

# A COMPELLING GOSPEL

By Steve Zeisler

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First Corinthians 9 is one of the great autobiographical legacies which the apostle Paul has bequeathed us. I am sure you have noticed that the apostle frequently digresses in his letters to tell about himself, about his motives, his strategy for ministry, his struggles, etc. We have seen that idolatry is the subject which Paul takes up in chapters 8, 9 and 10 of this letter as he answers yet another question posed to him by the Corinthian church. He begins his answer in chapter 8, but in 9 he detours a little to share his feelings about his calling and ministry.

The question which the Corinthians had asked concerned "things sacrificed to idols" (8:1). Paul's response illustrates a tension in the Christian life, one which he exhorts the Corinthians to attend to. The first aspect of the tension concerns the Christian's rights and freedom. Paul declares forthrightly that "there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one." Christians therefore are free from the superstitions and hang-ups that beset others. "...why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?" Paul asks (10:29).

The other side of this tension, however, demonstrates that Paul was willing, out of a heart of love, to restrict his freedom. Failure to be wise in the expression of our freedom places us in danger of coming under the influence and thinking of demonic forces. "Let him who stands take heed lest he fall...I do not want you to become sharers in demons," warns the apostle. When a Christian chooses to express his freedom, not only is his own spiritual well-being at stake, the well-being of other Christians is also at issue. One can cause another brother or sister to stumble. Callous disregard for others by insistence upon our rights-acting in arrogance rather than in love, in other words-is never correct behavior. Wisdom and maturity are essential requirements in the exercise of the balance between rights and restrictions.

To help us, Paul now goes on, in chapter 9, to share how he accomplished this in his own experience.

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? 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. My defense to those who examine me is this: Do we not have a right to eat and drink? 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? Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working? Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? 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?

I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the Law also say these things? For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing." God is not concerned about oxen, is He? Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because the plowman ought to plant in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crops. If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we should reap material things from you? If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things, that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. 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 with the altar? So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.

These 14 verses could well be summed up in the one verse, "...the Lord directed those who proclaim the

gospel to get their living from the gospel."The apostle is saying that he would have been well within his rights in insisting on exercising certain rights! Did he not have the right to act in the same manner as other ministers of the gospel? he asks. The Lord directed that those who preach the gospel get their living from the gospel. That is a right and proper thing, according to Paul. "The workman is worthy of his hire," said Jesus. Paul agrees. Thus, the apostle could well have claimed the authority of Scripture in the exercise of his rights.

## **WHO SHOULD RECEIVE SUPPORT?**

First, however, Paul does some evaluative thinking which leads him to make the assertion of verse 14. It is helpful to do this on occasion in order to determine whether one may justifiably earn his living by means of the gospel. Not everyone is called to this. Many who feel they are so called are not, in fact. We will spend a moment looking at the apostle's own evaluation of himself. The point which he is ultimately making, however, is the one which he makes in verse 14: "...the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel."

### **TEST #1**

Paul's questions in verses 1,2 of chapter 9 raise the query which those who work in the ministry should first ask: Is this position one which the Lord has called into being? As far as he is concerned, Paul is certain of his calling. Why, the Corinthians themselves above all others were incontrovertible evidence of his apostleship. Through ignorance of the facts, others may well have had questions concerning his calling, but not the Corinthians. Paul himself had led most of them to Christ. He had founded their church. There were legitimate criteria by which he could be measured, and upon which they could conclude that he had indeed been called to the proclamation of the gospel.

Every now and then we come across young Christians who suddenly sense that God is calling them to become missionaries. For one reason or another they feel that this is what they want to do for the rest of their lives. But just because they feel this way is no reason why others should conclude that God has in fact called them to the ministry. Before the question of support for them ever comes up there should be evidence that God has called them. Essentially, that evidence is found in a heart for service, well before any question of a full-time position is sought, in the ministry to which the person feels called.

### **TEST #2**

In verses 3-6, the apostle suggests that in discussing full-time support for someone in the ministry, the level of support requested ought to be appropriate. It must in no way be seen to be frivolous. Food, drink, shelter, etc., are quite in order. "Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife?" asks Paul. Seeking enough support to sustain a wife and family should not be regarded as an unreasonable request. Neither is some time that is free from the demands of labor, says Paul, asking, "Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working?" The criteria for determining who should be set aside for full-time ministry before us here applies the question, "Is the level of support requested appropriate and reasonable?" Lear jets, \$3,000 suits and air conditioned dog-houses obviously do not fall into the category of reasonable requests. When someone being considered for support by the Body of Christ indicates a need for luxuries and special treatment, serious questions are raised. The things which Paul mentions here (food, family life, etc.), however, are quite reasonable and well within the bounds of propriety.

