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# What Paul Changes and What He Refuses to Change: Constitutive Commitments and Missional Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19 - 23

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## Abstract

Few passages in Paul's letters have been read in such opposite directions as 1 Corinthians 9:19 - 23. Some readers take the sheer range of Paul's self-description as evidence that his convictions were negotiable; others flatten the passage into a vague appeal to cultural sensitivity. This article asks a single organizing question: what, according to the text, does Paul change, and what does he refuse to change? A close reading of the passage, with particular attention to the grammar of verse 21b (μὴ ὢν ἄνομος θεοῦ ἀλλὰ ἔννομος Χριστοῦ) and to the repeated verb κερδαίνω, shows that what varies from case to case is audience-facing practice, while what never varies is Paul's allegiance to Christ and his aim of bringing others into salvation. The reading is tested against the view that Paul's convictions were elastic and against his judgment of Peter at Antioch (Galatians 2:11 - 14). The article then situates the finding in contemporary action theory: Paul's bounded flexibility exemplifies the philosophical category of a constitutive commitment, and the passage offers a workable test for any agent whose practical identity must persist across extensive behavioral change: does a given adaptation alter what one is committed to, or only how that commitment is made intelligible to others?

## Keywords

Paul, 1 Corinthians 9, Constitutive Commitments, Personal Identity, Missional Flexibility

## 1. Introduction

Few passages in Paul's letters have been used by so many different, and opposite, kinds of readers as 1 Corinthians 9:19 - 23. Missionaries have quoted it to justify almost unlimited adjustment to other cultures; critics, both ancient and modern,

have quoted the very same verses as proof that Paul was a theological "chameleon" who simply told each audience what it wanted to hear. Both groups are reacting to the same feature of the text: Paul's fourfold claim to have "become" (γέγονα, *gegona*) a Jew, a law-keeper, a law-free person, and weak, ending in the sweeping summary, "I have become all things to all people" (πᾶσι πάντα ἐγενόμην, *pasi panta egenomēn*, 1 Cor 9:22). Unless otherwise noted, the Greek text follows the Nestle-Aland 28th edition (Aland et al., 2012); English renderings are the author's own.

This article is not asking whether Paul adapts; everyone agrees he does. It is asking a question that is at once exegetical and philosophical: what does the text show staying the same while Paul adapts, and what kind of thing must remain fixed in order for an agent to remain the same agent across such extensive behavioral variation? The question is not foreign to contemporary philosophy. In action theory, Harry Frankfurt asked what it is for a person to identify with some of his desires and commitments wholeheartedly rather than merely to have them (Frankfurt, 1988), and Charles Taylor argued that a person's identity is constituted by "strong evaluations"—commitments the agent cannot abandon without ceasing to be who he is (Taylor, 1989). Paul's four self-descriptions present a concrete test case for exactly this problem: an agent claims to have changed almost everything about how he lives, while insisting that something has not changed at all.

Some readers have taken the sheer range of Paul's self-description as proof that his convictions were negotiable—that he adjusted not just his behavior but his theological commitments depending on who was listening—a suspicion with roots in the nineteenth-century Tübingen school's distrust of Pauline consistency and echoed in modern readers who see him bending his own stated principles (Dunn, 1998; Morgan, 2003). Others have flattened the passage into a vague appeal to "cultural sensitivity," missing how much actually changes from one verse to the next and how sharply Paul marks the point past which nothing changes at all. Both misreadings share a common flaw: they treat Paul's four self-descriptions as instances of one and the same kind of change, rather than asking, verse by verse, exactly what category of thing is shifting and what category is not.

