

Implications for Missions from Paul's Ministry in 1 Corinthians

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When the theme of missions is studied, 1 Corinthians is often overlooked or ignored.¹ The cause of this is obvious. First Corinthians deals primarily with the circumstances that existed within that congregation. Paul writes this letter in response to several questions the Corinthians had earlier written to him (concerning marriage, food sacrificed to idols, spiritual gifts, and the collection).² Paul also writes because he has heard of some problems in the church from "Chloe's household" (1 Cor 1:11). Problems such as divisions, incest, lawsuits, and immorality were plaguing the congregation. Thus, Paul's primary focus is to instruct and admonish the Corinthians concerning their questions and problems.

Yet, 1 Corinthians has much to offer when considering missions and evangelism. Throughout this letter, even as Paul is focusing on the church's internal struggles, Paul's desire and heart for missions is evident. Many in the Corinthian congregation were consumed with themselves and Paul knows that ungodly attitudes and actions are not only dangerous for those in the church (since "the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God," 1 Cor 6:9) but he also knows that it damages their testimony or credibility with those outside the church. This article will therefore seek to draw out some key implications for missions through the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul.³ We will look at (i) his message: "Christ crucified"; (ii) his method: "The foolishness of preaching"; (iii) his means: "Working with our

own hands"; and (iv) his motive: "So that they may be saved."

Paul's Message: "Christ Crucified"

Paul makes it abundantly clear that the center of his message was always "Christ crucified."

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, But to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor 1:18).
But we preach Christ crucified....
(1 Cor 1:23)
For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified (1 Cor 2:2).⁴

Paul's message was the cross of Christ. Although he does not go into detail as to why the cross of Christ is central to the gospel in the context of the passages quoted above, we know from elsewhere that it is because on the cross Christ paid the penalty that was due to each sinner.⁵ He was the divine substitute who endured the wrath of God for all those who trust in Him.⁶ Paul's understanding of the centrality of the cross permeates all his thinking. "He cannot long talk about Christian joy, or Christian ethics, or Christian fellowship, or the Christian doctrine of God, or anything else, without finally tying it to the cross. Paul is gospel-centered; he is cross-centered."⁷

In a predominately Christian context, the cross of Christ seems to make perfect sense and is a cherished concept. But for most of the world the crucifixion of Jesus presents something that is weak and fool-

ish. Paul admits that the “the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” (1:18; also see v. 21). He then adds, “but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness” (1:23). Thus the very heart of the gospel message becomes a barrier to those who hear it. To those seeking signs and wisdom the gospel message is weakness and folly. Why is this so? It is because a crucified Messiah is the “ultimate divine contradiction.”⁸ Messiah was equated with power, glory, and triumph; whereas crucifixion was equated with weakness, shame, and defeat. For the Romans the crucifixion was the most severe penalty, usually reserved for insurrectionists and other extreme criminals.

The Jews sought miraculous signs since the Messiah would be one of great power, able to defeat the Romans. When the Jews demanded a sign from Jesus during his ministry, they were not asking for *any* miraculous manifestation, but one that would offer proof that he was indeed the Messiah.⁹ Yet, Jesus failed to produce such evidence. The Messiah was supposed to defeat the Romans, not be crucified by them! In Jewish theology to hang on a cross meant being cursed by God (cf. Deut 21:23).¹⁰ Thus, to the Jews, Jesus is a cursed criminal who failed to bring deliverance to his people.

The Greeks, on the other hand, sought wisdom. To the high-minded philosophers the cross as a symbol of one’s religion was foolishness. Why belong to such a weak, humiliating religion? Only a fool would commit himself to a religion like Christianity. Therefore, for all humanity the crucifixion of Jesus is an offense. As Fee explains, “It is hard for those in the christianized West, where the cross for almost nineteen centuries has been the primary symbol of

faith, to appreciate how utterly mad the message of a God who got himself crucified by his enemies must have seemed to the first-century Greek or Roman.”¹¹ But Paul did not yield to the temptation to alter the gospel. Instead of power and wisdom Paul preached the weak and foolish message of “Christ crucified.”

Apparently Paul felt a pressing need to remind the Corinthians concerning the centrality of the cross because they had lost the proper focus. The superior attitudes of some led them to form factions and look down on others. Perhaps some of the Corinthians began to think that the message of the cross was too humiliating. They had moved on to “higher” things related to wisdom and knowledge. They only wanted a victorious, risen Christ who conquers all his enemies. They did not want a Christ who suffered the humiliating death on a cross—a symbol of shame and weakness. Yet, Paul’s argument is that the message of the cross is the centerpiece of the gospel. A gospel without the cross is no gospel at all.¹² We move away from Biblical Christianity when we move away from the cross.¹³ “Paul recognizes that to move beyond the cross is not to ‘move on’ at all, but is to abandon Christ altogether.”¹⁴ The heart of Paul’s message was the cross of Christ.

