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## Paul and Asceticism in 1 Corinthians 9:27a

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### Abstract

Amidst the resurgence of interest in Paul and asceticism relatively little focus has been put upon one Pauline text with seemingly obvious ascetic potential: “I beat my body” (1 Corinthians 9:27a). After a brief introduction to the discussion of asceticism and an ascetic Paul, this article will survey the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of this text, especially in the patristic era, engage in exegesis of 1 Corinthians 9:27a, and draw conclusions as to the relevance of the text for discussion of Pauline asceticism.

### An Ascetic Paul? Recent Discussion

[1] Most study of Paul and asceticism focuses on 1 Corinthians 7 and the apostle’s attitude toward sexuality and marriage, comparing it with Hellenistic and Jewish sexual ethics. Oddly, very little attention has been paid to 1 Corinthians 9:27a (“I punish my body and enslave it”), a text that would appear to have obvious ascetic potential. This paper seeks to fill that gap. After a brief orientation to current debate on Paul and asceticism and on the definition of “asceticism,” we consider the role of 1 Corinthians 9:27a in the Christian ascetic tradition. Did this text play a greater role in earlier discussions of ascetic practice than it has more recently? Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 9:27a in its immediate context and in the context of contemporary scholarly discussion will occupy the remainder of the article.

[2] Paul has been variously championed as the model ascetic or the convinced anti-ascetic. Up until more recently, scholarship held firmly to the anti-ascetic perspective (Lohse; Brown: 44-57). These scholars often understood asceticism in terms of Hellenistic dualism; it entailed a negative attitude toward the material order and involved renunciation and withdrawal. Although ascetic-looking practices made occasional appearances in the Old Testament and second temple Jewish sources, they were either exceptional (e.g., Nazarite vows, Essenes) or entailed a fundamentally different motivation (e.g., temporary sexual abstinence of priests for purposes of purity). Israelite religion was essentially a world-

affirming, not world-denying, faith, as evidenced by its consistent endorsement of marriage and procreation. The same was true for the New Testament. The few seeming exceptions only proved the rule: John the Baptist's ascetic lifestyle was exceptional, and Paul's positive stance toward celibacy (1 Corinthians 7) had a pragmatic and apocalyptic motivation rather than a dualistic one. According to these writers, genuine asceticism (i.e., inspired by Greek philosophical dualism) was considered to have made its appearance in Christian circles only in the post-apostolic period. Thus, asceticism found no true home in early Judaism or Christianity, but represented a Hellenistic spirit and skipped over the Old Testament and New Testament to raise its head in the patristic era.

[3] The past two decades, however, have witnessed a resurgence of interest in an ascetic Paul. The 1980's saw the work of the SBL Group on Ascetic Behavior in Greco-Roman Antiquity, conferences in the 90's, and numerous studies in support of Pauline or New Testament asceticism (Wimbush; Wimbush and Valantasis; Vaage and Wimbush; see also Clark). Much of this interest reflects changing understandings of the very nature of asceticism. Although no consensus definition has been reached by these efforts, most are agreed that a traditional and strongly negative definition (renunciation or withdrawal rooted in Hellenistic dualism) is insufficient and was itself largely responsible for the earlier non-ascetic conclusions reached. Instead, attention focuses on behaviors commonly associated with asceticism (fasting, sexual continence, poverty, isolation) regardless of duration, degree, or ideological motivation; or emphasis rests upon the sociological role of such behavior – it is a (positive) response to some tension or hindrance found in society or self toward spiritual fulfillment. Thus, Paul's thoughts on celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7, even if pragmatically or apocalyptically motivated, still constitute a form of asceticism (i.e., ascetic behavior). The trajectory of asceticism does not skip over Paul (and the New Testament and early Judaism), but runs right through him; he is, in fact, “the model ascetic” (chapter title in Roetzel; drawn from Meeks: 193).

[4] The ascetic Paul has not won the day (Deming, esp. chap. 4), but he is definitely on the rise. To be clear, this embrace of an ascetic Paul does not force one to view the apostle as a Hellenistic dualist (as in older studies), but rests on a more positive definition. “Asceticism” derives from Gk *ἀσκησις* (physical training), which was then extended by Stoics and Cynics to refer to training in the philosophical or religious sphere, and is now generally understood in English as “given to strict self-denial, esp. for the sake of spiritual or intellectual discipline” (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*). While this paper does not claim to advance the debate about definition, neither can it avoid some definitional starting point. As noted above, a stricter, dualistic definition will typically result in a non-ascetic Paul, while a broader definition may allow for the opposite. For this paper, I will adopt the following working definition: practices designed to discipline or to deny desires (physical or psychological) in order to attain a spiritual goal. This avoids the Hellenistic dualism of earlier studies and seems to be an acceptable middle ground in recent study (Fraade; Kaelber; on the problem of definition, see Saldarini: 12-18).

### **1 Corinthians 9:27a in Early Christian Interpretation: Patristic (Ascetic) Writings**

[5] On occasion, this verse has been painted as the chief fountainhead of more severe ascetic practices, such as flagellation. “The practices of the Middle-Age Flagellants and similar self-

torturers have been justified by this text” (Findlay: 856). How, in fact, was 1 Corinthians 9:27a used and understood in early Christian interpretation? What role, if any, did it play in discussion of ascetic practices? This study of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of 1 Corinthians 9:27a will proceed more or less chronologically (on asceticism in this period more broadly, see Clark: 14-42; Brown: 33-64).