This article argues a narrower and, it is submitted, more defensible claim: in 1 Corinthians 9:19 - 23, Paul's extensive adaptation to different social and religious groups is not evidence of doctrinal or ethical elasticity but represents a strategic missional flexibility bounded by his allegiance to Christ and oriented toward the salvation of others. Section 2 establishes the ground of Paul's freedom in verse 19. Section 3 works through the "law of Christ" clause in verse 21b, since everything else in the passage depends on getting that clause right. Section 4 applies the resulting distinction to each of Paul's four "as" statements in turn. Section 5 tests the reading against the elastic-convictions view. Section 6 shows how the same distinction accounts for Paul's much harsher judgment of Peter's conduct at Antioch. Section 7 draws the philosophical consequence: what the passage fixes is a constitutive commitment in the Taylor-Frankfurt sense, and this yields a general

test for adaptation without loss of practical identity.

## 2. The Ground of Paul's Freedom (1 Cor 9:19)

Paul's fourfold self-description opens with a claim about his own standing: "for though free from all" (ἐλεύθερος γὰρ ὢν ἐκ πάντων, *eleutheros gar ōn ek pantōn*), he has made himself "a slave to everyone" in order to "win more of them" (9:19). This freedom is not introduced out of nowhere. It picks up directly from the argument Paul has just finished in 9:1 - 18, where he defends his right (ἐξουσία, *exousia*) to material support as an apostle and then explains why he has chosen not to use that right (Fee, 2014, pp. 469-470). The freedom named in verse 19, in other words, is not a general philosophical claim about human liberty. It is the specific freedom of someone who has already demonstrated, at real cost to himself, that he can give up a right without giving up his calling.

This detail matters. If Paul's freedom in verse 19 is an extension of his willingness to forgo a right for the sake of the gospel in verses 1 - 18, then the four adaptations that follow in verses 20 - 22 should be read the same way: as further instances of Paul setting aside something he is entitled to (in this case, a fixed manner of behaving) for the sake of the same goal (winning a hearing for the gospel). Nothing in verse 19 suggests that Paul is also setting aside a fixed set of convictions. What he gives up is a right, not a belief. Keeping that distinction in view from the outset makes it easier to see, in what follows, that Paul's adaptation operates entirely on the level of practice.

It is also worth asking what kind of freedom Paul is claiming when he calls himself "free from all" (*eleutheros ek pantōn*). He does not mean freedom from accountability, since the entire preceding argument (9:1 - 18) is built around Paul submitting to real financial and social cost precisely because he is accountable to his calling. Nor does he mean freedom from any fixed obligation whatsoever, since verse 21b will shortly deny exactly that. What he means, in context, is freedom from any single group's claim on how he must present himself—freedom, that is, from being owned by one audience's expectations. That is a social and missional freedom, not a doctrinal one, and recognizing this early keeps the passage from being misread later as a claim about doctrinal latitude.

## 3. "Under the Law of Christ" (1 Cor 9:21b): The Fixed Point of the Passage

Having said that he became "as one outside the law" (ὡς ἄνομος, *hōs anomos*) to those outside the law, Paul immediately adds a qualifier: "not being outside God's law but under the law of Christ." Everything this article argues depends on taking this clause seriously rather than reading past it, as much reception history has done.

Starting with the grammar, the construction here is a μή…ἀλλά (*mē…alla*) antithesis, "not…but," and the grammatical point should be stated with precision, since it is easy to claim more for the construction than it shows. On Wallace's

analysis, ἀλλά in such a construction is a contrastive (adversative) conjunction: after a negation it introduces a strongly contrasting or corrective statement—"not X, but on the contrary Y" (Wallace, 1996, pp. 671-672). The same pattern appears in Rom 8:9 ("you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit") and in 1 Cor 7:19 ("circumcision is nothing…but keeping God's commandments is"). What the grammar establishes, therefore, is contrast: Paul sets aside the description "outside God's law" and puts a contrasting description of his actual standing in its place. What the grammar does not establish, on its own, is that the two descriptions belong to different categories—one variable, one fixed. That further distinction is a contextual judgment, and it has to be argued from the passage rather than read off the construction.