Oftentimes, however, the cross, while not being forgotten, becomes ignored. Our intentions are good but somehow we succumb to the temptation to displace the cross with our modern insights. Carson warns us of this danger: “I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight. Whenever the periphery is in danger of displacing the center, we are

not far removed from idolatry.”¹⁵

Sharing the gospel with our neighbors or with people of another culture on the other side of the world can be a complex process. There are many factors to consider related to their knowledge of the Bible (or lack of it), their willingness to listen, or their differing worldviews. Nevertheless, we must not shy away from focusing on the crucifixion. The gospel has not truly been shared until the cross of Christ has been explained. Oftentimes, the most appropriate starting point is not the cross of Christ. But until we have explained the necessity of Christ’s death on the cross for sinners, we still have more to share.

We need to trust in God’s wisdom (which might sometimes appear foolish to us) and not rely on our own wisdom. There is always a temptation to present a Jesus more palatable to the likings of our hearers. We might reason that they will not understand the concept of a crucified Messiah or, even if they understand the message, it will not be acceptable in their culture. But to eliminate the scandal, the offense, is to eliminate the heart of the gospel message. Yes, it is foolishness, but it is God’s foolishness and as such is not to be altered. We must remember that God’s foolishness is wiser than our greatest insights.

Yet, the very message that seems weak and foolish to some becomes the message of hope and salvation to others. While some are offended, others are attracted.¹⁶ They are attracted because God promises to bless his Word and so the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of unbelievers and causes them to see their need of a Savior. The message of the cross is the power of God. To eliminate this message is to eliminate the only power to change hearts. God is able to work in many ways, but God

chose in his divine wisdom to work primarily through the foolishness of the message of a crucified Messiah. “The preaching of the cross alone has the power to set people free.”¹⁷

Paul’s Method: “The Foolishness of Preaching”

Paul’s method of communicating the message of a crucified Messiah was through the foolishness of preaching. He states, “God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1:21).¹⁸ Christ had not called Paul to baptize but, more importantly, “to preach the gospel” (*euangelizesthai*, 1:17).¹⁹ Paul explains to the Corinthians that not only is the message foolish but the method by which that message is delivered is also foolish. But the Corinthians cannot downplay the effectiveness of such a foolish method since that is precisely the means by which they were converted. Paul states,

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God (1 Cor 2:1-5).

In this text Paul is most likely alluding to the Sophists of his day. Many types of philosophers praised the art of eloquent and persuasive speaking, but the Sophists were best known for their oratorical abilities. Apparently, the Corinthians were also enamored with such oratorical prowess,

but Paul explains that their very spiritual existence was based on weak preaching (cf. 2 Cor 10:1, 10). He did not use the flashy but empty techniques that were so common in his day.²⁰ Paul in no way sought to exalt himself. His focus was solely on Christ. For Paul to seek to elevate himself by his rhetorical ability or philosophical reasoning would go against his “philosophy of ministry.”²¹ For, he says, he had already determined that the focus of his ministry was to proclaim the cross of Christ. Paul knew that the effectiveness of the preached message was not based on the polished performance of the speaker, but rather on the powerful presence of the Spirit. Later Paul would write to the Corinthians, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves” (2 Cor 4:7; cf. 2 Cor 13:4). The Corinthians were persuaded by Paul’s message not because he spoke with eloquent words of wisdom but because the Holy Spirit was present to bless the message. Thus, their faith rests on God’s work and not Paul’s.²² The power of God was demonstrated through Paul’s preaching since the Corinthians themselves were converted.

People will not come to a true knowledge of God and his work in Jesus Christ by using their own wisdom (1 Cor 1:21). They need to hear the message of the cross explained to them (cf. Rom 10:14-15). It was God’s divine plan that the world would come to know God not on the basis of its own wisdom, but rather through the foolishness of preaching. This is because “a God discovered by human wisdom will be both a projection of human fallenness and a source of human pride, and this constitutes the worship of the creature, not the Creator” (cf. Rom 1:18-32).²³

The preaching of the gospel must also not be manipulative. Paul writes, “my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom” (2:4). This verse, of course, must be balanced with 2 Corinthians 5:11, which states, “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men.” What Paul means is that he avoided manipulative persuasion. That is, he never sought to make the gospel less offensive in order to get desired results. He would not feed people’s “felt needs” simply to have decisions for Christ. Paul knew that such “decisions” were based “on the wisdom of men” and not “on the power of God” (1 Cor 2:5). According to Paul, only the gospel of a crucified Christ has the power to truly change lives.

