IMITATION OF PAUL AND THE CHURCH’S MISSIONARY ROLE IN 1 CORINTHIANS

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Did Paul want the churches he founded to engage in active missionary work? Though an affirmative response to this question has long been assumed by a majority of scholars,¹ this traditional understanding has recently been seriously questioned.² One point of contention in the debate is


the meaning of Paul’s commands to imitate him. Did Paul in fact expect his readers to imitate him in evangelism? The present study will seek to answer this question by studying the imitation texts in 1 Corinthians. The objective is to discover, according to Paul’s explicit indications, whether his commands to imitate him include an evangelistic component.

I. THE BROADER CONTEXT OF PAUL’S ImitATION COMMAND IN 1 CORINTHIANS 11:1

Just as the modern English injunction “imitate me” is inherently ambiguous, only the context of Paul’s command clarifies what sort of imitation he expected. Before turning to the immediate context of Paul’s imitation


5 Of course, the semantic ranges of μιμέομαι and μιμητής do not overlap exactly with their modern English counterparts, e.g. note the Greek philosophical and artistic usage of μιμέομαι (Michaelis, “μιμέομαι κτλ.,” TDNT 4:659–63); Jo-Ann Brant unconvincingly tries to impose this specialized philosophical meaning of μιμέομαι on Paul’s usage (Brant, “mimesis” 285–300). It should be noted that the English word “imitation” does perhaps more commonly carry negative
command in 1 Cor 11:1, we first need to investigate its broader epistolary setting. 1 Cor 11:1 appears at the close of Paul’s response to the Corinthians’ division over eating εἰδωλοθυτον, “idol meat” (chaps. 8–10). Certain “strong” members of the Corinthian community are eating meat sacrificed to idols (8:1–9) and attending “non-religious” banquets that gather in pagan temples (8:10–11). “Weak” members of the community, however, view such activities as having religious significance and are themselves being incited to partake in such meals. From the weak members’ viewpoint, when they “give in” and partake of questionable food, they engage in idolatrous syncretism. Thus, the weak are being led to sin against their own consciences by participating in what they consider idolatry, and if they persist, will be “destroyed” (ἀπολλυται; 1 Cor 8:11–13). While Paul agrees with the strong Corinthians’ assessment of meat sacrificed to idols in theory (i.e. it has no ultimate spiritual significance), he argues that the principle of self-denial for the good of the other takes priority. Paul avers, “Therefore, if food causes

connotations of “mimicry” than its Greek counterpart (see E. Larsson, “μιμέωμαι κτλ...,” EDNT 2:428–30; Louw and Nida §41.44; §41.45; De Boer, The Imitation of Paul 211). For all Pauline uses of μιμέωμαι (or (συμ-) μιμητικά, see: 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; 2 Thess 3:7, 9; Eph 5:1. Outside of Paul, the only other NT occurrences of μιμέωμαι (or cognates) are found in Heb 12:13; 13:7; and 3 John 11. The concept of imitation is also frequently present in Paul, e.g. see 1 Cor 7:6–7; 10:31–11:11; Gal 4:12–20; Phil 4:9; 1 Tim 1:15–17; 2 Tim 1:13; 2:2; 3:10; cf. Acts 20:35. It is commonly noted that Paul does not mention imitation of himself in letters to churches which he did not found (e.g. in Romans or Colossians). Though few ancient speakers or writers prescribe imitation of themselves, there seems to be no conceptual difference between Paul’s injunctions and others’ frequent appeals to imitate a third party (e.g. T. Benj. 3.1; 4.1; Seneca Epistulae Morales 6.5–6; 7.6–9; 11.8–10; Dio Chrysostom Discourse 55.4–5; for first-person appeals, see 2 Macc 6:27–28; 4 Macc 9:23; cf. Josephus Ant. 1.109). So Ernest Best (Paul and His Converts [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988] 68–70); contra Adele Reinhartz (“On the meaning of the Pauline exhortation” 395–96). Paul can be so bold because of his confidence in the gospel to shape the communities he founded, his apostolic authority, and his ultimate dependence upon Christ (1 Cor 11:1; Phil 1:5–6; 1 Thess 1:4–8). Cf. Malherbe, Paul and the Thessalonians 58.


2 Though Paul does not use the term “strong” in 1 Corinthians, we will adopt this designation for the believers who favored eating idol meat (cf. Rom 15:1).

3 Wedding and funeral banquets, as well as other social meetings, were commonly held within the precincts of a temple. See Peter D. Gooch, Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8–10 in Its Context (Studies in Christianity and Judaism 5; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993) 1–46; Wendell Lee Willis, Idol Meat in Corinth: The Pauline Argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985) 63, n. 234; Ramsay MacMullen, Paganism in the Roman Empire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) 36–42; Franz Poland, Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1909) 503–13. Gordon Fee thinks the issue throughout 1 Cor 8:1–10:22 is “the eating of sacrificial food at the cultic meals in the pagan temples,” but such a reading does not seem to account for Paul’s accommodating attitude in chapter 8 (Fee, Corinthians 359–60).
my brother to fall, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause my brother to fall” (1 Cor 8:13, my translation). Just as Paul gives up his right to receive financial support or take along a believing wife so that no stumbling block will be put in the way of his evangelistic ministry (1 Cor 9:1–27), the strong Corinthians should give up their right to eat meat sacrificed to idols, if that action proves spiritually harmful to their weak brothers.

