

XIV. The Gospel Livelihood

April 2/4, 2013

1 Corinthians 9:1-14

Aim: To support generously those who minister to us and devote their lives to the gospel ministry, as is their right.

The Corinthians were embroiled in a great debate on whether they should eat meat sacrificed to idols. Paul responded to their plea for guidance by laying down a fundamental principle: the Christian must be willing to forego doing anything in a gray area that causes a fellow Christian to stumble. In other words, the Christian must always give love priority over both his knowledge and his liberty in these matters on which God has not pronounced.

It seems, when we come to chapter 9, that Paul has finished dealing with the matter of eating meat and has gone on to a completely different matter, only to return to that subject again in chapter 10. But chapter 9 is not an interruption in Paul's argument at all. Actually Paul is here illustrating from his own life the very principle he laid down in chapter 9. He seeks to prove beyond any shadow of doubt that he was practicing the very same principle he urged upon them.

This entire chapter is devoted to Paul's 'freedom' which he enjoyed as a consequence of 'authority' (or 'rights') he had received from the Lord. This picks up his reference from the previous chapter to the Corinthians' 'authority,' which, however, they were using to the destruction of weaker members of the congregation. For this reason the present chapter is all about Paul relinquishing his 'rights,' forsaking his freedom.

Chapter 9 begins and continues, verse after verse, with a veritable avalanche of rhetorical questions, in which the apostle is exploring the nature of his Christian freedom within the context of his ministry. There are no less than sixteen question marks in the first 12 verses of the ESV translation of this section. They do not express an uncertainty in Paul's teaching, so much as a building up, stone upon stone, of a towering argument in which he deals with the criticism of his ministry-style by some of the Corinthians.

Why the use of such rhetoric? It may be at this relatively early stage in his relationship with the church some were querying his apostleship. Although Jewish intruders bent on usurping his leadership had apparently not yet surfaced, an element within the church was resentful of his authority. This is why his presentation of himself as an example is intertwined with an apologia for his conduct as an apostle. If he, the Lord's steward, has been ready to forego the consumption of meat and a good many more rights so as not to give offense, the Corinthians must renounce eating sacrificed flesh, recognizing that their spiritual father (4:15) is what he has always claimed to be: an accredited apostle of Christ.

It is obviously valid to see this section as a discussion about the apostle and his rights; a discussion that has profound implications for the financial support of gospel work, on a much broader front. But we must not lose sight of the Corinthian argument, or switch off from the book's melodic line. Paul is certainly discussing the nature of Christian freedom, but not in the abstract. Having warned his readers 'to take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak' (8:9), he now illustrates how this principle of loving, self-sacrificing service has governed all the decisions that he himself has made as to the circumstances of his own ministry – financial and otherwise.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 14

A. Paul Declares His Rights (1 Cor. 9:1-6)

1. Four Questions on Being an Apostle (9:1-2)

The immediate trigger for this passage is 8:13 where Paul affirms his willingness to forego the freedom to eat meat at all, if the exercise of such freedom causes a brother to fall. This readiness to give up his personal rights for the gospel benefits of others has, we now learn, directed and animated his whole apostolic ministry.

The first thing Paul does is ask four rhetorical questions in rapid-fire succession.

a) Question One (9:1a)

¹Am I not free?

Paul, continuing his ministry to the Corinthians about their stubborn insistence to continue eating in the temple of the gods, asks, ‘Am I not free?’ The Greek *ou*, ‘not,’ demands something like ‘of course’ as a response. Paul knew some would protest against the principle he had laid down. The Christian is supposed to be free in Christ, but how can he be considered free if he has to give up his freedom for the sake of another Christian? Essentially, Paul is saying, ‘I have no less freedom than you do, and I cherish my freedom no less than you do. But I cherish some things even more. I have practiced this principle and retained my freedom.’ Throughout this chapter he will explain that his freedom was not an absolute, but that concern for the salvation of others was a higher concern that qualified his ‘rights.’

b) Question Two (9:1b)

Am I not an apostle?

As he begins his argument, he focuses on his status as a true apostle of Christ. The apostles possess a unique authority in the church. As an apostle, he would, if anything, have greater freedom than the average Christian. If anyone could legitimately claim to be exempt from the duty of foregoing personal rights and privileges, it was an apostle. The next two verses make it clear that there were those outside the congregation of Corinth who challenged Paul’s apostleship and who stood in judgment over him. Paul’s next two questions refer to the two great marks of apostolic authority seen in himself.

c) Question Three (9:1c)

Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?

