

# Can We Win People For Christ?

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*“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more . . .” —I Corinthians 9:19*

In John 10:35, Jesus Christ makes a parenthetical statement that is easy to overlook, and yet it is a foundational principle when it comes to understanding the Bible. He says, “. . . and the Scripture *cannot be broken*. . .” (emphasis ours throughout).

The written Word of God is another part of His creative work, and in His inspired words, we see the same forethought, consistency, and magnificence that we see in everything that God does. Because His character is true and constant, the Scriptures can *never* be contradictory. When we encounter something in them that seems incongruous, the defect is only in our understanding, not in what God has provided for us.

The religious tradition that took root and gained prominence after the deaths of the first-century apostles did not hold this principle inviolate, and as a result, nominal Christianity today holds doctrines that are an unholy mixture of portions of the Scripture, along with pagan beliefs and philosophies that have been picked up through the millennia. In contrast, true doctrines fit together in a unified whole, each one supporting and reinforcing the overall body of beliefs. Because of this, if one doctrine is changed or misapplied, the consistency of the whole begins to unravel.

A clear example of this is what the Bible steadfastly shows regarding God’s calling and election. Scripture teaches that a man cannot even approach the Messiah unless the Father draws, or calls, him (John 6:44). In other words, salvation is not available to all people right now. But because not all professing Christians truly hold to the inerrancy of God’s Word, many believe that anyone can accept Jesus Christ as his Savior, and all that is needed is for other Christians to win over the unsaved. Sometimes this belief is pure and altruistic, and at other times the belief is shaded by a desire to win a person over to a particular denomination or administrative entity. Either way, the conventional religious wisdom is that we can—and should—“win people for Christ.”

However, this belief does not exist in a vacuum. A person’s understanding of God’s calling is linked with his belief in the different resurrections. It is crucial to the understanding of Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles because these festivals symbolize different physical and spiritual harvests—one early, smaller harvest and one later, much larger harvest. It shapes the understanding of the gospel of the Kingdom and tempers expectations on the effect when the world hears the gospel. If the scriptures about God’s calling are broken, then many other core beliefs begin to break down as well.

## Winning the More

However, one passage seems to suggest that Paul tried to win people for Christ. It is found in I Corinthians 9:19-22:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are

under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

Paul mentions five times here that he is trying to “win” different people, and in verse 22, he writes that he is trying to “save some.” This passage is commonly interpreted that Paul would present himself differently in various circumstances to win people for Christ; he became all things to all men in order to “save” at least some of them. This interpretation fits the general evangelical belief that Christians should do whatever is necessary to “win souls for Christ” and to get all manner of people “saved” before they die.

However, if that is what this passage means, then holy Scripture is broken! Such a reading contradicts numerous other clear biblical statements. For example, as alluded to above, in John 6:44, Jesus says, “*No one* can come to Me *unless* the Father who sent Me *draws him*.” A little later in John 6:65, He reiterates this: “. . . no one can come to Me *unless it has been granted to him* by My Father.” Without the Father providing an individual an approach to Christ, he cannot come to Him for salvation. The Father must intervene first—human intervention makes no difference.

Acts 13 contains the story of Paul and Barnabas preaching to Gentiles in Antioch. Luke writes in verse 48: “Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And *as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed*.” Even though the apostles preached to many, only certain people believed what they heard because only they had been appointed to eternal life.

John 17:3 provides a basic definition of the eternal life to which some were appointed: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” Eternal life, then, is not merely endless living, but is the quality of life that comes from having relationships with the Father and the Son—and only the Father determines who will have such relationships during this age. Those who are not appointed to eternal life now will have their opportunity in the second resurrection.

This parallels Paul’s statement in Ephesians 2:8 that grace and saving faith are both gifts from God. He is not beholden to give the faith that saves—that is why it comes as a gift only to some. In fact, in II Thessalonians 3:2, the apostle says that “not all [men] have faith.” An interlinear Bible will show that the Greek contains a definite article—“the”—before “faith”: “not all have *the* faith.” There is a *specific* faith, but only those to whom God gives it have it.

Jesus declares, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Claiming Jesus as our Lord has no effect if He does not know us (verse 23), and as John 6:44 shows, the Father determines whether a person can even approach Jesus Christ.