[6] Although a long tradition of scholarship has held that Greek dualistic emphases corrupted biblical tradition in the direction of asceticism in this period, such analyses seldom gave any notice to 1 Corinthians 9:27a.<sup>1</sup> Finding citations of, or allusions to, 1 Corinthians 9:27a is made more difficult by the fact that no thorough Scripture index to this body of literature yet exists.<sup>2</sup> Appendix I contains an alphabetically arranged listing of early uses of 1 Corinthians 9:27a.

[7] A fairly broad understanding of what constitutes a use of 1 Corinthians 9:27a has been employed in what follows in order to include all possible instances where it may be reasonably argued that an author intends some reminiscence of that text. No attempt will be made to distinguish carefully between citations, allusions and echoes since the boundaries between these categories are fluid and definitions are not clearly agreed-upon (Hays). For the purposes of this investigation, the texts fall into four groups:

1. Those that use 1 Corinthians 9:27a in reference to some form of harsh or severe bodily chastisement;
2. Those that use 1 Corinthians 9:27a in reference to various forms of bodily discipline or renunciation seen as an important element in the spiritual struggle between spirit and flesh, sometimes with explicit rejection of severe forms of chastisement;
3. Those that contain possible, but highly uncertain, echoes of 1 Corinthians 9:27a;
4. Those that use 1 Corinthians 9:27a in other (non-ascetic) ways.

*Group 1: Texts citing or alluding to 1 Corinthians 9:27a with reference to harsh bodily chastisement*

[8] Harsh treatment of the body for purposes of Christian perfection was not unknown to the authors of this period. Macarius is reported to have sat naked for six months in a marsh until he became unrecognizable from the mass of mosquito bites on his body; and Evagrius, also late fourth century, is said to have prayed all night in a cistern of water in mid-winter and to have stood for weeks in the open until his body was covered with vermin.<sup>3</sup> However,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Lohse (170 and n. 2), who notes only Origen’s use of this text in *Contra Celsum* 5, 49. Cf. also Burton-Christie, whose thorough study of the use of Scripture in early monastic tradition gives no attention to this text.

<sup>2</sup> Standard treatments of Greek and Latin commentators (Staab; Souter), for instance, contain no reference to 1 Corinthians 9:27. The most complete tool for patristic biblical references remains Allenbach.

<sup>3</sup> All these cases appear to have been exceptional responses to instances of particularly severe temptation, see Sinkewicz: xix-xx.

only one author makes reference to 1 Corinthians 9:27a in connection with such harsh bodily discipline.<sup>4</sup>

[9] In the prologue to his fifth-century history of Syrian monasticism, Theodoret alludes to 1 Corinthians 9:27a when speaking of the monks' triumph over the multitudinous attacks of unseen enemies.

. . . their love of the divine beauty was intense; with joy they desired to do and to suffer all for the Beloved. Thus, they bore heroically the storm of sufferings; in might they repelled all that the devil might hail upon them and, using the apostle's own words, *they chastised their body and brought it in subjection* [τὸ σῶμα ὑπωπιάσαντες καὶ δουλαγωγῆσαντες] (*Phil. hist.*, Prologue 3.1103; Greek text in *Patrologia Graeca* 82.1288B; Gutberlet: 23).

The larger context of this saying speaks of night watches, carrying chains, and withstanding hunger and cold, justifying Gutberlet's mention of "bodily asceticism" and "unusual corporal chastising" here and in the larger context. Although Theodoret probably uses 1 Corinthians 9:27a here in reference to the unusually harsh bodily discipline of the Syrian monks, such harsh treatment is not, however, primary elsewhere in his account of the monks' striving for virtue. That is, this use of 1 Corinthians 9:27a is to some degree exceptional.<sup>5</sup>

[10] Thus, there is very little evidence that 1 Corinthians 9:27a played any significant role in justifying harsh ascetic treatment of the body, and that which exists comes near the end of the period under consideration (late fourth to mid-fifth century).

*Group 2: Texts citing or alluding to 1 Corinthians 9:27a with reference to various forms of bodily discipline or renunciation seen as an important element in the spiritual struggle between spirit and flesh, sometimes with explicit rejection of severe forms of chastisement*

[11] This group of texts from the third to the fifth centuries comprises the largest number (see Appendix I). No development in the patristic understanding of 1 Corinthians 9:27a vis-à-vis asceticism is discernable; thus, the following section will simply illustrate those aspects of patristic interpretation that occur consistently throughout the period.

[12] The metaphors of "beating" and "subduing" are nearly always taken to refer to Paul's struggle for the virtue of self-control against the passions of the flesh, usually with reference to common ascetic practices such as fasting, watching, and avoidance of luxury:

To *pommel the body* is to fast and to avoid any kind of luxury. Paul shows that he disciplines his own body so that he will not miss out on the reward about which he preaches to others. (Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul's Epistles*; *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* 81.106-7 [italics added]; cited in Bray: 88-90).

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<sup>4</sup> Macarius of Alexandria might be added as a third if the echo of 1 Corinthians 9:27a were more certain; see under Group 3 below.

<sup>5</sup> "Das wesen der Tugend liegt eben für ihn und die Mönche nicht in Äußerlichkeiten, sondern im Willen . . . [bes.] die Liebe zu Gott: ὁ θεῖος ἔρωσ" (Gutberlet: 9-10).

If Paul . . . who proved superior to bodily necessities . . . felt the need to pommel his body, bring it into subjection, submit it to the authority of the soul and place its impulses under the virtue of the soul . . . (Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* XXII.22; Fathers of the Church 82:86; Greek text in *Patrologia Graeca* 53.23).

