uncircumcised when he was called?" That is, were you a Gentile when you came to faith? If so, then "he should not be circumcised." ... But in the present case it is not first of all a religious issue, but a sociological one. Being Jew or Gentile simply means nothing to God; whatever one was when called is what one still is, with no need to change. Christ has made such distinctions obsolete, and thus irrelevant. (345)

As Fee explains, the issue is primarily sociological. Your social identity as a Jew or a Gentile does not matter in the Kingdom of Christ. Whether you are physically descended from a line of Jews or physically descended from a line of Gentiles, you can still be saved and grow and mature as a believer. Being a physical descendent of Abraham does not make you a better Christian. Neither does being a physical descendent of Gentiles. Ethnicity is irrelevant. Scholars Ciampa and Rosner agree:

Fundamental to Paul's vision of the church is that it transcends ethnic boundaries and unites Jews and Gentiles in one body. In the churches in which Paul worked Gentiles did not need to become Jews and Jews did not need to become Gentiles. (310)

In Christ, it does not matter if we identify as "circumcised" (that is, a Jew), or "uncircumcised" (that is, a Gentile).

G. Scott McKenzie expands on this when he writes, "Paul's use of 'circumcision' seems to be shorthand for proselyte circumcision (ethnic conversion) and not the commands of God regarding

circumcision. The phrase ‘each one must remain in the way they were called’ in verse 20, therefore, can be understood as referring to their ethnic status” (51). McKenzie’s insight is crucial and lines up with Fee’s comments above – mainly that Paul is not talking about obedience to God’s commands, of which circumcision was one, but rather, Paul is using “circumcised” and “uncircumcised” as ethnicity markers; in other words, they were shorthand terms that represented an ethnic group of people.

Verse 19 also indicates that Paul is not talking about the biblical act of circumcision, but rather “circumcision” and “uncircumcision” as social identity markers: “For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.” Here Paul differentiates between circumcision/uncircumcision and obeying God’s commandments. Of course, this brings up controversy over what constitutes the commands of God. We can all agree that the act of circumcision was a command given to Abraham as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17) and later commanded again at Mt. Sinai (Leviticus 12:3). The question is, is it still a command for believers today? If it is still a command for today, then what is Paul referring to when he says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything? The scholars above agree that “circumcision” and “uncircumcision” in the first century indicated ethnic social status of Jew or Gentile. But is this what God originally intended circumcision to entail?

Circumcision and the Abrahamic Covenant

Before we address if the command of circumcision is applicable to believers today, let’s understand what the original command entailed and what it did not. To do so, we must turn to Genesis and the story of Abraham. In Genesis 15:4-7, God gave a promise to Abraham, then known as Abram:

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.”

God promised Abram that he would have a son, who would be his heir, and moreover, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. He also promised that he would give Abram the land of the Canaanites (15:7,18-21). These promises in Genesis 15 are what is referred to as the Abrahamic Covenant.

The promise of an heir and innumerable offspring seemed impossible because Sarai, Abram’s wife, was barren and beyond child bearing age (15:2; 16:1;17:17). Because of this, Abram and Sarai tried to attain the promise through their own means, that is through Sarai’s servant Hagar (Genesis 16). Hagar was given to Abram as a wife, and she bore him a son named Ishmael. Yet God said Ishmael was not the promised son; rather, Abram’s heir would come through Sarai (17:18-19).

In Genesis 17, God restates his covenant with Abram and changes his name to Abraham (verse 5), for he would be a father to a multitude of nations. This covenant is to endure through all ages:

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God” (17:7-8).

The Abrahamic covenant is an everlasting covenant between God and Abraham’s offspring. It endures even at the present time and extends to all who are in Christ. The New Testament teaches that Abraham’s offspring refers not just to those physically descended from Abraham, but rather to those who are spiritually children of Abraham, and thus we as believers are participants in the Abrahamic Covenant (Galatians 3:7-9, 29; Romans 4:11-12).

At this time, God gave Abraham circumcision as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. (Note: many think circumcision is a sign of the Mosaic covenant, but that covenant has a different sign – the Sabbath; see Exodus 31:12-18):

And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:9-14).

There are some important things to note here about circumcision. First, the promise was given in Genesis 15. Abram believed God’s promise and was counted as righteous because of his belief in what God told him (aka by faith in God’s promise; Genesis 15:6). He did not have to do anything to be counted righteous, other than simply believe God’s promise. Second, circumcision, the sign of this covenant, was not given until Genesis 17, over thirteen years later (cf. Gen 16:6 and 17:1). Therefore the sign came after the promise and after the declaration of Abraham’s justification by faith. Abraham’s entry into the covenant was not by circumcision but by belief in God’s promise. In other words, it was not by works but by faith. Paul points out this very thing in Romans 4:9-12:

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who

believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Paul stresses that Abraham was justified by faith, and so are all who are sons of Abraham. We follow the same pattern – we believe God’s promises, then respond in obedience, just as Abraham believed God’s promise and later responded in obedience to circumcise himself and his household. Therefore, it cannot be that he was somehow justified by circumcision. You do not become a member of the Abrahamic covenant through circumcision; rather circumcision is a sign of that promise. And in the case of Abraham, it was a sign that did not happen until at least thirteen years after he entered the covenant, so it cannot be confused with somehow being a requirement to enter.

What is circumcision symbolic of? Tim Hegg offers some helpful insight:

The sign is attached to the organ of procreation, but it is the cutting away of the flesh. Since the promised son is the key element to the success of the covenant, the sign points to the fact that the son would come, not by the flesh (such as the “Hagar Plan”) but through divine means alone (126).

Abraham and Sarah were not to depend on their own physical flesh, which was old and in Sarah’s case, barren. Cutting away a part of the very organ of procreation demonstrates that the heir would not come through dependence on the flesh but on the miraculous promise of God. This stands in contrast to what Abraham and Sarah had attempted to do in chapter sixteen, where they tried to produce an heir through their own efforts via Hagar. Paul comments on this when he says, “For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise” (Galatians 4:22-23). The sign of circumcision therefore was intended as a beautiful picture of relying on God to fulfill his promise and not on our own fleshly efforts to achieve God’s promise. Thus, the sign of the covenant is a declaration that we enter covenant relationship with God by faith and not by works. This was its intention, but sadly by the first century, circumcision had become twisted to declare an entirely antithetical message.