As we seek to communicate the gospel we must never compromise the integrity of our message by embracing a method that runs contrary to that message. Paul was not against a prepared and passionate presentation of the gospel, but against the type of performance that left people astonished at the skill of the preacher instead of the grace of the Creator. As we shall later see, Paul was incredibly flexible as he accommodated to the culture of his hearers. Yet, in his flexibility, Paul made sure that the message of the gospel was not jeopardized. Carson aptly comments,

When the pressure to “contextualize” the gospel jeopardizes the message of the cross by inflating human egos, the cultural pressures must be ignored. . . . [H]owever great Paul’s flexibility and cultural sensitivity, they are not open-ended; he draws the line where he thinks the gospel might be jeopardized. And clearly he thinks the gospel is jeopardized by any kind of eloquence or rhetoric that does not reinforce the message of a crucified Messiah.²⁴

We should also not impose our modern understanding of “preaching” on the New Testament texts. Paul’s understanding of preaching the gospel is not limited to someone standing behind a pulpit and delivering a sermon. Rather, it is simply proclaiming to others the message of Jesus Christ.²⁵ It means bringing good news to those who desperately need it. Those who proclaim the gospel do not need to be eloquent and polished speakers. It does not even require training or a degree. What is needed is a basic knowledge of the gospel combined with boldness (to take a foolish message to the lost) and humility (knowing that only God has the power to change hearts). The gospel message should, however, be proclaimed with authority since it is God’s authoritative Word that confronts and convicts people.

Paul’s Means: “Working with Our Own Hands”

The means of Paul’s financial support came primarily from “working with [his] own hands” (1 Cor 4:12). In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul offers several reasons why he is entitled to receive material compensation for his labor among the Corinthians. His point, however, is that although he had the right to receive such compensation, he refused any support so that the gospel would not be hindered.

The Context of Paul’s Argument

Besides being a missionary who traveled extensively planting churches, Paul also worked a “secular” job. Luke records that when Paul came to Corinth during his second missionary journey he stayed with Aquila and Priscilla because they were of the same trade as the Apostle (i.e., they were both tent-makers; Acts 18:3).²⁶ As a general rule, Paul did not receive money

from the people to whom he was currently ministering.

In 1 Corinthians 9:1-18, Paul offers more insight as to why he did not accept money from the Corinthians. These verses are found in the context of Paul’s teaching concerning meat sacrificed to idols (chs. 8-10). His argument in chapter 8 is that although an idol is really nothing more than the work of men’s hands and therefore is useless, some do not understand this truth. Consequently, we must be careful not to offend the weak. It is better, he argues, to abstain from eating meat offered to idols than to cause someone to stumble. That is, although we have the Christian liberty to eat such meat, we give up this liberty for the sake of others.

In chapter 9 Paul offers his own life as an example of giving up such rights for the sake of others.²⁷ In a series of questions, Paul reminds the Corinthians that he is an apostle who received his commission directly from the risen Lord. While others might doubt the legitimacy of his apostleship, the Corinthians cannot since they became Christians under his ministry (9:1-2). He then argues, “Do we not have a right to eat and drink? Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?” (9:4-5). His point in these verses is that like other ministers of the gospel, he too has the right to have the Corinthians supply his daily needs (v. 4) and to have a wife who would accompany him in his ministry (v. 5). He then adds, “Or do only Barnabas and I not have the right to refrain from working?” (9:6). Paul had the right to refrain from working a trade in order to survive. Yet, Paul did not demand these rights but sacrificed them for the sake of the gospel.

The Content of Paul's Argument

In verses 7-14 Paul gives at least four reasons why he had the right to receive material compensation for his labor among the Corinthians.

Argument from Culture

Sprinkled throughout this passage Paul gives several examples of other types of laborers who are supported from the work they perform. In 1 Corinthians 9:7 he lists three. A *soldier* does not serve in an army at his own expense. A *farmer* who plants a vineyard eats the fruit of his labor. A *shepherd* who tends the flocks drinks the milk of the flock. In verse 10 Paul mentions the *plowman* and the *thresher* who both hope to share in the crops. Finally, he brings his example even closer to home by using an example of religious service. Paul reminds the Corinthians that in Jewish or pagan temples even the *priests* who help in the religious sacrifices also share in the sacrificial food (9:13).

Argument from Scripture

But Paul is not content to let his case stand based on the argument from culture alone. Paul proceeds to point out that Scripture itself supports Paul's argument. Therefore to bolster his position Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 25:4, which reads, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing" (9:9).²⁸ Paul is using the common Rabbinical argument of lesser to the greater (*qal wahomer* or *a fortiori*). In other words, if animals that work are not to be denied reward for their labor, how much more should men be granted payment for their labor. Paul simply applies this principle to himself and his ministry among the Corinthians. Just as it was wrong to muzzle an ox while he is threshing (i.e., working), so also it is wrong not to support financially

those who work in order to advance the kingdom of God.

