

# Church-Supported or Self-Supported Ministers? (1 Corinthians 9:1-23)

Expository Lessons from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

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## I. Review from Prior Lessons and Introduction to the Topic

- a. After addressing the subject of division in the church, Paul tackled issues related to a specific problem with sexual immorality.
- b. After that, he looked more broadly at issues pertaining to married and single life as a Christian.
- c. In the prior lesson (on **1 Corinthians chapter 8**), we saw Paul turn his attention to the problem of some Christians eating meat sacrificed to idols.
  - i. He said that while idols and other 'gods' are not real, those Christians who understood those facts still need to be concerned about their "weaker brothers" who might be tempted to violate their consciences and thereby sin.
  - ii. Paul said that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Spiritual knowledge without love will create arrogant Christians!
- d. Now, in **1 Corinthians chapter 9**, Paul will address the topic of financial support for those who are preaching the gospel.
  - i. **Trigger Warning:** This is a topic (giving to pay the salaries of those in the full-time ministry) that I heard *preached so many times in the past* that, in reaction, I tend to shy away from teaching it. Also, this passage includes a verse that is often taken out of context to drive various agendas.
    1. Sometimes I feel like I have heard enough of certain passages and topics to last several lifetimes. In general, I want to 'balance things out' by covering material that has been neglected by other teachers and preachers.
    2. Rest assured, I am not trying to push an agenda in preaching from this chapter. As a church, we are simply preaching through this letter of Paul and taking everything that comes up.
    3. If I were simply doing topical preaching and picking things I wanted to teach on, these two things might never come up!
    4. My goal here is to try hard not to overreact against what I was taught (or mis-taught or taught to excess), but to be willing to look at every subject in this letter and strive to teach it accurately!

## II. In General, Those Who Preach Should Be Supported Financially by the Church

- a. In the following passage, count the number of reasons Paul gives to support his case that those who preach the gospel should be supported financially by the other Christians.
  - i. Also, for each reason he gives, consider the number of examples he uses.
- b. Also, consider how Paul uses rhetorical questions to make his case in a very compelling way.
- c. Read **1 Corinthians 9:1-14**.
  - i. Paul refers to the Christians in Corinth as his “work in the Lord” and states that they are “the seal of my apostleship”.
    1. He took the gospel to Corinth, as recorded in **Acts 18**.
    2. In **Acts 18**, we have a record of Paul’s time in Corinth on his second missionary journey. There it speaks of Paul taking the gospel to Corinth, preaching, and practicing his trade of tent-making to support himself financially.
      - a. “After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them. *So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers. And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks.” (Acts 18:1-4, NKJV)*
    3. It also says Paul remained in Corinth for *over a year and a half* on his second missionary journey.
      - a. “Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.’ And *he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.” (Acts 18:9–11, NKJV)*
      - b. Then, after the Jews attempted to have him tried before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, it says: “*So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the*

brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him....” (**Acts 18:18**, NKJV)

- ii. In the passage we just read from **1 Corinthians 9**, Paul gives four reasons why those who devote their lives to preaching the gospel should be financially supported by others in the church. Then he explains why he chose to work to support himself instead.
- iii. Paul makes extensive use of rhetorical questions to persuade the Corinthians here.
  1. I counted *thirteen rhetorical questions* just in these twelve verses! He fires six of these rhetorical questions in rapid succession in **1 Corinthians 9:4-7**:
    - a. “Do we have no right to eat and drink?
    - b. Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?
    - c. Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?
    - d. Who ever goes to war at his own expense?
    - e. Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit?
    - f. Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock?” (**1 Corinthians 9:4-7**, NKJV)
  2. A ‘rhetorical question’ is a question that a person asks in an argument where the answer is so obvious that there is no need to answer it. This device can be used very effectively to disarm one’s opponents by compelling them to deal with their own logical inconsistencies.
  3. This is a great tactic to master and use effectively to defend the faith, following the example of Paul here and elsewhere.
    - a. For example, this week, I saw part of a presentation on gender identity given at a school where the students were being indoctrinated in the modern fad that gender is a construct that one can choose, which has nothing to do with biological, genetic and physical traits one is born with.
      - i. If a student were to say in class, “I don’t agree; God made people male and female; it is not a

choice we make after we are born.”, what do you think the response would be from the teacher (and the administration of the school)?