At this point he gives two verifications of his apostleship. First he had seen the Lord. One of the qualifications for apostleship was being an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ. By reminding them he had seen the risen Christ, Paul was at the same time validating his own claim to apostleship and invalidating the false claims of others.

This question draws attention to the fact that the apostles (literally ‘sent ones’) received their personal commission directly from the risen Lord Himself. Paul’s own life-changing conversion and commission on the Damascus road was a parallel experience to the apostles’ encounter with the risen (Acts 9:1-6). The present tense of the verb indicates not only the *moment* Paul ‘saw’ but also that Paul *continued* to ‘see’ Jesus his Lord. The glory Paul saw with his eyes on the Damascus road he still sees inwardly, in his heart.

Some of the strong Christians in the church were always quick to claim special revelations from the lord. They might even have been claiming that God had privately revealed to them His will

1 Corinthians – Lesson 14

on some of these gray areas. By asking this question, Paul was saying he had received the greatest revelation God had to give.

d) Question Four (9:1d)

Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?

The other distinguishing mark of apostolic authenticity is highlighted in the fourth rhetorical question. The second proof of his apostleship was the Corinthian believers themselves. The apostolic commission was to preach the gospel to all the nations, and the very existence of the church in Corinth was proof positive of a divine enabling in Paul's ministry and a divine vindication accompanying it. The church at Corinth was one of the fruits of Paul's apostolic labors. So, the Corinthians of all people cannot possibly deny Paul's apostolic authority. They would not exist without it.

e) An Answer (9:2)

²If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

The reason for Paul's assertion of his apostolicity in the previous verse now emerges (v. 2a). Whatever problems existed between Paul and the Corinthians *they* were not yet rejecting his apostolic authority. This was to change within a year, however, as his defense in the Second Letter reveals (cp. 2 Cor. 11:1-12:13).

Who might these 'others' have been who rejected Paul's apostleship? We are not told about those 'others' who did not recognize Paul as an apostle. Perhaps they were the Judaizers from Jerusalem who had followed Paul to Galatia and Syria and who have now spread these negative words about Paul in Achaia. From Paul's self-defense in the first two chapters of Galatians we get a reasonable idea of the misinformation being spread about him. These persons probably used the networks of the synagogues to sow the seeds of doubt in the minds of Jewish members of the churches, including at Corinth. It does not appear that these opponents of Paul have yet arrived in Corinth. He speaks about them as if they had not yet penetrated that church. That day would not be long in coming. A year later, when he writes Second Corinthians, the Judaizers have arrived and are wreaking havoc in Corinth.

In ancient times seals were used on containers of merchandise, on letters, and on other things to indicate the authenticity of what was inside and to prevent the contents from being substituted or altered. The seal was the official representation of the authority of the one who sent the merchandise or letter. A sender made his special imprint on hot wax on a document as a mark of his ownership and therefore of its genuine origin. What was under the seal was guaranteed to be genuine; it was a symbol of authenticity. The Corinthian church was a living seal of Paul's apostleship, the proof of his genuineness. The church in Corinth was the Lord's seal on Paul, which said, 'This man is *My* apostle.'

Essentially, Paul says the Corinthians had more reason to accept his apostleship than anyone else because they had experienced the power of it in their conversion. Do you see the point Paul is making? If he, as an apostle, was willing for the sake of other Christians to forego his rights, how much more the Corinthians should be! But the length to which Paul was willing to practice the principle of foregoing personal rights becomes even clearer when we look at what he had given up. It wasn't something in the gray area at all! It was rather something of an undebatable nature! What was it? It was his right to receive payment from those to whom he had ministered.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 14

2. Three Questions on an Apostle's Rights (9:3-6)

In verses 1-2, Paul has addressed questions and statements to the Corinthians. In verses 3-6, however, he turns to speak to people elsewhere who dispute his apostleship. The language is of an imaginary courtroom and Paul is in the dock facing accusation and making his defense, which he does, in part, by a series of questions back to his accusers.

a) Paul Initiates His Defense (9:3)

³*This is my defense to those who would examine me.*

Having established his apostleship by the two distinctive authentications of seeing the risen Lord and bearing apostolic fruit, Paul now proceeds to cross-examine his critics, who, he sees, are only too keen to examine him. Like a man in court, he says to his accusers, 'This is my defense (*apologia*) to you.' 'Examine' (*anakrinō*) was a legal term for the investigation or inquiry made before a decision was reached in a case. He desires to clearly defend his rights. He then proceeds to fire three questions back at them, each of which contains the word 'authority' or 'right' (*exousia*). This important word was exactly appropriate for the 'delegated authority' possess by an apostle, one sent by Christ.