Argument from Precedent

Paul's third defense, as it were, is to argue from precedent. He reminds the Corinthians that others have exercised the very right that Paul is claiming. He states, "If others share this right over you, do we not more?" (9:12a). Since the Corinthians gave support to others, certainly Paul deserved such support. He was, after all, the one who first introduced them to the Savior and thus they became the very seal of his apostleship (9:2). Perhaps the Corinthians thought that since Paul did not accept financial assistance from them that he did not possess the right to do so.

Argument from the Lord

Paul clinches his argument based on the words of Jesus. He writes, "So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel" (9:14). Paul is most likely referring to Jesus' saying in Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7, which reads, "The worker is worthy of his wages." In the context of Matthew and Luke Jesus instructs the disciples whom he sent out to preach in the surrounding villages. Therefore, Paul rightly interprets Jesus' statement to mean that those who spend the majority of their time preaching the gospel have the right to receive compensation for their labor.

The Conclusion of Paul's Argument

The key principle in this section is found in verse 12 where Paul adds, "Nevertheless we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ." Again in verse 15 he notes, "But I have used none of these [rights]." Paul's rights as an apostle

and Christian worker gave way to the principle of not hindering the advance of the gospel. "When it becomes a choice, therefore, between his 'rights' and others' hearing of the gospel, there is no choice at all; anything that would get in the way of someone's hearing the gospel for what it is, the good news of God's pardoning grace, can be easily laid aside."²⁹

Paul makes it clear to the Corinthians that, in arguing for his right to receive material compensation from them, he is not now wishing to exercise that right (9:15). Later Paul would add that he is not like those who peddle the Word of God for money (2 Cor 2:17). For Paul to receive money for his labors would diminish his satisfaction of being able to proclaim the gospel without charge. He did not preach the gospel voluntarily, but under compulsion (9:16-17). Preaching the gospel without compensation *was* Paul's reward because it was evidence to both himself and others that the grace of God had transformed his life and desires (9:18). This type of sacrificial lifestyle demonstrated that Paul's treasure was not on earth but in heaven.

Paul therefore gives us a theological justification for supporting Christian workers, such as pastors and missionaries. Although Paul did not normally accept financial compensation for his labors among the churches, he acknowledges that he is an exception to the rule. His argument is that although he had the right to receive compensation for his labors, he relinquished that right so that the gospel would not be hindered.³⁰ Thus, we see two principles from this text. First, Christian workers should be paid for their labors when possible. Second, sometimes it might be more advantageous for Christian workers to "work with their own hands."

At times there are advantages for a missionary to earn his living through "tent-making." First, it gives churches the ability to send more missionaries. In many countries the cost of living is extremely high, making it difficult for churches to support missionaries in such countries. Missionaries should be willing to earn their own living if that will help the cause of the gospel. Second, it gives missionaries freedom from the control of others. Missionaries should be careful whenever requesting or even accepting pay for their ministry. It is possible that those who pay the worker may feel that they now deserve in some way to control what that person says or does.³¹ Third, it gives missionaries access into "closed countries." Another advantage of the "tent-making" approach is that often-times it is not possible to get into a country unless a Christian is prepared to employ their business or educational skills to gain access into a country (such as teaching English). Fourth, it gives missionaries opportunities to share the gospel with others. Working a "secular" job often provides many opportunities to share the gospel with co-workers.³²

Paul's Motive: "So That They May Be Saved"

Paul was unmovable when it came to the message of the gospel. Salvation can only be attained when a repentant sinner trusts in the finished work of Christ. Yet, there was flexibility in Paul's ministry. He did whatever it took to bring the gospel message to the lost. He explains,

For although I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that

I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some (1 Cor 9:19-23).

By not receiving material support for his labors Paul is thereby free from the manipulating tendency of man and is free to offer himself as a slave to all to win as many as possible. Although it is difficult, or even impossible, to know the precise manner in which Paul accommodated his behavior based on his setting, it seems likely that Paul is mainly reflecting on his differing conduct in Jewish and Gentile settings. “To put it in more contemporary terms, when he was among Jews he was kosher; when he was among Gentiles he was non-kosher—precisely because, as with circumcision, neither mattered to God.”³³