In Acts 2:38, Peter speaks about receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then he says, “For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, *as many as the Lord our God will call*” (verse 39). But without that calling, the promise does not apply. Likewise, Jesus declares that many are called, but few are chosen (Matthew 20:16; 22:14). Many verses mention God’s specific foreknowledge, calling, and election of some and not others (Acts 13:2; 22:14; Romans 1:6-7; 8:28-30; 9:11; 11:2; 16:13; I Corinthians 1:9; 1:24-28; Galatians 1:6; 5:8; Ephesians 1:4; 4:1; Colossians 3:

15; I Thessalonians 1:4; 2:12; 4:7; 5:24; II Thessalonians 1:11; 2:13-14; I Timothy 6:12; II Timothy 1:9; Hebrews 3:1; 9:15; I Peter 1:2; 2:9; 5:10; II Peter 1:10; Jude 1; Revelation 17:14). Clearly, God has specifically determined who will come into a relationship with Him during this age—and it is not everyone!

If the scriptures are to remain unbroken, either all of these examples of God limiting salvation right now are wrong, or the common interpretation of I Corinthians 9:19-22 misses the mark!

### **To Win Is to Gain**

What Paul means in this passage becomes clear when we understand the sense and usage of two Greek words, those translated as “win” and “save.” In the evangelical world, both of them have taken on lives of their own, but with just a little digging, we will see that no contradiction lies between this passage and the numerous other clear statements.

The word translated as “win” is *kerdaino* (*Strong's* #2770), and its basic meaning is “gain,” which is how it is typically translated. It means “to acquire by effort or investment.” It can mean “to earn” or “to make a profit.” The flipside is that it can also mean “to cause a loss *not* to occur.”

This word is used infrequently, but the verses that contain it are well known. For example, Jesus uses it when He cautions against *gaining* the whole world yet losing one's own soul (Matthew 16:26; Mark 8:36; Luke 9:27). The gain is a physical or material one—it is not speaking of evangelizing the whole world. It also appears in the Parable of the Talents, where two of the servants gain more talents through their efforts and investments (Matthew 25:16-22).

*Kerdaino* is also found in the well-known Matthew 18:15, where Jesus says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have *gained* your brother.” The gaining here is not about “winning” someone “for Christ.” When we gain our brother, we are gaining a better relationship. We are keeping a breach in the relationship from continuing. We receive a profit, as it were, by enhancing the connection or bond between us. There is no implication that we are opening his mind to the mysteries of God's Kingdom. It simply means that after bringing a sin to his attention, if he hears and receives us, then we have gained our brother because the relationship has been restored.

There is a similar usage in I Peter 3:1-2:

Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear.

Quite a number of translators and commentators read into this verse that the example of the godly wife wins the husband *to Christ*. But Peter makes no mention of Jesus in these verses, nor is he saying that a godly wife has the ability to call, let alone convert, an unbelieving husband. As shown already, God alone retains the power to open a person's mind and give him the faith that produces spiritual salvation.

This is not to denigrate the power of a good example in the least. Our example is a large part of whether we are upholding the holiness of God's name or bearing it in vain. Our example gives evidence of our spiritual paternity, for either we will resemble Satan or we will resemble God. When

we display the same characteristics as our heavenly Father, He is glorified, and those who observe our good example can see that God's way of life produces good results.

However, even the very best example will not convert another unless God is also calling him or her. Even after 3½ years of walking and preaching on earth, the perfect witness of the Son of God did not convert everyone He encountered! If a good example were all that was needed, we could expect that everyone who observed Jesus would come to Him—but that is not what happened at all! After His death, there were only about 120 disciples (or perhaps 120 families; Acts 1:15). Obviously, God did not call every person who encountered Jesus—He will call them when they are resurrected.

Clearly, the conduct of a child of God is of utmost importance, particularly in the case of one spouse being called and converted while the other is not. Yet, even if the believing spouse sets a perfect example, “chaste conduct accompanied by fear” will not win the unbelieving spouse *for Christ*. Instead, the “winning” or the “gaining” in I Peter 3:1 is similar to the gaining of our brother in Matthew 18:15. Just as it may be possible (through our efforts) to have a more profitable relationship with a brother who sinned against us, so it may also be possible for a godly wife to gain the heart of an unbelieving husband, so that he respects her more and begins to let go of his animosity.

This is similar to Proverbs 16:7: “When a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.” God can cause an enemy to begin looking favorably upon one of His children, and thus the former foe is gained. By our efforts, though, we can only gain a person in terms of the human relationship. We cannot cause a relationship to occur between man and God—only God can initiate that.

In the same way, the *winning* or *gaining* that Paul is striving for in I Corinthians 9:19-22 is simply protecting or improving the connection he had with the people he encountered. His gaining of these people was not the same thing as converting them or of opening their minds to the reality of God. He was trying not to be unnecessarily offensive, but the scope of his behavior was entirely on the level of human interaction, not on getting people saved in a spiritual or eternal sense.

