

## ***CHRISTIAN LIBERTY LIMITED BY A CONCERN FOR THE GOSPEL (1)***

### **1 Corinthians 9:1-18**

**January 15, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church**

“It is the nature of man to pursue his own interest, in preference to the public good.” Those are the words of James Wilson, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, at the state convention of Pennsylvania assembled to ratify the federal constitution. After admitting that it was not a perfect document and that he would not blindly follow it, he concluded, “But, when I reflect how widely men differ in their opinions, and that every man has an equal pretension to assert his own, I am satisfied that any thing nearer to perfection could not have been accomplished... Regarding it, then, in every point of view, with a candid and disinterested mind, I am bold to assert, that *it is the best form of government which has ever been offered to the world*” [Charles A. Goodrich, *Our Lives, Our Fortunes, and Our Sacred Honor*, 307-308]. Perhaps this is why Wilson was the very first man to be nominated and confirmed to the Supreme Court of the United States in 1789.

I was reminded of Wilson’s wisdom over the past few days as our nation was able to witness U. S. politics at work in the confirmation hearings for Judge Samuel Alito. I watched both the hearings for both Alito and recently confirmed Chief Justice John Roberts with great interest in the beginning to see what issues would be brought to the fore in questioning those nominated. What I noticed, as I am sure many of you did, is that the questioning typically focused on rights, whether explicitly or by leading questions or discussions of actions that would lead to the nominee’s “showing his cards” on how he might rule on a certain issue, whether it be abortion/women’s rights or presidential powers in individual rights/national security. Of interest in the Alito hearings was his statement on day one that “a judge can’t have any agenda,” while addressing those on the Senate Judiciary committee who do have an agenda. That became rather obvious as the week went on.

The apostle Paul also had to deal with the truth proclaimed by James Wilson. And, like Alito and Roberts, he also had to face the scrutiny of those who disagreed with him. In chapter 8, Paul showed that in “gray areas”, in those actions that are not expressly forbidden in Scripture, the believer is free to act as he pleases as long as his conscience is clear. However, these freedoms are limited. While it is man’s nature to pursue his own interests, they must not do so, even if it is their right, if it somehow infringes on the rights of others, or, more particularly, if it might cause a weaker brother to sin. The Christian’s liberty, as we saw last week, is limited by a concern for others. In our text this morning, Paul continues his discussion on the limits of Christian liberty by interjecting a personal application. In so doing he shows that *Christian liberty is limited by a concern for the gospel*.

#### **I. Paul’s Credentials (9:1-2)**

Following the section on the weaker brother, Paul wants to further encourage the Corinthians to analyze their freedom for the sake of others, particularly as it relates to the gospel. He does this by way of personal testimony. He was not asking the Corinthians to do something that he was not willing to do himself. Paul practiced what he preached and he sets forth his own life as an example of living a life that is free in Christ yet limited by a concern for the gospel. He asks four rhetorical questions that show his credentials in speaking to this subject.

## **1. Practice**

The first of these questions deals with Paul's practice. He begins with the question, "**Am I not free?**" To get the gist of his question, we need to back up to Paul's conclusion on the argument of eating meat offered to idols in chapter 8. "Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble" (1 Cor. 8:13). This verse serves as a transition to Paul's personal application in chapter 9. The answer to the question "**Am I not free?**" was an obvious "Yes." Paul asked the question anticipating an argument from the Corinthians that one could not really be free in Christ if they had to give up that freedom for the sake of a weaker brother. However, Paul had practiced the principle of restraint and yet retained his freedom. He remained free while limiting his freedom for the sake of others.

This was radical thinking for the Corinthian. You remember that they were of the philosophical mindset that Christian leaders were to be masters, not slaves. To give up a freedom was a sign of weakness, not strength. Those that questioned Paul's leadership would call this foolish. But Paul is simply demonstrating the truth that "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong" (1 Cor. 1:27). So while Paul was free to exercise his right to eat meat offered to idols, he relinquished this freedom for the good of the weaker brethren in particular and the welfare of the church in general.

However, this freedom existed for all believers. While Paul offered his practice as a model of remaining free while relinquishing certain freedoms, there was something else that Paul needed to remind them of that set him apart from others, particularly as it related to the exercise of freedom.

