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He Identified with the Lowly and Became a Slave to All: Paul’s Tentmaking as a Strategy for Mission

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The social background of first-century Christianity has received much attention recently, with many of these studies focusing on the letters from Paul to the Corinthians. Paul’s refusal to accept Corinthian financial support is a central concern of these letters. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is adamant concerning this issue, claiming that he would rather die than to accept the Corinthians’ pay (9:15). Why does Paul devote an entire section of the letter (chap. 9) to defending his refusal? How should we understand this section within the larger context of the letter?

I am principally concerned here with the social reality of Paul’s ministry and exploring questions of why Paul refuses the financial support of the Corinthians. To remain focused, I use 1 Corinthians 9 as a foundation and pay special attention to vv. 15–18 as they relate to Paul’s boast of making the gospel “free of charge” (v. 18). My aims are (1) to understand how Paul’s tentmaking and subsequent income affected his relationship with and ministry to the Corinthians; (2) to investigate the purpose and meaning of 1 Corinthians 9 in context; and (3) to examine 9:15–18 in order to shed light on Paul’s decision to remain financially free from the Corinthian body. I argue that Paul’s tentmaking trade was an avenue for him to identify with the lowly and to exhort the socially elite to do the same. As I suggest, this identification with the lowly was something Paul did in imitation of Christ. Further, Paul’s refusal of financial support proves to be his solution to possible obligatory relationships in Corinth and aids his overall objective, to remove divisions and unify the body there (1:10).

The nature of Paul’s trade
In a brief but penetrating study, Ronald F. Hock shows that Paul’s trade as tentmaker has been too long ignored and overlooked as an important aspect for understanding Paul and his social setting.1 Contrary to perceptions of Paul as a vocational theologian, Hock shows how tentmaking is central to understanding Paul’s life as an apostle. Through a detailed exploration into the daily life of first-century artisans, Hock paints a vivid picture of the life Paul chose to pursue and, we might add, endure.

We can highlight Hock’s findings as follows. Artisans typically worked many hours, often from sunrise to sunset. In this regard, Hock believes that Paul was no exception; in fact, it is likely that he was extraordinarily industrious, working “from before sunrise until sunset—save, of course, on the Sabbath.” The artisan’s workshop was typically dirty, noisy, and dangerous. Paul, being a worker of leather, might have benefited from slightly more favorable conditions. Workshops in the first century were typically located together according to type, near the town’s market. Duties in the workshop were often not strictly limited to crafting but included selling product to customers, training apprentices, and conversing with those who stopped by to “sit down and talk.”

Hock also makes clear that artisans in the first century were typically very poor. Even after working such extended hours, the pay was often only daily bread and not much more. Judging by the examples known to us, artisans were “usually hungry, poorly clothed, and cold.” How was the artisan, and thus Paul himself, perceived by his contemporaries?

First-century conceptions of the artisan
The fundamental status distinction in Paul’s day was likely that between being a slave or being free. Although this distinction was immensely important to those in the lower classes, the elite tended to view all manual laborers as slavish. Slaves were often viewed as subhuman, in a place of shame and dishonor, and others who performed manual labor could be stigmatized in this light. The position of being hunched over one’s work in a dirty setting with other slaves (or slavish freedman) promoted this view. Often, even the free person could not escape the stigma attached to his work; these workers were viewed as poor, uneducated, and un-free. According to Hock, they were “frequently reviled or abused, often victimized, seldom if ever invited to dinner, never accorded status, and even excluded from one stoic utopia.”

If Paul chose to be part of this class, how did this affect his relationship with...
various churches, particularly in Corinth? Was Paul not entitled to leave this life of manual toil and hardship and receive support as a missionary? Why did he remain a tentmaker?

The Corinthian church: social considerations

The social makeup at Corinth has been the subject of many recent studies. Too broad to detail here, I accept the emerging consensus that Corinth was a socially stratified and diverse church. Using 1 Cor 1:26 as a guide, we see that most in Corinth were of the lower classes, though the “not many” mentioned does not exclude that some were in fact “wise by human standards,” “powerful,” and “of noble birth.” These social divisions would likely have lead to disunity within the church at Corinth. Gordon Fee has argued, however, that the real issue in 1 Corinthians was not division within the church but rather tension between Paul and the church there as a whole.