### **“Save Some” From What?**

This leads us to verse 22, where Paul speaks of “sav[ing] some.” Sometimes we have an automatic tendency to think of eternal salvation, or at the very least justification, whenever we hear the words “save” or “saved.” However, that is only one facet of the Greek word translated as “save,” *sozo* (Strong's #4982), whose basic meaning is “to make safe.” It can be expanded to mean “to deliver or protect, either literally or figuratively.”

This word is frequently used in reference to physical deliverance from a dangerous or undesirable situation, and is often translated as “heal,” “preserve,” and “make whole.” When healing people, Jesus would tell them, “Your faith has *made you whole*.” He was essentially saying, “Your faith has *saved you*”—but the salvation was a physical one. The person was *saved* from a condition of misery.

In the highest sense, a person is not ultimately saved—“safe”—until he or she is no longer subject to death or to sin, which earns death. That is, we are not truly safe until “this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality” (I Corinthians 15:54). Until resurrected or changed at Christ's return—until we are “like Him” (I John 3:2), and “death is swallowed up in victory” (Isaiah 25:8)—we are subject to the corruption of our human nature, the breakdown of our physical bodies, and the cessation of life, all things that keep us from being *eternally* safe. Until we

are spirit beings, we will always be in need of deliverance, protection, healing, and restoration. Even the salvation that takes place upon our repentance and the forgiveness of our past sins does not guarantee our future safety, for until we take our final breath, it is possible for us turn away from God and reject His way of life.

When analyzing I Corinthians 9:22, then, we have to consider what kind of salvation Paul is talking about. Since no man is saved eternally at the point of conversion, he is not referring to eternal salvation. We also know that he could not have meant justification here either, because even an apostle does not have the power to justify. Nor was he given the authority to impart true belief. As we saw, only those whom God appoints to eternal life at this time are going to believe. So that sort of saving is not what Paul is talking about.

Before we get to the full explanation, we need to take a step back and understand how this passage fits with the rest of the epistle. I Corinthians 8-10 relate to the controversy over eating meat offered to idols. Paul's basic teaching throughout these chapters is that it was far better for the Corinthians to deny themselves a perfectly lawful thing than to risk causing a brother to stumble. Through much of this instruction, he uses his own pattern of self-denial as an example, showing in various ways that he would go without lawful things to keep from causing unnecessary offense.

Thus, if he were interacting with the Jews, he would deny himself things that could be offensive to them but that technically would have been fine. It is not that he would compromise with God's standards, but he would limit himself for the sake of not turning people away. This is what he was doing to *gain* them. By these means, he was working for a more profitable relationship. His basic point in the overall context is that, if he were willing to do this to gain people who were not even converted, then the Corinthians should be willing to limit and restrain themselves for the sake of gaining their own brethren. A person who is "gained" is more likely to hear what we have to say, so we may be used to help them in some way.

### **Seeking Positive Rapport**

So what does Paul mean by writing, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means *save* some"? He may have been referring to their eventual salvation, which he might play a part in, but which he could not actually claim as having brought about. As he had previously written: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase" (I Corinthians 3:6-7).

However, there is a type of "saving" that Paul could have a hand in through his preaching:

My brothers, if any among you strays from the truth, and someone turns him back, he should know that *whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his life from death* and cover a multitude of sins. (James 5:19-20)

James is not referring to eternal salvation or justification. He means *making a man safe* by helping him to stop a sin. If a person is sliding into apostasy, and someone turns him back, a type of salvation has occurred, for the one who had been going astray is now on a safer trajectory. If an individual helps another avoid or overcome any sin, a type of salvation has occurred because there is always greater safety where sin has been diminished. This salvation is only a shadow of the kind that God gives, but a saving nonetheless occurs anytime protection or deliverance is provided.

Thus, I Corinthians 9:19-22 shows that, wherever possible, Paul practiced self-denial so that he could gain a positive rapport with others. In this way, he might help them because his preaching of the truth could stir repentance in some area. He is not suggesting that through his preaching or example a person would be justified and brought into a relationship with God, but that his life would be better because there would be at least a little less enmity toward God and His way.

Without compromising, Paul kept the door open so that he could preach, and perhaps his preaching would protect or deliver someone in a small way, even if God was not calling the individual. Nevertheless, Paul was not bringing people into a relationship with Christ, nor is he suggesting that we try to do that either.