As a Jewish *Christian* Paul was no longer obligated to follow the Jewish customs of circumcision, food laws, and special observances. Yet, as a *Jewish* Christian, and when ministering to Jews, he was free to keep these rituals in order to share the gospel with his kinsmen. Although Paul totally opposed the notion of requiring Gentile converts to submit to Jewish religious ceremonies, he had no problem imposing them on himself or his co-workers since doing so kept doors of communication open with his Jewish listeners. So, for example, Paul had Timothy circumcised since he was ministering with Paul among the Jews (Acts 16:1-3), but refused to have Titus

circumcised since it was not in the context of accommodating to reach others with the gospel, but in the context of whether circumcision was needed for salvation (Gal 2:3). Also, in Acts 21:17-26 Luke records that Paul went through a religious rite of purification in order to halt the rumors that said that Paul taught the Christian Jews in the *diaspora* to forsake the Law of Moses and to abandon the practice of circumcision. Therefore, James and the elders of the Jerusalem church urged Paul to prove these rumors false by going through a rite of purification and paying for the sacrifices of four others’ Nazarite vows in the temple (cf. Num 6:1-21). Again, since it would keep the door open to minister in Jewish circles, and since he was not forced to comply with this ritual, he agreed to go through with it (also see Acts 18:18 where Paul takes a Nazarite vow). Although Paul’s behavior might look the same as that of another, his motivation was completely different. Whereas his Jewish kinsmen might perform a religious ceremony in order to fulfill certain religious duties that gain merit before God, Paul performs the same ceremony because he loves those under the law and wants to win them to Christ.

Perhaps Paul’s own credibility had been called into question by the Corinthians. It is possible that while Paul was in Corinth he ate food that had been offered to idols when he was with Gentiles but refused to do so when with Jews. Regardless, Paul desires the Corinthians to understand that his behavior is not inconsistent, although it may appear as such. His consistency is based on one principle:

accommodating to the lifestyle of others so that he might win some to Christ. Thus, although his behavior changes, his principle behind his behavior does not change.³⁴

This text in 1 Corinthians 9 is often referenced when discussing how to accommodate or contextualize the gospel. Of course, Paul knew there was a limit to his contextualization. He would not violate a clear command of God in order to win converts.³⁵ He would, however, live in such a way so as not to offend unnecessarily his listeners. Paul knew that it was not his job to offend; rather, it was the job of the cross. Paul did not seek to put an unnecessary stumbling block before his hearers. If anything is to offend, it is the message of a crucified Messiah. Oftentimes, however, those who need to hear the gospel never get the chance because we unnecessarily offend them, thereby cutting off further opportunities. It is important that Christians learn what is essential and what is negotiable in the Christian life. This is especially true for missionaries. A missionary should seek to adopt the culture of the country he is living in so that the gospel is not unnecessarily rejected.³⁶

In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul again mentions his motive of seeking the salvation of others. In this text, however, he specifically exhorts the Corinthians to imitate his behavior. At the end of the lengthy section on meat sacrificed to idols (chs. 8-10), Paul concludes,³⁷

Whether, then, you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ (1 Cor 10:31-11:1).

Although there is a chapter division before Paul's imitation command, it is clear that 11:1 fits better with what precedes than with what follows.³⁸

Paul's overarching life-principle is found in verse 31, "do all to the glory of God." Paul's focus was first of all theocentric. His goal was to please God by living a life fully devoted to Him. Paul first mentions eating and drinking since that fits his current discussion concerning the implications of eating meat offered to idols. He then adds a comprehensive statement to include all of life. "Whatever you do," writes Paul, you are to do for the glory of God.³⁹ But for Paul there was no dichotomy between living a God-glorifying, God-pleasing life and seeking to "please all men in all things" (10:33).⁴⁰ That is, one way Paul sought to glorify God was by not causing others to stumble because of his behavior. He writes, "If food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble" (8:13). Paul sought to please others by his sacrificial lifestyle "so that they may be saved" (10:33). It was the salvation of others that drove Paul to a life of service because he knew that when people receive the free gift of salvation, God is greatly glorified. According to Paul, the glory of God and the salvation of others go hand-in-hand since God's glory shines brightest when repentant sinners receive salvation that is only found in Christ.⁴¹

Paul's command to imitation is not based on pride or arrogance since he himself is merely an imitator of someone greater—Jesus Christ. Paul can only call on others to imitate him since he himself is an imitator of Christ. By grounding his exhortation in Christ, he adds authority to his command. In other words, Paul is saying that they should not think it odd to follow

in his steps precisely because he is only following in the steps of Christ. Christ sought to glorify God by not seeking his own advantage, but the salvation of others (cf. Rom 15:3). Likewise, we must live a life that is characterized by self-denial so that others might be saved.

Therefore, we are to imitate a behavior with the goal of glorifying God by bringing others to saving faith in Christ. Our desire should always be the salvation of others. Yet, the reason for this desire is not only that people are rescued from the coming judgment and will spend eternity in heaven, but, more importantly, that God's glory is once again displayed in the world. As John Piper rightly states, "The goal of missions is the glory of God."⁴² God is jealous for his glory, and we should be too. When we understand that his glory shines forth every time a sinner confesses Jesus as Lord, our passion for missions will be ignited. A passion for God's glory leads to a passion for missions and evangelism.

