

Essay

“Remain in the Calling in Which You Were Called” (1 Cor 7:20): A Post Supersessionist Reading of 1 Corinthians

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Abstract: This essay explores how Paul negotiates and constructs social identity for the *Christos*-followers in Corinth from a post-supersessionist perspective by using the Social Identity Theory. Focusing on a close reading of two controversial passages taken from 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 7:17–24 and 9:19–23), this essay argues that there is continuation of existing social identities of both the Jewish and gentile *Christos*-followers. In the *Christos*-movement, Jews were not expected to give up their place of belonging in order to become *Christos*-followers. Likewise, gentiles were not expected to leave behind their previous identity and embrace Jewish practices in order to become the people of God who worship the God of Israel. While the existing social identities continue, Paul also creatively transforms them. Reflection on the implication of this reading for contemporary ethnic Chinese *Christos*-followers in Muslim-majority Malaysia is also offered.

Keywords: post-supersessionism; 1 Corinthians; Jews; gentiles; social identity

1. Introduction: Continuation of Social Identities in Christ?

In the early twentieth century, Western missionaries came to Malaysia, converted many locals, and urged them to abandon their cultural beliefs, practices, and traditions perceived to be incompatible with their new faith. It was also fashionable for these new converts to adopt Christian names within their social circles and stop using their original ethnic names. Because of this, I (an ethnic Chinese Christian living in Muslim-majority Malaysia) grew up hearing many of my kinfolk describing Christianity as a *xi yang jiao* (Western religion). When someone became a Christian, a common unfortunate reaction was: “One more Christian, one fewer Chinese.” This raised the issue of one’s identity in Christ: could I still be a Chinese Christian—continuing to observe some of the cultural practices that defined my identity and maintaining my given names without adopting a “Christian” name—or should I abandon these practices and embrace a type of Christianity that was culturally Western in nature?

These questions are not new. In the first century, similar issues were addressed by Paul in his letters. Rooted in his Jewish tradition and identity, Paul was instrumental in bringing his understanding of the gospel of Christ to nations with their own distinctive cultures, traditions, and practices. Yet at the same time, he had to negotiate the complexity of welcoming the gentiles into the family of God. Must gentiles give up their identity? Must Jews cease to be Torah observant after following Jesus the Messiah? In this essay, I will explore how Paul negotiates and constructs social identity for the *Christos*-followers from a post-supersessionist perspective by focusing on two significant passages where Paul addresses the continuation of both Jewish and non-Jewish identities: 1 Cor 7:17–24 and 9:19–23.¹

One helpful approach to aid our understanding of group dynamics seen in the *ekklēsia* in Corinth is Social Identity Theory.² Social identity refers to a person’s knowledge of belonging to a particular social group or groups, and this includes values and emotional significance attached to the group or groups. Belonging to groups provides a set of norms governing one’s behavior, and, at the same time, serves as a basis of evaluating others



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outside the groups. Labels are often used to define group memberships such as ethnicity, gender, citizenship, relationship status, socioeconomic status, and religious affiliation. Social identity is not static throughout one's life. There are constant negotiations of group identity during the process of interaction with other groups and the changing allegiance of group membership. When Paul forms a new *ekklēsia* as part of the *Christos*-movement comprising Jews and gentiles, slaves and free, and rich and poor in Corinth, he provides direction on how the *Christos*-followers should reorient their lives in Christ. Inevitably, negotiations of existing social identities and whether they are to continue, discontinue, or be transformed in Christ are deliberated, thus allowing a new in-Christ group identity to develop.

2. The Continuation of Social Identities: 1 Cor 7:17–24

First Corinthians 7:17–24 appears within the larger context where Paul deals with various familial relationships in response to questions the Corinthians raised in a letter to him (1 Cor 7:1, and possibly also 7:25).³ In 1 Cor 7:1–16, Paul deals with issues concerning marriage, divorce, singleness, and widowhood. Subsequently, in 1 Cor 7:25–40, he emphasizes the advantages of singleness to the unmarried and widowed, although there is nothing wrong should one decide to change one's marital status.

2.1. Paul's Rule for All the *Ekklēsiai*

In the middle of dealing with the issues of the married and unmarried, Paul connects the notion of remaining in one's social position to the call of God in 1 Cor 7:17–24.⁴ In this passage, Paul lays down his rule for "all the *ekklēsiai*" (ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις πάσαις; 1 Cor 7:17). Three times elsewhere in 1 Corinthians (4:17; 11:16; 16:1; cf. 14:33) Paul also refers to what he instructed all the *ekklēsiai* to do. When Paul speaks in this manner, he wishes to, "emphasize his apostolic authority of his teaching" (Gardner 2018, p. 326). In 1 Cor 7:17–24, Paul underscores that the *Christos*-followers, both Jews and gentiles, are to remain in whatever situation that God has assigned them when they are called and walk (περιπατεῖτω)⁵ according to that divine calling. The overall flow of 1 Cor 7:17–24 is constructed in three almost parallel statements interconnected with two illustrations drawn from ethnic identities and social positions as follows:

1 Cor 7:17: each person should walk in the way (περιπατεῖτω) that the Lord assigned (ἐμέρισεν), to which God called (κέκληκεν) him/her.

1 Cor 7:18–19: illustration drawn from ethnic identities.

1 Cor 7:20: each person should remain (μενέτω) in the calling (κλήσει) in which he/she was called (ἐκλήθη).

1 Cor 7:21–23: illustration drawn from social positions.

1 Cor 7:24: each person wherein he/she was called (ἐκλήθη) should remain (μενέτω) there with God.

What can be seen is that throughout the entirety of Chapter 7, Paul deals with people in different social locations. Within the complexities of such group dynamics, remaining in one's social position is frequently stressed (1 Cor 7:2, 8, 10–11, 12–16, 26–27, 37–38, 40).

