

First Corinthians

March 23, 2025

Chapter 9

The Matters of Apostleship

“Paul’s Proof of His Apostleship”

Part 1 - Chapter 9:1-14

To ensure that the Corinth Church knows that Paul has the authority of the LORD to give the instructions thus far, the Holy Spirit guides Paul to address the Apostleship matters in the Church and his own seal of Apostleship.

D. Apostleship Matters

1. Paul’s Seal of Apostleship (9:1-2)

Recognizing that some, particularly the Jews in Corinth, may question Paul’s instructions in this letter, Paul begins by referencing the converts in Corinth as evidence of his Apostleship and his authority to provide the guidance from the LORD that he is delivering.

¹ Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?

² If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

Paul uses four questions to introduce his Apostleship. Let us look at each.

“Am I not free?” Free from what? In chapter 8:4, Paul said, “Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.” In 8:8, he says, “we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat,” food sacrificed to idols. Paul has set the stage for some saints in Corinth to wonder if they are willing to follow his teaching. Paul is free. He can eat what he wants to eat, whether or not it has been offered to idols, because it is just food. But Paul also said in 8:9, “But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” The most important word is “liberty.” The Greek word is *exousia*, which means the power to act or the authority to eat whatever he wants, wherever it came from, whether it was involved with idols or not. It was food. He had the right to eat it. “Am I not free” to eat what I want? The answer is yes. But just because Paul has the right to eat, it does not mean that eating meat sacrificed to idols is a loving way to live his life in front of weak saints. Paul placed a solemn swear in 8:13, “Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.” Paul has the right to eat, but he also has the responsibility not to sin by causing weak saints to stumble. With that, Paul asks the mature saints in Corinth to sacrifice what they have the right to do to benefit the weaker saints. You might ask, “This is chapter 9. What does it have to do with the instructions in chapter 8?” Not to get ahead in the story, the answer to that question is that Paul will come back to the eating topic in this chapter, verse 4, as he defends his right to instruct about eating food sacrificed to idols.

Therefore, we find that Paul is just as free as any man in Corinth. But why does he have the right to give all the instructions in chapter 8? That leads to Paul’s next question.

“Am I not an apostle?” Paul knows that he must answer this question by presenting his credentials. With this letter, written to the Corinthian Church, Paul must have known that there were Jewish saints in the Church who must have doubted Paul’s Apostleship. They were alive and there when Jesus selected the twelve, but Paul was not among them. Why should they accept him

as an Apostle? It was his word against theirs. Luke had not written the *Acts of the Apostles* to prove that Paul was an Apostle. Luke would not write that book for another five years. Peter had not written his letters to the Jews where he mentioned Paul one time, stating that

“...just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:15-16).

When this letter was written, besides Peter's mention above, no other book considered Scripture mentioned or introduced Paul as an Apostle except the letters Paul had written. The Holy Spirit will fix that problem through Luke when he compares Paul's Apostleship to Peter's and tells Paul's story of conversion and call to be an Apostle. That document is five years away. Paul has to defend his Apostleship on his own.

To answer the question, *“Am I not an Apostle?”* Paul answered, *“Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?”*

“Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” One of my favorite commentaries is *Barnes’ Notes on the Bible*. For this question, Barnes says the following. I could not say it better.

Here, it is implied and seems to be admitted by Paul that in order to be an "Apostle," it was necessary to have seen the Savior. This is often declared expressly; see the note in Acts 1:21-22. The reason for this is that the Apostles were appointed to be witnesses of the life, doctrines, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus and that their "being witnesses" consisted of the uniqueness of the apostolic office. That this was the case is abundantly manifest in Matthew 28:18-19; Luke 24:48; Acts 1:21-22; Acts 2:32; Acts 10:39-41. Hence, it was essential, in order that anyone should be such a witness and an apostle, that he should have seen the Lord Jesus. In the case of Paul, therefore, who was called to this office after the death and resurrection of the Savior and who had not consequently had an opportunity of seeing and hearing him when living, this was provided for by the fact that the Lord Jesus showed Himself to him after His death and ascension, in order that he might have this qualification for the apostolic office, Acts 9:3-5, Acts 9:17. To the fact of his having been thus in a miraculous manner qualified for the apostolic office, Paul frequently appeals, and always with the same view that it was necessary to have seen the Lord Jesus qualify one for this office, Acts 22:14-15; Acts 26:16; 1 Corinthians 15:8. It follows from this, therefore, that no one was an apostle in the strict and proper sense who had not seen the Lord Jesus. And it follows, also, that the apostles could have no successors in that which constituted the uniqueness of their office and that the office must have commenced and ended with them.