It is crucial that we make our decisions with the view of how others will interpret them. Not that we seek merely to please men, but we live in such a way so as not to give unnecessary offense to believers or unbelievers. We do not glorify God by insisting on our rights, but by yielding those rights for the benefit of others. Little things such as eating and drinking have eternal consequences because others are affected by our behavior. By imitating Paul, we imitate Christ, and by imitating Christ we will live a life of self-denial that will hopefully result in the salvation of others.

A second imitation command is found in 1 Corinthians 4:16 where Paul instructs, "Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me." This exhortation comes after Paul sarcastically chides the Corinthians for their worldly wisdom that caused them to think

too much of themselves. Their over-realized eschatology led them to think that they had already "arrived" spiritually and that they should not experience suffering and difficulties. In contrast to the Corinthians who were satiated and "living as rich kings," the apostles were hungry and thirsty, living as homeless fools. He writes,

You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and I would indeed that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you. For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless (4:8-11).

Paul concludes by exclaiming that he and other apostles have "become as the scum of the world" (4:13). After declaring that he does not write to shame the Corinthians but to admonish them as their spiritual father (4:14-15), Paul urges them to be his imitators (4:16). What are they to imitate? In this context it must be Paul's sufferings and willingness to lay aside his own rights in order to bring the gospel to those who need it.⁴³ The triumphalism of the Corinthians led them to believe that only the weak endure hardship and serve others. But Paul turns their reasoning upside-down. He exhorts them to imitate his sacrificial lifestyle, which leads to hunger, suffering, and persecution but also allows the gospel to go forth unhindered.

Paul did whatever was needed so as not to hinder the progress of the gospel. His focus was not on his rights, but always on

how the gospel could be advanced. This is a needed message for missionaries. It is easy to become consumed with our needs and turn our focus from others to ourselves. Among many mission organizations the primary cause of missionaries leaving the field is their relationships with other missionaries. Often the cause is jealousy. They begin to compare houses, vehicles, and job assignments and soon they are consumed with making sure they are being treated the same as the other missionaries. We need to learn from the Apostle that our goal must be the salvation of others and not our own needs.

Conclusion

The purpose of the Church is to glorify God. This is done primarily through making disciples from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation since God's glory shines brightest when idolaters and atheists confess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. But we must be careful that we do not pervert the message by eliminating or ignoring the central theme of the cross of Christ. Only the message of "Christ crucified" has the power to save. Furthermore, this message will not benefit the nations without being proclaimed to them. And, as we have seen, God chooses to bless the type of preaching that straightforwardly presents the gospel without using flashy techniques that elevate the speaker and not the Savior. Like Paul we must also be willing to give up our rights, such as receiving financial support, so that the progress of the gospel is not hindered. Finally, our motivation needs to be the salvation of others since God is greatly glorified when people of all nations confess that Jesus is Lord.

ENDNOTES

¹For a recent exception, see Robert L.

Plummer, "Imitation of Paul and the Church's Missionary Role in 1 Corinthians," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (2001) 219-235.

²These responses are marked by the phrase "now concerning" (*peri de*; cf. 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).

³It should be noted that not every aspect of Paul's life and ministry should be considered normative. For example, Paul's determination to preach the gospel where Christ was not yet named is not necessarily a model for every missionary. As an apostle, Paul believed God had called him to lay the foundation (Rom 15:20). Yet, Paul also recognizes the importance of others coming to finish the work that he had begun. In Corinth he did the initial planting work but it was necessary for Apollos to come after him so that his labor would bear fruit (1 Cor 3:5-9). Yet, having said this, Paul himself often encouraged his congregations to follow his example (e.g., 1 Cor 4:16-17; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 4:9; 1 Thess 1:6-7; 2 Thess 3:7-9; 1 Tim 1:16). Therefore, in line with the traditional understanding of the relationship between Paul's apostolic mission and the mission of the church, I assume that Paul expects all but the non-repeatable aspects of his apostolic mission to devolve upon the local congregations. Although this traditional understanding has recently faced challenges, its truthfulness has been vindicated in subsequent discussion (see Robert L. Plummer, "The Church's Missionary Nature: The Apostle Paul and His Churches" [Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001] for a recent summary of this debate and relevant bibliographical material).

⁴All Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible.

⁵See, for example, Rom 3:24-25; 5:1; 6:10; 8:1-4; Gal 2:15-16; 3:13-14; Eph 2:1-5; Col 2:13-14.