2.2. Two Illustrations: Remain in Your Calling

Paul provides two illustrations on how remaining in the calling that God called works out in the context of the Corinthians. In the first illustration, he addresses the continuation of both the Jewish and gentile identities (1 Cor 7:18–19). Paul insists that Jews who were circumcised when they were called should not remove or hide (ἐπισπάσθω) the mark of circumcision.⁶ The process of *epispasm* could possibly refer to actions related to the removal of signs of circumcision taken by some young Jewish men exercising in the gymnasium or participating in athletic games during the Hellenistic period. Removing the marks of circumcision is mentioned negatively in 1 Macc 1:11–15⁷ where it is synonymous with

abandoning the holy covenant of God and assimilating with the gentiles by doing evil (1 Macc 1:15). In recounting the same event, Josephus not only brings out this connection but goes further by stating that the Jews appeared to be gentiles, “left off all the customs that belonged to their own country, and imitated the practices of the other nations” (Josephus *Antiquities* 12.241) when they removed the mark of circumcision.⁸

Any attempt to remove the mark of circumcision was viewed not only as a serious attempt to abandon one’s social identity, but also tantamount to violating the Torah. Drawing from this tradition, Paul’s imperative not to become uncircumcised in 1 Cor 7:18 is to highlight to the gentile *Christos*-followers that the Jews were to remain Torah observant and faithful to the custom of their forefathers by ensuring that they, as paraphrased by Rudolph, “do not assimilate or Gentilise” (Rudolph 2011, p. 80) themselves. The continuation of the social identity of the Jews at the point of their calling remains.

Likewise, as Jewish *Christos*-followers should not erase their circumcision, Paul also asserts that the gentile *Christos*-followers who were not circumcised when they were called should not seek to be circumcised (1 Cor 7:18). Similarly, in Galatians Paul is adamant that the gentiles should not be circumcised (Gal 6:12–13; see also 2:3; 5:2–3) or even observe certain special Jewish days, seasons, months, and years (Gal 4:10). Just as Jews should not be “gentilised,” likewise, gentiles in Christ should not be made Jews in Christ.

These exhortations by Paul demonstrate that the ethnic identity of both Jews and gentiles remains distinctive. Paul reiterates this in 1 Cor 7:20: each person should remain (μενέτω) in the calling (κλήσει) in which he/she was called (ἐκλήθη). It is unfortunate that most English translations do not fully capture Paul’s nuance in this verse by translating the word κλήσει as “condition” (NRSV, NASB, ESV) or “situation” (NET, NIV 2011). This is probably done to avoid confusion with the two cognate words carrying the same meaning as “calling”, that are used in the same verse (Gardner 2018, p. 328 n12). While the choice of “condition” or “situation” in these translations is not inherently wrong, it misses Paul’s point. The phrase “remain in the calling” echoes God’s election of Israel out of the nations to be his treasured possession, a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation (Exod 19:5–6).⁹ It could also be seen as a reflection of Paul’s assertion in Rom 11:28–29 where he uses the word κλήσις to refer to the “irrevocable call” of the Jewish nation.

In using the language of calling, Paul not only affirms that God calls both Jews and gentiles, but also establishes the continuation of one’s unique ethnic identity and the importance of maintaining these fundamental significant identities, rather than obliterating them once a person is in Christ. Jews must not be ashamed of their boundary markers, and gentiles must not remove their foreskins. When one is in Christ, Jews remain Jews and gentiles remain gentiles as God has called them all.

Following this, Paul draws on a second illustration from the socio-economic situation of those who were called, whether slave or free. One should also remain in that situation when called, unless an opportunity presented itself for one to be manumitted from slavery (1 Cor 7:21–24).¹⁰ Paul affirms that a slave (δοῦλος) is a freedperson in the Lord (ἀπελευθεροςκυρίου) and a freedperson (ὁ ἐλεύθερος) is a slave (δοῦλος) of Christ (1 Cor 7:22). Even if one’s social position as a slave has been reversed to be a freedperson, one’s identity as *Christos*-follower remains. Paul also asserts that one’s economic position is irrelevant to one’s calling, just as one’s ethnic identity is irrelevant. What is important is that all should remain in God (μενέτω παρὰ θεῷ) in whatever condition that one is called.

2.3. Both Circumcision and Uncircumcision Have No Value?

There are two further issues that need to be addressed in 1 Cor 7:17–24. First of all, in 1 Cor 7:19, Paul appears to contradict himself when he says that, “circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing.” This statement seems to suggest that Paul seeks to erase key social identity by describing it in this manner. What needs to be emphasized here is that Paul is dealing not with the erasure of ethnic identity, but this is said within the context of the calling of God, a key theme in 1 Cor 7:17–24. Campbell argues that Paul’s statement here is not a comparison between circumcision or uncircumcision, but a comparison of both

circumcision and uncircumcision with the call of God (Campbell 2013, pp. 205–6; see also Gardner 2018, p. 325).¹¹ At the same time, references to circumcision/uncircumcision also point to the state of being circumcised and uncircumcised, metonymically referring to Jews and gentiles, respectively.¹² In this respect, it would be wrong to consider circumcision as good and foreskin as bad, and vice versa. Rudolph argues that both circumcision and foreskin, “have God’s authorization and seal of approval. Both callings are consistent with the believing life” (Rudolph 2011, p. 86).