Circumcision in the First Century

By the first century, the practice of circumcision lost its original intent and message. It was no longer a picture of depending on the promise of God by faith and not the flesh, and ironically had become just the opposite – a dependence on the flesh, specifically on being Jewish. Hegg explains that in the first century, circumcision was a Jewish identity marker:

In the 1st Century, circumcision was no longer simply the sign of the covenant with Abraham—it had long since combined with a cultural imperative to define Jewishness (at least as far as males were concerned). So clearly had circumcision become an ideological identity marker for Jews, that Paul could utilize the term “the circumcision” to mean

“Jewish people.” This was also the standard perspective of pagan authors. For them, “circumcision” and “Jewish” were one and the same (121).

In the first century, to be circumcised meant to be Jewish, either ethnically or by proselyte conversion. In fact, this idea existed prior to the first century. Theodotus, a Jewish poet from around 100 BC, writes this concerning the incident at Shechem in Genesis 34:

Jacob said that he would not give her until all the inhabitants of Shechem were circumcised and became Jews. Hamor said that he would persuade them. Concerning the necessity of their being circumcised, Jacob says, “For this is not allowed to Hebrews to bring sons-in-law or daughters-in-law into their house from elsewhere but, rather, whoever boasts that he is of the same race. (Charlesworth; Theodotus 4:1)

Notice how Theodotus equates being circumcised and becoming a Jew, and how he considers this to be a change in race – an ethnic change. Circumcision was a defining trait of being an ethnic Jew.

The message of circumcision had become one in which you had to be Jewish in order to be accepted as part of the people of God, a member of the Abrahamic covenant. Circumcision was no longer merely a physical sign of the Abrahamic covenant, but rather a change in ethnic status. This is why Paul had to take such a strong stance against Gentile believers becoming circumcised – it gave a message that one had to either be born Jewish or become Jewish in order to be a covenant member. This is not what the Bible taught about circumcision, which taught quite the opposite, but rather is what first century Pharisaical Judaism taught about circumcision.

The false message of first century circumcision was that believers in Jesus could not be saved unless they were first circumcised and therefore considered to be Jewish. Circumcision was understood to be intricately connected with Judaism, and thus many taught you had to become Jewish before you could be saved as a covenant member of the Abrahamic promise. Paul and the leaders of the early church could not allow this false gospel to be preached, and we see them combat it in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) and in many of Paul’s letters, the foremost being Galatians and Romans. Salvation through Christ is by faith alone, through Christ alone, not through any work of the flesh. Whether or not you were circumcised has no bearing on your salvation status.

However, this does not mean that Paul was against circumcision as it was originally described and intended in the word of God. In Acts, immediately after the Jerusalem Council, Paul has Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3). Paul could do this because Timothy had a solid understanding of the gospel message and would not believe that somehow his circumcision or change in ethnic status was required for his salvation. The apostles and leaders of the early church would want to ensure that believers had their theology straight before being circumcised:

Before they could receive physical circumcision, they had to be well grounded in the truth that their covenant status was based upon their faith, not the declaration of Jewishness offered by the rabbinic ritual of proselytism ... We may therefore presume that Paul’s

perspective on Gentile circumcision was that until the Gentile believer was sufficiently mature in his faith, he should not receive circumcision. Once he was well grounded in the fact that his faith in the Messiah was the means of his covenant inclusion, he would be circumcised, a process that gained him no new pedigree, nor awarded him any more covenant status than what he already had. In this way, circumcision would be a seal of the covenant without any connection to the rabbinic ritual of proselytism (Hegg, 122, 124).

This is also in line with Paul's behavior in Acts 21, in which he demonstrates that he does not teach against the law or circumcision (20-26). Circumcision according to God's original purpose is a beautiful demonstration of faith in the promise of God, and Paul understood this. But trusting in circumcision is a complete twisting of its message:

If one trusts in being declared a Jew for his covenant status, then he will have no use for [Jesus] and His saving work. He will have turned his back on the message of grace and believed the lie that one can enter the covenant of God's family through the works of the Torah (ibid, 124).

The key idea here is that being Jewish or non-Jewish has no bearing on a person's salvation or Christian walk. Since first century circumcision was associated with becoming a Jewish convert, Paul unashamedly taught that neither "circumcision" nor "uncircumcision" mattered.

Circumcision for Believers Today?

Now we can return to our question – should believers be circumcised today? We can answer this in two ways.

Let's begin with why a believer should not be circumcised – believers should not be circumcised in order to convert to Judaism, as a kind of requirement for salvation or covenant status. This is exactly what the false teaching regarding circumcision was in the first century. There is no requirement to become Jewish to be a member of the Abrahamic covenant. We must remember the original giving of the commandment to circumcise – circumcision came after Abraham received the promise, not before. Also, being a member of the Abrahamic covenant is open to all who receive God's promise through faith as Abraham did, not just Jews.

On the other hand, when or why might a believer become circumcised? First, believers must be firmly rooted in the truth of the gospel and understand that circumcision or uncircumcision has no bearing on their salvation. When this is solidly established, participation in circumcision as described in Genesis is a beautiful picture of dependence on God's promises and not on our own flesh. Also, note that the commandment to circumcise in Genesis is something parents are to do to their eight-day-old baby boys, again with the understanding that we depend not on our flesh but on God's promises. So believers recognize and proclaim this truth—that covenant status is based on faith in the promises of God and not on our flesh—when they circumcise their sons at eight days. But what about older males who have accepted Jesus as their Messiah? Should they be circumcised? It seems it would be wise to follow the

example of the apostles – making sure that the gospel message is not compromised and that circumcision is not required for salvation, but also teaching the value of circumcision as it was originally intended, as a mark of the covenant they have already entered into, based on God’s promises and not our own works. When and what this looks like will be different based on the walk and maturity of each believer.

Paul’s Circumcision Message

We can now understand that Paul’s message to the Corinthians was not against or even apathetic to circumcision as it was described in the original command given to Abraham. Rather, Paul was adamant that a person’s social identity – married or unmarried, circumcised (Jewish/Jewish proselyte) or uncircumcised (Gentile), slave or free – had no bearing on a person’s salvation or spiritual walk with God. If you were saved as a Jew or saved as a Gentile, you can fully live out your calling to God. What truly matters is walking in faith and obedience to him. How do we do this? By trusting him and listening to his commandments as described throughout his Word. May we each strive to do this, more and more.