The contextual case is cumulative. Paul denies being "lawless toward God" at the very moment he admits that his outward practice looks "as one outside the law" to a Gentile audience. These two statements make best sense together if the word "law" is doing two different jobs in the same sentence: one naming visible, Mosaic-law practice, which can vary by audience, and the other naming Paul's binding relationship to Christ, which does not. Two further contextual considerations converge on the same reading: the placement of the qualifier at the exact point in the sequence where misunderstanding becomes possible (discussed below), and the boundary Paul draws between variable practice and non-negotiable belonging in the Antioch episode (Section 6). It is this cumulative context, not the μή…ἀλλά construction itself, that carries the distinction between practice and allegiance.

Richard Hays captures what this second sense of "law" is doing: by "under Christ's law," Paul "does not mean that he has acquired a new legal code of commandments to obey…rather, he is asserting that the pattern of Christ's self-sacrificial death on a cross has now become the normative pattern for his own existence" (Hays, 1997, p. 153). "Under the law of Christ," on this reading, is not a rule book alongside the Mosaic law; it is a way of naming total, settled allegiance to Christ—the one thing Paul's adaptability never touches. This is the answer, stated as plainly as the text allows, to what Paul refuses to change: not a set of behaviors, but his belonging to Christ. Everything else in the passage is negotiable by comparison—but only within that boundary. Because the allegiance that anchors Paul has, on Hays's account, the specific shape of Christ's self-sacrificial pattern, the practices available for adaptation are those compatible with that allegiance. The range of negotiable practice is therefore wide but not unlimited: any "adaptation" that would contradict the pattern of self-giving for the other's good, or that would misrepresent what the gospel offers, lies outside what Paul is describing.

It is worth pausing on why Paul inserts this clause here, at exactly this point in the sequence, rather than at the beginning or the end of the unit. Of the four groups Paul names, Gentiles "outside the law" are the group for whom the risk of misunderstanding is highest: a reader could easily hear "I became as one outside the law" and conclude that Paul had simply abandoned any binding standard of

right and wrong. Paul heads off that conclusion at the exact moment it becomes possible. That placement is itself evidence that the boundary marked in verse 21b is something Paul is deliberately building into his own argument, not a limit modern readers are imposing on him from outside.

One more feature of verse 21b deserves attention: its two halves answer two different questions. "Not being outside God's law" answers the question of what Paul refuses to change: his standing before God. "But under the law of Christ" names what that unchanging standing actually consists of: not law-keeping in the Mosaic sense, but a settled relationship of belonging to Christ. Put the two halves together, and Paul has, in eleven Greek words, drawn the exact boundary this article is tracing: a boundary between an allegiance that does not move and a set of practices that do.

## 4. Tracing the Change across the Four "As" Statements

With verse 21b established as the permanent point, each of Paul's four self-descriptions can be asked the same question: what changes here, and what stays the same?

### 4.1. To the Jews, as a Jew (v. 20a)

This is the least surprising of the four, since Paul was in fact ethnically and covenantally a Jew. What "changes" here is not identity but emphasis: Paul brings forward a true part of who he already is for the sake of a particular audience. Barclay's work on Paul's Jewish self-understanding supports this reading: Paul's sense of who he is remains shaped by his Jewishness even as the gospel reshapes what that identity means in light of Christ (Barclay, 1995). Nothing about the content of Paul's message shifts in this case; only which true feature of his own identity he chooses to foreground shifts.

Notice, too, what this clause does not say. Paul does not say he became "as a Gentile to the Jews" or claim any identity foreign to himself; the text specifically restricts the change to something Paul already, truly is. If even the least controversial of the four adaptations is bounded by what is actually true of Paul, the more difficult adaptations that follow should be expected to carry the same restriction.