. . . while at rest they afflict and exhaust themselves by resisting their own desires, by harnessing their lust, by keeping unbounded liberty in check, and by dashing to the ground everything else which is opposed to the good of self-control. This is in accordance with the one who said, “I *punish my body* and subject it to servitude, so that after preaching to others I myself should be rejected” (Origen, *Comm. Rom.* IV.9.9; Fathers of the Church 103:290; no extant Greek text; Latin text in *Patrologia Graeca* 14).<sup>6</sup>

Here Origen understands Paul to be referring to the self-control of fleshly lusts by resisting desires, harnessing lust, and checking unbounded liberty.<sup>7</sup>

[13] Frequently, these authors point out that such struggle against the flesh does not entail overly severe treatment of the physical body, something that was apparently being practiced by others. Augustine claims to follow Ambrose in differentiating between Paul’s physical body (which is himself and is not evil *per se*) and his body *qua* flesh (which is “of himself” and is the fountain of evil). He beats and subdues the latter but not the former:

Therefore, the soul is by nature the ruler and mistress of the flesh, and should subdue and govern the flesh. Therefore, . . . the soul says . . . in St. Paul [1 Corinthians 9:27]: “But I chastise my body and bring it into subjection.” Therefore, Paul chastises what is of him and not what is himself. For what is of him is one thing, what is himself is another. He chastises what is of him, so that he, being just, may bring about the death of bodily wantonness (*C. Jul.* 24; see also Ambrose, *Letters to Priests* 49, “Ambrose to Horontianus”).

Of course, hardship and toil are still involved, whether self-imposed (Chrysostom, *Laud. Paul.* Homily 6.7; cited in Mitchell 2002: 477)<sup>8</sup> or suffered from external circumstances (Origen, *Comm. Rom.* I.3.3 in Fathers of the Church 103:65).

[14] When used in reference to ascetic practices, 1 Corinthians 9:27a appears to have been understood primarily in reference to the subduing of the desires of the flesh. Not

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<sup>6</sup> The same sense is found in *Comm. Rom.* VII.12.11, *Hom. Exod.* 13.5, *Hom. Lev.* 1.5.1 and *Cels.* VIII.22 with mention of sexual continence, vigils, meditation, abstaining from the pleasures of this life, and the allurements of the flesh or body.

<sup>7</sup> If Wiles is correct that Origen sees in the physical “flesh” more of an enemy than does Chrysostom, it is, perhaps, significant that both use 1 Corinthians 9.27a in very similar ways; i.e., Origen’s harsher view of the physical body is not reflected in his use of this Pauline text. Cf. Wiles: 41-42. For opposition to the supposedly harsh asceticism in Origen, see Epiphanius *Pan.* 64.71.

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus quotes 1 Corinthians 9.24-27 to show the apostle’s readiness to exercise almost “violent” effort to enter the kingdom of God (*Haer.* IV.37.7).

infrequently this is contrasted explicitly with overly rigorous bodily chastisement. Although various bodily disciplines are often in view (e.g., fasting, watching, avoidance of luxury), the authors seek to differentiate between the chastisement of the physical body *per se* and the subduing of the “flesh” (esp. Augustine). It is not uncommon for these authors to see in Paul’s “beat the body” a reference to the great and tiring effort necessary in the pursuit of virtue through self-control. Thus, 1 Corinthians 9:27a was clearly known to these writers and sometimes used in relation to moderated ascetic practices.

*Group 3: Texts containing possible, but highly uncertain, echoes of 1 Corinthians 9:27a*

[15] Discovering additional, even “fainter,” echoes of 1 Corinthians 9:27a in this large body of early Christian literature leaves considerable room for subjectivity. One promising avenue for such identification may be the occurrence of relatively unusual terms in the passage – *ὑπωπιάζω* (I beat) or *δουλαγωγῶ* (I enslave). Many passages contain merely an occurrence of the Greek terms (and in most cases only cognates of the terms found in 1 Corinthians 9:27a, e.g., *ὑποπιασμός*, chastisement). Of these passages, only two possess sufficient additional indicators to merit further investigation. Both of these we also judge not to be echoes of an ascetic tradition utilizing Paul’s terminology of “beat the body and bring it into subjection.”

[16] Palladius’ *Lausiac History* 18.24 mentions Macarius of Alexandria, a severe early Egyptian ascetic. At one point, while fighting demons who wished to drag him away, this Macarius carried a large basket filled with much sand. When asked about this, Macarius replied, “I am molesting my tempter; he is uncontrollable and tries to throw me out.” That is, Macarius is resisting the demons by carrying this basket so they cannot drag him away. Palladius then narrates, “When he had shuffled about for a long time, he went into his cell, *his body having been beaten into subjection*” (65). This combination of *beat*, *body*, and *subjection* is, indeed, suggestive of Paul’s phraseology in 1 Corinthians 9:27a. However, nothing else in the immediate context points in the direction of such an echo.

[17] In a hymn praising virginity Joannes Monachus sings

Be strong, O virgin – in wisdom beating the body [*ὑποπιέζειν τὸ σῶμα*]  
which has seen hard service (or “which misleads”) and bringing it into  
subjection [*δουλαγωγεῖν*] (*Hymnus in Georgium* 8; Greek text in *Patrologia*  
*Graeca* 96.1400B).

As with Macarius, it is only the combination of phrases that might suggest an echo of Paul’s text.