Although the situation in 2 Corinthians may prove supportive of this, the case for 1 Corinthians is weak. The argument that divisions existed within the church, on the other hand, is quite strong. For example, Paul almost immediately informs his recipients that he is concerned about the divisions among them (1:10–17). Later, we see that issues between the “strong” and the “weak” are a concern to Paul (8:1–13). Moreover, Paul’s exhortations regarding the Lord’s supper (11:17–34) could be understood as directly related to class differentiation. Clearly the letter reveals a deep concern for divisions among those in the church at Corinth.

Paul’s choice to remain a tentmaker was likely an embarrassment to some.
Would the rich, and those of noble birth, naturally feel proud that the founder and leader of their church worked as a slavish artisan? It is not inconceivable that a rich patron would rather pay Paul a wage than be subject to such shame. Besides, as Hock shows, it was not uncommon for a rich household to employ an “in house” philosopher. Was Paul’s role as apostle different? Paul, however, was convinced that he should and would remain a humble artisan.

The above background is crucial to understanding the forcefulness and import of Paul’s refusal to accept support in 1 Corinthians 9. By noting key points in vv. 1–14 that build up to the climax of vv. 15–18, we shall see that Paul’s refusal of financial support from the Corinthians was both an effort to remain free from the tangle of social webs and obligations and, more important, to identify with the lowly. Paul’s choice was at a great cost to himself, yet he did so with the hope of providing an example for the Corinthians to follow. He hoped they would give up their “rightful” freedom for the sake of others and dissolve any division and barriers between them.

1 Corinthians 9 and Paul’s “digression”

The difficulty in connecting chapter 9 with the surrounding discussion on eating meat sacrificed to idols (8:1–11:1) has not gone unnoticed. This chapter, when read in isolation, seems anything but a discussion on the subject of idol meat. Has Paul digressed? Has he put down the metaphorical pen, only to pick it up later to discuss an issue burning on his heart, quite aside from the topic at hand? Prima facie, chapter 9 appears to be a misplaced insertion separate from Paul’s main concern that the strong abstain from idol meat for the sake of the weak.

A close reading of the passage, however, reveals Paul’s skill to persuade through a well-constructed argument. This digression in fact functions as a comparison to amplify and undergird his basic argument in 8:1–11:1. Margaret M. Mitchell, noting that the term “digression” can be read negatively—connoting a lack of connection to the rest of the text—opts to replace the term with “exemplary argument.”

Though agreeing that 1 Corinthians 9 is an exemplary argument, we also retain the term “digression.” The chapter should be regarded as a discrete unit, yet in unity with the larger concern at hand. 

16. Admittedly, we can only postulate how the upper classes perceived the lower based upon evidence available to us concerning class distinctions. There must have been a basis for Paul’s concern to remove divisions among them, and status inconsistency fits well. For a discussion on status inconsistency as it might relate to early Christian groups, see Meeks, First Urban, 191–92.

17. For example, how would the wealthy in the church respond when business associates raised questions about their leader, whom they saw grunting away in a dirty shop near the market?


19. For a short summary see Alex T. Cheung, Idol Food in Corinth: Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy, JSNTSup 176 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 137–39.

20. Margaret M. Mitchell, Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians, HUT 28 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991), 250. She elaborates on the function of digressions in rhetorical speech through the words of W. H. Wuellner: “digressions in Paul’s letters are illustrative of his rhetorical sophistication and . . . they serve to support his argumentation. This view runs counter to the current scholarly opinion that Paul’s digressions are interruptions in his arguments and often carry him off into irrelevant material” (249, note 350).
theless, the question remains: How does the digression fit with Paul’s concern of idol meat?

Paul’s concern is that the strong Corinthians would exercise wisdom to give up their freedom (to eat idol meat) in order that their fellow Christians with weaker consciences might not stumble (8:9–13). Paul recognizes that the idols to whom the meat has been sacrificed are nothing, and thus the food itself is not defiled; however, he calls the “strong” to put aside their like knowledge and exercise love (8:1) for the sake of the weak. Paul uses the digression to illustrate that he too has freedom yet is willing to forfeit his rights for the sake of the gospel.

1 Corinthians 9:1–14

The freedom that Paul chooses to surrender is his right to receive a living from the gospel. His opening words are telling: “Am I not free?” Perhaps we could read Paul’s words as “Am I not free as well?” The expected positive response alerts his readers that his following argument is connected to the issue of freedom just discussed.