Seen within the larger context of 1 Cor 7, the picture becomes clearer. Whether one is married to a *Christos*-follower, married to a non-*Christos*-follower, unmarried, enslaved, free, circumcised or uncircumcised, one should not be particularly concerned with changing one’s social situation at the point when one is called by God to be in Christ. Each of these social locations have the Lord’s approval, and the Corinthian *Christos*-followers are called to remain in that condition with God (*παρὰ θεῶ*) in 1 Cor 7:24. Gardner rightly says, “the Lord’s grace is sufficient for them to continue in whatever their social circumstances. They do not need to make changes in their marital relations or social status to ‘remain there at God’s side’” (Gardner 2018, p. 326).¹³

2.4. Obeying the Commandments of God

The second issue we need to consider is where Paul declares, “obeying the commandments of God is everything” (1 Cor 7:19). What Paul meant by the phrase “commandments of God,” has attracted considerable discussion. Some see this to mean keeping God’s commandments in a more general sense as likened to obeying the will of God (Barrett 1971, p. 169; Fee 2014, p. 347), or as in its ethical sense (Garland 2003, p. 306; Gardner 2018, pp. 327–28).¹⁴ Others see this as referring to the universal Noachian law (Tomson 1990, pp. 271–72; 1996, pp. 263–69).¹⁵

The phrase “obeying the commandments of God” is a “technical term” (Fitzmyer 2008, p. 308) frequently used to refer to keeping the Law of Moses in Jewish and biblical writings. For example, Sir 32:23 contains this exhortation: “Guard yourself in every act for this also is the keeping of the commandments” (see also Sir 29:1; Wis 6:18). Jesus, in his reply to a rich, young man’s question on how to obtain eternal life, says, “Keep the commandments” (Matt 19:17). This is a clear reference to the Law of Moses as Jesus subsequently cites the Decalogue (Exod 20:12–16; Deut 5:16–20) and Lev 19:18 in Matt 19:18–19. In LXX Ezra 9:4, the phrase “commandments of God” is used as a clear reference to the Law of Moses. Likewise, similar use of the phrase can also be found in Rev 12:17 and 14:12.¹⁶ Elsewhere in Paul’s letters, the word “commandments” is used to refer to the Torah (see Rom 13:9). Thielman is right to argue, “The phrase Paul has chosen to refer to God’s commandments, therefore is one that in his cultural context clearly referred to the Mosaic Law” (Thielman 1995, p. 101). What is unmistakable here is that Paul’s teaching has a strong Jewish element. Gardner argues that this phrase “obeying the commandments of God” is added to Paul’s flow of thought, “lest the Corinthians should imagine that Paul was abrogating God’s law by saying circumcision does not matter” (Gardner 2018, p. 327).¹⁷

What is also significant in this passage is the use of imperatives in 1 Cor 7:17, 20, and 24. The *Christos*-followers are exhorted to “walk” (7:17; *περιπατεῖτω*) and “remain” (7:20, 24; *μενέτω*) in their calling. Both these imperatives echo God’s instruction to the nation of Israel to walk in his ways (for example, see Exod 18:20; Psalm 25:4; Deut 26:17; 28:9) and to remain loyal to God (Deut 18:13). The imperative “to walk” evokes the Hebrew word *halakh* carrying the meaning “to walk” in obedience to the halakhah, the exposition of the Torah. Because of the close association of *περιπατεῖτω* to the halakhah, Ciampa and Rosner view the use of the imperative “to walk” as a, “thoroughly Jewish metaphor” (Ciampa and Rosner 2010, p. 310). To a Jew, one has to “walk” or conduct one’s life according to the teachings of the Law of Moses.

In addressing the gentile *Christos*-followers in Corinth, the language of obeying God’s commandment and the use of imperatives reflecting Jewish metaphor presuppose that the teaching of Torah not only plays a significant role for the gentiles for their growth in

Christ, but it also becomes an ethical framework and an identity formation instrument to shape and transform the gentiles who are now in Christ.¹⁸ This can be seen, for example, in matters related to idol food where Paul prohibits the gentiles from eating such meals in the temple where participation in the worship of deities would have entailed. This is tantamount to idolatry according to the Torah. In view of this, Paul insists that the gentiles must adhere to the Torah, especially in their worship of God by abandoning idolatry. However, when it comes to social meals within the home of unbelievers, Paul allows the gentile *Christos*-followers to consume food that has been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8—11:1; see discussion in Section 3 below). Seen from this perspective, gentiles are required to keep what is applicable for them from the Torah. Therefore, Bockmuehl argues that for Paul the rule for all churches is, “for Jews to keep the Torah . . . and for Gentiles to keep what pertains to them—and only that. In either case, what matters are the applicable commandments of God” (Bockmuehl 2000, p. 171).¹⁹

The ethnic identity of the *Christos*-followers and their social-economic status as framed by the discussion on circumcision/uncircumcision and slave/free, respectively, are transformed and reevaluated in Christ (Campbell 2013, pp. 89–93) where they now belong to the family of God as evidenced by Paul’s use of sibling language, brothers and sisters (*ἀδελφοί*), in addressing them (1 Cor 7:24). As brothers and sisters, they are to treat one another with respect and build up one another as a family and close-knit group. Within this family where the *Christos*-followers belong together as *ἀδελφοί*, “blood is thicker than water” (Lim 2017, p. 92).²⁰

3. Paul’s Mission to Jews and Gentiles: 1 Cor 9:19–23

I have argued from 1 Cor 7:17–24 that Paul’s rule in all the churches was for Jews to remain as Jews and gentiles as gentiles. This has implications for our understanding of 1 Cor 9:19–23, a passage that is often used to support the argument that Paul abandoned his Jewish identity and was no longer Torah observant based on his statements: “To the Jews I became as a Jew”; “though I myself am not under the law”; and “to those outside the Law, I become as one outside the Law” (1 Cor 9:20–21). Can this argument be sustained?

