

When Rights Are Wrong

1 Corinthians 9:1-27

This week's sermon takes a brief break from the Revelation series, with a topical sermon on evangelism from 1 Corinthians 9:19-27. So for the devotional, we spend this week reflecting on the same text in the wider context of the chapter. Just before we start, though, we take a moment to anchor the chapter in its own wider context, 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1.

The argument of 1 Corinthians 8-10 is necessarily complex. While we call this letter 1 Corinthians (because it is likely the first of the remaining letters that we possess), it is actually the second letter that Paul wrote the Corinthians. (And our 2 Corinthians is likely the fourth that he wrote them.) So there is some pre-history underlying 1 Corinthians, that we can construct reasonably easily with clues from the text, and a judicious use of mirror-reading.

Paul has previously written to the Corinthians, offering pastoral direction on several issues, and they have written back to reject his teaching, and offer their defense. In 1 Corinthians 8-10, the issue is over joining feasts with friends and neighbors where the food would have been previously offered to idols (much like traditional Chinese offerings to ancestors find their way to the table still today). Paul has forbidden them to eat food they know to have been offered to idols; they (or a subset of them) have responded with reasons why eating the food is okay. Their argument has at least four parts: (1) we are theologically astute and can defend our position (Paul responds in 8:1-3); (2) idols are not real, living gods, and so it makes no difference whether the food has been offered to non-existent beings (Paul responds in 8:4-13); (3) we have the right to eat, and no one has us the right to deny us our rights (Paul responds in 9:1-27); (4) we are God's people and so are safe from ill-harm through eating the offerings (Paul responds in 10:1-13); (5) after two-and-a-half chapters spent disarming their defense of their own position, Paul sets out his teaching on participating in meals with those who make food offerings to other gods (10:14-11:1).

Day 1: 1 Corinthians 9:1-2 Who's your daddy?

Paul starts his argument, only to shift to a different point after one phrase. "Am I not free?" anticipates a line of argument that he will return to in 9:15. But first, he backs up to establish his own authority as an apostle. His defense of his apostolic authority has two planks: (a) Jesus directly commissioned him in a vision, and, (b) he founded the Corinthian

church and led its first members to faith in Christ. Both features establish his authority in their lives, and their obligation to respect him.

We learn two lessons from this line of thought, one negative, and one positive. The negative lesson: Over the last couple of decades, various people have set themselves (or each other) up as authoritative apostles. While this passage does not intend to provide a comprehensive response to a problem it never anticipated, it does at least provide a partial response. The original apostles held a unique authority not repeated in subsequent generations. The basis of their authority? Years spent under the personal tutelage of Jesus. Paul is added to this group as an exception, not as a norm, and even he at least had a heavenly vision and a special calling from God. The New Testament puts no one else at this level, so we should be suspicious of any who put themselves there today.

The positive lesson: the one who leads us to Christ or founds our church deserves special respect and appreciation, including generally accepting their teaching and following their guidance. At the same time, this is a general guideline, not an invariable rule. There are obvious limits and exceptions (especially when our leaders teach error, engage in immorality, or are heavy-handed).

Day 2: 1 Corinthians 9:3-14 The right of financial support

Paul spends this section establishing his right – as an apostle – to financial support for his work as an itinerant evangelist and missionary, and not least from a church that he established. His defense offers eight lines of argument: (a) analogy from military service, (b) analogy from farm laborers, (c) analogy from shepherding, (d) analogy from the Old Testament Law, (e) argument from greater to lesser, (f) the precedent they established when supporting other itinerant evangelists, (g) the precedent of the temple, Levites and Old Testament, and (h) the teaching of Jesus.

The contemporary application of this argument is readily apparent: pastors, missionaries, and vocational Christian workers have the right to support by their supporting churches, no less than those church members have a right to support from the companies for which they work, and for the jobs that they do. This is not a gift from the church which puts the recipients in their debt, nor a stick to use to keep vocational Christian workers in line. It is a basic right, decreed by custom, Law, and Lord.

Day 3: 1 Corinthians 9:5 The right of marriage

We take a step aside from the flow of the argument in this chapter to comment briefly on a recent silly and sensational news report about Jesus.