### 4.2. To Those under the Law, as One under the Law (v. 20b)

This clause requires more care, since "those under the law" is a group distinct from "the Jews" named just before; Fee (2014, pp. 468-469) is right to insist on this distinction, since otherwise Paul would simply be repeating himself. The referent is debated, and the argument here should not depend on settling it: "those under the law" may be non-Christian Jews viewed from the standpoint of their religious situation, or law-observant Jewish believers, or a broader circle that includes synagogue-attached God-fearers. If the group includes those who regarded continued law-observance as necessary for full standing with God, then on that point—though not necessarily on their theology as a whole—Paul takes a different

view, since he argues elsewhere that law-keeping does not establish righteousness. But the text does not say what "those under the law" believed, and nothing in what follows requires attributing a rejected soteriology to them. What changes here is practice—observing dietary customs, following law-shaped social norms—exactly as the narrated cases of Timothy's circumcision and Paul's own temple vow illustrate (Fitzmyer, 2008, p. 369). What does not change is Paul's own verdict on how salvation works. He never claims to have "become one who believes the law saves." The contrast within this verse is not a contrast between one behavior and a slightly different behavior; it is a contrast between practice and principle. Paul will alter the first without hesitation. He treats the second as already settled, which is exactly why he can move so freely on the first.

### 4.3. To Those outside the Law, as One outside the Law (v. 21a)

This is the clause directly qualified by the "law of Christ" statement examined in Section 3. Gentiles with no background in Jewish law need no law-shaped practice from Paul in order to understand the gospel, so Paul gives up nothing essential by not requiring one. What changes is the absence of a particular set of customs Paul would otherwise observe among Jews; what does not change, as verse 21b has already shown, is his standing before God. As noted above, it is exactly here, addressing people with no law-shaped framework at all, that Paul inserts his safeguard against misreading, at the exact point where the risk of misunderstanding is greatest.

### 4.4. To the Weak, Weak (v. 22a)

This clause deliberately recalls Paul's earlier instruction, in 1 Cor 8, that love for the weak believer should govern how disputed matters of conscience are handled (8:9 - 13). Two descriptions of "the weak" run through the literature, and their relationship should be made explicit. On the first, drawn from the immediate context of 1 Cor 8, weakness is weakness of conscience: the weak are believers whose scruples about idol-meat would be wounded by another's exercise of freedom. On the second, sociological description, "weak" names people who are socially vulnerable—those dependent on patrons or employers—rather than people who are morally deficient (Gardner, 2018, pp. 408-409; on Theissen's sociological reading, Thiselton, 2000, p. 705). These are not rival identifications so much as descriptions at different levels, and in the Corinthian setting they plausibly overlap: where access to meat and to dining invitations ran through patrons, employers, and guilds, social dependence and a scrupulous conscience about idol-meat would often mark the same persons. The argument of this article does not require choosing between the two descriptions; on either, what changes is Paul's posture toward the weak, and what does not change is the content of what he offers them—full standing within the fellowship of the gospel.

One further observation should be labeled for what it is: an inference, not a datum of the text. The verb form shifts here from an "as"-plus-category pattern to

a plain statement, "I became weak to the weak," and that shift may suggest something closer to genuine sympathy than outward performance—Paul taking on another person's felt experience as his own. If the inference holds, this clause comes closest of the four to erasing the line between practice and conviction, since Paul would then be not simply adjusting a custom but sharing a point of view. Even on that reading, the text keeps the same shape: Paul's sympathy toward the weak believer never leads him to suggest that the weak believer's scruple, rather than the truth of the gospel, should decide what is actually permitted. He accommodates the person; he does not relocate the standard.

### 4.5. The Constant across the Four

Across all four cases, the variable is Paul's manner of address: which identity he foregrounds, which custom he adopts or forgoes, which posture he takes toward another's conscience. The constant is the goal he states explicitly in verse 23: "that I might become a fellow partaker of it," referring back to "the gospel." Paul's own summary verb, repeated across the passage, makes the same point. "To gain" or "to win" is not, in Paul's use, a term for persuading someone to agree with an argument; its normal sense, confirmed by the parallel with "save" in verse 22b, is soteriological: bringing a person into salvation (Bauer et al., 2000, p. 541; Daube, 1947, pp. 109-120). Whatever adjusts across verses 20 - 22, the goal named in verses 22 - 23 never does. Read together, the four cases form less a list than a demonstration: the Jew clause shows that Paul's own true identity, not a false one, supplies the raw material for adaptation; the under-the-law clause shows that Paul can adopt a group's practice while retaining his own theological verdict; the outside-the-law clause shows the outer edge of that adoption, at the exact point where the text supplies its clearest safeguard; and the weak clause shows that even sympathy—if the shift of verb form warrants that inference—taken to its fullest extent still stops short of relocating the gospel's actual content.