In chapter 10, Paul shifts from discussing the principle of self-denial to denouncing idolatry as unfaithfulness. Paul cites examples from the OT as to how God deals with the unfaithful. Indeed, the Lord’s destruction of the Israelites, even after he had rescued them from Egypt, stands as a warning against presumption and unfaithfulness (10:1–13). An example of similar presumption in Paul’s own day would be partaking in an idolatrous religious ceremony (10:14–22). Even in cases where idolatry is not involved (e.g. meat from the market or “non-religious” banquets in a pagan temple), if another’s conscience is in danger, one should refrain from eating (10:23–30).

II. THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF PAUL’S IMITATION COMMAND IN 1 CORINTHIANS 11:1

Paul indicates to the reader that he is concluding this discussion on debated eating practices with the inferential ὥσπερ and a general summarizing tone (ἐίτε ὥσπερ ἐσθίετε ἐίτε πίνετε ἐίτε τι ποιεῖτε . . . ; 10:31). It is here that Paul instructs his converts to imitate him, and as we noted in the introduction to this essay, only the context of this command will clarify the kind of imitation expected. Keeping in mind the broader context outlined above, it is instructive to look particularly at 1 Cor 10:31–11:1. The text reads:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.  

In this concluding paragraph to the lengthy discussion on idol meat, Paul emphasizes the salvific intentions of his accommodating behavior (something he has already highlighted in 9:19–23). The ὄψις (good, advantage, benefit) which Paul seeks for all persons is none other than their

9 The term “brothers” for Paul obviously includes both male and female members of the congregation, and for ease of expression, we will use the term in this way as well.

10 See Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians 177; John C. Brunt, “Rejected, Ignored, or Misunderstood? The Fate of Paul’s Approach to the Problem of Food Offered to Idols in Early Christianity,” NTS 31 (1985) 114.

11 Note the argument’s structure: (A) idol meat issue, (B) apostolic paradigm and OT example, (A1) idol meat issue. Hopper claims that Paul employs epideictic discourse in 1 Corinthians, whereby he introduces an issue, digresses, and then returns to the main issue (Mark Edward Hopper, “The Pauline Concept of Imitation” [Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminar, 1983] 128). This ABA pattern of argumentation has been noted by others (e.g. Fee, Corinthians 16; John J. Collins, “Chiasmus, the ‘ABA’ Pattern, and the Text of Paul,” in Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus 1961 (AnBib 17–18; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1963) 2:575–83.

12 All English Bible quotations will come from the NRSV, unless otherwise noted.
salvation ( ἵνα σωθῶσιν). The question, then, is whether Paul expects the Corinthians to exercise this same concern for others' salvation. Or, is the apostle's self-denial simply an analogy for the Corinthian Christians' behavior towards one another?

Paul answers this question by signifying that the strong brothers' accommodation also has salvific intentions. Paul says that if the weak brothers persist in sinning against their own conscience, they will be destroyed ( ἀπολλυται γάρ ὁ ἀσθενών; 1 Cor 8:11). Paul's other uses of ἀπολλυμι make clear that this destruction refers to the weak brothers' ultimate state. The strong brothers' self-denial is meant to prevent the weak brothers from sinning against their consciences in idolatry, for no idolater will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9–11). Does the strong brothers' salvific concern, however, extend beyond those presently identified with the Christian community?

Several factors would seem to indicate that it does. First, the salutation of 1 Corinthians shows that Paul understands the teaching of this letter as applying beyond the concerns that occasioned it. The letter is not addressed simply to the Corinthians, but also to "all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Undoubtedly, Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians is a profoundly occasional letter. Specific issues at Corinth prompted Paul to write this letter, and the Corinthians are the primary addressees. Yet, if Paul writes with the broader church also in view, he surely intends the underlying principles of his specific advice to extend beyond the issues addressed. Second, in 1 Cor 10:31, Paul signifies that his concluding

13 Paul's reference to a person as an ἀδελφός can pertain to the person's outward relationship to the Christian community rather than his or her spiritual state (e.g. 1 Cor 1:11; 5:11; Rom 14:15, 21; cf. Matt 18:15–17; Acts 20:30; 1 John 5:16). Also, Paul's remark that the brother is one ἐν Ἱησοῦ Χριστῷ ἀπέθανεν (1 Cor 8:11) does not indicate that Paul views that person as definitively saved. Cf. Rom 14:15; 2 Peter 2:1, "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves" (emphasis added).