Chapters 8-10: Our Freedom in Christ

In chapter seven, Paul encourages the Corinthian believers to remain as they are, not needing to change their social identity to be a covenant member. In chapters eight through ten, he moves to a new unit of thought: the rights and freedoms we have in Christ, and moreover, our willingness to give up these rights for the sake of the gospel. Several questions arise in this section – can believers eat meat sacrificed to idols? Should they only eat vegetables? How should we treat our weaker brothers and sisters in the Lord? What does it mean to become all things to all people to save some? Did Paul follow the Torah only among Jews, merely as a gospel strategy?

To answer these last questions, we will examine the meaning of 1 Corinthians 9:20-22: “To the Jews I became as a Jew ... to those outside the law I became as one outside the law ... I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” Before we begin, let’s reacquaint ourselves with how Luke describes Paul in Acts. In Acts 21, Luke shows Paul’s commitment to the Torah. Paul was traveling to Jerusalem with the desire to be there by the Feast of Pentecost. Upon his arrival, Paul reports to James and the elders in Jerusalem about his ministry to the Gentiles:

And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. **Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law** (Acts 21:20-24, emphasis ours).

Contextually, we see a number of things from this passage. First, James and the elders relate how many thousands of Torah-obedient Jewish believers there are. Second, these had all heard that Paul was teaching all the Jews among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, which is further delineated into a specific allegation of teaching against circumcision and following the customs. Third, Paul is told to take four men who are under a vow to the Lord and along with them, undergo the purification ritual specified in the Torah. This vow was most likely the Nazarite vow described in Numbers 6 (Stein, 472). The purification ritual included a burnt offering, a sin offering, a peace offering, and the shaving of one's hair (Numbers 6:1-21). Note that over thirty years after the atoning death of the Messiah, we see Paul's willingness to participate in sin offerings, among others, in the Temple (Acts 21:26). In Judaism, a Nazarite was the highest sanctification of holiness one could achieve. Essentially, it was the means by which a lay person would step into the shoes of a priest of the Lord (Edersheim, Chapter 19). Though not written down until several hundred years later, the Mishnah possibly reveals a view that may have been in place during the first century, teaching that a Nazarite was honored beyond a priest and given the status of a *tzadik*, or righteous one, because one became a Nazarite by choice, not through heredity (Mishna Nazir vi). Fourth, Paul supports the men in this vow to prove that there is nothing to the allegations that had been levied against him by other Jews. In other words, Paul had been accused of teaching against the Torah and its instruction of how to live righteously, and this purification service was to prove beyond a shadow of doubt that there was nothing to these rumors. It was to show that the allegations were false, because Paul was in reality "a righteous one," who lived in obedience to the Torah.

Twelve days later, being falsely accused of bringing a Gentile into the Temple, Paul states emphatically:

Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, **believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets** (Acts 24:13-14, emphasis ours).

Luke is clearly portraying Paul as a Torah-obedient believer in Jesus as the Messiah. In fact, Luke's portrayal of Paul is quite similar to his portrayal of Stephen in Acts 6. Stephen was falsely accused of speaking against Moses (6:11) and the law (6:13). The religious leaders found lying witnesses who said that Stephen wanted to change the customs received from Moses (6:14). Similarly, Paul had been falsely accused of speaking against the law and against Moses (24:13), when in fact he believed and obeyed the Law and the Prophets (24:14). Luke shows that those who attempted to portray Paul as teaching against the Torah, against circumcision, against sacrifices, and against participation in the Temple were lying witnesses. In truth, Paul obeyed the law and encouraged others to do so as well.

Still, some will say, yes, Paul was Torah observant when he was with Jews, but when he wasn't with Jews, he lived as a Gentile. After all, didn't Paul say in 1 Corinthians 9:22 that he was "all things to all people?"

Before we can begin to understand 1 Corinthians 9:22, let's consider its larger context, found in chapters eight through ten. In both chapters eight and ten, Paul deals with issues related to food that has been sacrificed to idols. Chapter nine, which does not address idol sacrifices directly, is sandwiched between them. F.F. Bruce, in his commentary on First Corinthians, notes that some may be surprised by this sudden digression, yet he states there should be little surprise since chapter nine deals with the same larger theme: curtailing one's own freedom in the interest of others (82-83). Similarly, Pauline scholar Ben Witherington III says that chapter nine is less about Paul defending his apostleship as it is Paul "providing an example of self-sacrificial behavior" (203). Again, David E. Garland, commenting on First Corinthians 9, says that Paul writes chapter nine as an example of his counsel in chapters eight and ten. He states that chapter nine "... is integral to Paul's argument about idol food" (396). Therefore, if we are to understand chapter nine, let's begin with chapter eight.

Chapter 8: Love Supersedes our Freedoms

Paul begins in verse one with the topic of the chapter: "Now concerning food sacrificed to idols ..." Chapter eight has many similarities with Romans 14, so much so that we argue [Romans 14](#) addresses the very same issue: eating meat sacrificed to idols and the weaker brother. Paul begins by explaining what he knows about idols:

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one" (8:4).

Yet he goes on to say,

However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do (8:7-8).

If we read chapter eight in isolation, we may think that Paul grants freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols, unless it hurts the conscience of a weaker brother. This interpretation suggests that "strong" believers are not affected by such practices, but that the weak may stumble back into idolatry. However, this is inconsistent with the rulings of the Jerusalem council in which Gentile believers are told to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:29, see Witherington's commentary on Acts 15, p.434), as well as the condemnation of those in the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira who eat food sacrificed to idols (Revelation 2:14, 20). Moreover, it is inconsistent with what Paul says in chapter ten of First Corinthians, which we will discuss below.

Many First Corinthians scholars such as Gordon D. Fee and David E. Garland propose a different interpretation. Paul is not granting the Corinthians the right to participate in eating food sacrificed to idols. He has already written to them about the importance of avoiding idolatry in his previous letter (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:9-10). Most likely the Corinthians have written a response, saying that surely they can eat food sacrificed to idols because they have "knowledge" that idols are nothing and that there is

only one God (8:1,4). According to Fee and Garland, Paul grants them this “knowledge” for the sake of argument, and then shows how even so, they should not participate in idol sacrifices out of love for their brothers and sisters in Christ. As Fee states,

Although Paul will finally forbid their going to the temples, his first concern is with the incorrect ethical basis of their argument. The problem is primarily attitudinal. They think Christian conduct is predicated on *gnōsis* (knowledge) and that knowledge gives them *exousia* (rights/freedom) to act as they will in this matter. Paul has another view: The content of their knowledge is only partially correct; but more importantly, *gnōsis* is not the ground of Christian behavior, love is (363).