## 5. Against the Reading of Elastic Convictions

It is worth asking directly why the elastic-convictions reading gets this passage wrong, since it remains the more serious of the two misreadings named in the introduction. The suspicion behind it has a documented history: Morgan (2003) traces the modern distrust of Pauline consistency to F. C. Baur and the Tübingen school, for whom Paul's adaptability was evidence that his theology shifted with his circumstances. That documented position is a claim about inconsistency across Paul's career; it is not yet a claim about the verb κερδαίνω (*kerdainō*). The sharper construal tested in what follows—treating "to gain/to win" as a transactional word, as though Paul were counting converts the way a merchant counts profit and adjusting his message to suit whichever buyer stood in front of him—is a hypothetical model developed here to give the elastic reading its strongest form, and it should not be attributed to Baur, Morgan, or any other cited author.

Its lexical foothold is real but limited: κερδαίνω does carry a commercial sense, "to gain, to make a profit" (Bauer et al., 2000, p. 541). The question is whether that transactional sense fits this passage.

It does not. Verse 23 explains Paul's purpose in terms of the gospel, and the parallel with "save" in verse 22b fixes the verb's sense here as soteriological: what Paul is trying to gain is not agreement but a person's inclusion in salvation (Bauer et al., 2000, p. 541; Daube, 1947, pp. 109-120). One caution is in order about what this establishes. The fixed, salvific goal settles what Paul is doing; it does not by itself settle how far he may go in doing it, since a fixed goal is compatible with a wide range of means, legitimate and illegitimate alike. The restriction on the means—the limit on accommodation—comes not from the goal named in verse 23 but from the boundary drawn in verse 21b: Paul adapts as one who remains ἔννομος Χριστοῦ, "under Christ's law," which on Hays's (Hays, 1997, p. 153) reading is to say under the normative pattern of Christ's self-sacrificial death. Keeping the two clauses in their distinct roles—verse 23 fixes the end, verse 21b bounds the means—both retains the connection between winning and saving and grounds the exclusion of doctrinal concession where the text itself grounds it.

There is a simple test that separates the two readings, and the text of 1 Cor 9:19 - 23 passes it decisively. If Paul's convictions really did bend with his audience, we would expect his description of each group to include some hint that he adjusted his view of the group's standing before God along with his practice among them: that among the law-observant he came to regard the law as salvific, and among the lawless he came to regard the law as irrelevant to righteousness. The text does not do this. In every case Paul names the group, changes his practice, and leaves his own theological verdict completely unchanged. That absence of movement, verse after verse, is exactly what a text describing missional strategy should look like, and exactly what a text describing doctrinal drift should not.

The clearest evidence against this reading, however, is still the clause examined in Section 3. Any interpretation that takes verse 20's "as one under the law" as a genuine concession to law-based righteousness has to explain away Paul's flat denial, one clause later, that he is "lawless toward God." That denial would make little sense to include if the preceding clause were meant to concede exactly the point being denied. As Carson (1986) states the resulting limit, Paul's accommodating approach to ministry "is not a license for unlimited flexibility."

## 6. Testing the Boundary: Paul and Peter at Antioch (Gal 2:11 - 14)

The same distinction this article has traced in 1 Cor 9 also explains the episode that might otherwise look like an inconsistency in Paul himself: his public rebuke of Peter (Cephas) at Antioch for withdrawing from table fellowship with Gentile believers under pressure from "the circumcision party" (Gal 2:11 - 14). If Paul himself can become "as one under the law" toward law-observant believers (1 Cor 9:20), why does he condemn Peter's structurally similar adjustment as "hypocrisy"

(Gal 2:13) rather than praise it as the same kind of missional flexibility he practices?