*Group 4: Texts using 1 Corinthians 9:27a in other (non-ascetic) ways*

[18] This small group of texts is important to this study, since it shows that Christian authors did not automatically think of ascetic practices when hearing 1 Corinthians 9:27a. Twice in the preface to his commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans, Origen cites 1 Corinthians 9:27, but lays emphasis on v 27b (“lest I be disqualified”) in order to assert that Paul did not view himself as already perfect or beyond the fear of failure (*Comm. Rom.* Preface, §3 and 6; also IV.8.6). This is taken as balancing the confidence expressed in Rom 8:38-39 (“nothing can separate us”). It is possible that ascetic self-control would be heard in v. 27a (cf. *Comm.*

Rom. VII.12.11, noted in Group 2 above), but in the preface only the thought of v. 27b is explicitly in view. A similar treatment occurs in Chrysostom's *Laud. Paul.* 6.8. After quoting 1 Corinthians 9:27a in reference to Paul's wearying pursuit of virtue (see above on *Laud. Paul.* 6.7, Group 2), he then quotes the entire verse 27 so as to highlight Paul's godly fear implied in "lest I be disqualified" (cf. Mitchell 2002: 478).

### 1 Corinthians 9:27a in Early Christian Interpretation: Later Christian Writings

[19] The most literal application of Paul's "I beat my body" occurs in the practice of self-flagellation. Although the beating of *others'* bodies as a form of punishment or penance was known from earliest times, the beating of *one's own* body makes almost no appearance during the first millennium C.E. It appears to have become more common in the medieval period, mainly among mendicant and lay orders (Henderson: 147-60; Gougaud). Flagellation was not normally considered an end in itself, but was part of a larger penitential system; i.e., one ritual act among others in the process of penitence. Flagellation rituals played an important role in many sermons in the Flagellant movements as noted by Weissman:

"The holy discipline is hard, let us flagellate," [so] preacher Pier Antonio Buondelmonti. . . Rinierei Buonafé urged ". . . follow virtue . . . and whip ready, kneel." . . . Or, as Bartolomeo Scala urged, "*la disciplina in mano* [whip in hand], remedy the injuries of your pus-filled body" (261).

[20] This form of penance was primarily a means of sharing in Christ's suffering to ward off current divine punishment, and was inspired by Christ's flagellation during the passion rather than by reflection on 1 Corinthians 9:27a. Occasionally, reference was made to Psalm 73:14, "all day long have I been plagued and *chastened* [Vulgate: *fui flagellatus*, I have been whipped] every morning," but not to 1 Corinthians 9:27a. The Italian and French flagellant communities (12-15<sup>th</sup> centuries) appear to have drawn particular inspiration from the example of St. Jerome.

[21] Roman Catholic moral theology has long used the term "Ascetic Theology" with a much broader meaning than "asceticism" in Protestant ethics (Lau). Catholic moral theologians include under this rubric all training in virtue (e.g., prayer, sacraments) as well as the narrower sense of harsh bodily discipline (= *evangelical counsels*, more properly *mortification*) (Sabbatucci). A carefully qualified dualism appears to underlie Catholic teaching on renunciation (e.g., priestly celibacy), wherein the material world carries an inherent danger of being a conduit for lower urges. 1 Corinthians 9:27a does not appear to have played a significant role in Catholic teaching on mortification.

[22] We have no record that Luther ever focused in his writing or speaking on the meaning of 1 Corinthians 9:27a (including 1 Corinthians chap. 9 or vv. 24-27). He did, however, refer in passing to this verse numerous times while addressing other matters. In such instances he used the verse consistently to refer to the Christian's struggle against the evil desires of the flesh:

Therefore one should curb the sensual desires with all zeal, repress and detest concupiscence, and strive after modesty and chastity. And if it were impossible to cure and avoid altogether that evil which is implanted in our nature because of original sin, one should bemoan and deplore it, as Paul



complains (1 Corinthians 9:27): “I pommel my body and subdue it.” (4.238  
[on Genesis 24:1-4]; see also 9.151; 25.328; 31.359; 32.21; 52.138)

In at least one place he clearly rejects the harsher bodily discipline employed in some circles, but he does not allude to 1 Corinthians 9:27a in this regard (35.10). Luther’s vehement opposition to works of supererogation, along with his “earthier” (creation-affirming) outlook, meant, among other things, that rigorous bodily asceticism would be viewed with deepest suspicion. Nevertheless, an ascetic tension, some form of “inner-worldly asceticism” (so Weber and Troeltsch), has often characterized Protestant ethics. Alongside enjoyment of the good, created order, Christians are to live as though they had not (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:29-31) (Lau).

[23] John Calvin, in commenting on the meaning of “beat the body,” states that Paul “does not indulge self, but restrains his inclinations – which cannot be accomplished unless the body is tamed, and, by being held back from its inclinations, is habituated to subjection like a wild and refractory steed” (1.310-11 [on verse 27]). He refers then to “ancient monks” and their practices of watching, refraining from delicate foods, etc., which, however, were improperly directed toward the physical body, making clear that Calvin views this text in reference to fleshly passions, not to bodily austerity. “Let us, however, treat the body so as to make a slave of it, that it may not, by its wantonness, keep us back from the duties of piety; and farther, that we may not indulge it, so as to occasion injury, or offence, to others” (1.311).

[24] The majority of interpreters in the modern era reject an ascetic interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:27a in the sense of a call to harsh treatment of the body. Instead, to “beat the body” is generally taken as metaphorical and in reference to self-control, the suppression of fleshly passions, or the voluntary sacrifice of personal rights. Examples of such commentators include: C. Keener; A. Johnson; D. Garland; A. Thiselton; G. Lockwood; R. Hays; W. Schrage; S. Kistemaker; G. D. Fee; Chr. Wolff; F. F. Bruce; C. K. Barrett; and F. W. Grosheide. A small number of interpreters have, on the other hand, argued for the presence of harsh bodily asceticism in this text: H.-D. Wendland; J. Weiss; and G. G. Findlay.<sup>9</sup> Some commentators, whether due to the brevity of treatment or a focus in other directions, take no clear stance as to asceticism in this text: J. Paul Sampley; R. F. Collins; M. Soards; H. Conzelmann; A. Robertson and A. Plummer; and H. Lietzmann. Others suggest that Paul’s hardships in ministry (e.g., shipwreck, flogging) may be in view; i.e., this refers only to what Paul himself experienced in his body – it was not self-inflicted (Kugelman: 268). One writer even suggests the text may be a call to physical fitness (!) (Barclay: 85).