Later, Paul will show them that participation in anything associated with idolatry is wrong. For now, he shows that even if it were acceptable, it is harmful to other believers, so we should abstain. Similarly, Garland explains,

Paul's strict monotheism makes him rigidly opposed to any encroachment by religious syncretism, but his argument does not take the form of a raging renunciation of the actions of those who feel free to eat as they please. He chooses a more indirect route to try to convince those who have not yet been persuaded ... Paul leaves aside, for the moment, the theological aspect of the argument and turns to the potential effect of their current behavior on a fellow believer who may not have the same level of theological sophistication to rationalize such behavior or to apprehend its theological consequences (378).

Paul could have, at the start, forbid the Corinthians' syncretism—participating in both worship of the one true God and in idol feasts and sacrifices. But instead, for the moment, he hypothetically grants them the right and then shows that even still, they must act out of love for others and abstain. Later, in chapter ten, he will show that this supposed right or freedom is no right at all and is unacceptable.

Some understand Paul's statement in verse eight to be a declaration that all things are acceptable to eat as food, and therefore we are no longer under the food laws of the Torah. However, the context is not talking about kosher food laws, but rather meat that has been sacrificed to idols. It would be an example of eisegesis, or reading into the text, to interpret this passage as overturning the food laws of the Torah. Paul grants, again for the sake of argument, that eating meat sacrificed to idols is nothing because idols are nothing. He mentions nothing about the food laws found in the Torah. There are many things that God does not designate as food in the Torah (i.e. pig, shellfish, frogs, worms, etc.), and there is nothing to indicate that Paul is discussing any of these here in chapter eight.

In verse nine, Paul introduces the primary theme that will run throughout chapters eight through ten.

But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak (8:9).

We may have (supposed) knowledge, freedom, or rights, but we must not let these interfere with the gospel to the unsaved and the spiritual growth of the saved. Even if we argue that we can rightfully eat food sacrificed to idols, it is a right we must be willing to forego if it causes fellow believers to stumble

(10-13). Their spiritual growth is of utmost importance, to the point that Paul says he will never eat meat if it harms his brother's growth in the Messiah (13).

Chapter 9: Paul Sets Aside His Own Freedoms

This brings us to chapter nine. In chapter eight, Paul discusses the rights and freedoms of believers, and the importance of foregoing these if necessary for the sake of the gospel and the growth of other believers. In chapter nine, Paul will give an example of this very thing by discussing some of his rights and freedoms that he has willingly given up for the sake of the gospel. Paul begins in verse one with a series of rhetorical questions that demonstrate his rights and freedoms based on his apostleship. Paul has the right to eat and drink (4), take a believing wife (5), and refrain from working for a living (6), just as the other apostles do. It is the last right that Paul will focus on for much of chapter nine: the right to subsist on the gospel message and not work for a living.

Paul argues that soldiers are paid for their work, one who plants a vineyard drinks of the wine, and a herdsman drinks the milk (7). Similarly, he says that the priests who work in the temple eat of the offerings sacrificed there (13). These are examples from everyday human experience. But Paul goes further, asking the question, “Do I say these things on human authority?” (8). He then appeals to the authority of the Torah saying, “Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses ...” (8b-9a). Just as the ox can eat freely of some of the grain it treads out, so can Paul expect material provision for his work in proclaiming the gospel (9-11). On the authority of the Torah, Paul and Barnabas have a right to claim support for their work in the harvest of the world (10).

Some have argued that the precepts of the Torah are merely instructional, and not regulatory. However, this is inconsistent with how New Testament authors, including Paul, use the Torah and the entire Old Testament. In his essay entitled “New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” Roger Nicole states that more than ten percent of the New Testament is taken from the Old Testament, either through direct citations or indirect allusions. Nicole says,

From beginning to end, the New Testament authors ascribe unqualified authority to Old Testament Scripture. Whenever advanced, a quotation is viewed as normative. Nowhere do we find a tendency to question, argue, or repudiate the truth of any Scripture utterance” (137ff).

There is simply no scriptural basis for believers to assert that the Old Testament is merely informative, but not authoritative.

A person might disagree, pointing to Matthew 5 as an example. Here Jesus quotes various laws from the Torah (“You have heard ...”), and then seems to supersede or improve upon them (“But I tell you ...”). However, Jesus is not adding to, changing, or improving God's laws, but rather is exposing the heart of the law (i.e. adultery is not merely physical but starts in the heart and mind). Jesus certainly is not negating the external (i.e. “Do not murder”), but showing the condition of the heart (hatred of one's brother is equivalent to murder). In Matthew 5, the Old Testament remains authoritative. Moreover, Jesus applies it to even deeper levels than his listeners expected, requiring greater depths of dedication to God's commandments.

This is so crucial, and we are compelled to chew on this idea a bit longer. When it comes to the Torah, so many believers throw out the “external” law while claiming to cling to the “heart” of its message. We have seen this again and again. For example, many Christians are eager to learn about the significance of the Messiah in God's feast days found in the Torah, but lack the desire to actually participate in the feasts. They feel understanding is enough. But when we apply this same practice (understanding the internal and so dismissing the external) to other commands of God, we see the absurdity of such a practice. For example, let's consider the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14). There is an external aspect of this command, mainly that a husband or wife should not forsake his or her spouse and be joined with another. Yet there is also a deeper significance to this command, one that reveals our relationship to our Creator. He is said to be our husband and we his bride (Isaiah 54:6; Hosea 2:16-20; 2 Corinthians 11:2). We are called to be faithful to him and not join ourselves to other gods/lovers (Exodus 34:14-16; Jeremiah 3). This is the ultimate significance of the seventh commandment. Now, since we understand the “heart” level of “You shall not commit adultery,” may we then dismiss the external command? May we say, “It is okay if I am unfaithful to my spouse. I understand what the command is *really* about, and I will remain faithful to my God”? Certainly not! We are to obey the external command, while at the same time keep in the forefront of our minds the spiritual significance. The beauty of this command, like all of God's commands, is we can practice and rehearse and daily remind ourselves of our faithfulness to our God by being faithful to our earthly spouse. And it is the same with God's feast days, and many other commands in Torah. We must not dismiss them after we “understand” them.

We see in First Corinthians 9 that Paul thought the Torah and wider Old Testament were regulatory, not just in concept but also in application. First of all, his appeal to the Torah is an appeal to authority that is contrasted with and supersedes human authority or teaching. This is the stated purpose of his appeal to the Torah, for he writes in verse eight, “Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same?” Here Paul points out that not only do everyday life and human understanding demonstrate his point (7), but moreover, that which comes from God, of divine authority, demonstrates his point. Paul unabashedly states that the law has divine authority.