⁶Yet, in order to explain the message of “Christ crucified” Paul uses a variety of metaphors such as representation, sacrifice, curse, redemption, and reconciliation (see, for example, James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 207-233). Thus, there is some freedom as to how the cross of Christ might be explained.

⁷D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 38.

⁸Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 75. He then adds, “One may have a Messiah, or one may have a crucifixion; but one may not have both—at least not from the perspective of merely human understanding” (75). Barrett identifies some of the paradoxes that are found in the Corinthian correspondence. Paul speaks “of strength that is made perfect in weakness, of poor men who make many rich, of married men who are as if they had no wives, of those who have nothing but possess all things, who are the scum of the earth but lead it to salvation, who die and yet live” (C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Harper’s New Testament Commentaries; New York: Harper & Row, 1968] 64). He continues by stating that “the heart of the paradox is the preach-

ing of the feeble and stupid message of the crucified Christ, which nevertheless proves to have a power and a wisdom no human eloquence possesses, since it is the power and wisdom of God himself” (64).

⁹See Matt 12:38-39; 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-12; Luke 11:15-20; John 6:30.

¹⁰Carson states that the juxtaposition of the words “‘Crucified Messiah’... is only a whisker away from blasphemy, since every Jew knows that God himself has declared that everyone who hangs in shame on a tree stands under God’s curse (Deut. 21:23)” (22).

¹¹Fee, 76.

¹²Dunn rightly comments, “[I]t is... doubtful whether the death of Christ can be dispensed with in any theology calling itself Christian” (233).

¹³Blomberg notes that when we move away from a Christ-centered ministry there is often an “overemphasis on professionalism in the pastorate, scholarship as the dominant criterion for jobs in higher education, purely market-driven strategies for church growth, and therapeutic models of Christian counseling that deliberately avoid prayer, Bible study, and confession of sin” (Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* [the NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994] 60).

¹⁴Fee, 68.

¹⁵Carson, 26.

¹⁶Chrysostom writes, “The gospel produces the exact opposite of what people want and expect, but it is that very fact which persuades them to accept it in the end.... The cross

seems to be a cause of offense, but far from simply offending, it attracts and calls believers to itself” (Gerald Bray, ed. *1-2 Corinthians* [Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, vol. 7; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999] 15).

¹⁷Fee, 78.

¹⁸Although the focus of this text is on the content of the message, it cannot be separated from the method or form in which the message was proclaimed.

¹⁹It appears that Paul uses both *euan-gelizomai* and *kērussō* somewhat interchangeably, the main difference being that *euan-gelizomai* refers to the total activity of proclamation, whereas *kērussō* is used when the author wants to specify or limit that which is being preached. So, for example, Paul uses *kērussō* in the following verses to signify what content is preached: “that one should not steal” (Rom 2:21); “word of faith” (Rom 10:8); “Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23); “Christ” (1 Cor 15:12; Phil 1:15); “Son of God, Christ Jesus” (2 Cor 1:19); “Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Cor 4:5); “another gospel” (2 Cor 11:4); “circumcision” (Gal 5:11); “gospel of God” (1 Thess 2:9); and “the Word” (2 Tim 4:2).

²⁰Timothy Lim comments that in 1 Cor 2:4 Paul “appears to be rejecting not human communication in general, but that specific, studied art of persuasive speech as was practiced by orators and rhetoricians of the Graeco-Roman world and by at least some of the Corinthian preachers” (Timothy H. Lim, “Not in Persuasive Words of Wisdom, but in the Demonstration of the Spirit and

Power,'" *Novum Testamentum* 29 [1987] 146).

²¹Fee states, "One senses that for Paul this is not merely a historical replay of his time with them, but also functions as something of a paradigm for his understanding of Christian ministry" (90).

²²Barrett comments, "When Paul preached a divine power gripped his hearers ... and constrained them to penitence and faith; this was the work of the Holy Spirit" (66).

²³Fee, 73.

²⁴Carson, 34-35.

²⁵Carson states, "Done properly, preaching is simply the re-presentation of God's gospel, God's good news, by which men and women come to know him" (37).

²⁶Also see Acts 20:34; 1 Thess 2:9; and 2 Thess 3:7-9.

²⁷Fee contends that Paul's arguments go beyond simply showing how he limited his freedom as an apostle but are also intended to defend his apostleship itself (396). According to Fee, the Corinthians thought that Paul worked with his hands because he *lacked* the right to receive patronage since he was not a legitimate apostle, but Paul argues that he *relinquishes* such rights for the sake of the gospel (400). Although there may be some evidence that Paul is seeking to defend the legitimacy of his apostolic ministry, Paul's main thrust is clearly to offer his own ministry as an example of self-sacrificial behavior (so Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community at Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995]

203, 206).

²⁸Paul also quotes Deut 25:4 in 1 Tim 5:18 to support the payment of church elders.

