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# Seeking the Advantage of the Other: Paul's Model for Ministry in 1 Cor 8:1-11:1

JENNIFER S. GREEN

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**D**o not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.” With these words in 1 Cor 10:24, Paul articulates an important principle that guides his ministry and that he hopes will guide the lives of his readers as well. But exactly who, we might ask, is the “other”? Typically, interpreters identify the “other” in this passage as other people, and this certainly reflects Paul’s teaching in the larger context of the letter. While underscoring this concern for other people, I want to highlight that, for Paul, seeking the advantage of the human “other” is interwoven with a concern for the divine Other. Furthermore, the very concept of “otherness” under girding the unit is important for understanding Paul’s words; I will draw on some of Søren Kierkegaard’s insights regarding this concept in order to illuminate it more fully. Just as Paul’s consideration for the other/Other guided his ministry, it is my hope that such a study might enhance our own understandings of ministry today.



Scholars generally regard 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 as a complete unit in which Paul addresses the subject of Christians eating food sacrificed to idols. Within this unit, Paul’s argument progresses in four main sections, and each section emphasizes Paul’s concern for seeking the advantage of the other—both with regard to people and to God. The first section (8:1–13) opens the discussion with an implicit acknowledgment of the “otherly” nature of God even as Paul distinguishes between knowledge that “puffs up” (the self) and love that “builds up” (the other). Paul directs his words to those Christians who believe that it is harmless to eat food sacrificed to idols, since they know that idols do not actually exist (8:4) and that God alone has divine power and brought all things into existence (8:4–5). Paul grants that this group is correct in its basic view about the unique nature of God, and because of this, such eating activity is intrinsically neither wrong nor right (8:8). In affirmation of their belief about God, he recites what sounds like a creed proclaiming the “otherness” of God who is fundamentally different from all humans and even all gods, if they do actually exist (8:5–6).

The correctness of their knowledge, however, is not the end of the matter. Along with their consideration for the otherness of God, the “knowledgeable ones” must give consideration to other people who do not share in their knowledge and therefore refrain from certain social practices like eating food sacrificed to idols. Without endorsing their position, Paul recognizes the value of these weak ones—not because he agrees with them or benefits from them or prefers them but because they are souls for whom Christ died (8:11). Eating food sacrificed to idols in their presence may lead to their destruction (8:10), and this, says Paul, is tantamount to sinning against Christ (8:12). Disregarding the human other shows disregard for God the Other. Paul therefore urges the “knowledgeable” Christians to make sure that their knowledge about God does not cause them to lose awareness of the other people in their community.

In the second section of the unit (9:1–27), Paul draws on his own example to emphasize how one’s rights are to be shaped by a concern for other people. While his right to receive payment for his work cer-



tainly accords with scripture (9:8–11), Israelite tradition (9:13), and divine command (9:14), this is not the end of the matter. Paul's concern that others not have any obstacles to receiving the gospel leads him to give up his right to financial support and "become all things to all people" so that they might be saved (9:22). The value of the other person is worth far more than the value of any financial support for his work.

In this section, Paul again reveals his respect for God the Other. Paul explains that God has laid an obligation on him to proclaim the gospel, and for this reason, he cannot appropriately receive human compensation (9:16). His work is determined not by his own choosing or desire for a personal reward but by the commission entrusted to him by God (9:17). Furthermore, his ultimate goal in ministry is not to win power, prestige, or approval, but to win people for God. God's desires, not Paul's preferences, lead him to live as he does. Paul understands that his ministry is not about himself; it is directed outward toward the other/Other.

The third section (10:1–22) continues by presenting the matter of food sacrificed to idols primarily in terms of the otherness of God. Paul points out that pagan sacrifices are offered to demons *and not* to God (10:20). Idolatry contradicts the very nature of God who stands so far removed from any equal—who is so wholly other—that no rivals to God's loyalty or glory can be accepted. It provokes God to jealousy and leads to divine punishment, just as the Israelite ancestors experienced (10:1–11). Clearly, the Corinthians would prefer to eat food sacrificed to idols, but they must not base their actions on their own preferences. They must accept that God does not revolve around their appetites or conveniences but stands apart in divine otherness and cannot tolerate idol worship. In their minds, it seems quite appropriate to partake both of the Lord's Supper and of food sacrificed to idols, but Paul makes clear that however logical that seems, it is not acceptable. Instead they must choose *between* the table of the Lord and the table of demons (10:21).

While giving strongest emphasis to the otherness of God, this section simultaneously underscores the importance of the otherness of people, particularly other believers. During the Lord's Supper, participants experience *koinōnia* with the body of Christ. This refers both to the body of Christ that was broken and the body of believers who partake of the one bread in solidarity—a solidarity that is not to be damaged as a result of actions motivated by self-interest (10:17).