Second, he writes, “If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?” (12a). Since Paul can back his claim with the authority of God's Word, then it is clearly a “rightful claim.” It is an obligation that God has placed on the Corinthians through the precepts of the Torah, not just through human authority or examples. Paul has made a solid case because he has based it on the authority of the law. Clearly, for Paul, the Torah was God's authoritative voice that was intended to regulate human conduct.

Some may argue with this, saying that Paul’s statement “Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ” in verse 12b implies that the command was permissive, and thus instructional, but not regulatory. This is a wrong exegesis of the passage, and such a distinction creates a false dichotomy between instruction and regulation. Neither Paul, nor the Torah, creates a distinction between God's instruction and God's

regulation, and therefore, it is a mistake for us to do so. Every instruction God gives Israel in the Torah is expected to be followed. Paul appeals to the Torah as his authority, not merely as some historical reference. If Paul saw the Torah as an authority that superseded human authority to the point of citing a verse dealing with oxen, we cannot allow ourselves to create a false dichotomy by saying the law's purpose was formerly regulatory, but with the coming of Christ, it is now only instructive. For Paul, the Torah is authoritative, and Paul uses the Torah's authority to place obligation on those responsible for provision.

But notice, the obligation is not placed on those doing the work. Using the above examples that Paul gave, does the soldier have to accept pay for his service? Does a farmer have to drink wine? Or is a shepherd required to drink milk? Does an ox have to eat of the grain? Certainly not. In the same way, Paul can choose not to receive subsistence from the Corinthians rather than place an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Paul's lack of demand is not the same as a lack of obligation on the Corinthians.

This brings us to the passage in question. Let's examine it to see if Paul literally gave up the Torah to win those who did not follow the Torah. Further, let's see if he only kept the Torah for the sake of winning Jews.

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. 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. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Paul has just made the case that though he is free (1), he has made himself a servant (also translated slave) (19). The question we should be asking ourselves is, Was Paul really a slave? Clearly not. However, he was willing to be treated as a slave to those he was serving, and was not taking that which actually belonged to him, as a free man would. Does this violate the Torah? No. All the way through verse 16, Paul continues to make his case: though the Corinthians had an obligation to support him by the authority of the Torah, he would not impose that on them. Why? By not imposing this obligation upon them, he would be rewarded in heaven (17). The important key here is that Paul never changed his status from a free man to that of a slave. He was a free man who was not demanding the rights of a free man. Nothing in this section demands that Paul legally changed his status from a free man to a slave.

The next verse (20a), Paul writes that to the Jews he became as a Jew for the purpose of winning Jews. However, unlike the free versus slave analogy above, Paul was a Jew. What does it mean that he became "as a Jew"? Some scholars have posited that "becoming like a Jew" means following all the

laws and regulations set forth in the Torah, though Paul himself was no longer obligated to do so. Fee says the following:

How can a Jew determine to “become *like* a Jew”? The obvious answer is, In matters that have to do with Jewish religious peculiarities that Paul as a Christian had long ago given up as essential to a right relationship with God. These would include circumcision (7:19; Gal. 6:15), food laws (8:8; Gal. 2:10–13; Rom. 14:17; Col. 2:16), and special observances (Col. 2:16) (428).

Here Fee states that the obvious interpretation of this passage is that Paul accepts circumcision, food laws, and special days (i.e. weekly Sabbath and high Sabbaths) when he is among the Jews, for the purpose of winning the Jews. This interpretation raises some concerns. First, Fee claims it is an obvious interpretation, yet there is nothing in the immediate text to suggest that Paul is referring to the ceremonial or civil aspects of the Torah. Might there be a way to “become like a Jew” that includes following cultural or extra-biblical customs? Why is Fee's interpretation any more obvious than one of these, since the text does not offer any specifics? Second, as we showed in Acts, Paul had clearly not given up “special observances” from the Torah. In fact, he supported men in taking a Nazarite vow and was asked to go through a purification ritual, not for the purpose of “becoming like a Jew,” but rather as proof of his faithfulness to God's law and to refute the false allegations spoken against him. Third, Fee cites several passages in Romans, Galatians, and Colossians as support that circumcision, food laws, and special observances (holy days) are done away with. However, there are many valid and strong arguments based on the context of these same passages that show the opposite to be true (see [Galatians 6](#), [Galatians 2](#), [Romans 14](#), [Colossians 2](#)). Fee's support does not necessarily match his claims. It is crucial that the context of these passages be carefully examined.

In contrast, let's look at scholar Dr. Michael Brown, who has published a five volume set, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, and *The Real Kosher Jesus: Revealing the Mysteries of the Hidden Messiah*. Dr. Brown, like Paul, has “become like a Jew to win the Jews.” Michael Brown has a ministry to share the gospel with the Jewish people. He argues that Jesus is the promised Messiah, but he does so from the Old Testament, from the Mishna (the oral traditions of the rabbis that were written down), and from other extra-biblical rabbinic writings. Though a believer in the Messiah, Michael Brown, who is Jewish, becomes a Jew, arguing like them, using their sources and their teachings, in order to win Jews. He shows them how their own rabbis make many statements that support what is taught by the apostles in the New Testament about the Messiah, and then he compares these rabbinic statements to Jesus. This method would not work with Gentiles, yet holds great weight for someone of a Jewish background. Similarly, Paul, when speaking to his countrymen, argued for Jesus' messiahship from their own point of view in order to win them to Christ. He likely participated in some of their practices based on the Oral Law—regulations that were esteemed by the Jews. Neither Brown's nor Paul's method of evangelism has anything to do with observing the written law, the Torah, *to win the Jews*. Observing the law is not an evangelism strategy; it is a matter of obedience to God. On the other hand, understanding the cultural framework of the Jews and using it as a tool to preach the gospel *is* an evangelism strategy. Participating in some of their extra-biblical practices from the Oral Law *is* an

evangelism strategy, as long as these practices do not conflict with God's commands. It is “becoming like a Jew to win the Jews.”