[25] Although 1 Corinthians 9:27a was known as having import for Christian self-discipline, it was almost never understood in a woodenly literal fashion to support rigorous ascetic practices (e.g., flagellation) (contra Cooper: 31-32). Although one might expect 1 Corinthians 9:27a to show up regularly in discussion of more severe ascetic practices, this has not proven to be the case. In fact, the paucity of use in a rigorous ascetical direction stands out – only a

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<sup>9</sup> Findlay’s position is actually more ambiguous. Although he sees here “corporal discipline” and “physical castigation which tames the flesh” (856), he also rejects any extension to extreme bodily measures such as flagellation.

single text in the first millennium of Christian literary history. It was, on the other hand, used with rather more frequency to support a general subduing of bodily desires or fleshly passions. Paul's "beat the body" could be taken in an extended sense in reference to moderated ascetic practices such as fasting, watching, and endurance of affliction.

### Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 9:27a

[26] Why does Paul speak at this point in his argument in 1 Corinthians of "beating my body"? And, assuming that question can be answered, what light does this literary purpose shed on its intended meaning at this point in the argument?

[27] Questions as to the literary integrity of 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1 continue to be raised, but the unity of this section is accepted by most interpreters (Soden: 239-75). In the midst of a lengthy response to issues surrounding the eating of idol meat (8:1; cf. also 8:4, 7, 10; 10:19), the apostle pauses momentarily (9:1-24) to offer his own example (Mitchell 1993: 243-50). He has just warned some of the Corinthians against allowing their freedom in eating meat to become a cause for others to stumble (8:9), and has included himself among those who curtail their freedom ("if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat," 8:13). In chapter nine, Paul sets himself forth as a paradigm of one who possesses freedom and rights ("Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?" 9:1), yet who gladly restricts those rights in the interests of others:

"we have not made use of this right" (v. 12a);

"I have made no use of any of these rights" (v. 15);

"though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them" (v. 19);

"to the weak I became weak" (v. 22a).

He refrains from taking a wife along on his journeys (v. 5), from receiving pay for his ministry (vv. 6-18), and even from insisting on a lifestyle free from Torah-observance (vv. 19-23). In all these areas Paul exemplifies the restriction of personal rights that he is calling on the Corinthians to exercise in the sphere of eating meat. As he will say at the close of the larger section, "not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (10:33b–11:1). Just as Paul abstains from using certain rights or freedoms in the interests of others, so the Corinthians should abstain from exercising their freedom to eat idol meat in the interests of the "weak."

[28] Before returning explicitly to the issue of eating and idolatry (10:1-13), Paul concludes this portion of his argument with well-known athletic metaphors in vv. 24-27. As numerous authors have made clear, these sports metaphors were widely used in moral instruction to illustrate the importance of self-mastery, including the temporary renunciation of otherwise permissible matters (Pfitzner: 16-75). Olympian athletes were known to spend ten months in rigorous training, doing without certain foods, sex, and other matters in order to win the prize. Such self-control (*ἐγκράτεια*, *ἐγκρατεύεσθαι*) was often the focus in ethical texts using these metaphors. So Paul, having previously recounted aspects of his voluntary renunciation of apostolic rights, now portrays himself as an apostolic athlete who exercises the same *ἐγκράτεια*.

Athletes exercise self-control [ἐγκρατεύεται] in all things; . . . So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified (9:25a, 26-27)

Although these athletic metaphors often spoke of the great effort involved in such self-discipline, Paul's point is not so much to call the Corinthians to strenuous effort as to call them to give up the exercise of certain freedoms for the sake of the community (Fee: 435).

[29] The structure of 9:26-27 highlights this point and shows v. 27a to be the climactic positive statement of apostolic self-control. First come two parallel metaphors, running and boxing, in which Paul notes negatively what his apostolic activity is not, namely, aimless [ἀδήλως] or haphazard [ἀέρα δέρων]:

ἐγὼ τοίνυν      ὅπως τρέχω      ὡς οὐκ      ἀδήλως  
                          ὅπως πυκτεύω      ὡς οὐκ      ἀέρα δέρων

(So I do not run aimlessly,  
 nor do I box as though beating the air).

Such aimless running or haphazard punching is the opposite of the rigorous, goal-oriented training of the athlete. Instead [ἀλλά], and now portraying his point positively, he states:

ἀλλὰ              ὑπωπιάζω<sup>10</sup> μου τὸ σῶμα  
                          καί      δουλαγωγῶ

(but I punish my body  
 and enslave it).

[30] The literal sense of ὑπωπιάζω (blacken an eye) is by far the most common; see also the cognate noun ὑπόπιον (a black eye, darkness under the eyes, a gloomy countenance) and adjective ὑπόπιος (pertaining to a black eye) (Weiss: 8.590-591). It is difficult to see this sense in 1 Corinthians 9:27a (I give my body a black eye?); thus, by only a slight extension one arrives easily at “beat, treat roughly, torment” (BDAG). This less common sense is preferred by most English translations.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This reading is preferable on external and internal grounds, but many early scribes found it difficult, and substituted either ὑποπιάζω or ὑποπιέζω. These represent either typical vowel-substitutions (ο for ω, and ε for α), or preference for slightly more familiar verbs. See presentation of manuscript evidence in Robertson and Plummer: 198.