14 E.g. see 1 Cor 1:18, 19; Rom 2:12, 14:15; 2 Cor 2:15; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:10.

15 1 Cor 1:2; cf. 1 Cor 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33. Weiss's proposal that this universal address is a later interpolation has no manuscript support (Weiss, Der erste Korintherbrief 4). Grammatically, the phrase cannot be understood as referring to κλητοῖς ἀγίοις (J. B. Lightfoot, Notes on Epistles of St Paul from Unpublished Commentaries [London: MacMillan, 1895] 145; contra Georg Heinrici, Kritisch Exegetisches Handbuch über den ersten Brief an die Korinther [MeyerK; 6th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1881] 13; Frederic Louis Godet, Commentary on First Corinthians [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977] 45; Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians [ICC; 2d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914] 3; cf. 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1). Furthermore, the words ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ are too general to be restricted to believers in the province of Achaia (contra Charles Hodge, An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians [New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1857; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980] 5; Francis Baudraz, Les Épitres aux Corinthiens: Commentaire [Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1965] 20; cf. 2 Cor 1:1). It appears Paul wrote with a consciousness that his letters, though occasional, would circulate (Col 4:16; 2 Pet 3:15–16); other attempts to explain 1 Cor 1:2 are not convincing. For example, see Manuel Guerra, who argues that πάντες οἱ ἐπικαλομένοι οὐ τὸν κύριον Λέονidas de la comunidad cristiana en Corinto," Scripta Theologica 17 [1985] 11–72) or Ulrich Wickert, who claims that Paul presents the universal church as somehow joining in the writing of this epistle ("Einheit und Eintracht der Kirche im Präskript des ersten Korintherbriefes," ZNW 50 [1959] 73–82).
remarks on the food issue have implications beyond the Corinthians’ current situation. He writes, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (10:31; emphasis added). Third, after broadening the scope of his conclusion with this introductory remark, Paul follows in 10:32 with a command that extends explicitly beyond the Christian community. The apostle writes, “Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.” Thus, Paul instructs the Corinthians to consider the repercussions of their actions not only for persons identified with the church, but also for those outside the church—both non-believing Jews and Greeks. Christians are to be blameless or inoffensive in their relationship to such outsiders (ἀπρόσκοποι . . . γίνεσθε). Such behavior should not be misunderstood as avoiding offense at any cost for the sake of politeness or civil peace. A Christian is to avoid offense in adiaphora for the sake of the gospel and its progress. This point is clarified by Paul’s elaboration of what it means for Christians to be blameless in relation to others. He explains that their behavior should be parallel to his own: “just as (καθός) I try to please (αἴρεσκω) everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of the other (τοῦ ἄρετου)” (1 Cor 10:33). This explicit parallel between Paul’s salvation-oriented activity and the “blamelessness” of his addressees demonstrates that the term ἀπρόσκοποι connotes an active missionary role for the congregation. The Corinthian Christians must not only regulate their behavior to avoid offense; they must

16 Also, see Paul’s earlier statement in 10:23–24, “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up (οἴκοδομεῖ). Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other (τοῦ ἄρετου).” Bowers acknowledges that the term “other” here is so general that it must be understood as including unbelievers (such as the non-Christian dinner host of 10:27; Bowers, “Church and Mission” 94, n. 1). “Building up” for Paul means both the maturation and multiplication of the church, as we will see in our discussion of 1 Cor 14:23–25.

17 Cf. Col 4:5–6; 1 Thess 4:11–12.


19 We do not find here an early form of christliche Bürgerlichkeit (Dibelius).

20 Robertson and Plummer comment, “An ill-advised exhibition of Christian freedom might shock Jews and an ill-advised rigor about matters indifferent might excite the derision of Greeks, and thus those who might have been won over would be alienated” (Corinthians 224).


22 Murphy-O’Connor writes, “Paul has dedicated himself to ‘seeking the advantage of many in order that they may be saved’ (x, 33). It is not enough that the Corinthians avoid creating stumbling-blocks, they must positively empower the conversion of Jews and Gentiles and the continuing growth of their fellow Christians” (“Freedom or the Ghetto” 573). Richardson and Gooch comment, “[Let us address] a question about the effectiveness of accommodating one’s behaviour for the good of others. Where their ‘good’ means not just their feeling comfortable but instead their ultimate salvation, accommodation has to be accompanied by additional procedures whereby the others are moved away from their present way of life and brought into the freedom of the gospel. Otherwise accommodation will only be the confirmation of their way of life (‘If you’re living like us our life must be acceptable’)” (“Accommodation Ethics” 115).
actively work for the “building up” of the church—that is, both the matura-
tion or multiplication of the church (10:23; 14:3; 14:24–25). 23

In the final sentence of this concluding paragraph on the idol meat issue,
Paul injects the imperative, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (11:1). 24
Standing alone, this command is ambiguous, but the preceding verses make
clear that we should understand it as a restatement of Paul’s exhortation to
evangelistically-motivated self-denial. The appeal to imitate Paul flows as a
natural reiteration of the previous discussion, but the concluding reference
to Christ is somewhat more enigmatic. Given the immediate context (i.e.
the preceding verse), Paul seems to be saying that Christ was a model for
him in that Christ did not seek his own advantage, but that of others—for
their salvation. This understanding of Christ as selflessly giving himself
for others’ salvation corresponds with Paul’s presentation of Christ in his
other letters, as well as agreeing with the Gospel traditions. 25

Paul’s mention of his (and Christ’s) salvation-oriented self-denial, along
with the triple reference to the “Jews, Greeks, and church of God” in 10:32,
points us back to a passage which closely parallels the current one. In 9:12,
19–23, Paul discusses the same three groups with evangelistic intentions. 26
A closer look at this passage will help us understand the accommodating
behavior Paul urges the Corinthians to imitate in 1 Cor 11:1. Paul writes:

> Nevertheless, we [Paul and Barnabas] have not made use of this right [to ma-
terial benefit], but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way
of the gospel of Christ. . . . For though I am free with respect to all, I have
made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I be-
came as a Jew, in order that I might win Jews. To those under the law I be-
came as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I
might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one out-
side the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law)
so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that
I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by
all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might be