In verse 20b, Paul writes, “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.” Many assume that “under the law” is a synonymous phrase for “like a Jew” in the first part of this verse. Certainly it is common to use parallel phrases to emphasize a point, yet it seems out of place in this particular list since “Jew” (20a), “under the law” (20b), “outside the law” (21), and “weak” (22) cannot all be parallel phrases. In fact, Paul purposely includes a variety of groups to show that he is all things to all people (22). This is not to say that the categories are mutually exclusive, yet none of them are perfectly synonymous. Fee admits the puzzling nature of listing “Jew” and “under the law” in a list of varying groups, yet still claims they are synonymous:

[Under the law] is more puzzling. Ordinarily this would obviously refer to Jews; but does it also do so when listed as a second item following “the Jews”? Most likely it does, and is so expressed because the specific issue was related not simply to matters of national origin but especially to matters of Jewish (religious) legal requirements (428).

Again, there are several concerns with Fee's understanding of “under the law.” He states the specific issue is related to matters of Jewish legal requirements in the Torah, but he does not give support from the context of First Corinthians 9, nor other Pauline passages. How do we know Paul is referring to those who follow the regulations in the Torah? First Corinthians 9 provides very little context to determine what Paul means, so we must look at how Paul uses “under the law” (*hupo nomos* in Greek) in other passages.

In our discussion on the book of [Romans](#), we discuss the term *hupo nomos*, translated “under the law.” As we explain, *hupo nomos* consistently refers to those who are without Christ and therefore slaves to sin. This status puts them under the penalty of the law. *Hupo nomos* is never applied to believers, but rather to those who are in an unregenerate state, and while it may refer to unbelieving Jews, it may also apply to Gentiles. Garland agrees, saying, “‘To be under the law’ means to be judged by the law (Romans 2:12), to be under divine wrath as a violator of the law (Romans 4:15), and under a curse (Galatians 3:10)” (430). Where “as a Jew” indicates identifying with a particular culture, “under the law” indicates identifying with a status before God: under his judgment (as opposed to under his grace).

This, of course, raises an issue with the immediate text. How could Paul present himself as *hupo nomos*, under the penalty of the law, in an unregenerate state, when in reality, Paul is *hupo charis*, under grace? Again, common sense must prevail here. When we are speaking to the unsaved, do we come to them with a spirit of arrogance telling them that we are going to heaven, but they are going to hell? Obviously, this is not a productive approach. Instead, we help to reveal their need for a Savior because we too have a need for a Savior. We may ask if they have committed adultery, lied, or stolen. We confess that we too have done this previously, and were under the judgment of God for our sins. In

other words, we relate to those who are lost, identifying with them in their state of being *hupo nomos* in order to show them a path from their predicament.

As believers, now under grace, we are still able to relate to those who are under the law, because we have not yet seen the fullness of our salvation. This is what Paul so poignantly depicts in Romans 7:14-25:

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Just as Paul openly admitted, we still struggle with sin and are fully aware of the battle between our flesh and our minds. We eagerly await the full reality of our salvation, when both our minds and bodies will be redeemed (Romans 8:23). Because of this struggle, we can identify with and understand those who are under the law, though we are no longer under the law.

Next, Paul says he becomes like one outside the law, to win those outside the law (21). Again, Fee assumes this means that Paul adopts Gentile customs that are contrary to Jewish Law. He states,

To put it in more contemporary terms, when [Paul] was among Jews he was kosher; when he was among Gentiles he was nonkosher precisely because, as with circumcision, neither mattered to God (cf. 7:19; 8:8) (427).

The implication of Fee's understanding is that God's commands given to Israel were arbitrary. It would mean that God's commands didn't really matter to him but were arbitrarily chosen for some reason other than their importance to the Creator, and therefore, they can be discarded to win those who do not follow them. Is this what Paul meant when he said he became like one outside the law? The burden of proof is on Fee, for where does Paul say, "To win the Gentile, I ate their pork, shellfish, or other biblically-unclean food"? Someone might point to Galatians two, where Paul corrects Peter for withdrawing from eating with Gentiles. In our discourse on [Galatians 2](#), we show that Peter was in the wrong, not because he didn't eat biblically unclean foods (which would have violated God's law), but rather because he didn't eat with Gentiles. Peter chose to follow the Jewish Oral Law that forbid eating with Gentiles, even though such a law was in direct conflict with God's law. Fee cites 1 Corinthians 8:8 as support for the idea that Paul eats nonkosher foods to win the Gentiles, yet the context of this

passage (discussed above) is not talking about eating unclean meats such as pork, but rather eating food sacrificed to idols (which Paul does not permit for multiple reasons—see chapter eight above—even if it allows you to relate to Gentiles).

Garland rejects the idea that Paul took on Gentile customs when he was among Gentiles and says, “The principle ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’ did not regulate [Paul’s] actions” (431). Rather, when Paul states that he becomes all things to all people, he means that he will always sacrifice himself for the sake of the people he is preaching the gospel to. It is not about living their lifestyle; rather, it is about modeling the example of Christ who came in the likeness of man, as a servant (Philippians 2:7), though he was by nature God (Philippians 2:6). Christ is the ultimate example of self-sacrifice and humility to win souls, and Paul follows this example.

Becoming like one outside the law does not mean becoming lawless for the convenience of sharing the gospel. It does not mean changing God’s instruction given to his people. Paul does not encourage us to compromise our obedience in order to more effectively preach God’s Word.

So what does Paul change? Where is he flexible? He is flexible in areas of freedom that God has granted us. For example, there are certain cultural practices that do not violate God’s commands, which we have the freedom to either participate or not participate in. In such areas, Paul did what most effectively reached his audience. Becoming as one “without the law” would include using cultural elements that are important to a specific group of people in order to help them understand the gospel. This is a missionary strategy that is still used today. The movie, *The End of the Spear*, documents Operation Auca, in which five Christian missionaries evangelized the members of the Waodani tribe. One of the tribesman, Mincayani, speared the missionaries. Yet later, the son of one of the missionaries returns to show them that God’s son allowed himself to be speared and did not retaliate, and because this missionary followed Jesus, he also would not retaliate. This movie shows how “becoming as one outside the law (not outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law” is rightly interpreted. Notice that the missionaries did not become spearmen to win the Waodani tribe, but rather used the tribe’s own culture, even a cruel aspect of their culture (spearing others), to show the magnificence of God, and thereby, win them to Christ.

Similarly, Paul did not become a pagan to win pagans. He did not become an idolater to win idolaters, an adulterer or a participant in child sacrifice to win adulterers or those practicing heinous idolatrous sacrifices. He did not even eat meat sacrificed to idols to become like those who ate meat sacrificed to idols. He did not give up the Torah to win those who do not follow the Torah. Just as the Christian missionaries remained Christian, but used a cultural aspect of the Waodani tribe in order to reach them on their level, so too Paul remained faithful to the Torah, but used Gentile cultural aspects to reveal the One True God. We see an example of this in Acts, when in Athens:

Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship,

I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring." Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:22-31).