The answer is that Peter's withdrawal was not simply a change of personal practice made to secure a hearing. In that specific setting, it functioned as a signal to Gentile believers that full membership among God's people required keeping the law—that is, it made a claim about the content of the gospel itself, not merely about Peter's own manner of eating. That is precisely why Paul's objection is theological rather than a matter of table manners: "if righteousness came through the law, then Christ died for nothing" (Gal 2:21). Peter's action crossed from a variable social practice into an altered claim about what the gospel requires. Paul's own adaptations in 1 Cor 9 are built to avoid exactly that crossing, which is why the "law of Christ" clause appears at the one point in the passage, verse 21, where the risk of that crossing is greatest.

The difference between the two cases lies in what each adaptation communicates about belonging. Note that this is a contrast in communicated content, not in audience status: the argument does not assume that Paul's addressees in 1 Cor 9 were all outside the fellowship, since the text does not settle the makeup of the groups he names. The point is what his adjustments say. When Paul becomes "as a Jew" or "as one under the law," nothing in the adjustment announces to any Gentile believer—present or hypothetical—that law-observance has become a condition of full membership in God's people; the practice changes while the communicated terms of belonging remain what they were. Peter's withdrawal at Antioch communicated the opposite. Whatever Peter intended, withdrawing from the shared table in a mixed community functioned as a signal to the Gentile believers there that their standing was in question unless they adopted Jewish practice: it redrew the terms of belonging. The actions belong to the same category—adjusting table practice around different groups—but they differ in what each action says about who belongs and on what terms. Practice can change; the terms of belonging to Christ remain intact.

## 7. Philosophical Implications: Constitutive Commitments and Adaptation without Identity Loss

### 7.1. The Hierarchical Model and Its Critics

The claim that Paul's flexibility is bounded by a fixed allegiance invites analysis in the terms of the debate Frankfurt initiated. Frankfurt's (Frankfurt, 1971) influential account distinguished first-order desires from second-order volitions and located an agent's identity in the desires with which the agent identifies wholeheartedly—those a person is not ambivalent about, and against which he cannot act without a distinctive kind of self-betrayal (Frankfurt, 1988). On this picture, the self that persists across behavioral variation is precisely the pattern of wholehearted identifications.

This hierarchical model has been attacked from several directions, and any use of it must reckon with the objections. Watson (1975) argued that the model

merely postpones the problem it was built to solve: a second-order desire is still just a desire, and wanting to want something tells us nothing about whether wanting it is worthwhile. What fixes a person's identity, on Watson's alternative, is not a hierarchy of desires but the agent's evaluational system—his judgments about what is valuable, against which first-order motivations are themselves assessed. Velleman (2000) pressed a related regress worry: if identification were a further mental act, it would itself stand in need of identification, and the account would either go on forever or stop arbitrarily at some brute, reasonless positing. Identification, Velleman concludes, must bottom out in something the agent takes to be reason-giving, not in a mere act of endorsing. Bratman (1996) offered a constructive refinement: what constitutes identification is not an occurrent inner state but the agent's settled, self-governing policies—his standing commitment to treat certain considerations as reasons in deliberation and planning. Identity, on this view, is a matter of the norms the agent has committed himself to be governed by, not of any episode of psychological force.

The critics converge on a conclusion that matters for the present argument. What remains constant in a person across extensive behavioral change is not a brute second-order wanting, and not the mere persistence of a desire, but the agent's settled commitment to norms he treats as authoritative—his strong evaluations (Taylor, 1989), his evaluational judgments (Watson, 1975), his self-governing policies (Bratman, 1996). A working definition follows, and it will govern the rest of the article: by an agent's *identity* this article means his practical or normative self-understanding—the terms in which he understands what he is doing and why, fixed by the norms he has committed himself to be governed by. An agent can vary his habits, manners, customs, and social postures extensively while remaining the same self in this sense, provided these variations are governed by, and do not revise, that normative level. What the agent cannot do, while remaining the same self in this sense, is treat the normative level itself as one more variable to be optimized for the audience at hand. To revise the governing norms is not to adapt one's practice; it is to change one's practical identity. The claim should be stated no more strongly than the evidence allows: it concerns practical identity as just defined, not numerical identity or personhood—revising one's governing commitments makes one a different agent in the terms by which one understands oneself, not a different human being.