- ii. Following the example of Paul, perhaps a way to open up the minds of your opponents would be to start by asking a series of rhetorical questions.
  1. For example, by saying, “*IF* a person can choose their gender, can they also choose:
    - a. Their age identity? Can a 30-year old adult identify as a senior citizen or as a young child and thereby get discounted admission prices?
    - b. Their racial identity? Can I identify as African-American or Native American, despite the fact that I have no genes nor ancestry to support that claim?
    - c. Their species? Can I identify as a frog, a zebra or a rabbit?
    - d. Their person? Can I identify as Jesus Christ, John the Baptist or Donald Trump, if I *sincerely believe* I am that person?
  2. The rhetorical questions expose the logical inconsistency of the other person simply by asking questions and putting it back on them. How can they accuse you of being a narrow-minded bigot when you just asked a question that they could answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’?
  3. Of course, almost all of us would consider anyone who is attempting to claim a different age, race, species or personal identity from the one they were given at birth as *either dishonest or mentally ill*.
  4. **Challenge:** Jesus called us to be “wise as serpents and as harmless (or innocent) as doves” (**Matthew 10:16**). Let us follow the example of Paul in how we explain and defend the

faith, including any aspect of it that may be challenged by others.

- iv. Paul argues that those who are devoted to preaching the gospel, such as the apostles, should be financially supported by other Christians, especially by those who are benefitting from the teaching. He uses the following reasons:
  1. First, Paul points to the fact that all the other apostles (except Barnabas and Paul) have the acknowledged right to refrain from working (and to take along a believing wife).
  2. Second, Paul uses reason and appeals to 'common sense' examples from how things work in everyday life.
    - a. Three examples he gives here:
      - i. *Soldiers* who go to war do not pay their own way while in the military; they are supported financially by the government (through taxes).
      - ii. *Farmers* who plant vineyards partake of the fruit of the vineyard.
      - iii. *Shepherds* who tend flocks of sheep or goats, who can then drink the milk that comes from that flock.
    - b. **Side Comment:** Perhaps these three examples provide beautiful multi-faceted analogies of those who preach, teach and lead in the church.
      - i. They also are *soldiers fighting in a war* (against Satan).
      - ii. They are *farmers who are planting* (seeds of the gospel), watering and pruning.
      - iii. They are *shepherds who are overseeing a flock*: making sure the sheep are fed and kept safe, watching out for the wolves and lions, and going after the lost sheep.
  3. Third, Paul appeals to the Old Testament Scriptures, giving two examples.
    - a. Do not muzzle the ox.

- i. “Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, ‘*You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.*’ Is it oxen God is concerned about? Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ.” (**1 Corinthians 9:8–12**, NKJV)
- ii. Paul here quotes from **Deuteronomy 25:4**.
  1. In **Deuteronomy 24:19-22** and **25:4**, there are rules pertaining to showing kindness toward others related to the harvest.
  2. The **Deuteronomy 24:19-22** passage tells them to leave something behind for the poor, alien, fatherless and widows during the harvest.
  3. Read **Deuteronomy 25:4**.
    - a. This says that those who are doing the work of treading out the grain (oxen) should not be muzzled while doing their work. They should be free to eat from some of the grain they are treading out.
- iii. Paul uses the same passage in **1 Timothy**. There, he uses it to support his case for the church providing financial support for elders.
  1. “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, ‘*You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,*’ and,

“The laborer is worthy of his wages.” (1  
**Timothy 5:17-18**, NKJV)

- b. The second Old Testament example Paul gives in **1 Corinthians 9** to support the idea that he is entitled to material support: priests eat from the offerings under the Law of Moses.
  - i. “Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar?” (**1 Corinthians 9:13**, NKJV)
- c. This points back to **Leviticus 1-8** and **10:12-15**, where the priests were allowed to eat from portions of the offerings given by the people.
- d. Note how Paul understands and uses the Old Testament for practical purposes in challenges facing the church.
  - i. In **1 Corinthians 5:6-8**, in addressing sexual immorality in the church, Paul wrote, “Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast (of Unleavened Bread)...”
  - ii. Here in **1 Corinthians 9**, Paul has presented Old Testament directives as foreshadowing financial support for those involved in Christian ministry. He reasons, after quoting **Deuteronomy 25:4**, “Is it *oxen* God is concerned about? Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? *For our sakes, no doubt, this is written....*”
    - 1. Paul sees passages in the Old Testament as being written for our sake, to benefit Christians.
    - 2. This underscores the importance of us knowing the Old Testament. As Paul said in **Romans 15:4**, after quoting a passage from **Psalms 68/69** and applying it to Christians:
      - a. “For whatever things were written before were *written for our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of the