With this reading, the entire chapter takes the shape of an exemplary argument. Through a series of rhetorical questions, Paul demonstrates that he too, like the Corinthians, has freedom. Using a mock defense speech (ἀπολογία, 9:3), Paul systematically constructs the argument for his right to make a living from his missionary endeavors. He builds a strong case for the apostle’s right to receive support, and, when the argument seems complete (9:12), he adds yet another premise (9:13–14). His argument is obvious by the end of v. 14. Just as the soldier doesn’t finance his own military expenses, just as the vineyard owner eats of the fruit he produces, just as one who tends livestock drinks of its milk, just as an ox eats of the grain it treads, just as the priest is entitled to the food of the temple, so too are those who proclaim the gospel entitled to make their living from it. Paul has built his case. He has defended the right to receive income for his toil and labor in the gospel.

The climax of Paul’s argument naturally follows. However, it has been flipped on its head. Paul does not lead the argument to its expected climax (to demand pay for his work); rather, he states the very opposite. He will have none of it. He will not accept the very thing he has just argued he is entitled to. Rereading vv. 4–14 with this in mind, each of Paul’s rhetorical questions actually receives a response opposite to what is expected, thus making the climax more powerful (see chart on next page).

The theme of Paul’s digression is seen in v. 12b and is repeated through recurring threads in 15a and 18b: We/I have not made use of this/these right(s). Paul, although having the right to partake of these things, refuses. Why, we ask, after building such


22. Mitchell, Rhetoric, 244–46; Martin, Corinthian Body, 52. This “apology” is in defense of his right to refuse support, not his apostleship. There is no internal evidence in 1 Corinthians suggesting that Paul needed to defend his apostleship. See Witherington, Conflict, 203; contra Fee, First Epistle, 363.

23. Although ἔξουσίαν (v. 4) is often translated as “power” or “authority,” “right” seems to best capture Paul’s sense here.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Question:</th>
<th>Expected Answer:</th>
<th>Paul’s actual (hypothesized) answer:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Do we not have the right to food and drink?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>I refuse food and drink in order to keep the weak from stumbling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>I will deny myself a spouse for the sake of the gospel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Who at any time pays the expenses for doing military service?</td>
<td>No one</td>
<td>I will pay my own expense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit?</td>
<td>No one</td>
<td>I will not eat the fruit of my vineyard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk?</td>
<td>No one</td>
<td>I will not drink milk from the flock I tend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Do we muzzle the ox while treading out the grain?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>I will muzzle myself while treading out the grain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-11</td>
<td>As a farmer reaps a crop from his field, should not a material crop be reaped from spiritual seeds planted among you?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>I will not take from the crop I have planted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Do not those employed in the temple eat of what is offered on the altar?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>I refuse temple food while working there; my food shall come from outside</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a strong case, does Paul renounce this right to support? To this question we now turn.

1 Corinthians 9:15–18
As already mentioned, the thrust of Paul’s message in chapter 9 is that, despite having the right to receive a living from the gospel, he has not made use of it. Would it not have been easier to receive an income from the work in which he invested so much of his time? Does not the tone of his defense suggest that there was tension between Paul and the Corinthians over this issue and that accepting their money would have relieved the situation?

Before discussing the ramifications and social considerations relating to Paul’s refusal of his right, we look at the nature of and reasons for Paul’s refusal in 9:15–18.

Paul is adamant. He has not made use of these prerogatives, and he assures the Corinthians that in writing them he is not proposing to do so (9:15). He has already interjected the reason for his refusal in v. 12: He will “endure anything rather than put an obstacle [ὁ γονοτήν] in the way of the gospel of Christ.” Although this noun

24. Questions arise here whether Paul is actually disobeying a command to receive his keep from the gospel (Matt 10:9–10). Both Theissen (Essays on Corinth, 42–43) and Witherington (Conflict, 209–10) effectively handle this charge by arguing that Paul shows how sustenance from the gospel is a privilege, not a command. In other words, a worker is worthy of his wages, not necessarily commanded to receive them.