### 7.2. The Pauline Case as an Instance of Norm-Governed Constancy

This structure is visible in 1 Cor 9:19 - 23 with unusual precision. Paul's four adaptations operate wholly at the level the critics would call contingent: custom, posture, foregrounded identity, manner of address. The fixed point named in verse 21b—being "under the law of Christ"—operates at the level of a governing norm, and the way the text describes it supports this analysis. Hays's (Hays, 1997) reading, adopted in Section 3, is that "under the law of Christ" does not denote a new list of rules but names the pattern of Christ's self-sacrificial death as "the nor-

mative pattern for his own existence" (p. 153). That is precisely Bratman's category: a standard Paul has committed himself to be governed by, in terms of which his contingent-level adaptations are deliberated. Verses 19 - 22 are, in effect, a record of practical reasoning conducted under a fixed norm; verse 21b is the agent's explicit avowal of the norm itself.

This also fits the grammatical observation of Section 3, provided the fit is stated in the right order. The μή…ἀλλά construction in verse 21b marks a contrast (Wallace, 1996, pp. 671-672); the grammar as such does not sort the contrasted terms into categories. The categorization comes from the context, and the philosophical analysis articulates what the context shows: the contrast falls along the line between the contingent level and the normative level. Philosophically, that is what avowal of a governing norm looks like when the contingent level has drifted far enough to create ambiguity: the agent does not merely deny the deviant description but reasserts the description under which he stands. Paul's denial that he is "lawless toward God" is not a defensive aside; it is the constitutive level marking its own boundary against the very adaptation he has just described.

### 7.3. Two Objections

First, the elastic-convictions reading might be recast as a rival philosophical model. On this recasting, Paul treats his commitments as first-order preferences, to be traded off transactionally against audience uptake, and the *kerdainō* language shows precisely a maximizing strategy. As Section 5 noted, this model is a hypothetical sharpening developed here for testing, not a position documented in any author cited: its documented ancestor is the Tübingen suspicion of Pauline consistency (Morgan, 2003), and its lexical foothold is the commercial sense the lexicon records for the verb (Bauer et al., 2000, p. 541); neither amounts to an argued transactional theory of 1 Cor 9. The model nevertheless fails on its own terms. A transactional agent revises his commitments when the payoff warrants it; but the text shows Paul varying his practice while explicitly refusing to vary his verdict (Section 5). The maximizer's behavior and Paul's diverge exactly where the models make different predictions, and the text sides with the norm-governed model. The repeated goal verb is the tell: what Paul seeks to "gain" is not agreement but salvation (Bauer et al., 2000, p. 541; Daube, 1947)—a fixed end, stated before the adaptations and unchanged after them. And, as Section 5 argued, the limit on the means by which that end may be pursued is grounded in verse 21b's boundary rather than inferred from the fixed end itself. Bratman's framework captures the whole pattern naturally: a fixed end plus a self-governing policy about permissible means is the signature of planning agency, not of preference-trading.

Second, the charge of anachronism must be faced. Frankfurt, Watson, Bratman, and Taylor did not write about Paul, and Paul did not write about them. But the direction of fit here needs no historical claim. The philosophical apparatus is being used to articulate a distinction the text itself marks—between what varies (four descriptions of practice) and what does not (one avowed allegiance)—and the text

provides independent linguistic evidence for the distinction: the not…but construction, the fixed soteriological goal, and the convergent parallel in Galatians 2. If the modern debate and the ancient text illuminate each other, that is the ordinary work of applied philosophy, not a fallacy. Nor does the argument require Paul to have had a theory of constitutive commitment; it requires only that the passage, read closely, displays the structure such a theory describes.