Scriptures might have hope.”  
**(Romans 15:4, NKJV)**

- e. **Challenge for Us:** Read the entire Old Testament. Realize that it was written for us. It provides practical principles and guidance for us. Paul assumed the Corinthian Christians, who were predominantly Gentiles (see **1 Corinthians 12:2**), knew the Old Testament well, down to details that most today would consider relatively obscure lines.
4. The fourth (and concluding) reason that Paul gives for Christians providing material support for those devoted to preaching: *Jesus said to do it!*
    - a. “Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.” (**1 Corinthians 9:14, NKJV**)
    - b. **Question:** *Where* did Jesus teach that? Is there anywhere in the gospels that Jesus taught this, or is Paul referring to something Jesus said that was not recorded in the gospels?
      - i. Let us go back and consider something we discussed earlier in this message. Consider what Paul said to Timothy on the subject of providing support for those devoted to ministry (in that case, referring to elders).
      - ii. “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘*The laborer is worthy of his wages.*’” (**1 Timothy 5:17–18, NKJV**)
      - iii. There, Paul quotes from both the Old Testament (**Deuteronomy 25:4**) and the New Testament (**Luke 10:7**). Paul refers to both passages he quotes from as “Scripture” (in Greek, literally, “the writings”).
      - iv. Read **Luke 10:1-8**.
        1. When Jesus sent out the seventy, Luke records that he told them not to bring



money since they would be given food and drink by those who received them.

- c. While Paul could have started with this (Jesus said so), he brings it up last as his closing argument. This is analogous to 'the final nail in the coffin' in making his case.
  - i. He is teaching them how to think and building his case on a solid foundation. Again, the four arguments provided by Paul regarding support for those devoted to preaching and leading in the church:
    1. Example of all the other apostles.
    2. Examples from everyday life (common sense, fairness).
    3. Examples from the Old Testament.
    4. What Jesus Himself said on this subject.
  - ii. He is enforcing how to use reason and the Scriptures (including the Old Testament).
  - iii. While I often say, "let's *start* with what Jesus said", Paul actually does the reverse here: "Let's *close* with what Jesus said." No one can shut down the discussion like Jesus, making the final and most convincing point.
    1. Let us recall that Jesus describes Himself as both the 'Alpha' and the 'Omega'. He is the 'First' and also the 'Last'. (**Revelation 1:11, 22:13**)
    2. Sometimes it is good to save the best for last!

### III. Yet Paul Did Not Ask for Financial Support for Himself

- a. "If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless, we have not used this right, but *endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ.*" (**1 Corinthians 9:12**, NKJV)
- b. Read **1 Corinthians 9:15-23**.

- i. Paul said he *would rather die* than be deprived of his boast (that he preached the gospel free of charge to the Corinthians).
  - ii. Paul did not exercise his rights; instead, he made himself a servant of everyone else in the effort to win even more people to Christ.
- c. This should give us an appreciation for Paul and his heart. He worked day and night, not wanting to be a financial burden to anyone (even though he clearly had the right to support) in a desire to not hinder the gospel in any way.
- d. However, where does that leave us today? Should we be financially supporting elders and preachers in the church, or should they be self-supported?
- e. My own experience:
  - i. I spent several decades in a church that relied heavily on full-time ministry staff and large budgets, which required substantial weekly giving from the members (with tithing sometimes pushed). This was that church's model for spreading the gospel.
  - ii. For some of the time I was in that church, I was supported in the full-time ministry, leading a house church in Somerville, Massachusetts for about 5-6 years. I was in that position first as a single man and later as a married man without children (at the time).
  - iii. Later, I left the full-time paid ministry but continued for several years to be active in a self-supported ministry role that included Bible teaching.
  - iv. Later, with my family, I went to Albania on a mission team from the same church. While initially I was fully supported by the church, after a few months I was able to find a part-time engineering job there. We stayed in Albania for about 2-1/2 years.
    - 1. When church missions-related funding dried up due to a financial downturn in the U.S. economy and stock market (c. 2001-2002), I was able to remain while others had to return home. It was easier for me to remain longer in Albania, since I was able to offset my living expenses by working part-time as an engineer.
    - 2. During that time, I had the opportunity to travel on weekends to other countries in Eastern Europe, teaching the Bible in churches there as well.