<sup>11</sup> Thus, “buffet” (American Standard Version, New American Standard Version), “beat” (New International Version), “pommel” (Revised Standard Version), “punish” (New Jerusalem Bible, New Revised Standard Version), “chastise” (Douay-Rheims Version). The King James Version’s “keep under” is based upon the Byzantine manuscript tradition (vl. ὑποπιάζω) and may be an attempt to preserve a supposed etymology from the prefix ὑπό. Some suggest a further figurative extension, “discipline, keep under control,” but this sense is doubtful.

[31] Interpreters remain divided as to whether the verb's meaning is here related to the boxing metaphor. For Pfitzner and others, Paul's "I beat my body" no longer has the contest in mind; it is not the boxer's opponent but Paul's own body which is in view. In addition, they argue "the verb *δουλαγωγεῖν* hardly fits into the language of the actual contest" (Pfitzner: 91; also Lietzmann; Thiselton; Weiss; a similar debate occurs over "disqualified" in v. 27b, whether it refers to disqualification from the contest or has moved on to Paul's judgment eschatology). The majority, however, correctly see in v. 27a the continuation of the boxing metaphor – more specifically, of the boxer's pre-fight training rather than the actual match against an opposing boxer.<sup>12</sup> During the training period boxers would indeed treat their own bodies roughly and subjugate their normal bodily needs to the aim of the training. That this is a continuation of the metaphor is made certain by Paul's choice of *ὑπωπιάζω*. Since there were many other, more common, verbs for beating or training (see Embry: 162; Louw and Nida: domain 19A), the choice of this verb can hardly be attributed to anything other than reflection on the boxing metaphor.

[32] What Paul "treats roughly" and "subdues" is his body (*μου τὸ σῶμα*). The precise sense of this phrase is central to discussions of this verse in relation to asceticism. In line with Paul's usage of *σῶμα* (body) elsewhere (Robinson; Gundry), the major options normally considered here are:

- *σῶμα* = physical body: Paul treats his *physical body* roughly (cf. 5:3; 7:4; 12:16; see Gundry: 34-80, 135-244);
- *σῶμα* = *σάρξ* (flesh): Paul treats his *sinful nature* roughly;
- *σῶμα* as synecdoche for the whole person: Paul treats *himself* roughly (see 9:19, where Paul speaks of making *himself* a slave; also 6:19-20; 12:12, 13; 15:38-44; see Bultmann: §17).

Combined with varying understandings of *ὑπωπιάζω*, quite a range of interpretations is possible (with a sampling of commentators holding each position immediately following):

1. Paul literally beats his physical body, akin to more severe ascetic practices such as flagellation (Wendland);
2. Paul endures the beating of his physical body by others, usually with reference to his oft-recounted ministry hardships (Findlay; Garland);
3. Paul disciplines his physical body, i.e., exercising firm control over bodily, though not necessarily sinful, desires; e.g., celibacy, fasting (Barrett; Calvin; Hays; Heinrici; Robertson and Plummer);
4. Paul mortifies his flesh, referring to his struggle against sinful desires (Bousset; Grosheide; Hodge);
5. Paul treats himself roughly, i.e., denies himself legitimate freedoms, such as receiving pay for his apostolic labor (Fee; Thiselton; Wolff).

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<sup>12</sup> Paul's "I fight not as beating air [*ἀέρα δέρων*]" in v. 26b could refer either to shadow-boxing in training (Conzelmann; Thiselton) or to missing the opponent in an actual fight (Fee; BDAG).

[33] The first interpretation may be fairly confidently dismissed since nothing in the literary context makes a reference to literal beating of Paul's physical body meaningful, nor is such harsh practice found elsewhere in Paul's writings.<sup>13</sup> The second interpretation is also probably not in mind. Both the language and context suggest a voluntary practice ("I beat" as a form of personal self-control) rather than the endurance of involuntary hardships.<sup>14</sup> Although references to the latter are common in Paul's letters (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:11; 2 Corinthians 6:4-10; 11:23-27; Galatians 6:17; cf. also Colossians 1:24), they do not appear to be in view in 8:1 – 11:1.

[34] The equation of *σῶμα* (body) and *σάρξ* (flesh = fourth interpretation) has been a major element in ascetic interpretations of this text. To "beat my body" refers, then, to the struggle against the "body of sin [*σῶμα τῆς ἁμαρτίας*]" (Romans 6:6) or the "body of flesh [*σῶμα τῆς σαρκός*]" (Colossians 2:11). "Der Hauptsitz, der Kern der Sünde ist ihm die Sinnlichkeit. Daher Kampf gegen die Sinnlichkeit eine Hauptaufgabe des Christenlebens" (Bousset: 117). However, the issue in 1 Corinthians 9 has not been Paul's (or the Corinthians') struggle with tendencies of the sinful flesh, but the need to exercise self-control over that to which one has a right.<sup>15</sup>

[35] Thus, the most likely interpretations are:

- (# 3 above) Paul treats his own *physical body* roughly, denying its permissible demands such as eating meat (1 Corinthians 8) and sexuality (1 Corinthians 7 and 9) (not, however, in the sense of severe treatment nor struggle against "sinful flesh"). In light of Paul's acknowledged praxis elsewhere, one could extend this beyond the immediate context to include ascetic practices such as fasting and watching.
- (#5 above) Paul treats *himself* roughly, denying himself permissible rights such as eating meat, receiving pay for ministry, and marriage (cf. 1 Corinthians 8-9).