### 7.4. The General Test

The passage thereby supplies a general test for adaptation without loss of practical identity—one of the kind any agent with durable commitments requires, whether a missionary, a professional, or a public figure operating across cultures. Bornkamm states the Pauline version of the principle: "Paul could not modify the gospel itself according to the particular characteristics of his hearers. The whole of his concern is to make clear that the changeless gospel…empowers him to be free to change his stance" (Bornkamm, 1966, p. 194, quoted in Fitzmyer, 2008, p. 369; cited to the same effect in Fee, 2014, p. 477). The test verse 21b supplies is narrower and more demanding than any principle of flexibility: does a given adaptation change what is being offered, or only how it is made intelligible to the person receiving it? An adaptation of the second kind revises no governing norm and therefore leaves the agent's practical identity intact. An adaptation of the first kind is different in kind: because it revises the norms in terms of which the agent understands himself, it does not leave the same practical self in place. If the language of "replacement" is used at all, it should be understood accordingly—as the replacement of one practical self-understanding by another, in the sense defined in Section 7.1. The Pauline example establishes no more than that: it shows an agent preserving his practical identity across extensive behavioral change, and it shows, in the Antioch episode, where he located the line past which adaptation would cease to be his. It does not warrant the stronger metaphysical claim that a person who revises his governing commitments literally ceases to be the same human being. The Antioch episode (Section 6) shows Paul applying exactly this test to Peter: Peter's withdrawal did not merely alter table practice but revised what membership in the people of God required—a change at the normative level—and Paul treated that as a matter for public rebuke rather than private preference. Practice may change at the table; the terms of belonging may not.

## 8. Conclusion

This article has argued that 1 Cor 9:19 - 23 should not be read as evidence that Paul's convictions were negotiable. Read closely, and especially in light of verse 21b's claim to be "not…outside God's law but under the law of Christ," the passage shows a man whose missional practice changes extensively—what identity he foregrounds, which custom he keeps or sets aside, which posture of sympathy he adopts—while a single commitment does not change at all: his allegiance to Christ, expressed and tested through his consistent aim of bringing others into

salvation. The elastic-convictions reading mistakes a change in audience-facing practice for a change in belief, and it cannot account for Paul's own explicit denial, in the very passage it cites, that he is lawless toward God. The contrast with Peter's conduct at Antioch confirms what is at stake in keeping this distinction in place: when adaptable practice starts to carry a claim about the content of the gospel itself, Paul treats that, and only that, as a line that must not be crossed.

Philosophically, the passage illustrates the structure of constitutive commitment: an agent preserves his practical identity—his normative self-understanding, in the sense defined in Section 7.1—across extensive behavioral change precisely by refusing to treat his governing allegiances as negotiable. Paul's freedom in verse 19 is therefore not a license to say whatever an audience wants to hear, and the range of his adaptability is not unlimited. On Hays's account, the allegiance that anchors Paul is patterned on Christ's self-sacrificial death, and that pattern marks the outer boundary of permissible adaptation: practices compatible with that allegiance may vary as widely as the gospel's audiences require, but an "adaptation" that contradicts the pattern of self-giving love, or that revises what the gospel offers, is not flexibility but a change of practical identity. Within that boundary, Paul's freedom is the exercised capacity of a self whose commitments are fixed enough to bear a very wide range of expression.

## Declaration of Generative Al and Al-Assisted Technologies in Manuscript Preparation

During manuscript preparation, the authors used Claude (Anthropics) solely for limited language editing of selected sentences in order to revise in order to improve clarity. No Al tool was used to generate research content, analyze data, interpret results, or prepare references, the ideas, argument, and intellectual contribution of the paper are entirely original. All AI-assisted suggestions were reviewed, revised where necessary, and approved by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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