3.1. The Context: Idol Food and Rights to Give Up Eating Such Food

The passage 1 Cor 9:19–23 appears within the wider context of 1 Cor 8:1—11:1 where Paul deals with the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols.²¹ It is almost certain that those who raised this issue were gentile *Christos*-followers as it was unlikely for a Jewish *Christos*-follower to participate in such meals.

In 1 Cor 8:1–13, Paul provides a theological understanding rooted in his Jewish perspective that an idol does not exist and there is only one God. Because of this, Paul adopts a general view that food itself is neutral and could be consumed by gentile *Christos*-followers. Yet, out of consideration for others, Paul instructs them to be careful not to exercise their freedom in consuming such food, lest they cause some weak brothers and sisters to stumble. He then offers himself as an example where he gave up his rights for the sake of others (1 Cor 9:4–6, 12, 18). Following this, Paul provides specific practical situations when one could or could not eat idol food (1 Cor 10:1–33). He draws from the scriptures of Israel in his instructions forbidding the consumption of such food within the temple precinct where there were clear associations with idolatry (1 Cor 10:1–22). When it comes to consuming food bought from a meat market or during a fellowship meal within a private home, it was permissible as there was no participation in the rituals of offering food to idols (1 Cor 10:23–33). However, if an informant present during the meal points out the food served had been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 10:27), Paul advises that it would be good to abstain from it for the sake of the conscience of the informant. For Paul, the reason for exercising one’s liberty in eating or not eating such food is for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).

3.2. Paul's Adaptability

From the context of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1, we see Paul's theologizing at work in providing instructions to the *Christos*-followers concerning consuming idol food. There are debates as to why Paul permits the eating of food from the meat market or in private homes. One strong argument is that there may be sufficient ambiguity about the origin of the meat from the market as Paul would not allow gentiles to knowingly consume idol food.²² However, in 1 Cor 7:12–16, Paul insists that a believing spouse who has an unbelieving (ἄπιστος) spouse should not dissolve the marriage unless the unbelieving spouse is the one initiating the separation. Within such a situation where pagans and *Christos*-followers lived together within a household, there would inevitably be occasions where consuming food sacrificed to idols could not be avoided. Paul seems to want the gentile *Christos*-followers to remain well-integrated in the gentile society.

By allowing the Corinthians to consume idol food, it has been argued that Paul abandons his Jewish identity and is no longer Torah observant. The passage in 1 Cor 9:19–23 has often been used to support this traditional view. Based on 1 Cor 9:20, Barrett argues that Paul, "could become a Jew only if, having been a Jew, he had ceased to be one and become something else. His Judaism was no longer of his very being, but a guise he could adopt or discard at will" (Barrett 1971, p. 211). In fact, Paul was, "ready . . . to cease to be a Jew" (Barrett 1971, p. 211).

D. A. Carson further argues that Paul's concern is only to position himself for evangelism, and, because of this, the apostle thinks of himself as neither Jew nor gentile, but adopts a third position described as, "a distinctively Christian position, needing to flex one way in the evangelization of Jews, and needing to flex another in the evangelization of Gentiles" (Carson 2004, p. 403). If Paul observes the Torah at all, it is merely for expediency's sake.²³ Carson also sees limited sense of continuity between what he describes as Paul's, "pre-Christian beliefs and his beliefs as a Christian" (Carson 2004, p. 398). The continuity of Torah relevance is only limited to unchanged beliefs about God, moral and ethical prescriptions, and passages dealing with predictions, typological and salvation history fulfillments (Carson 2004, pp. 398–412).

This traditional interpretation, according to Tucker, summarizes three ideas: Paul keeps Torah as merely a matter of expediency; Paul views the consumption of idol food as being in conflict with Torah observance; and Paul renounces the Mosaic Law when he claims that he is no longer under the law (Tucker 2011, p. 91).

Since the main thrust of the traditional interpretation lies on a few statements by Paul in 1 Cor 9:20–22 ("to the Jews I become as a Jew"; "though I myself am not under the law"; and "to those outside the Law, I become as one outside the Law"), it is necessary to take a closer look at the flow of this passage as depicted below (Table 1).

Table 1. The Flow of Paul's Argument in 1 Cor 9:20–22.

Paul's Adaptability to Different Groups	Paul's Purpose
To the Jews I became as a Jew,	in order to win Jews.
To those under the law I became 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 outside 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.

Several comments on this passage are in order. First of all, by way of illustration, Paul describes how he adapts himself to different groups of people: the Jews, those under the Law, those outside the Law, and the weak.²⁴ Paul describes the Jews in two different categories: "Jews" and "those under the law." If both refer to the same group of people, the

latter appears to be redundant. Most likely, Paul has two groups of Jews in mind with the former referring to diaspora Jews and the latter referring to a subgroup of Jews holding on to a strict interpretation of the law such as the Pharisees (Bockmuehl 2000, p. 171; Rudolph 2011, pp. 153–59; and Tucker 2011, pp. 103–5).²⁵ That this group of Pharisees are to be distinguished from the rest of “the Jews” finds support elsewhere in the New Testament where such distinction is maintained.²⁶ The Pharisees kept strict observance with whom they had table fellowship by avoiding any fellowship with Jewish “tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 15:1–2), let alone with the gentiles. By describing himself as one that is not under the law, Paul claims that he is no longer following the strict halakhic interpretation of the Pharisees, especially when it comes to table fellowship with the gentiles when the state of ritual purity of the food may be questioned.²⁷