Here, Paul finds an object from Gentile culture, an altar to an unknown God, and uses it to proclaim to them a God they do not know—the true God, who made the world. He started with something they could understand and used it to preach the gospel. He became as one “outside the law.”

What, then, is the meaning of Paul’s statement, “not outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ?” Paul is making sure his readers know that he is not living outside God’s law, and that he is not actually *hupo nomos*, under the reign of sin, but rather is *hupo charis*, under grace. *Hupo charis* is a synonym for being under the law of Christ because it is only through Christ that we leave our status as being *hupo nomos* (a slave to sin, under the penalty of the law) and live in the forgiveness found through Christ’s death. Should Paul have not written this, the Corinthians may have questioned whether Paul found himself actually a slave to sin once again and fallen from grace, or believed wrongly that Paul was not living in obedience to God’s Torah. This statement makes it clear that Paul is simply reaching out to people where they are, not acting like them where they are. This is another example of how Paul imitated Christ, who left his dwelling place in heaven to dwell with men in their fallen state, but did not live sinfully, violating the Torah as men do. As Garland states, Paul “conformed to the pattern of his Lord. He imitates Christ's self-emptying humiliation and suffering for others” (436).

Paul continues this same theme, saying that he becomes weak to the weak (22). He has already given specific instruction on how he becomes weak to the weak in chapter eight, where he is willing to permanently forego eating meat if it causes his weaker brother to stumble. The theme of self-sacrifice for the sake of the gospel continues through the end of the chapter, where Paul describes his self-discipline to win the prize. He is driven, his focus is unwavering, and his willingness to forego pleasures and rights is constant.

Chapter 10: Our Freedoms are Limited by God's Word

Paul has made clear that the believer has many freedoms and rights, and that we can choose to

relinquish them for the sake of others. However, at the start of chapter ten, Paul makes equally clear that our freedoms and rights are limited by God's Word. Most assuredly, we do not have the right or freedom to participate in sin. Using Israel as an example, Paul reminds the Corinthians not to “desire evil as [the Israelites] did” (10:6). For example, we should not practice idolatry, engage in sexual immorality, test God, or grumble (10:7-10). Unlike Paul's personal examples in chapter nine where a believer can choose to participate or not participate in a certain activity (i.e. eating meat, taking a wife, receiving payment for preaching the gospel), we do not have the freedom to disobey God. We do not obey God simply for the sake of the weaker brother. We obey God because God asks us to and he is our king.

At this point in chapter ten, Paul returns to the issue of meat sacrificed to idols. Recall, in chapter eight Paul hypothetically, for the sake of argument, grants the Corinthians freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but tells them that even so, they should abstain for the sake of the weaker brother. Now, in chapter ten, Paul strongly states that the Corinthians are to have nothing to do with idol sacrifices.

In chapter 10:14-22, Paul's focus is not on the weaker brother, but rather on idolatry and obeying God's commandment that we worship him alone (Exodus 20:3-4). If we participate in idol feasts and sacrifices, we are then participants with demons (20). As Paul says,

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (10:21-22)

Now we see that the “strong” Corinthians' knowledge was lacking, or as Fee said, partial. Yes, idols are really just stone and wood and are nothing, and yes, there is only one God. However, lurking behind idolatry is the strong influence of demons. This teaching is not original to Paul. We find the same teaching in Moses' song:

They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with abominations they provoked him to anger. **They sacrificed to demons that were no gods**, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded (Deuteronomy 32:16-17, emphasis ours).

Paul understands, just as Moses, that idolatry is the worship of and submission to demons, and we must have nothing to do with it.

In 10:23-30, Paul shifts to meat of questionable origin such as that sold in the marketplace or served at the home of an unbeliever. In such cases, the meat is not a part of an idolatrous practice, and Paul informs his readers that they do not need to investigate its origin. He states that believers can eat whatever meat is sold in the marketplace and eat meat served in the home of an unbeliever without questioning its origin. In such a case, the meat is simply meat, unassociated with idolatry, unattached to demonic strongholds. However, if someone informs them that it was part of an idol sacrifice, they are to refrain from eating it. Garland offers insight into this, saying,

Paul allows Christians to circulate in pagan society, but there are limits to what is permissible. They may not eat anything that is openly announced as having been “offered in sacrifice to the gods” ... If anyone declares that the meal has the slightest religious significance, Christians must not partake. From Paul's perspective, it becomes idol food and forbidden when someone openly proclaims it to be so (493-494).

If believers knowingly eat food offered to idols, then they proclaim that idolatry is acceptable. Therefore, Paul gives firm direction not to eat meat if we find out that it was sacrificed to an idol, even if it is not directly a part of a temple feast. This directly applies to us today. We may find meat in our local grocery store that is labeled "halal," meaning it has been slaughtered unto Allah, the god of Islam. We should therefore refrain from eating it since it is meat that has been sacrificed to a false god.

Verses 29b-30 cause some confusion, especially following verse 28. Together they read as follows:

But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? (10:28-30)

It seems as though Paul is now shifting his position, claiming that if we find out the meat was sacrificed to an idol, we should avoid it only for the sake of another's conscience, and not because of its significance as idol food. Then he seems even to negate the importance of the other's conscience, saying, “Why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?” In other words, why should what someone else thinks determine what I can and cannot do? This is completely inconsistent with everything he has just said. In the first place, whether or not it is associated with an idol does matter, for we do not want to promote and therefore condone anything related to idolatry. Second, even if it was okay (such as the argument in chapter eight), we still must not partake for the sake of the one who may be harmed by such an act. So can Paul now be saying, “My freedom is not determined by another's conscience?” That is exactly what he has argued against, starting in chapter eight.

Garland offers a helpful explanation (499), in which verse 28-29a is a parenthetical comment, sandwiched between verses 27 and 29b-30. The passage then would read like this:

27 If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. 28 (But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— 29 I do not mean your conscience, but his.) For why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience? 30 If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?

Verse 27 reads, “If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.” Here Paul says we can go to an unbeliever's house and eat what they serve without worrying about its origin.

In verse 28, Paul inserts a parenthetical reminder: if you find out the food was sacrificed to an idol, do not eat it, for the sake of the conscience of the informant. The word for conscience is a “slippery word” (Garland, 496) that does not have to mean a sense of ethical right and wrong; it can also refer to an “awareness” or “consciousness,” which would simply mean the informant is the one who knows the food is religiously significant (i.e. sacrificed to an idol), and he has shared this knowledge with you (ibid). You now therefore need to change your actions in light of this knowledge.

