



My Rights

Christopher B. Harbin

1st Corinthians 9:15-23

Our national discourse gives much attention to issues of rights and freedoms. We talk openly of a right to bear arms, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and related issues enshrined in our Declaration of Independence. There we read of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as basic building blocks for a society. Somewhere in the mix, we add questions of economics, mobility, health, education, conscience, and charting the courses of our own lives. In discussing rights, we may overlook issues of responsibilities placed upon us by government or gospel. How does the gospel of Christ relate to our concern with personal rights? What role should it play in our discussions?

Concerns with personal rights was just one more issue surfacing in the church of Corinth. Among all the factious issues at hand, perhaps this one cut to the heart of the church conflict more than any other. When the believers in Corinth assessed rights, they placed themselves in first and primary position. They considered themselves as deserving and paid much less attention to others or the needs of the body as a whole. We are wont to discuss rights from a personal standing, whereas, that might not be the healthiest of positions from which to discuss them.

Disney's *Aladdin* came out while Karen and I served as your missionaries in Mexico. Her aunt mailed us a copy while we were there. We were amazed at so many nuances of American culture that Robin Williams embedded in the animated film, little references we could not grasp after having been out of the US for just one year. There were other issues the film tackled, however, that were timeless and unbound to questions of cultural literacy. At one point, Aladdin finds his rights and desires in conflict with following through on a promise and the need to place a higher good above his own.

Rights, responsibilities, personal desires, and ethics battled within him as he strove to determine his course of action. He was bound by his word to free the genie, but bound by his desires to hang onto the promise of power and security the genie afforded. Disney's story allows us to travel down the road of his initial reluctance to do what is right and see the disastrous results escalating. At the end of the story, however, we find Aladdin growing beyond the limitations of his uncertainties, fears, and anxieties. He eventually releases the genie, making sure that such awesome power does not become enslaved to another with darker purposes and priorities.

The Corinthian believers were not dealing with genies, sorcerers, and magic lamps. They were, however, dealing with concerns over personal rights, status, and placing themselves ahead of others in the lines of social importance. Moving to the front of the line, gaining importance over others, fighting for their personal desires and issues to be heard above the crowd was working against the health of the body. Paul called their attention to his own example, that they might see the difference between the character of his life and their own.

As they dealt with their freedoms and rights under the gospel, Paul called attention to his own rights. The church had every responsibility to pay and support him financially during the years of his ministry among them and elsewhere. By all rights, they should have supported him while he taught and preached among them, meeting all of his economic needs. It was his right. It was their responsibility. More importantly, however, Paul had not pressed the issue. Rather, he had labored for their rights and their access to the gospel, even when it meant economic and physical hardship for himself. His example was to set his rights aside for the advancement of the gospel, responsibilities over rights.

That was not a word the Corinthians sought. They were much too concerned with issues of personal wealth, advancement, and privilege. They were consumed with themselves and altogether too unconcerned with others, the very antithesis of the gospel Paul had preached and lived out before them.

They should have rewarded Paul in accordance with the value of the message he had preached. He had every right to expect payment for his preaching and teaching, just as the rabbis of Judaism and the philosophers of Greece and Rome. Payment was his right and their obligation. Part of the teaching, however, was to let go of such rights. That did not in any way release them of their obligations. It did, however, show them higher principles by which they should also have lived.

We might say Paul failed in his teaching. In part, that is what these letters are about. Paul felt obliged to teach the churches things he had overlooked during his ministry among them. He also found himself dealing with new issues or teachings they had not yet internalized. After all, learning takes time. It is about a lifetime investment in adaptation to new instruction, new experiences, and new conclusions. As regards faith, it includes a lifetime of pruning and growth as God slowly molds us into the creatures we were fashioned to become.

Now at some distance away, Paul could deal more directly with some issues he had only modeled and never addressed openly. There had not been time during his short ministry in Corinth to delve into every facet of the gospel of Christ Jesus. We might look at this church and credit Paul with their failure to learn. On the other hand, we might recognize their failure to assume their responsibility to learn. We might see their responsibility to take hold of the teaching and modeling set before them. We might point out their need to rise to a new appreciation of themselves as servants before Jesus Christ. We might see the gospel claim on their lives to give up all their assumed rights in service to God.

That was the example set before them. That was exactly how Paul had lived and taught in their midst. Rather than accept this new example as the pattern for life in the gospel, however, they continued to look upon Paul with the appreciation of their larger society. They saw him as a fool for not charging students for his teaching. They interpreted his lack of economic ambition as a weakness or failing, never recognizing it for an expression of grace and mercy inherent to the gospel. They failed to grasp this essence of new life in Christ, greater preoccupation with others than with self.

Aladdin struggled with these issues. He stole bread, yet shared it with others whose needs were greater than his own. He gained control over a powerful genie, struggling to determine how he might proceed in meeting his own desires in contrast to respecting and responding to the welfare of others. When at last he chose to free the genie, all questioned his sanity and the pursuit of his own happiness.

So the Corinthians questioned Paul's character in not pursuing his personal interests. They missed the point of the gospel that self-interests are not primary in a life given to Christ Jesus. The gospel is not about my rights. The gospel is not about getting ahead in the line. The gospel is not about my will, my desires, and my personal blessings. It is about Christ Jesus who set those issues aside to give his life on behalf of others.

Perhaps we are free in Christ to pursue our personal interests and agendas. God is generally gracious enough to give us plenty of rope for such. In the balance, however, all we manage in pursuing our own rights and desires is to avoid the transformation of life to which we are called. Until I am ready to let go of my rights, I remain enslaved. It is only when I find the freedom in the gospel from pursuing my rights that I can be truly free, as free as Christ Jesus who surrendered his rights that we might be free to love without condition. Are we ready for that kind of surrender?

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