Secondly, Paul qualifies his accommodation to “those under the law” as being “not under the law.” He also qualifies that to “those outside the law” he is “not free from God’s law.” As we have argued earlier, “those under the law” refers to a specific subgroup of the Jews with strict halakhic interpretation of the law which Paul no longer follows, hence Paul could claim that he is “not under the law.” The description of “those outside the law” refers to the gentiles, and Paul qualifies that he was “not free from God’s law” as a Jew. Paul makes it clear that he remains Torah observant. It is significant that out of the four different groups of people that Paul mentions in 1 Cor 9:20–22, he only explicitly states the negative qualifications for these two groups, emphasizing that he does not see himself as part of these groups. Yet for the two other groups, “the Jews” and “the weak,” there are no such negative qualifications. Paul does not say: “To the Jews I became as a Jew (though I am not a Jew)” (Tucker 2011, pp. 100–2; Rudolph 2011, p. 203). This indicates that Paul saw his Jewish identity was still salient as a *Christos*-follower. This reading makes sense as Paul refers to himself as one “not free from God’s law” when he accommodates the gentile *Christos*-followers, though, “not to the extent that he ceases to be Torah-observant” (Tucker 2011, p. 107). Paul also does not say, “To the weak I became weak (though I am not weak).” This is because Paul often claims himself to be weak elsewhere.²⁸ In the context of 1 Cor 9:20–22, Paul sides with the weak whose consciences were defiled, who stumbled and were destroyed (1 Cor 8:7–13) when they saw others consuming idol meat in a temple.

Finally, another statement of Paul further puzzles interpreters: “I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law” (1 Cor 9:21). What does Paul mean by “Christ’s law”? It is important to note that Paul is not saying that there is now a new “Christian law” (Gardner 2018, p. 408). What Paul has been insisting thus far is that he is not beyond the law and the law continues to matter to him. Yet, Paul also concerns himself with the paradigmatic example of Christ, which he declares at the end of the section dealing with idol food: “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Paul models his life after the example of Jesus who ate with tax collectors and sinners, reached out to gentiles, and yet remained Torah observant (see Matt 5:17–20; Luke 10:8).²⁹ He depicts Christ’s life and death as an example in self-giving (Phil 2:5–8) where one is to look not to one’s own interest but to the interest of others (Phil 2:4). In this regard, Rudolph argues that the actions of Jesus eating with sinners, Pharisees, and other ordinary Jews are examples of being “all things to all people” (Rudolph 2011, pp. 181–82). Being aware of the Jesus tradition, Paul would most likely view the sinners that Jesus welcomed as “paradigmatic of Gentile sinners” (Rudolph 2011, p. 183).³⁰ This rule of adaptation concerning commensality, where Jesus adapted to different standards of Torah observance at table fellowship with different groups of people, is one that Paul is most likely aware of. This is especially true when Paul advises the Corinthians to, “eat whatever is set before you” (1 Cor 10:27) as an echo of Jesus’ own exhortation to his disciples to, “eat what is set before you” (Luke 10:18).³¹ It provides Paul with a framework to negotiate the complexity of encountering a variety of food-related customs in both Jewish and gentile homes. Therefore, by following the example of Christ, Paul maintains a flexible halakhah within the context of 1 Corinthians, and this is likely what Paul means by “Christ’s Law.”

3.3. Paul's Mission: To Win or To Win Over People?

Within 1 Cor 9:19–23, the word *κερδαίνω* typically translated as “to win” appears five times (9:19, 20 [twice], 21, 22). Much of the discussion on this word is deeply influenced by the work of David Daube who examines the background of the meaning of *κερδαίνω* and comes to the conclusion that this word refers to, “to win over an unbeliever to one’s faith” (Daube 1947, p. 109).³² However, Daube also notes that the other possible meaning of *κερδαίνω* is, “to win back a sinner to the way of life required by his and your faith” (Daube 1947, p. 109).

To understand *κερδαίνω* as act of evangelism has been questioned by Gardner (Gardner 2018, pp. 404–6).³³ First of all, the meaning of the *κερδαίνω* is “to gain”³⁴ such as to make a profit, an accounting language. Within the context of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1, Paul is dealing with *Christos*-followers and not those outside the community. He warns about the behavior of some who insisted on eating idol food in temple that caused others to stumble and fall away, an action described as a “sin” (1 Cor 8:12–13). Therefore, it is necessary for those who have fallen away to be gained back for Christ. Gardner is right to state, “*It was thus the behavior required of all Christians to ensure that those who were falling away were won back for Christ*” (Gardner 2018, p. 404; italics his). Hence, Paul is not talking about winning over those outside the community for Christ. What he is concerned with here is to *win back* the weak whose conscience had fallen away (1 Cor 8:10–13); to *win back* those who by their action of eating idol food in the temple caused others to stumble (1 Cor 8:9–12); to *win back* those who participated in idolatry while consuming idol food (1 Cor 10:1–22); to *win back* the Jews who were offended by the practices of the gentiles (1 Cor 10:32); and to *win back* those “under the law” who possibly frowned upon others having table fellowship served with idol food (1 Cor 10:25–31).

This idea of winning back those who have fallen away can be further supported from Matt 18:15 where *κερδαίνω* is used by Jesus in pointing out one’s faults in order to “gain” that person back. Furthermore, in 1 Cor 10:32 Paul warns about behaving in a manner that might give, “offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the *ekklēsia* of God.”³⁵ He presents himself as an example where he does not seek his own advantage so that many “may be saved” (1 Cor 10:33). The language of salvation in 1 Cor 10:33 (and also in 9:22) need not be seen narrowly in terms of conversion, but more broadly in ensuring the people of God remain within the covenant community in Christ. Here we see Paul’s desire in wanting to win back Jews as Jews and gentiles as gentiles. This is in line with what Paul has been advocating for: the continuation of social identities of those who are in Christ and their behavior being one that would mutually build each other up in Christ.³⁶ It is fitting, therefore, that Paul wraps up his argument in 1 Cor 9:19–23 with these words: “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings” (9:23).