“Are you not my work in the Lord?” is Paul's fourth question. The saints in Corinth had come to the LORD through the leadership of Paul's ministry in the city. They knew him. They knew him well. They knew his miracle-working powers that only the LORD and the Apostles had. They knew he had seen Jesus personally as a Pharisee. He was involved with the death of Jesus as a Pharisee. Then, Paul met Jesus again on the road to Damascus. It was then that the LORD called him to be an Apostle. The saints in Corinth knew all this well. They had no reason to doubt that Paul was an Apostle. Had Paul been a fake, the LORD would not have blessed his ministry as a false or lying minister. The new life in Christ through the ministry of Paul should have been enough proof for those who have met him, but for those who had not met Paul, his Apostleship was

undoubtedly doubted. Paul admits that when he says in verse 2, “*If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.*”

“*... you are the seal of my apostleship in the LORD.*” What is a seal? In that day, when important documents were drafted and official, a drop of wax was dropped on the page. The official's signature ring was then embedded in the wax, leaving the royal diagram of the ring in the wax. Paul is using this same illustration, not with paper, wax, and a ring, but with the lives of the saints at Corinth converted under the leadership of his ministry. The LORD had officially changed their lives. They could not deny the change in their lives. They were officially the stamped seal of his Apostleship. Others may deny it, but the saints in Corinth could not.

Now that Paul has given his defense of Apostleship, he can speak to his right as an Apostle to be funded by the ministry.

2. Paul's Defense of Apostleship

a) His Right as an Apostle (9:3-7)

As an Apostle, Paul has the right to be funded by the Church.

³ My defense to those who examine me is this: ⁴ Do we not have a right to eat and drink? ⁵ Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?

⁶ Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working? ⁷ Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock?

This passage is filled with questions. Those who want to examine Paul's Apostleship need to answer these questions.

“*Do we not have a right to eat and drink*” as Apostles? Absolutely.

“*Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas*” as Apostles? Absolutely! In this question, Paul tells us that all the other Apostles were married. We already knew from the Gospels that Peter [Cephas] was married, but we did not know about the rest.

“*Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working*” as Apostles? Here, we have an interesting statement by Paul. Barnabas was not with him at this time. After Paul and Barnabas finished the first missionary journey together, the two separated from each other because of what had happened with John Mark. As Paul started his second missionary journey with Silas, Barnabas began his second missionary journey with John Mark. Yet, even in the disagreement, Paul and Barnabas must have respected each other's work. For Paul, he and Barnabas had the right to work or not to work. If you remember, the Church supported the original Apostles through tithes and offerings. Evidently, both Paul and Barnabas accepted that they were under the authority of the Church in Antioch but were not supported by financial means by that Church. However, Paul was supported in his ministry by some Churches, such as the one in Philippi. Paul had heard that Barnabas was also supported by the Churches he established, placing him in the same life circumstances as Paul. Because we only know what Paul has said about Barnabas in this passage, we will set Barnabas aside and explain what Paul means as he is speaking to Corinth. When Paul arrived in Corinth and built the Church in the home of Aquilla and Priscilla, the Church did not support Paul and his team with their daily needs. Thus, Paul had to work as a tent maker to provide for his livelihood. However, when the offering arrived from Philippi, he was able to stop working to focus on the full-time ministry in Corinth. With Paul's question as an Apostle in verse 6, he had

every right to be supported by the Corinth Church, but he did not ask for it; instead, he had to learn the trade of a job he had never done. He had to learn to make tents. This was foreign to Paul. He was a Pharisee. He had been raised in privilege. To be a Pharisee, he had to be the son of a Pharisee, purchased the position from a Pharisee, or held such a high status in life that he was selected in the *good old boy* *Pharisee* system to take the place of a Pharisee who had died with no one to pass the position onto in his will. Tent-making was not the work of any Pharisee during his upbringing years.

Paul is not shaming the Corinth Church. But he is making his point that he had the right to be paid by the Church, whether he did or not. With that, Paul asks more questions to prove his point.

“Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense?” This question is after his question about the Church's support in his ministry. He gives the example of soldiers. In that day, as there are now, there were full-time and part-time soldiers. Full-time soldiers made money every month for their daily service. Part-time soldiers were only paid when they were called up to serve from time to time. Be that as it may, when soldiers served, they were paid. Why was it not right for ministers to be paid by the Churches they lead through the tithes and offerings?

“Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it?” Dropping his example from money to food, Paul gave this question as an example. He was instrumental in planting the Church in Corinth; why would he not be supported by the fruit of that ministry?

“Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock?” As before, Paul gives the example that even the shepherds and herdsmen of a flock drink the milk of that flock. Why should Paul not have the right to drink from the milk of the ministry he was tending?

With all the rights Paul has to be supported by the ministry he oversaw; he now speaks of his right to share the Gospel in that ministry.

b) His Right to Share (9:8-11)

Paul says,

“I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the Law also say these things? For it is written in the Law of Moses, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING.’ God is not concerned about oxen, is He? Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake, it was written because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crops. If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?”

As we have done with the previous passages in this chapter and others, we could separate this passage into single thoughts and speak at length about each. However, with this passage, doing so would water down the intent. Here, Paul takes the spiritual high ground, applies an Old Testament example, and ends with a reasonable conclusion. What is that conclusion? It is this. A farmer invests in equipment and toils in the field if he hopes his efforts will provide a living for himself and his family. Paul has metaphorically done just that with his work in Corinth. He has sowed the spiritual things in the lives of the saints, matured many of them, and established the Church of the LORD, and the result of all his work was a great harvest of saints, which is the purpose of the Church. Why would his spiritual work not provide for his material needs? It should.

Now, Paul must address his right of authority over the saints in Corinth.