It seems some in Corinth had suggested that Paul was not an apostle because when he was with them he worked in order to support himself, refusing to accept a salary from the infant church, no doubt – they may have said – because he was shamefaced, knowing himself to be unqualified.

b) Paul Enumerates His Rights (9:4-6)

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?*

Paul begins to establish his rights as an apostle of Christ; rights that the Corinthians seemed quite ready to allow to all the other traveling messengers of the Lord Jesus. Paul specifically says he had the right to expect them to pay enough for him to have his needs met (v. 4), to have a Christian wife to travel with him (v. 5), and not to have to work with his own hands (v. 6).

In the first question, Paul says in short, don't I have the 'right' or 'authority' (*exousia*) to be supported financially in my ministry as an apostle by those to whom I minister? Yet he intimates delicately that he has elected not to charge them and will not do so on any return visit.

In the second question, the right to have a believing wife does not mean that Paul was married; it only means that such a right was generally recognized. Paul was probably a widower; in any case he had a right to marry a believer. This verse supports the principle of paying pastors, evangelists, missionaries, and other such Christian workers enough so that their wives do not have to work; so they can have more time to be with their husbands in the ministry.

As honored leaders the 'apostles' and the 'brothers of the Lord' were to be given hospitality and provisions wherever they went among the churches. Paul's appeal to the Corinthians' experience suggests that they were familiar with other apostles, brothers of the Lord, and with Peter and his wife. Jesus' brothers (cp. Mark 6:3) James and Jude are well known from the New Testament as leaders in the early church. Most likely these leaders had visited Corinth in the three years between Paul's departure from the city and the writing of this letter. 'To take along' (*periagein*) means 'to carry about in one's company,' suggesting that the apostles and, it seems, the brothers

1 Corinthians – Lesson 14

of Jesus were accompanied by their wives on their journeys. A wife's support and companionship is especially helpful when the husband is ministering away from home.

In the third question, Paul again appears to be appealing to something they knew, namely that Barnabas, too, chose not to exercise his right not to work for his sustenance. Evidently Barnabas was known to the people of Corinth. Otherwise, why would Paul refer to him? Clearly there were no adequate grounds for discrimination against Paul and Barnabas; Paul establishes that there is no reason why he should be denied these rights of support. That Paul engaged in manual labor at Corinth is certain (cp. Acts 18:3), though that is not the issue here. If the church has been ready to maintain others (see v. 12), why should they not keep these two men in an adequate fashion? He is an apostle and should be treated as such.

B. Paul Defends His Rights (1 Cor. 9:7-12a, 13-14)

Before telling them why he had given up his right to their financial support, Paul goes to great lengths to prove that remuneration for the preacher is indeed beyond debate.

1. Rights Based on Human Authority (9:7)

⁷Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?

He first argues that this is *a universally recognized principle* in every realm of human endeavor. By a series of homely examples in the form of rhetorical questions Paul now shows the rightness of a congregation providing for the apostle. It is the common experience of all human societies that work is rewarded by payment, whether in cash or in kind. A soldier fighting for his country does not pay his own way. The farmer who plants a vineyard expects to eat of its fruit. A shepherd is entitled to use the milk from the flock. All these are commonly accepted, with no one even raising so much as an objection. All three types of workers are paid for their work. It is the customary, rightful, and expected thing. So it should be with paying the preacher.

In 9:4-6 Paul has asserted rights which pertain to him: to be financed by the churches, to marry and for his wife to travel with him, and not to be compelled to seek paid employment. Now appear more rhetorical questions, each a metaphor and each demanding an affirmative answer. These questions all illustrate a single principle – namely, that a worker may justly anticipate being sustained by his own labors. Paul understood that Christ never intended his apostles to be vagabonds. The serving soldier is provided with rations; the vinegrower eats from his crop; the herdsman drinks the milk of his sheep and goats. By implication, Paul, considered as a soldier, a planter, and a shepherd, ought to be granted remuneration by the church. In short, there is the same connection between the work of an apostle and his nourishment from the congregation as there is between the work of the legionary, viticulturist, and shepherd and their sustenance.

2. Rights Based on Biblical Authority (9:8-10)

a) What the Law Says (9:8-9a)

⁸Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain."