4. Implications of the Continuation of Social Identities in Christ

We have seen from 1 Cor 7:17–24 and 9:19–23 that there is continuation of social identities of both the Jews and gentiles in Christ, and their transformation as *Christos*-followers, “does not lead to a mutual assimilation into some generic undifferentiated humanity” (Ehrensperger 2016, p. 200). When individuals perceive that they are a part of a group, it creates social identity with a positive sense of belonging which is important for the cohesiveness of and the growth of the group. When this occurs, it creates a strong mission impetus where the continuation of the social identity of the group not only provides discursive bridges to invite outsiders into the communal gatherings,³⁷ but also creates an inhabited space for the *Christos*-followers, both Jews and gentiles, to negotiate their various social identities that may mutually benefit and build up one another so that this may further advance Paul’s mission to the nations (Tucker 2011, pp. 64–68).³⁸

This reading has significant implications today. I mentioned in the beginning of this essay that Christianity in my part of the world was viewed as a “Western religion.” When I was growing up, it was not unusual to hear stories of families disowning their children for

embracing Christianity or objecting them to be baptized. As a collectivist society, embracing Christianity was seen as betraying one's culture, identity, and community.

A major part of the Chinese traditional belief is the veneration of our ancestors as an expression of filial piety and paying respect to our ancestors.³⁹ The families and extended families are obligated to carry out continued obeisance to the ancestors by placing ancestral tablets on a household altar where daily prayers are offered and incense lit. Sacrifices and offerings of food are also carried out on a regular basis, such as bi-monthly, and on special occasions, such as *Qing Ming Festival*,⁴⁰ Hungry Ghost or *Zhong Yuan Festival*, and the death anniversary of the ancestors. After the rituals of offering food to the ancestor are completed, both immediate and extended family members near and far will come together and consume the same food. Within such a context, there will be occasions where family members who are *Christos*-followers would be present.⁴¹

The issue of consuming such food by *Christos*-followers has been widely debated. Western missionaries, often without appropriate understanding of the local culture, particularly the significance of a communal meal for familial ties within Asian context, had discouraged local Christians to participate in such meals based on their erroneous understanding of 1 Cor 8, leading to divisions in the family. Such divisions are even more severe if the eldest son, who is often tasked with carrying out the rituals of ancestor veneration in a Chinese tradition, is a *Christos*-follower. Failing to participate in such meals is tantamount to dishonoring the ancestors, especially where filial piety is the foundation of Chinese beliefs, hence the statement, "one more Christian, one fewer Chinese." This statement shows that Christianity is incompatible with the Chinese cultural norms, and one has to abandon one's culture in order to express Christ devotion. This negatively impacts the mission of the Church. It is, therefore, not surprising that despite centuries and decades of the gospel taking root in this region, the development of indigenous theology remains slow.⁴²

Based on our reading of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1, proper contextualization is necessary. If there is a continuation of the social identity of Chinese *Christos*-followers, then the consumption of such food is not an issue. What is needful is a proper contextualized ritual in offering one's filial piety to one's ancestor without challenging our loyalty to Christ. While participating in the rituals of ancestral worship might be against "obeying the commandments of God" (1 Cor 7:19), it does not preclude honoring the ancestors by bowing in respect and participation in communal meals. Our reading of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 also means that it is important to *win back* those who have stumbled and fallen away because of previous misappropriation of Paul's teaching. Perhaps the face of Asian mission might have taken on a different shape if we had properly understood that the continuation of social identities is part of what Paul is advocating for in his gentile mission.

5. Conclusions

In this essay, we have argued from 1 Cor 7:17–24 and 9:19–23 that there is continuation of social identities of both the Jews and gentiles in Christ. In the *Christos*-movement, Jews were not expected to give up their place of belonging in order to become *Christos*-followers. Likewise, gentiles were not expected to leave behind the previous identity and embrace Jewish practices in order to become the people of God who worship the God of Israel. At the same time, while allowing gentile social identity to continue, Paul also ensures that the gentiles are not completely outside the Law. Paul insisted the gentiles must give up their associations with the deities that they had previously worshipped. While the existing social identities continue, Paul also creatively transforms them. Ultimately, Paul reminds the *Christos*-followers that what is most important is that whatever one does, it is for the sake of the gospel of Christ.