## **2. Position**

Paul next reiterates his position, "**Am I not an apostle?**" In verse 2 we read that there were those that denied Paul's apostleship. We see further in 2 Corinthians that some of these even claimed to be apostles themselves. Paul's concern is for those in the church that might be influenced by these others. While some of his practices might be misunderstood, the reality that he met all of the qualifications of apostleship could not be denied.

Those that denied that Paul met the qualifications for apostleship pointed to the requirements drawn up when Matthias was chosen to succeed Judas among the twelve, which we read about in Acts 1:21-26. An apostle had to have been chosen and followed Jesus from the time of His baptism to His ascension and had to be a witness of Jesus' resurrection. These that denied Paul's apostleship also turned to the fact that he was not numbered among the Twelve and had not received the day-by-day instruction of the others. However, this argument was weaker than the first in that Matthias was not numbered among the Twelve in this way and did not receive instruction from Jesus directly. Further, Judas was numbered among the Twelve, did receive instruction directly from Jesus, and subsequently betrayed Him. But what of the first argument, that Paul was not with Jesus in His earthly ministry nor was he a witness to the resurrected Christ?

It is in response to this question of his apostleship that he asks two further questions to answer these criticisms. Paul had already written that he was chosen or called to be an apostle in opening this letter (1:1). Here he asks, "**Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?**" Agreeing with them that an apostle had to be an eyewitness to the resurrected Lord, he reminds them that he had seen Him. Of course, we know that he is referring to the scene on the road to Damascus, where

he is converted and commissioned (Acts 9). He again refers to this instance in 1 Cor. 15:8, where, after relating Christ's resurrection appearance to others, he wrote, "and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also." This is a testimony to the truth that Paul was the last person to fulfill the requirements of apostleship and therefore the last apostle in church history.

Notice also Paul's choice of words, "**Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?**" While some translations have "Jesus Christ," "Christ" is not in the original. Paul's emphasis is on the human Jesus of Nazareth, raised and glorified. As one writer suggests,

"Seeing" here does not describe a "spiritual apprehension" (such as every believer has), "nor the ecstatic visions which [Paul] had sometimes enjoyed in a state of trance (2 Cor. 12:1ff), but that actual beholding of the human and glorified Redeemer which befell him on the way to Damascus." [George Findlay, as quoted by Curtis Vaughan in *1 Corinthians*, 92].

So Paul offers his firsthand account of the resurrected Jesus as the foundation for his apostleship.

But Paul does not leave it at that. Anticipating the argument that Paul's vision was a matter of private interpretation, he offers a second proof of his apostleship by asking, "**Are you not my work in the Lord?**" The Corinthian church itself was an external evidence of his apostleship. If Paul were not an apostle, why did the church continue to grow, something that could be granted by the Lord alone (1 Cor. 3:5-7)? That alone was a sign of apostolic activity. Further, as Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 12:12, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles," the greatest of these being their own conversion and continuance as a church. So Paul reminds them, "**If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you.**" Paul had not only seen the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, but he had been enabled and empowered by Him to carry out the work of an apostle to the Gentiles. While some did not recognize this apostleship, the Corinthians were without excuse.

Paul concludes this argument, "**For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.**" The "seal" was a sign of authenticity. The imprint of the seal in wax or clay was a mark of ownership, a sign of genuineness. The church at Corinth was a living seal of his genuineness as an apostle. As Leon Morris wrote, "Their very existence as Christians proved his point" [*1 Corinthians*, 130].

So what we see in Paul's listing of credentials is not only did he give up the general right that all Christians have in the area of meat offered to idols, but his specific right as an apostle as well.

## **II. Paul's Defense (9:3-11, 13-14)**

Paul writes, "**My defense to those who examine me is this**" (v. 3). For a defense, there must have been an accusation. What was the accusation? There were those that questioned Paul's apostleship, not on the merit of apostolic qualifications as listed above, but on his continued practices that, to them, were contrary to the actions of an apostle, in this case, Paul's refusal to eat meat sacrificed to idols. They certainly did not like his teaching that others should do the same. As we have seen, some looked at this as a sign of weakness and, as we saw last week, inconsistency. In the verses, Paul, seeing that some had confused qualifications and rights, defends his rights as an apostle drawing upon another right he had as an apostle yet refused to exercise, the right to be compensated.