An even stronger argument follows. The principle of workers being paid for their work is not merely according to human judgment, as in the previous illustrations. God's Law teaches the

1 Corinthians – Lesson 14

same thing. Paul shows that remuneration for the preacher is *clearly taught in Scripture*. This matter is not mere human arrangement and therefore, arguably, dispensable; it is, in fact, an unchanging principle of God's decree in the Torah. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4. Paul does not attempt to explain this verse in its original context but derives from it a lesson relevant to the Corinthian situation.

b) *What the Law Means (9:9b-10)*

Is it for oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰Does 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.

Since this is part of the law of God, it is reflective of His unchanging character and concerns. Paul does not mean to imply that God has no interest in the welfare of animals, for He does (cp. Job 38:41; Ps. 147:9; Mt. 6:26). God *is* concerned about oxen, but not merely about oxen. God's ultimate concern is not for animals but for people. If He wants to be certain that oxen are 'paid' for their work, how much more is He concerned that men be compensated for theirs.

It follows 'certainly' (or 'definitely,' *pantōs*) that God requires His apostolic servants to be sustained by their labors. The metaphor of the ox crushing the grain leads into two further pictures – that of the plowman and that of the thresher, men who 'hope' to enjoy the produce of their field. Plowmen plow and threshers thresh expecting and anticipating a harvest of grain. The principle, when applied to a farm and his harvest, is that the farmer's labor must be rewarded by a share in the end-product. Christian ministers till the soil and sow the seed expecting to reap a harvest of souls for the Kingdom, while deriving their physical sustenance from those labors.

God didn't give this command out of some unusual concern for oxen, but to teach His people that in taking care of his oxen a man was taking care of himself. If the laborer expected to receive the fruit of the oxen's labor, he must take care of them. The same is true with God's people. By giving the minister the support he needs, they are helping themselves.

3. Rights Based on Spiritual Benefit (9:11)

¹¹If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?

Paul now takes another step, from the material harvest of verse 10 to the spiritual harvest, indicating that he has every right to share in that spiritual harvest; and to share, not simply in spiritual things, but in the material as well.

The references to the plowman and the thresher suggest that every workman for the Lord, whether or not he is an apostle, is to be paid (cp. Jn. 4:36); at Corinth, although the apostle planted, Apollos watered (3:6). Paul and others are plowing human soil and planting the gospel seed in hope of spiritual blessing, also expecting a material return.

Paul had every right to apply the principle to himself. If men working for men should be paid for their labor, surely men working for God should be paid for theirs. The Lord's servants deserve to be supported well. There should not be a double standard, applying to preachers, missionaries, and other Christian ministers a standard that is considerably lower than that set for those laboring in the systems of man. We should pay them as generously as is feasible and leave the stewardship of that money to them, just as we expect the stewardship of our own money to be left to us.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 14

Paul also appeals to *their sense of values*. A very serious question is at stake here: which is greater—the spiritual or the material? How we answer that tells us a lot about ourselves.

4. Rights Based on Past Practice (9:12a)

¹²*If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?*

Paul shared a unique relationship with the Corinthians. He was their spiritual father. If others were entitled to share their material things, he was even more so. Although these anonymous men did not establish the church, they have accepted proffered support as of ‘right.’ Harboring no grudge, Paul asks politely if this should not be the case for him and his colleagues.

The Corinthians apparently had always supported their pastors. Those they now supported, or had supported, doubtlessly included Apollos and Peter (cp. 1:12; 3:22). As the church’s founding pastor and as an apostle, Paul had ‘more’ claim on their support than the others.

Once again he has clearly established his right to full financial support. In fact, because he was the one who had brought the gospel to the Corinthians, he ought to be their main priority and responsibility with respect to material help.

5. Rights Based on Old Testament History (9:13)

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?*

Why should those who minister be supported financially? Earlier he pointed to the soldier, the vine grower, and the shepherd as examples of those who derive their living from their work (v. 7). Now he finds in the priests in the temple in Jerusalem a similar principle. This is not just another example, but one sanctioned in the sacred Scriptures. Paul’s simple observation is that the priests and those who work in the temple, and in particular those who serve at the altar, have a share of what is sacrificed (Lev. 6:26). This had been the universal pattern since the founding of the priesthood in Israel (cp. Num 18:8-24).

Those who served in the temple in Jerusalem received their living from the temple. The priests were supported by the worshipers. No one disputed this, nor should anyone dispute the principle of a Christian congregation paying their minister.