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Notes

- ¹ The audience addressed in 1 Corinthians were likely gentile *Christos*-followers (see 1 Cor 12:2). This does not mean there were no Jewish *Christos*-followers in Corinth. Paul mentions that he baptized Crispus (1 Cor 1:14), and if this was the same person named in Acts 18:8, he was a leader of the Corinthian synagogue. Sosthenes (1 Cor 1:1) could possibly be another named Jewish *Christos*-follower (Acts 18:7).
- ² For an overview of Social Identity Theory, see (Lim 2017, pp. 26–48). On the use of Social Identity Theory in New Testament studies, see (Tucker and Baker 2014; and Tucker and Kuecker 2020).
- ³ The phrase “now concerning” (περὶ δὲ), appearing six times in 1 Corinthians (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12), may indicate that these were issues the Corinthians raised in a letter to Paul, taking the cue from 7:1: “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote.” See (Mitchell 1989, pp. 229–56) who disputes the assumption that περὶ δὲ used in 1 Corinthians always refers to the letter Paul received.
- ⁴ Ciampa and Rosner (2010, p. 307) sees 1 Cor 7:17–24 functioning to, “reinforce Paul’s advice to be content in one’s situation.” The notion of calling features prominently in this passage, appearing a total of nine times. See 1 Cor 7:17, 18 [twice], 20 [twice], 21, 22 [twice], and 24.
- ⁵ Most English translations paraphrase the Greek word περιπατέω as “live” (NIV, NET) or “lead the life” (ESV, NRSV). The KJV and NASB translations retain the meaning “walk”. See Section 2.4 below on how περιπατέω may have evoked the Jewish understanding of the halakhah where the Hebrew word *halakh* means “to walk.”
- ⁶ Contra Fredriksen (2022, pp. 75–105). Fredriksen argues that in 1 Cor 7:17–19, Paul is addressing two different groups of gentiles: those were circumcised when they became proselytes, and those who had not been circumcised (89–90).
- ⁷ See 1 Macc 1:11–15: “In those days certain renegades came out from Israel and misled many, saying, “Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles around us, for since we separated from them many disasters have come upon us.” This proposal pleased them, and some of the people eagerly went to the king, who authorized them to observe the ordinances of the Gentiles. So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil (author’s emphasis).” The literature of 1 Maccabees reflects the ideological movement of a family of Jewish priests in purging the Hellenistic influence in Judea during the latter half of the second century BCE.
- ⁸ See Josephus *Antiquities* 12.240–41: “... they were desirous to leave the laws of their country, and the Jewish way of living according to them, and to follow the king’s laws, and the Grecian way of living. Wherefore they desired his permission to build them a Gymnasium at Jerusalem. And when he had given them leave, they also hid the circumcision of their genitals, that even when they were naked they might appear to be Greeks. Accordingly, they left off all the customs that belonged to their own country, and imitated the practices of the other nations” (author’s emphasis).
- ⁹ See also Deut 7:6, 14:2; 26:18. For further discussion, see (Rudolph 2011, pp. 79–80).
- ¹⁰ Elsewhere in 1 Cor 1:26–29, Paul reminds the gentile *Christos*-followers to consider their own κλῆσιν that not many of them were, “wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor 1:26) and yet God chose the foolish to shame the wise; the weak to shame the strong; the lowly and despised to nullify the things that are, so that boasting is excluded (1 Cor 1:27–29). This suggests that Paul is not against upward social mobility in one’s socioeconomic situation if such an opportunity is present.
- ¹¹ Cf. (Collman 2021, pp. 41–42) where he compares circumcision/uncircumcision to keeping the commandments of God.
- ¹² For example, see Gal 2:7; Eph 2:11; and Acts 11:13. For further discussion, see (Thiessen 2016, pp. 8–11; Campbell 2013, pp. 205–9; and Collman 2021, pp. 39–44).
- ¹³ See also (Collins 1999, p. 274): “With respect to salvation, no social situation is more advantageous than another.” Likewise, Fitzmyer (2008, p. 307): “There is no need to deny that ethnic background. One’s physical condition has no bearing on the grace of vocation; to try to alter that condition would be a misunderstanding of God’s election.”
- ¹⁴ References are often made to Gal 5:14 where Paul expresses that the Law is fulfilled in loving one’s neighbor as oneself.
- ¹⁵ For further discussion on the relationship between Noachide commandments and New Testament ethics, see (Bockmuehl 2000, pp. 145–73).
- ¹⁶ Scholars are divided as to the what the phrase “the commandments of God” means in Rev 12:17 and 14:12. Aune argues that it, “must be regarded as referring to the ethical requirements of the Torah” (Aune 1998, p. 712, see also p. 837), which specifically refers to the second table of the Decalogue (Aune 1998, pp. 710–12). Osborne takes this phrase to include, “all the commandments, especially the ethical requirements of the commandments” (Osborne 2002, pp. 486, 543). The main focus of these two passages is to remain faithful and steadfast to Christ even in unfavorable conditions. Korner argues that faithfulness to Christ in Revelation entails, “Jewish-like lifestyle of worship, humble submission, obedience to Torah/commandments, of public testimony by the

faithful (chs. 4–5; 7:9–12; 12:17), of praise of God, and of repentance from activities that are *anathema* to Jews by the faithless” (Korner 2020, p. 237). In view of this, it probably makes more sense to take the phrase “the commandments of God” as pointing to the Torah.