If we remove the parenthetical comment, we can see the flow of Paul's argument and connection between verse 27 and 29b-30:

27 If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. 29b For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? 30 If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?

Thus, in verse 29, he returns to the thought left off in 27: we can eat whatever is served to us at the house of an unbeliever without raising questions on the basis of conscience (27), for we have liberty to partake with thankfulness (29b-30). Garland explains,

If one can partake with thankfulness to the one true God, how can one be denounced for eating that over which one has said a prayer of thanksgiving? When someone specifies that the food is sacrificial food, the situation is different: the Christian must not eat. In all other cases, the Christian may eat even if the food may have been sacrificed to an idol without the Christian knowing it (499).

This parenthetical understanding makes the most sense of the context of chapters eight through ten, as well as the wider New Testament (cf. Acts 15; Revelation 2).

Paul closes chapter ten with a summary statement of the last few chapters:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved (31-33).

This has been Paul's point through most of chapters eight, nine, and ten. He has become “all things to all people” (9:22), meaning that he willingly foregoes his rights and freedoms to bless others, allowing them to hear the gospel and grow in the Messiah.

Again, we must stress that Paul can only adapt himself in areas of freedom. He cannot adapt himself in areas of God's instruction. If God says, "Do not commit adultery," Paul will uphold and obey this commandment instead of becoming an adulterer to win adulterers. He makes it his goal to give no offense to anyone (10:32), yet he will uphold a commandment, even if it offends his audience, because it is not within an area of freedom. God's commandments are not optional for the sake of preaching the gospel to a certain group. Garland agrees:

Paul is flexible, but he is "not infinitely elastic." He does not think that fundamental and distinctive Christian demands are negotiable, depending on the circumstances. He did not eat idol food in order to become "as one without the law to those without the law." He did not tone down his assault on idolatry to avoid offending idolaters or to curry favor with them. His accommodation has nothing to do with watering down the gospel message, soft-pedaling its ethical demands, or compromising its absolute monotheism. Paul never modified the message of Christ crucified to make it less of a scandal to Jews or less foolish to Greeks. The preacher of the changeless gospel could adapt himself, however, to changing audiences in seeking their ultimate welfare, their salvation. Through his mediation of the gospel he seeks their transformation (435).

Returning in brief to the Acts passages mentioned at the beginning of this study, we recall that some have said Paul only obeyed the Torah to become "as a Jew." In order to make this case, one must be able to show that obeying or disobeying the very commands of God is a freedom that Paul had. Was obeying the commandments optional for Paul? If in Acts Paul proves that he lives in complete observance of the law (Acts 21:20-24), how can he at times choose to put aside the law for the sake of the Gentiles? That would be inconsistency at best, and hypocrisy and deceit at worst. Paul himself said in Romans that he upholds the law (Romans 3:31). He says that God's law is holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). How can Paul uphold the law while at the same time be free from obeying its precepts? How can he claim freedom from that which is holy, righteous, and good?

The answer is that Paul does not have the freedom to disobey God's law. The context of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 is not about obeying God's commandments to win the Jews and then discarding them to win the Gentiles. Neither the Sabbath, nor the biblical holy days, nor the food laws, nor any other aspect of God's commands for his people are cited as examples of freedom in 1 Corinthians 9. Rather, Paul gives examples such as taking a wife, eating meat, and accepting pay for ministry. A person will be hard pressed to make the case that Paul is referring to the Torah since Paul does not cite any part of it as an example of freedom.

In fact, Paul does discuss the law in 1 Corinthians 9, not as an area of freedom in which he can choose to participate, nor as an evangelism strategy, but rather, as a source of authority (9:8-14). The implication of this is severe. Paul believed in the authority of the entire Word of God. We cannot explain away Paul's obedience to the law as "becoming like a Jew" when he does not explain it as such. Rather, he obeys the Torah because he knows that God's law is authoritative. We simply cannot claim

the freedom to set aside God's commands as we choose.

Disobeying God's law is not an option or freedom for Paul or any believer. Support for such an idea is usually based on misinterpretation of (mostly) Pauline passages about the law, taken out of context, as well as ignorance, whether accidental or deliberate, of what God says about the nature of his law. That is why we strive to examine Paul's passages here and elsewhere, to show their consistency with the entire Word of God.

Conclusion

Interpretation of ancient texts is quite an undertaking, and 1 Corinthians is no exception. We are reading someone else's mail from two thousand years ago, and we only have pieces of the correspondence between Paul and the Corinthian church. Beyond these challenges, we recognize that it was a completely different culture with different sociological, economic, and religious values and practices. Even the vocabulary such as the word "circumcision" was nuanced and therefore easily misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misapplied. Therefore, we have attempted to approach the text with caution and humility.

We argue that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7, is not devaluing circumcision as a command of God, but rather admonishes his readers to keep God's commands (7:19). So what does Paul mean when he says that "neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision" (19)? Paul uses "circumcision" and "uncircumcision" as makers of social identity, the first being ethnically Jewish, and the latter being born a Gentile. Neither of these matter when it comes to relationship with God. In fact, no social identity has any bearing on being a covenant member of the people of God – ethnic Jew or Gentile, married or single, slave or free – all are invited and welcome in the family of God. Paul stresses that people need not and should not change their social status to be saved.

In chapters eight through ten, Paul discusses the freedoms and rights we have in Christ. For example we have the right to eat meat sold in the marketplace, to take a believing spouse, and to receive pay for ministry. However, we must be willing to give up these rights in order to effectively preach the gospel to unbelievers or encourage our weaker brothers and sisters in the Lord. This was not only Paul's example, but moreover, Christ's example. As Paul states in Philippians 2:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:3–8).

Jesus was God himself, yet he willingly gave up his rights and became a servant, ultimately laying down his life. If he did that for us, we should be willing to give up much lesser rights such as what food we eat or how much pay we receive.

In context, therefore, this passage is not about whether we can disobey God's law and if we can eat meat sacrificed to idols – we already know from this passage and many others, both Old and New Testament, that we must avoid such things. Further, it is not about obeying the Torah only when among Jews as a gospel strategy – Paul sought to always uphold the law. Rather, it is about taking on an attitude of service and humility – always obeying God, and being ever willing to quickly give up what we think is rightfully ours in order to spread the gospel. May our attitude be that of Christ Jesus.

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