The fourth section of the unit (10:23–11:1) concludes Paul's discussion of the issue and offers summarizing statements that draw on the dual concepts of "otherness" set forth in the previous sections. The first summary statements appear in 10:23–24: "All things are lawful," but not all things are beneficial. "All

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things are lawful,' but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other." Following this, Paul offers some specific counsel that continues to uphold regard for God's otherness (10:25–26) and regard for the consciences of other people (10:27–29). Then 10:31–11:1 presents Paul's final counsel on the matter: "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 light of what appears in chapters 8–10, the other-regarding focus of these summary statements can be understood as pointing both to other people and God the Other. In reference to other people, Paul builds on his earlier discussion about other Christians who are reluctant to eat food sacrificed to idols and expands the category of "the other" to include Jews and Greeks as well as Christians (10:32). He makes clear that his motivation for seeking the advantage of *all* other people is that they may be saved (10:33). Paul's unrelenting devotion to encouraging the salvation of others stems from a deeply held belief in the absolute value of



all people—a value that arises from God’s creation of all people and Christ’s dying for all people (8:6). All people are “worth” being saved, and for this reason, Paul will do nothing to put an obstacle in the way of the gospel, even if it means forgoing his lawful rights (9:12).

Paul’s regard for other people serves as an example for the Corinthians to imitate (11:1). When making decisions about personal conduct, the Christian is called to move beyond her or his own perspective and recognize that certain actions can have a drastically different effect on another person from the effect on oneself, to the point of destroying someone. Moreover, the Christian is called to respect the otherness of all people, not just those who share the same opinions. Likewise, Christian conduct is to be guided by a respect for the otherness of God, a God who does not exist solely for the gratification of human desires or convenience. Because of who God is, Christians should live in ways that advance God and God’s purposes; they should seek God’s advantage.

**Kierkegaard writes, “Love in all its expressions turns outward toward people.”**

**By definition, it focuses on the other *and not* on the self.**

As one seeks the advantage of other people and God the Other, one should not view this as an effort to accommodate two competing interests, but recognize the interrelatedness of the two. Seeking the advantage of the other is how one glorifies the Other. Relating to God is not a private matter concerning only the individual and God. It is not to be equated with the possession of a spiritual quality or special knowledge or personal right that allows one to remain detached from the nitty-gritty of this earthly life. Instead, Paul associates the glory of God with concrete situations like eating and drinking and loving those with whom one may not necessarily agree. In the same vein, pleasing the other cannot appropriately be separated from pleasing God. Paul makes clear in 10:33 that his desire to please others emerges from his desire that they be saved, not that he gain their approval or some other personal advantage.<sup>1</sup>

The unit ends with a call to imitate Paul in his efforts to seek the advantage of the other, efforts that are patterned after Christ. As the prime example of seeking the advantage of the other/Other, the cross glorifies God (John 21:19) and provides humans with righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor 1:30) by making manifest the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24).



This study of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 indicates that Paul’s exhortation to seek the advantage of the “other” refers both to people and to God. Significantly, Paul also emphasizes the negative element: that this focus on people and God *is not* a focus on the self (cf. Rom 15:1; Phil 2:4). Kierkegaard presents an insightful explication of this point in his 1847 book *Works of Love* as he maintains that love occurs when one respects the “otherness” of a person. It grows from the recognition that a person has an independent core of value that is not based on another’s own preferences, interests, or needs.<sup>2</sup> Love happens, in the words of Diogenes Allen (expounding on Kierkegaard), when one escapes the notion that others exist as beings in orbit around oneself.<sup>3</sup> Viewing a person merely for his or her relative value to oneself essentially destroys the reality of the other; at that point, it is only one’s own self that really matters.<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard writes, “Love in all its expressions turns outward toward people.”<sup>5</sup> By definition, it focuses on the other *and not* on the self.

Kierkegaard argues that such other-regarding love is rooted in the nature of God. God loves all people equally not because of their usefulness, likeableness, or any other admirable characteristic, but simply because they are humans created by God. Paul indicates that this value is demonstrated in Christ’s dying for all people (1 Cor 8:6). As a reflection of such divine love, love for the neighbor experienced by humans is not to be grounded in utility or self-seeking desire. It is true that humans need each other (1 Cor 12), but



love for another is not contingent on that need.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it grows from the recognition of the independent value of the other person. Christ, the incarnation of God's other-regarding love, provides the perfect pattern for Christian love.<sup>7</sup>

In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard focuses on love directed toward other people, but his observations about "otherness" can also be applied to human love for God, the divine Other. In truly loving God, a person respects God's "otherness," recognizing God's value as independent from one's own preferences, needs, conveniences, or comprehension. Loving God is not to be equated with accepting those divine characteristics that agree with one's own desires, for at that point the reality of God's otherness is ignored; it is the self that matters instead. For this reason, obedience to God entails denying one's own desires or conveniences out of love for who God is. Trusting in God involves reliance on one who does not act according to human timetables or in ways that always seem most logical to human thought. God is not to be controlled or manipulated, but appreciated for who God is, even when God's nature or divine commands elude human understanding. Love of God is to be rooted in the understanding that God does not orbit around a human self but exists as wholly other. Paul's affirmation of God's "otherness" finds fullest expression in the third section of our text, but elements of it can be seen throughout.