23 See below for a more detailed discussion of “building up.”
24 For a brief survey of major commentators’ views on this verse, see Belleville, “‘Imitate Me’”
122–25.
25 E.g. Rom 15:1–7; 2 Cor 8:9; Eph 5:1–2; Phil 2:5–11; Mark 8:31–35; 10:45; Luke 19:10. See
Peter T. O’Brien, “The Gospel and Godly Models in Philippians,” in Worship, Theology and
Ministry in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Ralph P. Martin (ed. Michael J. Wilkins and
Terence Paige; JSNTSup 87; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992) 273–84; L. W. Hurtado,
“Jesus as Lordly Example in Philippians 2:5–11,” in From Jesus to Paul: Studies in Honour of
Francis Wright Beare (ed. Peter Richardson and John C. Hurd; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier
University Press, 1984) 113–26. Also see Richardson’s presentation of Jesus’ pattern of accom-
modation in the Synoptic Gospels (Richardson and Gooch, “Accommodation Ethics” 131–40).
26 In chap. 9, Paul calls these groups “the Jews” or “those under the law” (Jewish non-believers),
“those outside the law” (Greek non-believers), and “the weak” (persons in the church with inad-
quate or hesitating faith). Paul uses the term “win” loosely—applying it to both non-believers and
“the weak.” One should not understand “the weak” as an outright non-Christian category, as does
a fellow sharer in proclaiming it [NRSV: share in its blessings] (1 Cor 9:12, 19–23). 27

Here one gets a clearer picture of what Paul means by his attempts to “please” all people (1 Cor 10:33). The apostle adjusts his behavior in inconsequential matters so as not to put an unnecessary barrier between a non-believer (or person of questionable faith) and the gospel. In the church’s relationship with the same groups (Jews, Greeks, the weak), it is also to exercise the principle of self-denial in striving for the other’s salvation (10:32–11:1).

The concluding verse of the passage quoted above (v. 23) is especially important for gaining a greater understanding of Paul’s mission and the mission of the church. The text, 1 Cor 9:23, reads: πάντα δὲ ποιῶ διὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, ἵνα συγκοινώνως αὐτῶν γένωμαι. The most debated words here are συγκοινώνως αὐτῶν. There are three main ways of understanding them: (1) “partner/sharer in [the blessings/benefits of] the gospel”; 28 (2) “partner/sharer in [the work/proclamation of] the gospel”; 29 or (3) “partner of the gospel [in the common task of saving people].” 30 Each option has various advocates, but most commentators and translators have favored option (1). For example, the NRSV reads: “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.” Yet, understanding εὐαγγέλιον as “blessings”


or “benefits” of the gospel is unlikely. In fact, if εὐαγγέλιον denotes “blessings” of the gospel in 1 Cor 9:23, it is the only example of this meaning in the NT.31

In spite of this semantic improbability, “blessings of the gospel” continues to be the translation of choice for many scholars. The primary reason given for this translation is the context following 9:23—especially verses 24–27. It is assumed that verse 27 is a clearer restatement of Paul’s thought in verse 23. That is, in verse 23, Paul says that he faithfully fulfills his apostolic ministry in order to share in the gospel’s blessings (23). And, in verse 27, he forthrightly states that his own salvation is somehow contingent on the faithful completion of his Christian labors (27). While it is true that 9:24–27 should be read along with 9:23,32 an interpretation which puts Paul’s salvation in question is unlikely on several counts. First, Paul has given indication elsewhere in Corinthians that Christian laborers will lose rewards for unfaithful service, but their salvation is not in question (1 Cor 3:15; 4:5; cf. 5:5).33 Second, Paul speaks confidently of his ultimate salvation in other places (Phil 1:21–23; cf. 1 Cor 1:8–9, 30); it seems improbable that he is here voicing some hidden fears. Third, in all other places where Paul applies the term αἰδοκιμίος (9:27) or its cognates to himself, he is concerned with the Lord’s approval of his apostolic ministry.34 So, if 9:24–27 does not refer to Paul’s concern for his ultimate salvation, how does the passage function in the letter?

The athletic metaphor of 9:24–27 serves to underscore the teaching of 9:19–23, that is, one must exercise self-discipline and temporary hardship for a greater ultimate goal. To apply the metaphor in Paul’s and the Corinthians’ case, the self-discipline is accommodation in adiaphora, and the greater goal is the “winning” of more persons. Paul and the Corinthians undergo such hardship to gain an “imperishable crown” (9:25). While this crown is frequently interpreted as a symbol for salvation, it is more likely a reference to converts, as in all other occurrences of στεφανός in Paul’s

31 Gundry Volf, Paul and Perseverance 248. Gundry Volf comments, “In 1 Corinthians 9 [εὐαγγέλιον] denotes the divine power of salvation which Paul preaches (9:12, 14a, 18b) or the activity itself of preaching the gospel (9:14b, 18c).”


33 Gundry Volf, Paul and Perseverance 242.

34 1 Cor 3:13; 2 Cor 10:18; 13:6–7; 1 Thess 2:4; cf. Gal 6:4; 1 Tim 3:10; 2 Tim 2:15 (Gundry Volf, Paul and Perseverance 236).
undisputed letters. Paul’s converts are his crown—the ultimate authentication of his faithful service and his grounds of boasting before the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 3:14). In 9:24–27, where Paul’s concern is with the Lord’s approval of his apostolic ministry and the “winning” of more people through his self-denial, it is not surprising to find a reference to converts as a crown. We note, however, that unlike Paul’s other references to a crown, he includes his addressees in this quest for the Lord’s approval through “winning” more converts. Thus, a proper understanding of 9:24–27 does not support reading 9:23 as Paul’s desire to share in the “blessings of the gospel.” The disputed verse must refer to Paul’s partnership with others in proclaiming the gospel (option 2) or Paul’s partnership with the gospel in saving persons (option 3).