### 1. The right explained (vv. 4-6)

Paul asks, “**Do we not have a right to eat and drink?**” In other words, as a minister of the gospel, and even more so as an apostle, do I and others involved in the work of the ministry not have the right to be fairly compensated in the essentials of life for our work among you? Of course, the answer was yes, and the Corinthians would not argue this. As a matter of fact, Paul’s refusal to be compensated was a source of contention with those that disputed his apostleship. As D. A. Carson points out:

The nub of the charge against Paul, it appears, is that he refuses support from the Corinthians and that he does not travel in his itinerant ministry with the kinds of comfort and support that senior leaders should expect... It may be hard for us at first to understand why this should be so serious a charge. But in much of the first-century Hellenistic world, traveling teachers were assessed, in part, by the amount of money they could take in. People wanted to brag about how much money they had paid to Professor So-and-so for a course of lectures... If Paul would not accept money from the Corinthians, who wanted to lavish it on him so they could feel good about how important their guru was, many felt it proved he did not really understand the rules of the game, and so he could not amount to much. [*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 126]

Do you see what was happening? Paul’s refusal to accept their compensation was a cultural denigration to them.

Further, Paul asks, “**Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?**” The question here is not whether or not an apostle had the right to marry. Paul had already addressed this in chapter 7. While Paul chose to remain single, he certainly had the right to marry. The question was whether or not they had the right to bring their wives along on their travels. Paul intimates that other apostles did in fact carry their wives along in their missionary efforts, as did Jesus’ brothers born to Joseph and Mary after Jesus. It is difficult to know why Paul singles out Cephas, or Peter, in this instance. The probability is that Peter, mentioned many times in this letter, had visited Corinth with his wife. Paul’s purpose here is to remind them that their requirement to compensate included the welfare of the family as well.

And finally, Paul asks, “**Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working?**” The question Paul posits is, “Were he and Barnabas the only apostles not worthy of pay for their work? The answer was no. That being the case, the church was obligated to support them and their family in that work. We know that Paul worked as a tentmaker, raising his funds in that way as to not be a burden on the church. However, that was a choice and did not exclude them from the reality that they should compensate those who did the work of ministry. Evidently, these that examined or sat in judgment of Paul thought that his refusal to take advantage of these rights proved that he actually lacked these rights. They apparently reasoned that he did not take these advantages because he was not truly an apostle.

### 2. The right justified

Not only does Paul state and defend his right to be compensated by this line of reasoning questions, he justifies this right in three different areas.

He first appeals to *the norms of society* (v. 7). “**Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense?**” It would be unthinkable that a soldier should give his time and effort for a

country and have to pay his own way as well. A soldier could not fight during the day and then raise his support by night. No, they were provided with whatever they needed to serve effectively. Likewise, **“Who plants a vineyard and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock?”** The planter expected to be compensated either in money or by his share of the crop. A shepherd was entitled to the milk of his flock. In commenting on these norms of society, Roger Ellsworth, noting this universally recognized principle, states, “All of these are commonly accepted, with no one even raising so much as an objection. So it should be with paying the preacher” [*Strengthening Christ’s Church*, 148].

Paul next appeals to *the teaching of Scripture* (vv. 8-11). **“I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I?”** Had Paul left his appeal with the norms of society, the Corinthians could have rightly accused him of leaning on human judgment alone for justifying his argument. But he backs up his appeal to culture with an appeal to Scripture, **“Or does not the Law also say these things?”** Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4, **“YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING.”** This verse states that even the ox is entitled to eat the grain they are threshing. This command of God was not given out of a concern for oxen. The principle given is that in taking care of the oxen the man was taking care of himself. If the ox was not allowed to eat, then he could no longer thresh. If the ox could no longer thresh, then the man’s livelihood was gone. But Paul’s contention here is that God’s concern is not for the oxen, but for the man, **“for our sake.”** As one writer put it, “He is reasoning from the lesser to the greater: if God wants the farmer to take care of his ox, does he not require man to take greater care of fellow man?” [Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 292]. So Paul asks, **“If (or “since,” which is evidenced among them) we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?”** He reinforces this thought by asking, **“Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar?”** Again, according to Deuteronomic law, the priests were to receive due compensation for their ministry among the people of Israel. Was less required of those in Corinth toward those who ministered among them? And if others were compensated, how much more should he, their spiritual father, be compensated (v. 12)?