### **TEST #3**

The third criterion which Paul raises (7-10) concerns productivity. Is the person who is receiving support actually doing anything? He asks, "Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? 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?." Later, quoting the Old Testament, he asks, "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing." The ox which

labored to thresh the grain should not be denied partaking of the fruit of his labors. Hard work and productivity, in other words, should be rewarded by allowing the worker to partake of the harvest accruing to such work.

But implicit in Paul's illustrations is the question, "Is anything being accomplished? Is anything growing." The results do not have to be high profile and striking. We are speaking of a heart condition. Real prayer, real encouragement, teaching, counseling, evangelism, etc., are in question here. There are some who have God-given gifts and opportunities who are unwilling to work hard. Just because one has graduated from seminary does not mean that a Christian bureaucracy must now find a position in the ministry for that person so that his needs are fully met. A mere degree, title, dream or whatever does not qualify one for support by the Body of Christ.

Having raised these questions then, Paul's response as he views his own ministry is, "I qualify." Jesus said so. Reason, history, the Scriptures, all agree that it is right and proper that Paul and others like him be supported in the ministry to which God had called him.

## **A TEST FOR THOSE WHO GIVE**

In verse 11 the apostle hints at the problem which, for wrong reasons, might preclude people from supporting those in the ministry: "If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we should reap material things from you?" he asks. Certain churches in a stinting, grudging way finally come around to supporting those who minister to them. This verse helps us see why that might be so. If you do not value spiritual things then you are not inclined to make material provision for those who minister to you. If spiritual input and blessing come up short in your mind when they are weighed in contrast with real estate sales, stocks and bonds, business deals, billings, raises, perks-material blessings, in other words-then you certainly will not be inclined to reward those who merely minister spiritually. If on the other hand you truly value those who minister to you, then it only makes sense to support them and care for them. This is appropriate; it is right.

## **UNDER COMPULSION**

The apostle never shirks from asserting what is right. It is entirely appropriate to be aware of your freedom and your rights as a Christian. But it is also entirely appropriate to give forego your rights and privileges on occasion. When Paul wants to make a contrasting point he never downplays what is true and right in order to do so.

This brings us to the apostle's second point. Verse 15:

But I have used none of these things. And I am not writing these things that it may be done so in my case; for it would be better for me to die than have any man make my boast an empty one. For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. 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.

We have in this passage a remarkable insight into the heart of this great servant of God, this man who later will say, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ." Paul shares with us this picture of himself so that we may grow to be like the One whom he himself imitated. He is saying that if he were indeed to exercise his rights as a Christian minister in this area, a certain boast which he held would no longer be his.

Certainly, the apostle is not talking about boasting as we commonly understand that word. He is not saying what a great man he is, but rather is using this word about himself in the sense that it is a badge of distinction; this is how he thinks of himself, in other words.

When I perform wedding ceremonies, I am always careful to ask the bride and groom by what name I should address each-by full first and middle names, an abbreviation, a nickname, or whatever. A wedding is a momentous occasion and I feel it is important not to assume without asking what name best fits each person's self-identity. In a way, this is what Paul is doing here. "This is how I think of myself; this is my impression of myself. My boasting is my mark of self-distinction." This distinction is called his reward in verse 18 and we will look at it directly in a moment.

But first he describes his hesitation at being given special consideration for doing what he cannot help himself doing anyway. "I am under compulsion," he says, "for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel." He has been so overtaken by the gospel he no longer feels free to not preach it. Verse 17 indicates that on some days he did this voluntarily, but on others he was not so excited about preaching. On some days he went out, filled with enthusiasm for preaching, teaching, counseling, traveling, etc., but on other days he would just as soon skip it. But what is important is that he never had the option of not ministering. Given that fact, he feels it strange to be rewarded for the very thing that he could not help doing.

Having described his compulsion-"woe is me if I do not preach the gospel"-Paul now goes on to say what is his reward, what is there about him that he can approve of as he carries out his ministry. The one thing he can do, he says, is adorn the glorious message of the gospel by making it available free of charge. Having preached all day he could make tents at night, sacrificing something of himself in order to make an offering to the Lord by adorning the ministry he had been given. Supporting him for his work among them would rob him of the one choice which he had in life, which was to beautify the gospel by the free offer of it. He did not have the option of not preaching. That choice was no longer available to him. What he could choose to do, however, was to give something of himself for the sake of the gospel. He did not want to lose that privilege.