The immediately preceding context also favors these interpretations. Paul has just finished speaking about the renunciation of his rights among various groups for the ultimate purpose (ήνα) of “winning” or “saving” them. Note the repeated “in order that I might win/save” (vv. 19, 20 [2x], 21, 22 [2x]). When we arrive at the final sentence of this section, we expect a parallel thought. Paul anticipates the reader’s question, “Paul, why have you not demanded your personal and apostolic rights?” Paul responds, “[Not because I am a lesser apostle, or because I am not ultimately free to act according to my own conscience. No! Rather,) all of these things I do because of the gospel, in order that I . . . ” At this point, the reader expects the sentence to be completed in parallel fashion with the preceding six ήνα clauses, e.g. “in order that I might save more people, win more to Christ, or proclaim the gospel more effectively.” Translation options (2) and (3) lie within the parameters of this expected conclusion. In fact, it would be extremely odd for Paul to conclude this discussion of his self-denial for the sake of others with a self-centered motive (i.e. “I do all of these [apparently selfless] things because of my ultimate desire to share personally in the gospel’s benefits”). Paul has already said that the only wage he earns as an apostle is the benefit of being able to preach the gospel free of charge (9:18; cf. 10:24).

Thus, the two most likely translations of συγκοινωνος αὐτῶν are “partner/sharer in [the work/proclamation of] the gospel” or “partner of the gospel” [in the common task of saving people]. The words συγκοινωνος or κοινωνός followed by a genitive are equally likely to mean “partner of” or “partner/sharer in.” Nevertheless, in the LXX, NT, and Apostolic Fathers,

35 1 Thess 2:19; Phil 4:1. In 2 Tim 2:5, the verb στεφανοῦσα refers to the fruits of Timothy’s ministry, and in 2 Tim 4:8, the non-evangelistic nature of στεφανος is signified by the addition of a genitive qualifier (ὁ τῆς δικαιοσύνης στέφανος). Also, see 1 Pet 5:4 where a crown is promised to the elders and is dependent on their faithful oversight. For ἀφθινος as applying to believers, see e.g. 1 Cor 15:42, 50, 52, 53, 54.
37 “Partner of”: Prov 28:24; Isa 1:23; Matt 23:30; 1 Cor 10:20; Phil 1:7 (μου); Heb 10:33; Mart. Pol. 6.2, 17.3; Herm. Sim. 5.6.6. “Sharer/Partner in”: Esth 8:12; Mal 2:14; Sir 6:10; Rom 11:17; 1 Cor 10:18; 2 Cor 1:7; Phil 1:7 (τῆς χάριτος); 1 Pet 5:1; 2 Pet 1:4; Herm. Man. 4.1.5; Herm. Sim. 2.9. The meaning “partner of/with” can be made unambiguously by the use of the pronominal adjective (e.g. 2 Cor 8:23, κοινωνος ἡμῶν) or the preposition μετα followed by the personal pronoun (Herm. Sim. 5.6.6). Συγκοινωνος/Κοινωνος followed by the dative makes the translation “sharer in” more likely, though not definite (Rev 1:9; Barn. 19.8; Did. 4.8; but note Luke 5:10).
when συνήκοινονός/κοινωνός means “partner of,” a partnership with persons is always in view. Although the gospel is in some sense personified in Paul’s writing (9:12), this personification is not so clear as to prepare the reader for Paul’s calling the gospel his “partner.” When Paul does speak of his status in direct relationship to the gospel, he prefers to speak of himself in subservient fashion, as a διάκονος τοῦ εὐαγγελίου. Furthermore, the only other place in Paul’s letters where he speaks explicitly of “partnership” and “the gospel” does not entail a partnership with the gospel (Phil 1:5). In that case, the Philippian congregation’s partnership in the gospel consists of prayerful and financial support of Paul’s mission, as well as an active proclamation of the gospel from the congregation itself (Phil 1:7, 2:15–16; 4:15; cf. 1 Cor 16:6). The term “partnership in the gospel” in Philippians thus is a summary of all facets of the Philippians’ participation in the gospel’s advance. Likewise, in 1 Cor 9:23, εὐαγγέλιον refers to a partnership in the work/proclamation of the gospel. Indeed, εὐαγγέλιον frequently refers to the proclamation of the gospel when the word is not serving as the object of a verb (as in 1 Cor 9:23).

While it is wrong, then, to understand the gospel as Paul’s “partner” in 1 Corinthians, it is important to note that the apostle does speak of himself as having “partner[s]” in [proclaiming] the gospel. Paul’s description of himself as a συνήκοινονός calls attention to the fact that he is not alone in his “gospel work.” While the word κοινωνός alone would make this point, the συν- prefix further emphasizes this meaning. Who, then, are Paul’s partners in proclaiming the gospel? Surely, Paul is referring not only to the other apostles and itinerant missionaries, but also to the Corinthian congregation.
which is laboring to advance the gospel.\textsuperscript{45} Thus, when translating 9:23, the word \textit{sugkoinwnovÍ} should be rendered “fellow partner/sharer” to bring out this sense.

1 Corinthians 9 further elucidates Paul’s imitation command by clarifying the relationship between the apostle’s exemplary evangelistic self-denial and the nature of the gospel. In 9:12, Paul describes the gospel as a dynamic force which he does not want to hinder through his insistence upon apostolic rights (9:12). The gospel is in some sense depicted as an independent power which inevitably accomplishes God’s will; one may hinder or further its advance, but its ultimate effectiveness is guaranteed.\textsuperscript{46} Ascertaining this dynamic nature of the gospel is important for understanding why Paul expects his converts to reproduce his self-sacrificial behavior for others’ salvation (10:31–11:1). Once the gospel becomes effective in its hearers, they, too, are included in its dynamic advance. They are either fellow partners with Paul or stumbling blocks; there is no middle ground.\textsuperscript{47} Each person, according to his or her situation and giftedness, is a partner in the work of the gospel. Ultimately, it is the nature of the gospel that provides the theological basis for Paul’s expectations of his churches’ evangelistic activity in imitation of his own (1 Thess 1:5–8).