6. Rights Based on the Command of the Lord (9:14)

¹⁴*In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.*

Analogies from the world have been employed (soldiers, workers in a vineyard, shepherds), followed up with a reference to Moses’ requirements for an ox, and this has been complemented by the example of priests and Levites obtaining their food from the Jerusalem temple. Now Paul shows that the principle of reward for labor was applied by Jesus to the seventy-two (Luke 10:7).

Paul buttresses this Old Testament provision for priests with the greater requirement of the Lord Jesus Christ for new covenant ministers. He says the Lord has distinctly commanded that the pattern that had prevailed in the temple should prevail in the church (Luke 10:7; cp. Mt. 10:10). Here ‘ordered’ (*dietaxen*) carries the double meaning ‘commanded’ and ‘arranged.’ By Jesus’ ‘command,’ He provided for an ‘ordering’ whereby those who announce the gospel should live from the gospel.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 14

The Lord commands His people to offer support to those who minister to them, but He does not command those who minister to accept the support. Paul did not. He had the right, as much as any and more than most. But for the gospel's sake, for the brethren's sake, and for love's sake, he gladly limited his liberty. He willingly waived his right.

C. Paul Denies His Rights (1 Cor. 9:12b)

...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.

With all these reasons, we are, therefore, set up and ready for the conclusion to be drawn. They should stop criticizing their apostle and support him gladly and generously as far as his material well-being is concerned. But then, suddenly, by Paul's next words, his readers are totally wrong-footed! The hammer blow falls in the middle of verse 12, with the most unexpected of statements. 'Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right.' In other words, Paul has neither asked for, nor been willing to accept, any financial support from the Corinthian congregation.

Paul interrupts this lengthy argument for his defense with a very emphatic 'but...' followed immediately by a further 'but....' Greek has no stronger way of expressing an opposite view than the word Paul uses (*alla*).

We should leave aside any romantic notion about 'tentmaking' ministry (cp. Acts 18:3) in Paul's case. Tents were made of leather which was heavy to handle, foul smelling and very unclean to the handlers. Most likely Paul's hand and arms were permanently stained. Paul's trade included the repair of all manner of leather goods like saddles and boots. Furthermore he plied his trade at night. Because of tentmaking Paul 'endured all things.' The basic meaning of 'endure' (*stegō*) is 'to bear or to pass over in silence.' Paul used the present tense, indicating that throughout his ministry he continued to bear uncomplainingly whatever was necessary to fulfill his work. His customary way of life was self-denial. For him tentmaking was a source of physical suffering since it was so arduous and exhausting. But in a society that despised work – especially manual work – as fit only for slaves, it was a source of his social rejection, including from the Christians in Corinth.

Paul insisted on not being paid and therefore had to work with his own hands at his trade of tent-making, which he had learned as a young rabbi as part of his training. This meant that he was not wealthy and had none of the trappings of the successful orator. In the world's eyes, therefore, he would not be worth listening to and his message would be as despised as his methodology. Undoubtedly, this caused real offense to some of the Christians in Corinth, who wanted a much more culturally acceptable approach and a far less radical message than the gospel of the cross. This therefore is why Paul is being criticized.

Paul explains his refusal of his rights in order that 'we might not give any hindrance to the gospel of Christ.' 'Hindrance' has the sense of cutting or severing (*egkopē*): Paul is afraid that if he demands payment, he will cut back the advance of the gospel. Paul did not want new converts or potential converts to have reason to think he was preaching the gospel for selfish motives. He wanted no one thinking he was in the ministry for the sake of money or an easy living.

This explanation is, if anything, more astonishing than the practice itself. Could it have been in the interests of the gospel for Paul to disregard a proper condition of service? But, having done

1 Corinthians – Lesson 14

it, he may have conveyed the impression that he not a genuine apostle. He will clarify his policy statement in verses 15-18.

In asking the Corinthians to be willing to give up personal rights, Paul was only asking them to do what he himself had done. As an apostle, he could have claimed their financial support, but he had refused to do so. And, again, their financial support was a matter on which God had clearly pronounced. It wasn't even in the gray area. So Paul had the right to expect the Corinthians to be willing to give up the eating of meat sacrificed to idols for the sake of those who conscientiously opposed it. There is something far more important than Paul's perfectly legitimate rights, or the Corinthians' foolish and illegitimate compromise, and that is the gospel itself.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 9:15-27.