

Giving Up Rights for the Gospel?

1 Corinthians 9¹⁶

How quickly it is for us to move from this is my “freedom” to this is my “right.” As we learn of our liberty in Christ and enter into the joy of not being under law, we must guard against the development of a subtle temptation. The temptation is that what I am free to do now becomes my right to do, regardless. When freedom becomes rights, then conflict and division are almost sure to follow.

In an almost strange turn, some at the church in Corinth were challenging Paul’s apostolic authority because he had given up a right for the sake of the gospel. So, having laid down some key principles on Christian Liberty, Paul now shows how he understands these principles to operate in relation to his own ministry. Particularly, Paul is concerned with the financial support of those in vocational Christian service.

The Right to Receive Support

(v.1-14)

Paul develops a series of arguments to show why those serving the Lord should be supported by those who are being served. It particularly relates to the apostles, but has broader applications in the larger scope of ministry.

¹ Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? ² If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

³ This is my defense to those who would examine me. ⁴ Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵ Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?

The Prerogatives of Apostolic Office

(v.1-6)

Paul uses this opportunity to not only show the necessity for supporting those laboring in the ministry, but to defend his own apostleship.

Defense of His Apostolic Office

(v.1-2)

Carefully note the second phrase. Paul asserts that he has seen “Jesus our Lord.” The wording here is unusual. In fact, Paul uses the name *Jesus* very rarely and usually to refer to Him in His Incarnation. So Paul says, “That I am an apostle is proven by the fact that I have seen the Lord in His physical, but resurrected body.” The church at Corinth seems to be challenging the Apostleship of Paul on these grounds. We can challenge the so-called modern apostleship on the same grounds. Note that his apostleship operates “in the Lord”. If he was not an apostle to any one else, he should be to the Corinthians for he founded the church there.

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Development of His Apostolic Privileges**(v.3-6)**

He lists his shared privileges:

To the most basic subsistence. We have a right to eat don't we?

To the common practice of the apostles. Peter, the brothers of Jesus and the rest of the apostles all have wives (and it is implied that they traveled with them in ministry). It is worth noting that the "wife" is referred to as "believing sister". Peter's own marital state is attested to in the Gospels.

To the unity of Paul and Barnabas with the rest. Paul and Barnabas are not exceptions to the general rule, are they?

He has the right to be supported because he has a vocational ministry as an apostle.

The Practice of Human Experience**(v.7-8a)**

Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

Just by observing what people do in their ordinary lives we see that those who labor in a field are expected to be supported by their labor. No soldier pays his own way. Every farmer and shepherd expects to be provided for from his vocation.

In the first part of verse 8, Paul recognizes the non-authoritative nature of his arguments so far. Very few held apostolic office and human experience is not a sure or reliable guide on spiritual matters.

He has the right to be supported because it is the nature of the way things are to be supported by one's vocation.

The Principles of Scriptural Teaching**(v.8b-12)**

⁸ Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹ For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹² If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?

Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

A question we might ask is simply, "Why go back to this text?" The answer lies on Paul's wanting to drive home that the care and concern God demanded when it came to the simple beasts of labor, certainly should not be withheld from people, much less God's servants.

He has the right to be supported because it reflects the care of God and God's people. There is a mutual sharing – Paul to them in spiritual things and they to him in material things. And since others, with lesser responsibility to them are supported should he not all the much more?

Here is the central point and why he is bringing this up in the larger context of Christian liberty and rights. He may have this right, but they have never exercised it. They have

freely given it up in order to not put anything in the way. He is keeping any obstacle in the way, not of believers, but of the gospel itself. So he is modeling for the church what true Christian liberty does. It does not use the right, the freedom, the liberty when it will harm another believer (Ch 8) nor when it will be an obstacle to the gospel. Unlike the haughty at Corinth, he is not giving up a freedom to do something optional. He is giving up essential rights and privileges at the heart of daily living and serving. The principles on which he does so are the same ones on which they are to stop asserting their rights in liberty.

The Provision of Priestly Needs

(v.13)

¹³ Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

Paul shows that the pattern of vocational ministry being supported by those ministered to goes all the way back to the Old Testament Temple. The priests were supported by the tithes and the (literally) offerings of the people. They brought in their wealth and their sacrifices. Many of the sacrifices allowed the priests portions of what was being offered.

He has the right to be supported because it was the principle in the Old covenant as well.

The Precepts of Jesus' Direction

(v.14)

Paul argues from Matthew 10:10 where Jesus sends the 12 out into the neighboring areas to proclaim the kingdom. In doing so, they were not to raise all kinds of money or to take along personal wealth, but rather to be supported by those to whom they were preaching. He has the right to be supported because Jesus taught it and commanded it in His own ministry.

But now that he has firmly grounded his defense of the right to be supported, he goes on to show why he gave up that right.

The Responsibility in Refusing Support

(v.15-27)

Here is the right (and it was a liberty) that Paul had. But he had chosen not enforce that right in regards to the church at Corinth.

For the Sake of the Ministry

(v.15-23)

The gospel is the heart beat of Paul.

¹⁵ But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. ¹⁶ For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷ For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

The Responsibility in Proclamation

(v.15-18)

A very direct translation of the Greek which captures this would read like this, "To me it is better to die than... the boast of mine no one shall empty (shall void)." There is a

strong emotion here. Paul would rather die than, what? Receive support from the church at Corinth so that they could void his boast in not being self-supporting.