Both interpretations are contextually as well as linguistically plausible and overlap in meaning to a large extent: denying food and sexuality to one's *self* or to one's *body* are not greatly different; the denial of pay for ministry fits denial of self but ill suits rough treatment of the body. Paul is here most likely referring to himself rather than to his own physical body (#5). He has just spoken of making *himself* a slave to all (v. 19: *πᾶσιν ἑμαυτὸν ἐδούλωσα* [I make *myself* a slave to all]), which *δουλαγωγῶ* in verse 27a echoes. This means Paul has substituted *μου τὸ σῶμα* (my body) for *ἑμαυτὸν* (myself). Some suggest that Paul's general concern with the "body" in the letter has prompted his reference to the physical body. However, the numerous references to *σῶμα* elsewhere in the letter have a variety of referents, each of which is contextually determined and not all of which are concerned with the physical

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<sup>13</sup> Such treatment is explicitly rejected in the disputed Paulines: Colossians 2:23, against "severe treatment [*ἀφειδία*] of the body"; and Ephesians 5:29, "no one ever hates his own body."

<sup>14</sup> Paul's "we endure [*στέγομεν*] anything" (9:12) refers specifically to his refusal of pay for ministry (see esp. 9:6-18).

<sup>15</sup> Reference to the sensual desires of the Israelites in the ensuing passage (10:1-11) is not relevant, since 9:24-27 primarily concludes 9:1-23, which does not speak of Paul's struggle with fleshly desires. Rejection of this interpretation also means that Paul is not thinking here of dying with Christ (e.g., the "old self" in Romans 6:6).

body.<sup>16</sup> The impetus for Paul's substitution in this instance is much simpler. The *agon* imagery in verses 24-27 with its references to running and boxing calls to mind the athlete's treatment of his physical body, his training, and self-control. Thus, it is quite natural for the athlete's body to remain in mind when Paul continues the boxing metaphor with the more specific image of landing a blow. Paul's reference to *μου τὸ σῶμα* (*my* body) rather than "the" or "his body" (i.e., the athlete's) is necessary due to the way he has employed the metaphor in his rhetoric. If he had used a "just as . . . so also" format, he could have said "just as the boxer treats his body roughly, so I treat myself roughly." However, since he is speaking about the reality of his apostolic example using the language of the metaphor ("I do not run aimlessly"), a confusing overlap of reality and metaphor is almost unavoidable. In the language of the metaphor, "I [Paul, the boxer] give my body a blow"; but in terms of his apostolic praxis, this equals "I treat myself roughly" (see Straub: 89-91).

### Conclusions

[36] We have found nothing that would open the door to understanding "I beat my body" in the direction of a harsh physical asceticism embodied in such practices as self-flagellation, severe exposure to the elements, and the like. This finding is echoed in the history of the text's interpretation where such an interpretation was almost non-existent. The question remains, however, whether Paul's exercise of self-control in this context, his refusal to use or enjoy certain permissible things (marriage, meat, pay for ministry), constitutes a form of asceticism as we have broadly defined it and allows one to view Paul as an ascetic.

[37] It may help to compare two interpreters of the text who come to opposite conclusions. Victor Pfitzner's *Paul and the Agon Motif* devotes seventeen pages to an analysis of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (82-98). He comes to conclusions similar to this paper's on many of the key issues examined above, but does differ by seeing no continuation of the boxing metaphor in verse 27 and by referring *ὑπωπιάζω* to the privations suffered in the apostle's ministry. As to Paul and asceticism he concludes:

In these words ("I beat my body") there is no trace of an ascetic mortification of the body, of self-castigation carried out for its own sake. *Ἐγκράτεια* (self-control) does not assume the importance of an independent virtue, as in the Stoic diatribe. Nor does it serve a purely self-centred goal, Paul's own salvation, but stands in the service of his apostolic commission . . . (93-94).

[38] Pfitzner highlights three points to deny that Paul was an ascetic in this passage:

1. Paul's activity ("beating my body") was not "carried out for its own sake"; i.e., truly ascetic behavior is not performed as a means to a higher end, but is the end in itself.
2. Self-control was "an independent virtue" in Stoicism, but is not so here.

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<sup>16</sup> 6:13-20 (8x), the physical body as the agent of sexual expression; 10:16-17, the "body of Christ" in the setting of the Lord's Supper; 12:12-27 (18x), metaphor of a social "body" and of the human body with differing members; 15:35-44 (9x), two kinds of bodies, a mortal (*ψυχικόν*) body and a resurrected (*πνευματικόν*) body.

3. Paul's self-control was not for self-improvement or his own salvation, it was no "purely self-centred goal." That is, truly ascetic behavior has self-improvement, self-mastery, progress in personal moral development as its aim. Instead, Paul's behavior has an aim outside of himself – fulfilling his apostolic calling.

Thus, Paul's self-control differs fundamentally from ascetic self-control in Stoicism. Roetzel, however, will question this sharp disconnect between Paul and Stoic thought on self-control in this text (see below).<sup>17</sup> As for asceticism, Pfitzner has defined it sufficiently narrowly so as to exclude Paul. In light of current debates over the definition of asceticism (see above), his definition is probably too narrow. According to recent study of ascetic behavior, hardly any of the Christian and Jewish ascetic tradition would fall under this overly narrow "asceticism." Pfitzner's "not ascetic" does not withstand scrutiny.

[39] Calvin Roetzel's treatment of this passage comes to a conclusion opposite that of Pfitzner – Paul was the model ascetic (see esp. 148). First, the apostle's use of the *ἐγκράτ*-wordgroup links his thought to "a dualistic Hellenistic anthropology"; both "viewed passions and desires as dangers to be curbed through the repression of the flesh" (147). Second, the athletic metaphor had "rich ascetic associations" and suggested "temporary asceticism" (148). Paul's linking of dualistic *ἐγκράτεια* with this sports metaphor "supports ascetic behavior" (148).