And finally, Paul appeals to *the words of Christ* (v. 14). **“So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.”** In Matthew 10:10 Jesus said, “The worker is worthy of his support.” In sending out the seventy, Jesus elaborated on this in Luke 10:7, “Stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for the laborer is worthy of his wages.” Paul evidently had this saying of Christ in mind when he asked the question in verse 4, **“Do we not have a right to eat and drink?”** According to Jesus, the answer is yes.

### III. Paul’s Concession (9:12, 15-18)

Given all of this, Paul writes in v. 12, **“Nevertheless, we did not use this right.”** Having given his credentials as an apostle and defended his right to be paid for his apostleship, Paul denies payment from the church at Corinth. It would be easy for us to look at this and conclude that this was not a huge concession given that Paul had a means of support through tent making. However, this would be to miss the point. Let’s put this in perspective. Paul was much more than a bi-vocational pastor, which is difficult enough. He was a church planter. Not only that, he was planting churches among the Gentiles who had no previous knowledge of the gospel. Therefore, he also served as both the only teacher for a time and had to invest an enormous

amount of time in cultivating leadership. He also served as an apostle, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the doctrines upon which the church was built. He had to keep up with the churches he planted to ensure that they were staying the course. All of this while making tents!

Further, we know that Paul did receive offerings from other churches along the way. But these offerings were not received as compensation for the work of the ministry while done in their midst. It was joyful support given by churches, like those in Macedonia, in appreciation of Paul's pioneering gospel work. So while Paul had the right to be compensated, he refused. Why?

We see, first of all, his refusal was for the sake of the gospel. Again, v. 12, **“Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.”** Given his peculiar circumstances, Paul wanted to do nothing that would hinder the furtherance of the gospel. In other places Paul wrote that he did not want to be a financial burden on the church. Therefore, he willingly chose not to accept payment for his services, even though this compensation was his by right. From Paul's perspective, accepting payment could prove detrimental to his credibility and to the witness of the gospel, so he graciously declines. However, the principles that Paul elaborated on were still in force. As D. A. Carson rightly asserts, “This does not mean that he thinks all Christian leaders, or all church planters, ought to adopt the same policy. Far from it. He insists that in the normal way of things those who work in the religious arena should be supported out of the fruit of their work.” Given his peculiar circumstance, he chose to refuse all compensation. But he does not require this of all, if any, other ministers of the gospel. I would suggest that to have made this a requirement would have seriously limited the number of men who surrender to the work of the ministry. It is not a requirement, but a concession.

But we see a second reason that Paul refused compensation from Corinth in verses 15-18. After again stating that he had not exercised this right, he states that his refusal was not some sort of guilt trip on the church. He says, **“I am not writing these things so that it will be done so in my case.”** It is plain from the context that the church had offered to compensate Paul and that he had refused. The reason he gives is that he would rather have died than to have anyone deprive him of his boast of abandoning his right. In the next few lines Paul writes why he adopted this stance. In verse 16 we see that Paul has no option whether he will preach the gospel. He was **“under compulsion.”** Preaching was not an option for Paul. Some of the apostles volunteered for the position or sought Jesus out and were called. Not Paul. He was specifically called and commissioned to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul's commission was intricately tied to his conversion. Paul could not abandon his preaching without abandoning his salvation. So Paul's reasoning in verses 16-17 is that his very boast is in not simply preaching, but in doing so voluntarily. What was it that proved to others that Paul was captured by the grace of God unlike any other of the apostles? This he answers in verse 18, **“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.”** Paul's heavenly reward was wrapped up in his offer of the gospel, his work of ministry, **“without charge.”** Again notice Carson's comment here:

This is staggering. Paul is so concerned to prove his own wholehearted, enthusiastic, voluntary commitment to the task of apostolic preaching to which he has been called, that he chooses to abandon one of his rights. He turns his back on his right to be supported, knowing that this decision will cost him an enormous amount of time, effort, labor, and misunderstanding. But he will be able to preach the gospel “free of charge”

and thus model the freedom of grace by the way he serves. It will also enable him to show that he serves, not merely out of compulsion, but out of a transformed mind and will, so that by God's grace he is in fact laying up treasure in heaven. [*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 128]

That was the purpose for Paul's concession. The gospel and the grace of God compelled Paul to forego what was his by right.

### **Conclusion**

James Wilson was right, "It is the nature of man to pursue his own interest, in preference to the public good." Our sin nature often leads us to think of ourselves before others. We often are more concerned about our rights than the gospel and the grace and glory of God. When is the last time you conceded a right for the good of others and the cause of Christ?