These verses are somewhat obscure in their wording and difficult in the way they are constructed. What they try to get across?

Support is not to be treated as a way to reward the messenger. The church is not to treat support as a reward for voluntary service. It is an obligation, but not one that Paul is expecting. He is not serving as a volunteer, but as a steward.

Support is not to be used as a way to manipulate the message. Paul is a steward of Christ and his accountability for the Gospel is to God. His stewardship and obligation is to preach the gospel. His reward for not accepting support is the freedom of proclamation and the liberty from obligation it gives him.

Think about this last sentence. The (NIV) misses the full force of what Paul is saying by not translating the word gospel every time it occurs. *“What then is my reward? That when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.”* In other words, while the church at Corinth is concerned about wanting to exert their rights, Paul is concerned about the preaching of the gospel.

Now this concern carries over in the next paragraph as Paul identifies his evangelistic strategy.

The Responsibility to People

(v.19-23)

¹⁹ For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ 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 not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

Paul gives an underlying principle on which his conduct is based. His great objective is to win the lost. To that aim, he does the following:

To the Jews, he lives as a Jew under the Jewish law in order that he might win those who were under the Law even though he is free from Jewish Law.

To the Gentile, he lives as a gentile without the Jewish Law, but under the Law of Christ, that he might win those who do not have the Law.

To the weak, he lives as though his conscience were sensitive to the same issues in order to win them.

The principle is that Paul will, within the Law of Christ, culturally identify with and accommodate to his audience so as to gain the hearing of all the lost and see God save some. Paul understood that this would open himself to the criticism that he was inconsistent. But he was following the example of Christ who, in carrying out this principle in His own ministry, was accused by the Pharisees of being a drunkard and glutton.

The point Paul makes to the church at Corinth is this, “You need to give up your rights in order to edify the weaker saints; I choose to give up my rights in order to

evangelize the sinners.” It is hard for us to think in these categories because, while we are concerned for edification, we have too little a concern for evangelism.

Paul did everything for the sake of the gospel so that he might be a co-participant in its reward and blessing.

For the Sake of the Minister

(v.24-27)

He has refused support for the sake of the *ministry* of the gospel. Now he turns to the *minister* of the gospel.

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵ Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ²⁷ But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

This discussion is carried along with an extended illustration. Paul loved athletics. He used it often in his illustrative material. (And he can be forgiven to not using soccer.) In doing so, the personal lesson is driven home with real force.

Principles for the Minister

(v.24-25)

There are two principles which Paul illustrates by an analogy to sports.

The future objective is a prize.

There is a goal toward which they were striving. The runners were all running in order to receive the prize. The prize they received was a garland or a wreath of vines and flowers which would fade and decay. But we are striving for a prize which is an incorruptible crown. The point here is that we must be involved in serving Christ *striving toward the prize of a crown in eternity*.

The present need is self-discipline.

The mark of truly great athletes is daily self-disciplines in pursuit of defined objectives. The goal of an incorruptible crown in eternity means that we discipline ourselves for ministry today. Discipline for competition, just as for ministry, means denying good things in pursuit of the better and best. It also means training, team work, enduring hardship and pain.

In my coaching of soccer, I used to tell the athletes, “Practice and training and running and drills are not meant to be fun. They are hard, grinding, laborious and sometimes boring. But they are the daily disciplines that lead to a season of victories. You will rarely rise on the playing field above the level of your work on the practice field.” It is little different in ministry. You want to serve God? You want that crown? Then today there has to be the self-discipline of training, practice, correction, and sometimes grinding, boring details. It will require giving up much in order to achieve more.

So how did Paul turn these principles into his own practice of ministry?

Practices of the Minister

I serve in such a way as to be effective in that which I am serving. See how he says this? I do what I do in such a way as not to be out of my lane or flailing around. I strive to be effective.

I discipline myself in such a way as to not be disqualified. How many people do we know today who were serving God in the past but have washed out by being disqualified by sin?

In an Olympics not so long ago most of these principles were clearly illustrated. The USA lost a gold medal in the 4x100 relay because an inexperienced runner was adjusting the baton in his leg. I watched two boxing matches where the wild swinging of some of the boxers cost them matches as their opponent scored on counter punches. And we saw tremendous athletes overcoming amazing obstacles through discipline and determination to achieve their prize. And many of us remember when the great British sprinter Linford Christie disgraced himself by an inappropriate response to being disqualified in the 100 meter sprint.

We must not lose sight of our overall context. Paul is addressing his rights as an office bearer in the church and his giving up those rights for the sake of the gospel. The very willingness to give up much is driven the greatness of what he was striving for. The lesson here is not to find something great to strive for. This is not a message on Christian self-motivation. The lesson here is for self-denial and self-discipline for the sake of gospel and the glory of God.

Reflect and Respond

The mark of the true Christian servant is one who will argue strongly for Christian liberty and then be willing to give it up for the sake of the gospel.

The effective proclamation of the gospel is an overarching principle in liberty. We must be free to be culturally relevant so as to reach the lost with the gospel while obeying the law of Christ.

We must identify effective strategies for evangelism. And we must do so in our own cultural milieu. Will you not begin to think with me about ways we can reach the lost in our community?

Self-discipline and self-denial, while not the most popular topics in Christian circles today, *are essential ingredients for effective ministry.*

May God cause us to extend ourselves, give up our liberty and train with real endurance to become effective proclaimers of the gospel.