25. Here we return to the question of whether Paul’s defense is a true apology or a contrived one. Although there is no internal evidence to suggest that Paul was responding
is not attested elsewhere in the New Testament, its cognate verb ἐγκόπτω is. This word often carries the sense of causing a military hindrance or preventing an enemy advance. In other words, Paul is concerned that he not place anything in the way of the Corinthians that would prevent them from receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ. What might that hindrance be? Paul is not explicit, but I believe the overall theme of 1 Corinthians sheds light on the issue. His central concern in the letter is summarized in 1:10, “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” The very issue Paul is addressing in idol meat (8:1-11:1) is unity and love between the body. Although we cannot be certain that well-defined factions existed among the Corinthians, we can be sure that Paul is concerned that the actions of the strong may destroy the weak and thus the unity of the church. It is probable that Paul’s acceptance of financial support would have given some perhaps key contributors reason to claim rights over Paul. Could this have caused a hindrance to the gospel to those in the lower strata? For the time being we put these questions aside in order to probe more deeply into vv. 15-18. In v. 15, Paul, arguably using hyperbolic language, insists that he “would rather die” than to have his boast taken from him. What exactly is his boast? It is not that he proclaims the gospel but that he proclaims the gospel without payment from the Corinthians—that he makes the good news “free of charge.” Proclaiming the gospel is not an option for Paul; as a commissioned apostle he is under obligation to do so (“woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel,” v. 16). Paul is not under obligation, however, to preach the gospel free of charge. His reward, then, because he does so voluntarily, is presenting the good news at his own cost. Because he does so, he has found a ground for boasting.

To boast implies that there is something worthy to boast in. Paul’s long hours of difficult labor, “working night and day” (1 Thess 2:8-9) in order to have daily bread, are the grounds for his boasting. This is his reward (v. 18). His reward is to know that he did not make use of his right to receive payment for his missionary work. Paul is proud that he has made the gospel free. And should we somehow believe that Paul is proud because of human achievement, remember why he decided to withhold his right and endure the hardship—to avoid any hindrance to the gospel of Jesus Christ at Corinth (v. 12).

to a specific complaint (i.e., refusal of support), his further discussion of the theme in 2 Corinthians (11:7-12; 12:13) seems to point to, at the very least, Paul’s ability to foresee a complaint. See C. K. Barrett, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (London: Adam & Charles Black, 2d ed., 1971), 200, and Fee, First Epistle, 9, 398-99. Others argue that no specific attack is in view here: Martin, Corinthian Body, 52, 83-84; Dunn, I Corinthians, 61-62; Witherington, Conflict, 203. For an illuminating discussion on the relation between the “defenses” (concerning the privilege of support) in 1 and 2 Corinthians, see Theissen, Essays on Corinth, 44-46.

26. Acts 24:4; Rom 15:22; Gal 5:7; 1 Thess 2:18; 1 Pet 3:7. ἐγκοπήν is also not attested in the LXX though is elsewhere in antiquity. See BAGD.


28. Richard A. Horsley cleverly brings out the paradoxical nature of Paul’s statement: “Paul poses the rhetorical question: What then is my ‘reward/pay’? (v. 18). He provides an utterly paradoxical answer: His ‘pay’ is to make the gospel ‘free of charge’” (1 Corinthians, ANTC [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998], 130).
The hindrance: patronage, status, or both?

This returns us to our earlier questions on the social reality at Corinth. We have noted that the social status of those in Corinth was stratified and that most were not rich. Some, however, were. It would appear that Paul is addressing these rich Corinthians in the letter.29 What was Paul trying to convey to them in his refusal of their support?

Peter Marshall has suggested that the payment that Paul refused was “not disinterested but represented the vested interests of a group of people from the higher ranks in Corinth who wished to put Paul under obligation to them.”30 John Chow, in his work revealing the nature and structure of patron relationships, echoes this concern, showing that Paul’s acceptance of the gift would signal his willingness to be subject to the powerful patrons in the church.31

Hock, exploring the nature of the philosopher’s charging of fees and entering a household, agrees that accepting the gift would have placed an obligation upon Paul that he was not prepared to accept.32

These positions, essentially arguing the same point—that Paul refused support to remain free of obligatory relations in Corinth—are persuasive in that they provide an explanation as to why Paul accepted the support of some churches (Phil 4:10–18) and yet would refuse the payment at Corinth.33 It is also suggestive when looking at the issue in 2 Corinthians regarding the “super apostles” (chaps. 10–13). Was Paul enraged because these apostles had chosen to accept money, or was he perhaps upset that in their acceptance of payment they entered into relationships with certain groups within the church, stirring further division? Though difficult to conclude, we can at least infer that Paul was concerned to remain neutral with regard to social divisions, seeking to foster unity.34