- 17 Cf. 1 Cor 15:56 where Paul seems to negate the Law by stating that, “the power of sin is the *ὁ νόμος*.” For further discussion, see (Vlachos 2009, pp. 73–86) where he argues that the use of *νόμος* here refers to divine law in general with the Edenic Fall account in view. See also (Rudolph 2011, pp. 156–57).
- 18 For further discussion, see (Tomes 2009, pp. 209–17).
- 19 Cf. (Rudolph 2011, pp. 84–85): “... with respect to status before God and eschatological blessing, being Jewish or Gentile is irrelevant. What is important in God’s eyes, what pleases him, is that Jews and Gentiles keep their respective commandments.” See also (Tomson 1990, pp. 271–74). Contra Collins who believes that keeping the commandments of God is only “appropriate conduct for the Jews” (Collins 1999, p. 284).
- 20 For further discussion on how Paul uses sibling language drawn from Greco-Roman philosophical discourse and fictive kinship language of the ancient associations in identity formation, see (Lim 2017, pp. 51–92).
- 21 In 1 Cor 8: 1, Paul uses the phrase “now concerning” (*περὶ δὲ*) for the third time (1 Cor 7:1, 25), possibly indicating that he is responding to a letter written by the Corinthians to him. See also footnote 3 above.
- 22 For example, see (Ehrensperger 2022, pp. 34–46). See also (Ehrensperger 2013, pp. 189–209; and Rudolph 2011, pp. 93–101).
- 23 Examples that are often cited are taken from Acts 16:3 and 21:17–26 where Paul’s actions of Torah observance have been interpreted as a matter of expediency on account of the Jews and to fulfill a vow of appeasing the accusation of those who were zealous of the law. It is as if Paul caves in under pressure to be a Torah observant Jew whenever it suits him.
- 24 See the discussion of Nanos and his view on Paul’s use of rhetorical adaptability where Paul varies his speech to different audiences by reasoning from the premises of the audience in 1 Cor 9:19–23 (Nanos 2012, pp. 122–28). See also (Nanos 2013, pp. 596–607). This approach of Nanos excludes lifestyle adaptability where Paul varies his conduct to adapt to the lifestyle of his audiences when he is among them. However, Rudolph is of the view that lifestyle adaptability is included, based on the example of Jesus (Rudolph 2011, pp. 14–17, 180–90) as Paul’s concern for both Jews and gentiles *Christos*-followers go beyond mere rhetoric.
- 25 On the possibility of strong Pharisaic influence among the diaspora Jews, see (Dunn 1990, pp. 138–41; and Rudolph 2011, pp. 194–96).
- 26 For example, see Mark 7:3 where the Pharisees and the rest of the Jews are described in two categories: “the Pharisees, and all the Jews.”
- 27 Rudolph describes Paul as adapting to the gentiles by presumably, “visiting Gentile homes, sharing table-fellowship with Gentiles and conforming to the customs of his Gentile host” (Rudolph 2011, p. 204). For further discussion, see (Tucker 2011, pp. 104–5; and Rudolph 2011, pp. 196–201). See also Gal 2:11–14 where Paul opposed Peter after Peter withdrew from having table fellowship with the gentiles.
- 28 For example, see 1 Cor 2:1–5; 4:10; 2 Cor: 11:21, 29–30; 12:5, 9–10; 13:4, 9.
- 29 While there is no evidence that Paul knew the historical Jesus, there are indications that Paul was aware of the Jesus tradition. For example, in 1 Cor 11:23 and 15:3, Paul talks about receiving and handing on what he knew about the Jesus tradition. Horsley argues that the language of receiving and handing on, “were virtually technical terms in Jewish culture for the transmission of important traditions such as customs, rituals, and ethical teachings” (Horsley 1998, p. 160).
- 30 Wedderburn argues that the early church was more open to the inclusion of gentiles based on the tradition of Jesus welcoming sinners. “... if Jesus was a friend ... of ‘sinners’ (Matt 11.19/Luke 7.34) then he was also a friend of Gentiles who were also classed among ‘sinners’” (Wedderburn 1989, p. 136).
- 31 For further discussion, see (Rudolph 2011, pp. 187–90; and Tucker 2011, pp. 110–14).
- 32 Although Daube’s work is slightly dated, it has been influential and cited approvingly by many scholars in recent years. See, for example, (Ciampa and Rosner 2010, 423 n141; Garland 2003, 429 n12; Thiselton 2000, p. 701; and Fitzmyer 2008, p. 369). Daube suggests that idea of *κερδαίνω* as a missionary term carrying the meaning of drawing in those outside the faith can be traced to a number of Hebrew words in rabbinic writings. It is interesting to note that Daube acknowledges that there is lack of evidence of any rabbinic background implying winning over the outsiders to the faith, such as proselyting the gentiles. He states, “I cannot, indeed, affirm that the Rabbis used their term of ‘proselytizing.’ I have not found it in that field; it is certainly not frequent there” (Daube 1947, p. 117). He concedes, “the masses which God ‘gains’ in the chain texts examined are Israelites condemned and reprieved, ‘won back,’ not Gentiles ‘won over’” (Daube 1947, p. 117). Notwithstanding this conclusion, Daube maintains that the meaning of *κερδαίνω* in the sense of winning back a Jewish sinner as used in Matt 18:15 can, by extension, be applied to mean winning over the gentiles as used by Paul. He concludes, “it is most unlikely that the writer using *κερδαίνω* in Matt. 18.15, with reference to the ‘winning back of a sinner,’ would have hesitated to use it, as Paul and 1 Peter do, with reference to actual ‘proselytising’” (Daube 1947, p. 118). Daube’s conclusion is problematic and this is rightly criticized by Gardner. Gardner states that Daube does not offer clear evidence of rabbinic background to *κερδαίνω* that implies winning over outsiders (Gardner 2018, p. 405).

- ³³ Gardner argues that, “the idea of ‘winning’ or ‘gaining back’ has been too quickly dismissed” (Gardner 2018, p. 406, author’s emphasis).
- ³⁴ See BDAG. See also the usage of this word in Mark 8:36; Matt 16:26; 25:16, 20, 22; Luke 9:25; Phil 3:8; and James 4:13.
- ³⁵ See also Rom 14 where Paul exhorts both the Jewish and gentile *Christos*-followers not to judge one another or put hindrances or obstacles in the way of one another concerning food and observance of certain days (Rom 14:13). What is important is to build up one another (Rom 14:19).
- ³⁶ See also (Tomes 2009, pp. 215–16) where he argues the New Testament writers are more concerned with giving advice for appropriate ethical behavior rather than drawing up rules in ensuring that the gentiles would not cause offense to the Jews and vice versa. See also Rom 14:19–21.
- ³⁷ See 1 Cor 10:27–28 and 14:23–25.
- ³⁸ See the discussion that diversity rather than uniformity is the norm in early Christianity in (Campbell 2018, pp. 107–19).
- ³⁹ For further discussion, see (Yao and Zhao 2010, pp. 103–21).
- ⁴⁰ *Qing Ming* Festival observed annually in April is similar to All Souls’ Day commemorated on 2 November in the Western Christian liturgical calendar.
- ⁴¹ I grew up participating in such meals a number of times where we ate food that had been offered in the rituals of ancestral worship.
- ⁴² For example, I have struggled to find a suitable textbook for an introductory course in the New Testament written by Asians for Asian context. It is only in 2022 that a full-scale textbook was finally published. See (Thomaskutty 2022).

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