\section*{III. Imitation of Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:14–18}

Let us now consider the only other overt “imitation text” from 1 Corinthians. In 4:14–18, Paul writes,

I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers.\textsuperscript{48} Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me. For this reason

\textsuperscript{45} 1 Cor 3:6–7, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”

\textsuperscript{46} See Rom 1:16, 1 Cor 1:18, 21; 4:15; 14:36; 15:1; Phil 1:12; Col 1:5–6; 1 Thess 1:5–8; 2 Thess 2:13–14; 3:1; 2 Tim 2:9. Also see Schütz, \textit{Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority} 51–52; Gundry Volf, \textit{Paul and Perseverance} 251; O’Brien, \textit{Gospel and Mission} 138. The OT background of the effective “word of the Lord” has certainly influenced Paul’s thinking (e.g. Isa 55:11). John Howard Schütz comments, “What does Paul understand by a ‘gospel’ which could be ‘hindered’? He cannot be speaking about hindering the \textit{content} of the gospel. Nor can he mean that he will refrain from damaging his own \textit{delivery} of it. To grasp the metaphors here we must imagine the gospel as a force or agency able to accomplish something, having a purpose toward which it proceeds. Paul will do nothing to thwart that thrust of the gospel toward its own goal. The renunciation of his apostolic ‘right’ seems to him a small price to pay to assure this” (\textit{Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority} 52).

\textsuperscript{47} Matt 12:30, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”

I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

This short passage is so general in tone that it is difficult to delimit further what sort of imitative behavior is expected. The broader context, however, does give some indication. Paul has just finished chiding the Corinthians for their undue adulation of certain leaders, celebration of worldly wisdom, and triumphalism (1:10–4:13). In contrast to the Corinthians, the apostles are threatened, viewed as fools, mocked as weak, persecuted, and even considered “the rubbish of the world” (4:8–13). It is this correct embodiment of Christian leadership and existence, as typified in the apostles’ acceptance of worldly disapproval and suffering, that Paul hopes his converts will imitate. Humility and the way of the cross are diametrically opposed to the triumphalism of the Corinthians. Paul thus aptly terms his “gospel-lifestyle” as his “ways in Christ Jesus,” since the Lord who suffered and died on behalf of humanity is in some sense pictured in them (1 Cor 1:23–24; 2:2).

It is noteworthy that the persecutions which the apostles endure result from speaking openly “the foolishness of the cross” (1:18; 4:8–13). For Paul, opposition and suffering are almost always related to his proclamation of the gospel. If the Corinthians are to imitate Paul by enduring suffering,

49 Referring to the passage, Boykin Sanders remarks, “... Paul offers almost no guidance that would enable us to ascertain specifically what aspects of his life are to be imitated. The lack of specificity on Paul’s part has vexed many interpreters of 1 Cor 4:16” (B. Sanders, “Imitating Paul: 1 Cor 4:16,” HTR 74 [1981] 353). Castelli, drawing on Foucault, argues that Paul’s vagueness is intentional and furthers his exercising of power to enforce sameness (Imitating Paul 110). See Belleville for a concise presentation of the views held by major commentators as to what Paul meant by “be imitators of me” in 1 Cor 4:16 (Bellevisle, “Imitate Me” 122–23). Also see the history of interpretation section in E. Coye Still, III, “The Function of 1 Corinthians 4:6–17 in its Epistolary Context” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, forthcoming).

50 1 Cor 1:10–4:21 is best understood as a single unit, with 4:14–21 as the concluding paragraph. This understanding of the 1 Corinthians’ structure is widely accepted. E.g. see Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians 30; Barrett, Corinthians 28; Fee, Corinthians 183; Collins, First Corinthians 195. Note the framing brackets: Παρακαλέω δέ άμαξας (1:10) ... Παρακαλέω οὖν Ἰήρας (4:16).

51 Possibly we should view the τοῦτα of 4:14 (i.e. the “things” Paul is writing with which he does not wish to shame the Corinthians) as referring to the entire discussion of Paul’s and Apollo’s servant ministry which begins at 3:5. Boykin Sanders reads the text this way and bases his interpretation largely on the parallel τοῦτα of 1 Cor 4:6 and 4:14 (“Imitating Paul” 353–54). In the end, according to Sanders, Paul is exhorting the Corinthians to have a selfless communal concern which excludes divisiveness (361–63).

52 W. D. Spencer advocates a similar reading. He writes, “What has [Paul] just told us are his ways? They are the list of sufferings. Paul’s suffering is both the content and the methodology of his teaching. By suffering he seeks to remove all obstacles in his hearers’ process of learning. Though entitled to material benefits (1 Cor 9:11), he forgoes them if necessary to promote God’s reign and undergoes hunger instead (9:12b; 6:3). Indeed, suffering can be substitutionary, taking the place of his learners or providing the payment of the civil price for bringing them the gospel (Eph 3:1, 13; Col 1:24; 2 Tim 2:10). It can be a tool for encouragement, helping the learners to speak more boldly on their own (Phil 1:12–14). It encourages prayer participation in Paul’s ministry (2 Cor 1:11)” (William David Spencer, “The Power in Paul’s Teaching (1 Cor 4:9–20),” JETS 32 [1989] 57).