The argument that Paul refused support simply to avoid obligatory relationships does not answer every concern in 1 Corinthians 9. It sheds some light on Paul’s refusal of the gift but does not fully explain the nature of the hindrance of the gospel. Is Paul implying that his acceptance of the gift would place him in a relationship with the Corinthians that would keep him from his greater missionary strategy of evangelizing the world? The hindrance, according to this reasoning, is that an obligation to the Corinthians would restrict Paul’s plans to travel the world to spread the gospel.35

But is that the sense we get from 1 Corinthians 9? How do vv. 19–23 then fit with Paul’s refusal and the larger question of 8:1–11:1? Paul makes clear there that freedom is of central concern. Though he is free, he has become a slave to all (v. 19). He has done so in order that he might win more to Christ. How has Paul made him-

29. Theissen, Essays on Corinth, 70–99, esp. 95–96; Dunn, 1 Corinthians, 48; Witherington, Conflict, 22–23.
33. Compare Witherington (Conflict, 208–09), who agrees, yet stresses that the Philippian gift was not necessarily a regular salary. The thrust of Marshall’s study is that the source of enmity at Corinth was due in part to Paul’s acceptance of the gift from the Philippians while refusing the Corinthians’. See his Enmity, esp. 234, 257–58. His thesis, though interesting, is difficult to demonstrate from 1 Corinthians itself.
34. Admittedly, this is not entirely satisfactory, because Paul was not completely neutral. His plying of a trade instead of receiving payment would have connected him with those lower in status. Apparently this was a lesser risk than connecting with the upper strata. See further Horrell, Social Ethos, 213.
self a slave? By giving the gospel free of charge. Why has he done this? To win more, or, stated differently, to remove any hindrance to the gospel (v. 12).

How does becoming a slave remove the hindrance? Although we have noted that Paul was able to stay free of obligatory relationships in doing so, this is not the primary concern of the text as it stands. It would seem that Paul, in becoming a slave, has decided to identify with the lowly, to be a hardworking, poor artisan in order to win more to Christ. Paul gave up his freedom to be supported by the gospel and decided to toil with his hands, working long hours in a lowly environment, for the sake of the gospel. And, because Paul writes primarily with the rich in mind, he is urging them to do the same. He is pleading with those in the upper strata to give up their freedoms, as he has, in order to remove division within the church and be “united in mind and purpose” (1:10). It is not insignificant that Paul ends the section with which his exemplary argument is primarily concerned (8:1–11:1) with the words “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (11:1).

In Paul’s decision to be a lowly artisan we see, I suggest, that Paul was imitating Christ. Although his plea in 11:1 for the Corinthians to imitate himself seems appropriate in light of our discussion, we may be uncertain how to connect his introduction of imitating Christ to his argument. This is central to the overall argument of 8–11:1 and cannot be overlooked. Paul is pleading with those who are strong to give up freedom for the sake of the weak. This Paul has done. So has Christ. Paul urges the Corinthians to deny their rights for the sake of others. This Paul has done. So has Christ. Paul urges the Corinthians to imitate him. Paul has become as a slave to all in order to bring salvation through the gospel (9:19, 22). So too has Christ.

**Conclusion**

The “digression” of 1 Corinthians 9 is intricately connected to Paul’s main theme in 8:1–11:1; indeed, we see the theme of Christian unity here as in the whole of the letter. Paul has argued that the Corinthians are to consider the weak among them, overlooking their own knowledge of idol meat being nothing, and show love by not partaking. Wanting to make clear that he exercises the same principle in his own life, Paul makes use of an exemplary argument. Although he has the freedom and right to make a living as a missionary worker, he has refused to do so for the sake of the gospel and unity of the body. Paul is free to accept the gift, but he chose not to exercise this right and became a slave, plying his trade and remaining financially free in order to win some to Christ. Paul urges the strong to forfeit idol meat—their right and freedom—for the sake of the weak. In imitating Paul’s example they identify with the weak and thereby imitate Christ. This is the hope, theme, and purpose of Paul’s letter—that there would be no division within the church, and that they would be “unified in the same mind and purpose.” Paul’s hope is that all division would be toppled and the church would truly become one body—that is, finding identity not in earthly categories but in Christ.

36. Though it may seem disjointed for Paul to introduce the idea of imitating Christ in 11:1, it reveals not incoherence, but rather that Paul’s entire argument of 8–11:1 was rooted in a deeper theological principle, namely, that the church should imitate Christ’s becoming low and giving up freedom for the sake of salvation.

37. Showing how Christ did this would take us beyond the scope of this article. A good starting place, however, would be the Philippian hymn (Phil 2:5–11; esp. v. 7).