- v. Returning to the U.S., I remained active in Bible teaching in the large church, again self-supported through an engineering career.
- vi. Over the past 8 years, I have been co-leading a house church (which recently has grown beyond what a house can hold). At this time, I am semi-retired, only working part-time as an engineer, while taking the roles of teaching, leading and pastoring in the church here. Therefore, I am able to be fully self-supported while fulfilling an expanded role of leadership in our local church.
  - 1. Recently, I heard that there were some discussions among the brothers in our church (when I was not present) in which at least one brother suggested that it might be better if I was financially supported to some extent by the church, so that I could be freed up from my engineering work to be more fully available for ministry work.
  - 2. However, at this time, I prefer to be self-supported financially since I am able to do that.
- f. My personal assessment of church-supported vs. self-supported ministry:
  - i. Advantages of being supported by others (by the church) include the following:
    - 1. This is easier for the individual involved on so many levels.
    - 2. The person is not so divided in their focus of time and energy.
    - 3. In being supported by others, it is possible to 'spread the financial load' among many people so the church leader does not get crushed by being overworked (doing church ministry while maintaining a secular job to earn money).
  - ii. Advantages I have seen in supporting oneself while involved in church ministry include the following.
    - 1. This tends to remove one or more potential barriers between me and others, most of whom presumably are working at jobs themselves.
      - a. This removes the potential that others will think I have *mixed motives* in trying to convert them (since there is no possible financial gain for me).
      - b. It is easier for me to be more relatable to other when they ask me, "What do you do for work?"

2. There is no fear of speaking my convictions or challenging other Christians in the church on sin and worrying about the potential financial impacts of alienating people (especially including the wealthy or major contributors).
  - a. While ideally, this should not be a problem, I have seen this to be an issue in churches I have been in over the years.
3. With my own outside stream of income, I retain the ability to help others financially, give to the poor, etc.
4. Having to work harder keeps me from giving in to laziness as much!
5. Many years ago, a vocational (medical) missionary encouraged me to read a book, *'God's New Envoys: A Bold Strategy for Penetrating Closed Countries'*, by Tetsunao Yamamori. The main point of the book was that most of the unevangelized people of the world live in countries that are closed to traditional foreign missionary-type evangelism.
  - a. If someone wanted to go to that country as a Christian missionary, they would not be allowed in. However, if they had a career valued by the government of that country (such as teaching English, medical work, construction, water engineering, etc.) the same person would be welcomed in!
6. Maintaining a 'regular job' while working in the ministry to help others in the church allows me to provide a more relatable (and hopefully more convicting) example to the other men who are struggling to take care of a family, meet the demands of a job, etc.
  - a. For me, the leaders who inspire me the most are those who are able to lead *by the example of their lives*.
  - b. I believe the apostle Peter was exhorting the elders in the church to become this type of leader, one who *leads by example* (as opposed to trying to manage others by edict).
    - i. "The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by

compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; *nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock....*" (1 Peter 5:1-3, NKJV)

7. Having many self-supported preachers, teachers and elders may provide a model for evangelizing the world that may be more adaptable.
  - a. If we want to have thousands of house churches in places like the U.S. and evangelize countries that are currently closed to traditional evangelistic missionaries, this approach may become more and more useful.
  - g. **Bottom Line:** Both approaches (paid vs. self-supported in the ministry) have their advantages. Most apostles chose one path, but Paul also made tents (at least during part of his ministry). Let us be open to both approaches!

#### IV. Becoming All Things to All Men

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 9:19-22**.
- b. I have seen this passage abused to push all kinds of worldliness in the name of evangelism.
  - i. Halloween parties to reach out to neighbors.
  - ii. Going after what the world values (wealth, big homes, famous people emphasized, etc.)
  - iii. 'Seeker-friendly' churches that blend with the world to make themselves appear more attractive to those who love the world.
- c. However, we must never use this statement as an excuse to love the world or to short-change the Biblical teaching on holiness.
  - i. Several years ago, while in a large church, some of the sisters in the church started to embrace and put into practice some countercultural teachings on head covering and modesty in dress.
  - ii. These changes were upsetting to the leaders of the church, who protested that they were making the gospel 'less attractive to the world' (to women in the world who embraced feminism and/or worldly, immodest clothing styles).
- d. This passage about "becoming all things to all men" needs to be understood in context. Paul worked hard and this impacted how he lived, giving up his rights in a selfless desire to save as many as possible.

- e. At the same time, we must not go to the other extreme in reaction to the worldly churches around us. We should not be striving to live in a way that is deliberately unrelatable to those around us, either!
  - i. The Christians in Corinth, and others we see in the book of **Acts**, were not called to live in isolation from others. The Christians were not sitting around waiting for the pagans to beat a path to their doors. Neither did they expect non-believers to jump through a series of man-made hoops and barriers to demonstrate that they had reached a level where they proved they were 'good enough' to receive the gospel.
  - ii. **Closing Challenge:** Let us consider our own lives in light of this passage. What does it mean for us today to imitate Paul's heart, to be willing to make ourselves lower for the sake of saving a few more souls, without compromising any of the commands of God?