53 B. Sanders, “Imitating Paul” 356.

54 Note 1 Cor 16:8–9, “But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.” Also see Acts 9:15–16; 20:23–24; Rom
mocking, and persecution, it is not “suffering for suffering’s sake.” For the Corinthians, as for the apostles, their open adherence to and proclamation of the “foolishness of the cross” will result in the world’s disapproval and opposition.  

In Paul’s absence, Timothy, by his exemplary conduct and verbal explanation, is to set before the Corinthians the apostle’s ways which correspond with his teaching. The primary example that Timothy brings to the Corinthians is the same one that his “father in the gospel” models—holding to and holding out the gospel amidst opposition.

### IV. THE CHURCH’S MISSIONARY ROLE IN 1 CORINTHIANS 7:12–16

Looking beyond the imitation texts and their immediate contexts, we find that 1 Corinthians offers corroborating evidence that Paul expected his converts to imitate him through missionary activity. For example, in 7:12–16, Paul makes another call for salvation-motivated self-denial. The apostle exhorts a believing spouse to live at peace with a non-believing one. The ultimate goal of this irenic behavior is not temporal harmony, but eschatological salvation. Paul writes, “Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband for all you know, you might save your wife” (1 Cor 7:16). In this conjugal relationship, as in other relationships, the evan-

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8:36; 1 Cor 15:30–32; 2 Cor 1:8–9; 2:14–3:3; 4:7–12; 6:4–10; 11:23–33; Phil 1:14–18; Col 4:3; 1 Thess 3:2–4; 2 Tim 1:8; 2:3; 3:10–12; 4:5. 

55 Compare Paul’s descriptions of the Thessalonians, who imitate him, the Lord, and the churches in Judea by their suffering in proclaiming the gospel (1 Thess 1:6–8; 2:14–16; 2 Thess 1:4–10). Brant rightly observes, “The equation of ‘imitation’ with suffering afflicion ignores the fact that the Thessalonians were engaged in some activity that incurred the opposition of others” (“mimesis” 292). See also John Piper, “The Supremacy of God in Missions Through Suffering,” in Let the Nations be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 71–112; Scott Hafemann, “‘Because of weakness’ (Galatians 4:13): The role of suffering in the mission of Paul,” in The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul’s Mission (ed. Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 131–46.

56 Gutiérrez detects an allusion to a common Hebrew idiom here (רָצַז הָדַר רָצוֹן) (e.g. see Judg 2:17; 1 Sam 8:3–5; Prov 2:13; 3:23; Gutiérrez, La Paternité spirituelle 181, n. 4). De Boer notes, “The Old Testament used the term way or ways to designate the religious affiliation and commitment which the course and events of one’s life expressed” (The Imitation of Paul 148).

57 Another translation/interpretation of this verse is: “How do you know, wife, if you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, if you will save your wife?” [So, don’t try to force the non-believing spouse to stay if he or she desires to leave. You have no guarantee that you will bring about his or her salvation, and such intransigence on your part will only bring about strife, but God has called us to peace.] Regardless of whether one favors the “optimistic” or “pessimistic” translation, the significance of the verse remains the same for our study: Paul assumes that the Corinthian Christians desire the salvation of non-believers. In favor of the optimistic translation are: the Greek fathers (Josef Blinzler, “Die ‘Heiligkeit’ der Kinder in der alten Kirche: Zur Auslegung von 1 Kor 7,14,” in Aus der Welt und Umwelt des Neuen Testaments [Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1969] 171, n. 46); Joachim Jeremias, “Die missionarische Aufgabe in der Mischehe (I Cor 716),” in Neutestamentliche Studien für Rudolf Bultmann zu seinem siebzigsten Geburtstag (ed. Walther Eltester; BZNW 21; 2d ed.; Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1957) 255–60; C. Burchard,
gelistic concern of believers is assumed. Paul does not write, “[Believing] wife, you must desire, pray, and actively work for your husband’s salvation.” Such active concern is assumed. Paul mentions the possibility of an already desired outcome (i.e. the salvation of a non-believing spouse) to encourage the Christian towards peaceful and self-sacrificial behavior.

V. THE CHURCH’S MISSIONARY ROLE IN 1 CORINTHIANS 14:23–25

1 Cor 14:23–25 also reveals Paul’s assumption that the Corinthians are concerned for non-believers’ salvation. The text reads,

If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all. After the secrets of the unbeliever’s heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, “God is really among you.”

In this passage, Paul presupposes the Corinthians’ desire for non-Christians to be convicted of sin and turn to the Lord in faith. To accomplish this desire, Paul explains, communication within the church meeting should be intelligible to a visiting non-believer. While tongues “build up” (οἰκοδομεῖται) the individual Christians, prophecy “builds up” the church (14:3–5, 12, 17, 26). This description of non-believers coming to faith through prophecy is the primary example Paul gives of how intelligible speech “builds up” the body. Thus “building up” the church obviously includes not only the edification of current believers, but the addition of new members (8:1; 10:23–24, 31–33; 14:23–25; cf. Eph 4:11–16). Paul and Apollos are no longer the only ones building the Corinthian church (3:9–17); they serve as an example of the proper attitude which the now numerous builders should have among themselves (4:6; 14:1–26). As believers admonish one another and mix among outsiders, the church is “built up” through both maturation