[40] Roetzel has adopted a fairly broad definition of asceticism: "a symbolic act of self-denial, . . . either temporary or lifelong, both positive and negative that provides a coherent worldview and a guide to behavior" (137). He also cites with approval the definition of Vööbus: "the practice of the denial of physical or psychological desires in order to attain a spiritual ideal or goal" (215 n. 27). This paper proceeded from a similar definitional breadth, which will usually move in the direction of a "yes" to the question, Was Paul an ascetic? Roetzel's "yes," however, demonstrates a crucial ongoing area of debate. He correctly rejects Pfitzner's disconnect between Paul and Stoic self-control. However, he identifies Paul's flesh/spirit dualism as another expression of "dualistic Hellenistic anthropology." The nature of this connection between Pauline dualism and Hellenistic dualism continues to be a crucial and debated area regarding whether Paul was an ascetic. Those, like Roetzel, who see Paul (and Hellenistic Jewish sources) as more fundamentally pessimistic regarding human passions and flesh (i.e., in the direction of a fundamental ontological dualism), will be able to give a stronger, unqualified "yes."<sup>18</sup> Those who seek to highlight differences between Hellenistic dualism and Paul's more pragmatic or moral dualism, will give only a carefully qualified "yes" (Brown: 44-57; Ziesler).

[41] This paper suggests that Paul's "I beat my body" is not based upon a dualism of the Hellenistic sort, nor even the flesh/spirit dualism found elsewhere in Paul. Instead, he calls for the willing self-denial of legitimate (i.e., fundamentally good) enjoyments such as meat

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<sup>17</sup> Pfitzner's characterization of *ἐγκράτεια* in Stoicism relies on Grundmann, who inappropriately imports the idea of self-seeking meritorious behavior into Stoic thought as a contrast to grace in Paul.

<sup>18</sup> Roetzel apparently equates *σῶμα* in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 with *σὰρξ* ("*ἐγκράτεια* [sic] refers to the control of the flesh or fleshly desires"), and notes Paul's "seen/unseen" contrast (2 Corinthians 4:18) as a form of ontological dualism (148).

offered to idols in the interests of mutual love. This is certainly asceticism, broadly defined. Thus, from both *wirkungsgeschichtlich* and exegetical perspectives, 1 Corinthians 9:27a deserves a place in continued reflection upon an ascetic Paul.

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## Appendix I

### Texts making reference to 1 Corinthians 9:27a<sup>19</sup>

Author	Text	Group #
Ambrose	<i>Letters to Priests</i> 49, “Ambrose to Horontianus”	2
Ambrosiaster (aka Hilary)	<i>Comm. on Paul’s Epistles</i>	2
Athanasius (Pseud.)	<i>de Trinitate dialogi</i> . I.12	2?
Augustine	<i>C. Jul.</i> 24	2
Basil	<i>regulae fusius tractatae</i> 16.1	2
Basil	<i>regulae fusius tractatae</i> 18	2
Basil	<i>Hom. in Psalmos</i> (Hom 14 on Ps 29)	2
Chrysostom	<i>Hom. 1 Cor.</i> XXIII.2	2
Chrysostom	<i>Hom. 1 Cor.</i> XLII.5	2
Chrysostom	<i>Hom. Gen.</i> XXII.22	2
Chrysostom	<i>Hom. Heb.</i> 33.9	2
Chrysostom	<i>Laud. Paul.</i> Homily 6.7	2
Chrysostom	<i>Laud. Paul.</i> 6.8	4
Clement Alex.	<i>Stromateis</i> Bk. 3, ch. 101	2
Evagrius	<i>Exhortations</i> 2.12	2
Gregory of Nyssa	<i>de beatitudinibus</i> 2	2
Irenaeus	<i>Haer.</i> IV.37.7	2
Macarius	<i>Lausiac History</i> 18.24	3
Maximus Conf.	<i>The Ascetic Life</i> 14	2
Joannes Monachus	<i>hymnus in Georgium</i> 8	3

<sup>19</sup> Additional texts containing possible but highly unlikely echoes of 1 Corinthians 9.27a include: Basil, *comm. in Is. I-16* 31; *regulae fusius tractatae* 37.1; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 64.71; 76.54; Gregory Naz., *Or. Bas.* 14.3; 27.7; 32.19; Gregory of Nyssa, *de vita Mosis*; Origen, *Hom. Jer.* 20.7.5; *Hom. Lev.* 2.4.6; 3.4.3; and Procopius of Gaza, *Comm. in Cantica Cantic.* 3.6.

Origen	<i>Cels.</i> V.49	2
Origen	<i>Cels.</i> VIII.22	2
Origen	<i>Comm. Rom.</i> Preface, §3	4
Origen	<i>Comm. Rom.</i> Preface, §6	4
Origen	<i>Comm. Rom.</i> I.3.3	2
Origen	<i>Comm. Rom.</i> IV.9.9	2
Origen	<i>Comm. Rom.</i> VI.10.2	4
Origen	<i>Comm. Rom.</i> VII.8.6	3
Origen	<i>Comm. Rom.</i> VII.12.11	2
Origen	<i>Hom. Exod.</i> 13.5	2
Origen	<i>Hom. Lev.</i> 1.5.1	2
Theodoret	<i>interpretation epist. I ad Cor. 9:27</i> 3.225	2
Theodoret	<i>Phil. hist.</i> , Prologue 3.1103	1