²⁹Fee, 411.

³⁰Robertson and Plummer state that if Paul received financial compensation, "he might be suspected of preaching merely for the sake of what he got by it. Moreover, those who had to maintain him might resent the burden, and be unwilling to listen to him" (Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 2d ed. [The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1914] 186).

³¹Blomberg comments, "Bivocational ministry has numerous advantages—freedom from human 'strings,' not imposing a financial burden on any group of believers, and exemption from charges of mismanaging funds or ministering primarily for financial gain" (176).

³²See Ronald F. Hock, "The Workshop as a Social Setting for Paul's Missionary Preaching," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979) 438-450. Hock demonstrates that not only were the synagogue and house important social settings for the preaching of the gospel, but the workshop was just as important. Painting a possible scenario of Paul's time in Thessalonica, Hock writes, "During the long hours at his workbench cutting and sewing leather to make tents, Paul would not only have been supporting himself, but he would also have had opportunities to carry on missionary activity (see

1 Thess 2:9). Sitting in the workshop would have been his fellow-workers and perhaps one or more visitors, perhaps customers or perhaps someone who has heard of this tentmaker—"philosopher" newly arrived in the city. In any case, they would have been listening to, or debating with, Paul, who had raised the topic of the gods and was exhorting them to turn from idols and to serve the living God (1:9-10). Some of those who listened—a fellow-worker, a customer, an aristocratic youth, or even a Cynic philosopher—would want to know more about Paul, about his churches, about his Lord and would return for individual exhortation (2:11-12). From these workshop conversations some would eventually accept Paul's word as the word of God (2:13)" (449-450).

³³Fee, 427.

³⁴Some have questioned Paul's consistency, stating that Peter's action of refusing table fellowship with Gentiles is simply an application of Paul's own principle stated in 1 Corinthians 9 (see, for example, Peter Richardson, "Pauline Inconsistency: I Corinthians 9:19-23 and Galatians 2:11-14," *New Testament Studies* 26 [1979-80] 347-362; for a response to Richardson, see David (sic, D. A.) Carson, "Pauline Inconsistency: Reflections on I Corinthians 9:19-23 and Galatians 2:11-14," *Churchman* 100 [1986] 6-45). Paul, however, is not contradicting himself since the issue in Antioch was whether the Gentiles had to keep the Jewish ritual law *in order to be saved*. Peter's refusal to eat with

the Gentiles conveyed the wrong message, thus jeopardizing the heart of the Gospel—salvation by grace alone and not by the works of the law. Robertson and Plummer explain, “Peter sacrificed a Christian principle to save himself from Jewish criticism” (193).

³⁵Witherington notes that Paul “accommodates his style of living, not his theological or ethical principles” (211).

³⁶Carson states, “[I]n every culture it is important for the evangelist, church planter, and witnessing Christian to flex as far as possible, so that the gospel will not be made to appear unnecessarily alien at the merely cultural level” (122).

³⁷The inferential *oun* (“then”) is one clue that Paul is ending his discussion on meat sacrificed to idols. Robertson and Plummer write, “The [*oun*] gathers up the results of the long discussion, and introduces a comprehensive principle which covers this question and a great many other things” (223).

³⁸Robertson and Plummer note, “The division of the chapters is unfortunate. This verse clearly belongs to what precedes” (225). Fee agrees, “This final imperative has suffered from one of the more unfortunate chapter divisions in the NT” (490); also see Barrett, 245-246.

³⁹Barrett expands Paul’s statement, “I do not act to the glory of God if I give to an idol some of the honour due to God alone; nor if I cause scandal or ill-feeling in the church, or cause a fellow-Christian to fall from his faith” (244).

⁴⁰Of course, Paul did not always seek

to please men. He only did so when pleasing men would at the same time be pleasing to God. He sought to please men only when his actions pertained to matters of Christian freedom and would aid his ability to share the gospel. If one’s actions would compromise the gospel, Paul’s attitude was altogether different. Thus he acknowledges that sometimes it is wrong to please men. In Galatians he writes, “If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ” (1:10). Elsewhere he states, “We speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts” (1 Thess 2:4; cf. Col 1:10 and 1 Thess 4:1). Barrett explains, “Pleasing men is evil when it is done with a view to currying favour with them, or so as to avoid persecution; it is good when it is done so as to lead them to the faith” (245).

⁴¹For an excellent book on how God is glorified in missions, see John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

⁴²*Ibid.*, 214.

⁴³Robertson and Plummer comment, “The context shows the special points of assimilation, viz. humility and self-sacrifice” (90). Soards likewise states, “In mission they should live as Paul did, sacrificially offering their very selves to God for the execution of God’s will and work in the world” (Marion L. Soards, *1 Corinthians* [New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999] 103).