



ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”



Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students
Presented by the
President of

[Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis](#)

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life’s urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today’s Christian students to become tomorrow’s Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

X X X

August 25, 2006

X X X

All Things to All Men

Kevin T. Bauder

Few passages of Scripture are more popular among contemporary Christians than 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Especially fashionable is Paul’s line in verse 22 about becoming “all things to all men.” This passage is commonly taken to mean that effective evangelism requires Christians to imitate the people around them. Many evangelicals cannot even imagine this interpretation being mistaken. It is even repeated by some fairly reputable commentators (Gordon Fee, for example) who, however, offer few reasons for accepting it.

Few such reasons exist. The popular interpretation is far more influenced by wishful thinking than it is by any factor in the context of 1 Corinthians 9. In fact, a careful study of the passage in its context yields quite a different interpretation.

1 Corinthians 9 is the center of an extended section dealing with meat offered to idols. This kind of meat was sold at a discount in the shambles and was often served in the homes of non-Christians. Apparently, the Corinthian believers had asked Paul whether Christians could be permitted to eat meat which had been consecrated in idolatrous worship.

Broadly, Paul answers this question in two ways. In chapter 8, he argues that an idol is nothing. Since meat offered to idols has in reality been offered to nothing, it is not intrinsically tainted or polluted. All other things being equal, it may be eaten with safety.

In chapter 10, however, Paul argues that all other things are not necessarily equal. A key concept in 1 Corinthians 10 is *identification*. Paul notes that the Israelites were identified with (“baptized into”) Moses, and consequently with Christ, in the cloud and in the sea (1-4). Because they were identified with God and His work, any subsequent identification with idols was intolerable (5-10). Their experience serves as an analogy to instruct believers today (11-14), and underlines the importance of keeping away from idolatry. Eating the Lord’s Supper identifies the believer with Christ (15-17), just as eating from the altar identified the Levitical priests with God’s work (18). In the same way, eating idol-meat can sometimes identify a person with idolatry, which is implicitly to identify with the demon who stands behind the idol (20-22). This identification is a terrible sin that provokes the Lord to a dangerous jealousy. Clearly, Paul thinks that Christians should never do anything, including eating meat offered to idols, that would identify believers with demons.

Not only is eating to be restricted by the principle of identification; it is also to be restricted by the principle of avoiding offense. Paul names three categories of people: Jew (unsaved Israelites), Gentile (unsaved pagans), and the church of God (New Testament Christians). If eating offends any of these groups, it must be avoided (31-33).

How far is this principle of avoiding offense to be taken? Paul actually addresses this question in chapter 8, where he gives one example of what it means to offend. Paul assumes that Christians must never defile their own consciences, even in circumstances under which they may actually have liberty (7). In other words, if a believer thinks it is wrong to eat meat offered to idols, then it actually is wrong for him or her. What if such a “weak” believer were to observe another Christian eating and enjoying the meat? Then the weak Christian might be emboldened to eat, even at the cost of transgressing conscience. Under these circumstances, not only has the weak Christian sinned by violating conscience, but the stronger Christian has also sinned by setting a bad example (9-12).

Paul takes this very seriously. He states emphatically that if meat is going to cause his brother to offend, then he will not eat meat as long as the world stands (13). This seems like an extreme statement, and a reader might think that Paul is hyperbolizing. Evidently, Paul anticipated that the Corinthians might read his words with some incredulity. Therefore, he goes on in chapter 9 to assure them that he means exactly what he says.

Chapter 9 is Paul’s extended insistence that he is perfectly willing to surrender all sorts of rights and privileges. First, he establishes that he actually has certain rights and privileges: he has a right to sustenance, to take a wife, and to expect financial support (3-6). These privileges are grounded in his apostleship (1-2), in the example of the other apostles (5), in natural law (7), in the moral precedent of Mosaic legislation (9-10), and in the relative value of spiritual and temporal goods (12). Paul insists that just as the Aaronic priests derived their living from the sacrifices of the altar, God has ordained that vocational preachers of the gospel should derive their living from their preaching (13-14).

These are Paul’s rights. Yet he insists that he does not use them (12, 14). What matters is the preaching of the gospel (15-17). The advance of the gospel is far more important than the exercise of any right or authority (18). Therefore, Paul’s actual conduct confirms that he means what he says about not eating meat if it offends a brother. He is perfectly willing to limit his rights for the sake of the gospel.

This entire discourse provides the context for 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. These verses are popularly taken as Paul’s description of his positive strategy to gain a hearing for the gospel. People often assume that Paul attempted to imitate the customs, habits, and mores of those to whom he ministered, acting like a Jew when with Jews, a Gentile when with Gentiles, a weak person when among the weak, and so forth.

Some Christians go a step further. They find in this passage permission, or even an obligation, to adopt the same evangelistic strategy. To reach Goths, for example, they get tattooed and pierced and dress in black. To reach bikers they wear leather, and maybe even colors. The mind staggers to imagine their ministry among nudists or transvestites.

Paul’s point, however, is not that he imitates the customs, habits, traditions, mores, or even the look and feel of his intended audience. Rather, his point is about the exercise of his rights and liberties. When among Jews, he exercises no right that would be offensive to Jews. Among the weak, he does nothing to offend the weak. Among the Gentiles, he does nothing that would offend a Gentile. Paul’s point is that rights and liberties are to be freely surrendered for the sake of the gospel.

Perhaps we should mimic the customs and even the preferences of those to whom we minister. If so, that will have to be justified from some other passage. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 simply teaches us not to offend those whom we love. X



Meditation 1

Edward Taylor (1642-1729)

What Love is this of thine, that Cannot bee
In thine Infinity, O Lord, Confinde,
Unless it in thy very Person see,
Infinity, and Finity Conjoyn'd?
What hath thy Godhead, as not satisfide
Marri'de our Manhood, making it its Bride?

Oh, Matchless Love! filling Heaven to the brim!
O're running it; all running o're beside
This World! Nay Overflowing Hell; wherein
For thine Elect, there rose a mighty Tide!
That there our Veans might through thy Person bleed,
To quench those flames, that else would on us feed.

Oh! that thy Love might overflow my Heart!
To fire the same with Love: for Love I would.
But oh! my streight'ned Breast! my Lifeless Sparke!
My Fireless Flame! What Chilly Love, and Cold?
In measure small! In Manner Chilly! See.
Lord blow the Coal: Thy Love Enflame in mee. X



Francisco de Goya. *The Sacrifice to Vesta*. 1771.



ΤΟΥΤΟ ΦΡΟΝΕΙΤΕ ΕΝ ΥΜΙΝ