As the exegesis presented above suggests, an emphasis on the "otherness" of people and God pervades 1 Cor 8:1–11:1. Kierkegaard's theoretical analysis of this concept, therefore, provides a valuable rubric for reading Paul's response to a particular situation in Corinth and suggests avenues for the expansion of this principle to ministry today.



Given the historical circumstances surrounding Paul's writing of this text, it is understandable that Christians might most often turn to this text in Corinthians in situations of conflict. Indeed, this text poses hard but vitally important questions to people who find themselves in such situations: Am I truly seeking the advantage of *both* other people *and* God? Instead, could it be that I am so interested in appeasing certain people or pleasing those who have the most power that I do not hold true to what I believe is pleasing to God? Or might it be that I am so caught up in an issue that I fail to realize that I could be destroying another person or God's purposes for the community? Am I truly seeking the advantage of the other/Other *and not* the self? Or am I merely protecting my own comfort zones, preferences, or position in the community? Am I indeed motivated, as Paul was, by a passionate desire that others might know God's love? Am I considering the "otherness" of some people (i.e., those who agree with me) and not others? Situations of conflict are often dominated by discussions about the final decision on a matter or identifying which party represents the weaker Christian, but what would happen if we spent much more time reflecting on whose advantage we are actually seeking?

The principle of seeking the advantage of the other also speaks to a multitude of other situations that do not involve conflict, both inside the church community and outside of it.<sup>8</sup> One such situation is that of ministry. Even in cases where someone expressly seeks to benefit others, it is important to consider the subtle ways that seeking the advantage of the other can disguise or slip into seeking the advantage of the self. Instead of recognizing the independent otherness of people or of God, it is possible that the real, underlying motivation for particular actions might be to accomplish something for oneself, whether a sense of approval (by other people and by God) or a feeling of being needed (by other people and by God).<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard further warns that moral self-satisfaction can be the actual goal of actions directed toward the other. Authentic, other-regarding love, however, does not dwell on itself.<sup>10</sup> It does not use the other as a means to one's own end. Rather, seeking the value of the other stems from the recognition of the independent value of the other, not how they can be of value to the self.

Seeking the advantage of the self can be a subtle process that goes undetected even by the well-meaning person engaged in it. Again Kierkegaard is instructive as he highlights the danger of self-deception. Ultimately, only the individual can truly know if he or she is seeking the advantage of the o/Other or the self; it is not something that can fully be evaluated externally since it centers on interior perceptions of the other/Other. Because of this, Kierkegaard stresses the importance of self-scrutiny, of looking inward to ensure a true looking outward toward the other.<sup>11</sup>

Along with this intense self-evaluation, one might heed Paul's counsel to imitate his example and the example of Christ, especially as one reflects on *who* the other is in the community. The other is not limited to those people who bring personal benefit or enjoyment, who represent the majority, who pay a person's salary, or even who are most respected in the community. Christ continually showed regard for those who were not in positions of power and thereby brought glory to God. For Christ, truly seeking the advantage of people, particularly those in power, often upset them and did not bring about their approval. Christ always showed regard for God the Other, even when this did not coincide with his personal preferences and led him down the path to the cross. For us too, respecting God's otherness and seeking God's advantage will lead us to places that are not particularly advantageous to us.

Efforts to seek the advantage of the other/Other have far-reaching implications not only in situations of conflict but also in other aspects of ministry. Ministers will certainly do well to "imitate" Paul in preaching and teaching this important principle and reflecting on its role in our own lives. May we actively examine our inner motivations as well as encourage each other to recognize the vertical and horizontal aspects of Paul's exhortation, thereby bringing glory to God and bringing others to God's glory.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Cf. Gal 1:10 and 1 Tim 2:4 where pleasing others is equated with seeking human approval/personal advantage and so is opposed to pleasing God.
- 2 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 44–60.
- 3 Diogenes Allen, *Love* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1987), 10.
- 4 *Works of Love*, 55–57.
- 5 *Works of Love*, 189.
- 6 *Works of Love*, 44–60. For this reason, friendship and romantic love—both based on preferences and needs—are not the same as Christian love, although they are not necessarily inimical to it.
- 7 *Works of Love*, 99–101.
- 8 Note that Paul himself preached this principle to other groups, including the Galatians (Gal 5:13–6:10), Philippians (Phil 2:1–11; 3:17), and Romans (Rom 7–8:17; 12; 13:8–10; 14:1–15:13).
- 9 For further reflection on this, see Henri Nouwen's book *In the Name of Jesus* that focuses on the common temptations in ministry to seek relevance, popularity, and power (New York: Crossroad, 1989). In this short, readable book, Nouwen considers his own struggles in academic and congregational ministry, drawing parallels between these temptations and the temptation of Christ.
- 10 *Works of Love*, 144.
- 11 *Works of Love*, 179.