59 All commentators are agreed that non-believers are at least included in Paul’s phrase “ιδοναι την ἀπίστοι” (14:23). Barrett favors understanding this phrase as descriptive of one group, i.e. “unbelieving outsiders” (Barrett, Corinthians 324–25). See Walter Rebell, “Gemeinde als Missionsfaktor im Urchristentum: I Kor 14,24f. als Schlüsselsituation,” TZ 44 (1988) 117–34.
Paul’s repeated assumption that the Corinthians are concerned for non-believers’ salvation is undergirded by the apostle’s theological reflection elsewhere in the letter. Non-believers are classed with “the world,” which is under God’s condemnation (1:21; 11:32). Non-believers are “wrongdoers” (ἀδικοί) who will not inherit the kingdom of God (6:9). They are in need of God’s cleansing, sanctification, and justification (6:11). Believers, on the other hand, have been cleansed, forgiven, are victorious over death, and will inherit God’s kingdom (1:2; 6:11; 15:3, 50–58). Motivated by love (13:1–13; 16:14), believers must logically desire and work for the salvation of those who do not share in their blessed estate. Paul’s addressees’ active concern for the lost must have been so self-evident that the apostle chose to focus on practical advice about how to win the lost, rather than instructing his converts that they should desire to do so. Paul advises, “Be accommodating and self-denying in your behavior towards outsiders as you seek their salvation” (10:32).

VI. A PASSIVE OR ACTIVE WITNESS?

In response to the texts presented above, some scholars claim that if Paul envisions an evangelistic role for his church in 1 Corinthians, that role is only passive and behavior-oriented. Against this objection, we can note the following points: (1) In the passages where Paul mentions his own attractive behavior as a witness for the gospel, this witness underlies an assumed verbal proclamation (9:19–23; 10:31–11:1). It seems logical to assume that the congregation’s conduct is also the platform for proclamation. (2) The congregation’s active concern is conveyed by Paul’s depiction of the Corinthian believers themselves as “saving” non-believers—the same way Paul speaks of himself as “winning” and “saving” non-Christians. That is, both Paul and his converts serve as subjects of the verb σώζω, or related verbs. (3) The social setting of first-century Christianity was much different from modern Western Christianity. Due to early Christians’ refusal to participate in social and civil functions which involved idolatry, their religious affiliations were immediately and widely known—more so possibly than if they had preached in the marketplace. Early Christians’ networks

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60 When Jesus says, “I will build my church . . . ” (οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν), no one doubts that these words indicate the inclusion of new disciples, as well as the maturing of current ones (Matt 16:18). On the concept of “building up” in Paul’s letters, Ridderbos states, “In accordance with the redemptive-historical character of the church this upbuilding must be seen first of all as the continuing work of God with his people (Rom. 14:19, 20), whose temple and dwelling place it is. This continuing and consummating work consists both in the bringing in of those who till now have been without (cf. Rom. 15:20ff.) and in the inner strengthening and perfecting of all who in Christ now belong to it (1 Cor. 14:3; 1 Thess. 5:11, et al.)” (Herman Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology [trans. John Richard de Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 432).

61 Bowers, “Church and Mission” 94.

62 1 Cor 7:16; 9:19, 22.
of social relationships were instantaneously affected in such a way as to testify to their new-found allegiance. Discounting such behavior as a “passive witness” reveals a serious misunderstanding of the first-century context. Common sense requires that the congregations’ behavioral witness be accompanied by verbal proclamation. For example, in the instance of the salvation of the non-believing spouse, Paul certainly considers it necessary for the non-believer to accept certain propositional truths before that person can be considered saved (15:3–11). How would the non-believer discover these truths unless his or her spouse articulates them? It is artificial and illogical to assume that Paul envisions a situation where the believing spouse would never take the initiative to discuss the gospel. Such silence would be culpable, given the non-believer’s desperate situation (1:18). Similarly, in 14:23–25, we could ask, how does the non-believer come to be in the church meeting unless he or she has been invited by others? If we restrict ourselves to the passive understanding of the congregations’ witness, we would have to say that the congregation sang so loudly and beautifully that some non-believers were attracted to the meeting—but no one invited them.

Circumstantial evidence also seems to indicate that the Corinthians imitated Paul in his active missionary concern. Priscilla and Aquila, who had resided in Corinth during Paul’s initial evangelistic tour (Acts 18:1–3) are leaders of a congregation in Ephesus at the time of his writing (1 Cor 16:8, 19; Acts 18:18–26). Similarly, it appears that the former synagogue ruler from Corinth, Sosthenes, is now co-laboring in the mission field along with Paul (1 Cor 1:1; Acts 18:17). Certain, Paul did not expect the missionary concern of the Christians in Corinth to be expressed in bland uniformity. Some persons would primarily seek the salvation of non-believers in their own home (1 Cor 7:16), others would primarily testify to non-believing neighbors (1 Cor 10:31–11:1; 14:24–25), and others would even travel with the apostle or start churches in new cities (1 Cor 16:19; 1 Cor 1:1; cf. Acts 18:17–26). While the obligation of gospel dissemination falls upon the church as a whole, an individual believer’s giftedness and life situation determine the manifestation of that obligation (1 Cor 12:12–30).

63 See Peter D. Gooch, Dangerous Food 1–46; Ramsay MacMullen, Paganism in the Roman Empire 36–42.
64 J. Christiaan Beker writes, “In 1 Corinthians 15 we have a striking example that the coherence of the gospel for Paul is not simply an experiential reality of the heart or a ‘Word beyond all words’ that permits a translation into a multitude of worldviews” (J. Christiaan Beker, The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul’s Thought [trans. Loren T. Stuckenbruck; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990] 76).
66 Paul undoubtedly expected apostles and some other persons to be involved in full-time ministry, as distinguished from the majority of the church (1 Cor 9:14; 12:28).