At times, of course, he was supported. Different circumstances-his health, his surroundings, the needs of fellow-believers, etc.-indicated that he be supported, and he was. But his heart was inclined to make free of charge the offer of the gospel. That was his contribution toward what he was doing, and he did not want to lose it, especially as far as the Corinthians were concerned.

What an extraordinary and compelling illustration of giving up one's rights! The rights he so clearly enunciates in verses 1 through 14 he denies himself, so overcome is he by something else-his compulsion to preach the gospel-which supersedes his rights and his freedom. He did not find laboring for the cause of Christ so heavy a burden to bear that he needed to be reimbursed by having his needs met. On the contrary, it was his joy and his compelling reason for living.

On occasion, people who perform heroic deeds of rescue or other examples of bravery express surprise and amazement when they are praised for what they did. This is especially the case with parents or family members who, say, dive into icy waters to rescue a drowning child. How could the rescue of a dearly loved child be considered heroic? they ask in wonderment. They did not feel they had a choice. Love had overcome their fear.

As I studied this passage, knowing that we would be meeting together on Mother's Day, I thought about motherhood, pregnancy and childbirth. For various reasons, some women remember the process of pregnancy and giving birth as painful and traumatic. They look back on it as a bad experience. They did not want to be pregnant to begin with; they had a difficult delivery, etc. There are others, however, who longed for and prayed for their child for years before he was born. They may have suffered morning sickness for months. They watched their bodies balloon out of shape. They spent many sleepless nights silently awaiting the birth process. And then at last came the great day when the pain really began! Yet they never for a moment feel resentful, or sorry for themselves. Far from feeling they had lost anything in the process they felt highly privileged to have brought a life into being. As they gazed upon their new-born the last thing in the world they expected was praise for their heroism for having gone through with the entire process.

Similarly, to compliment the apostle Paul for his courage or sacrifice in giving birth, as it were, to so many new believers by his preaching of the gospel would to him seem absurd. He had been overwhelmed by God's choice of him as his spokesman. He was totally owned by Christ. "For I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel."

## RESULTING FREEDOMS

Verse 19 lists some conclusions that flow from Paul's description of himself.

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow-partaker of it. Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified

There are some remarkable implications which resulted from the apostle's being taken over and owned by his ministry. That compulsion in turn produced great freedom in his life precisely because Paul's Master was firmly in place in the apostle's mind and heart. He had the kind of freedom ("all things to all men") that most of us would like to have. Paul could enter into any community and never feel the need to impress people. Seeking the approval of men was not part of his agenda. He was without prejudice and hang-ups. Wouldn't you like to live like that-to be unconcerned about which group was in or out of fashion, but having the freedom to enter into the life of everyone you encounter?

Paul says this of himself in Galatians: "If I were still trying to please men, I would not be the bond-servant of Christ." As long as we feel the need to be approved of, the need to be liked by a certain group, then being a bond-servant of Christ is not possible. On the other hand, bond-servants of Christ are freed from all constraints of this nature. Living in this way Paul is ready to take on anything. He can enter any community and speak to anyone he meets, rich or poor, of the wonders of his glorious gospel. John 12 gives this word on some who were still caught in the past: "Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God" (John 12:42,43). They lost Jesus Christ as a result.

Secondly, in this section Paul compares life to a race, a contest. As such, effort and progress are mandatory. The apostle says that he has given up striving for the things that are perishable as he strives for that which is imperishable. How rewarding it must have been for Paul to have given up pursuing things which in the end would amount to nothing. And how liberating, to no longer run and compete for something which would wither and die in a few days. Owning and possessing material things or high station no longer mattered to the apostle. His goal, rather, was the imperishable. What a wonderful way to live-not wanting everything that everyone else has, refusing to believe all the latest philosophies. This was how Paul lived.

And thirdly, he says, "I buffet my body." He was not enslaved to his appetites. His compulsion for service to Christ enabled him to say no to things which would distract or derail him in his calling. His body had become his servant, not his master.

Neither what people thought, nor the things of this world, nor his own appetites dictated to Paul how he should act and live. Something greater-the love of Christ-had overtaken him.

To conclude, I propose that we use Paul's short autobiography here to help us evaluate those who are set aside for full-time ministry. We have seen some Christian leaders in prominent positions give in to greed and self-promotion. Others who have served faithfully and well have been taken advantage of by callous

congregations. May God grant us leaders who are so overwhelmed by their calling in Christ that ministry is their passion and joy. May He grant, too, that all of us will so value spiritual things that returning material benefit to those who serve faithfully is our hearts' desire.

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