A Harvard divinity school professor publicized the translation of a purportedly fourth-century papyrus fragment which possibly alleges that Jesus was married. There are a lot of hypotheticals in play: (a) is the papyrus a forgery? (b) from what century does it derive, and from what group? (c) is any reference to a wife literal or metaphorical (the New Testament calls the Church “the bride of Christ”, and never intends to imply that Jesus was married). More details will come out over the next several weeks, but enough questions have already been raised that Harvard University has backed off its commitment to publish the journal article until the situation is clarified.

For the moment, though, the most fundamental rebuttal is this: What difference would it make if Jesus were married? The New Testament never affirms that he was, and clearly assumes that he was not (even though most Jewish men of his age would have been). Nevertheless, the New Testament and Christian theology offer no reason why he could not have been married. After all, Peter was married, Jesus’ siblings were married, and so were the other apostles. Only Paul (and possibly Barnabas) was single, and even he never asserts that his marital status was mandated. The New Testament finds nothing spiritually debilitating in marriage or in sex.

Day 4: 1 Corinthians 9:12b-18 Paul’s voluntary renunciation of the right to support. Here Paul comes to the nub of his argument; all that precedes was laying the foundation. Paul has the right to financial support, and no one has the authority to deny him this right. But ... Paul can voluntarily surrender his right. If he so chooses. And he does so choose. Not because he does not deserve support, and feels guilty accepting it. But for two reasons: (a) so that he can make the gospel available freely to all who are interested, and, (b) so that he can earn the reward that Jesus offers for service above and beyond the call of duty.

Paul himself will elaborate the application of this point in the following sections, which we will look at in the next two days. For today it is sufficient to note this: Jesus does give us certain rights (not just apostles), and we can legitimately claim them if Scripture confirms them. No one can legitimately deny them to us, or require us to renounce them. On the other hand, even if Jesus accords us a right, provided others are not manipulating us through guilt, but we genuinely perceive that this right is hindering the progress of the gospel, we can voluntarily renounce it. Before God, we may make use of all our rights; like Jesus and Paul, we may choose not to use them all. But the choice is ours. No one else can make it for us.

Day 5: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 Paul's voluntary renunciation of other rights.

Paul's renunciation of his right to support is only the beginning, the thin edge of the wedge. He surrenders other rights, again, for the gospel. He gives up the right to be who he is, and to live as he wants. He is not a pleaser in the contemporary sense of fearing conflict, but he aims to be a pleaser for the sake of the gospel. He lives as others need him to live, so that he is not a hindrance to the gospel. When reaching Jews, he lives according to the Jewish law, even though, as a Christian, he is no longer obliged to keep the Law. When reaching gentiles, he lives like a gentile (even though he may still prefer to live according to his native Jewish customs). Among Jews, he lives as a Jew; among gentiles, as a gentile; among another group, like them; and so forth. This is not because he lacks conviction, but because of conviction: his chief purpose in life is to win others to Christ, so he will do whatever is necessary to fulfill that goal.

Which is an obvious lesson for us: so should we. We remove the social and cultural barriers which impede others from coming to faith in Christ. In social and cultural dimensions, we live with, and live like, those around us, so that our lifestyles provide no hindrance to them coming to faith.

Day 6: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Paul's self-discipline in order to reach the goal. Here Paul broadens his point beyond his own experience. This is how he chooses to live, but it is more. It is how any athlete lives: voluntarily restricting his use of his rights by training, in order to win a prize. (This example comes to his mind because Corinth was a site for ancient sporting competitions, second in size and fame only to the Olympus games.) And it is implicitly how the Corinthians should live, too, so they do not forfeit the prize set aside for them (salvation).

So Paul completes his counter-argument against the Corinthian defense that they have a right to live however they want, and if they want to join meals where idol worship occurs, and where idol food is consumed, they can do so. Paul will reject the legitimacy of this particular right in the course of the next chapter. But for the moment, he rejects the propriety – albeit not the legitimacy – of the general argument. Christians are not people who claim all their rights. We, like our Savior, and like Paul himself, are people who voluntarily surrender their rights, at their own initiative, when it facilitates evangelism. If that means that we surrender our right to self-determination, or if we surrender our culture or our first language, this is a small cost to pay for the spread of the gospel. Whatever the right, we rightly surrender it, if so doing advances the spread of the gospel.