



## *The Disciple's Rights*

Don't we have the right ...? I have not used any of these rights.

1 CORINTHIANS 9:4, 15

Few would question the assertion that we should renounce the wrong things in our lives. It is self-evident that such things mar our lives, spoil our enjoyment of life, and limit our usefulness to God and man. But not everyone is equally convinced that in the interest of the gospel the disciple of Christ may need to renounce some things that are perfectly right and legitimate.

I once heard an arresting message on this theme preached by Rowland V. Bingham, founder of the Sudan Interior Mission, whose sacrificial missionary career gave him the right to speak with authority. Although it was sixty years ago, much that he said is still clear in my memory and colors this study.

Four times in 1 Corinthians 9 Paul asserts his rights in the gospel. Three times he claims that he has refrained from exercising these rights in the higher interests of spreading the gospel. He affirms that he is ready to forgo any right he may have, and forsake any privilege, out of love for Christ and in the interests of the progress of the gospel. Listen to the lengths to which he is prepared to go: "*We did not use this right.* On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ" (v. 12; emphasis added).

Oswald Chambers had some trenchant words to say in this connection:

*"If we are willing to give up only wrong things for Jesus, never let us talk about being in love with Him. Anyone will give up wrong things if he knows how, but are we prepared to give up the best we have for Jesus Christ? The only right a Christian has is the right to give up his rights. If we are to be the best for God, there must be victory in the realm of legitimate desire as well as*



*in the realm of unlawful indulgence."*

Elsewhere the apostle insisted that everything that is legitimate is not necessarily helpful under all circumstances:

*"Everything is permissible for me"--but not everything is **beneficial**.* (1 Corinthians 6:12; emphasis added)

*"Everything is permissible"--but not everything is **constructive**.* (1 Corinthians 10:23; emphasis added)

He knew from experience that it was possible to indulge in permissible things to an inordinate degree and thus become a slave to them. So he adds yet another restraint:

*"Everything is permissible for me"--but I will not be **mastered** by anything.* (1 Corinthians 6:12; emphasis added)

That means that the disciple must choose his priorities very carefully, even in things that are right in themselves. If we are aiming at the heights of Christian experience, there will always come the challenge to voluntary renunciation of some rights.

The Christian life is not the only realm in which this is the case. What renunciations the aspiring athlete is prepared to make in order to break a record or win a prize!

As in all else, our Lord set a shining example in His earthly life. As Son of God He was "heir of all things" and enjoyed rights and privileges beyond our dreaming. Yet for our sake He renounced them. Consider the stupendous surrender of rights involved in the Incarnation, when He "forsook the courts of everlasting day, and chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay."

A seventeenth-century poet depicts the scene when the Son of God





renounced His rights to the enjoyment of the glories of His position as "heir of all things" in these vivid words:

*Hast thou not heard what my Lord Jesus did?  
Then let me tell you a strange storie.  
The God of power, when He did ride  
In His majestick robes of glorie,  
Resolved to light; and so one day  
He did descend, unrobing all the way.  
The starres His tires of light and rings obtained,  
The cloud His bow, the fire His spear,  
The sky His azure mantle gained.  
And when they asked what He would wear,  
He smiled, and said as He did go,  
He had new clothes amaking down below.*

*(George Herbert)*

On earth He surrendered His right to the comforts of home life, the right to the congenial company of heaven, and at the last, the right to life itself. The only rights He did not surrender were those essential to His role as Mediator between God and man. "I lay down my life for the sheep," Jesus claimed. "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:15, 18). If sacrifice is "the ecstasy of giving the best we have to the one we love the most," it follows that at times there will be lower rights that must be renounced in favor of those who are higher.

Once a traveler has paid his fare, he is entitled to a seat on the bus. No one can legitimately take it from him. And when a mother with a baby in one arm and a bag of groceries in the other boards the crowded bus, he still has the right to keep his seat. But he also has the higher choice of giving it up to the lady. In the same way, at times the interests of the gospel--and that is Paul's



preoccupation in this passage--requires the renunciation of some of our rights.

Paul practiced what he preached. "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible" (1 Corinthians 9:19). He makes reference to his personal rights in four areas (vv. 4, 5, 6, 11), but he asserts that although he might have done so legitimately, he exploited none of them to the full (vv. 12, 15, 18).

### **THE RIGHT TO GRATIFY NORMAL APPETITE**

"Don't we have the right to food and drink?" he asked (1 Corinthians 9:4). He may have been asserting his liberty to eat certain foods, for food offered to idols was a theme of the previous chapter. But the context would rather suggest that he is claiming the right to eat and drink at the expense of the church--the right of the Christian worker to be maintained on the material level by those whom he serves in spiritual things.

But his question could be expanded to include not only food and drink but also all his normal physical appetites. Because they are bestowed by God, they are not unholy. In themselves they are legitimate, but they can be indulged in to such a degree or in such a relationship as to render them sinful. Because they are legitimate, that does not mean that we should always use our right to the full, much less abuse it.

The joy of sharing the gospel was to Paul of far greater importance than food or drink. When the interests of the gospel demanded it, he gladly went hungry and thirsty. Hear his testimony: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:12).

Do we share his outlook? Have we discovered for ourselves his secret?

It can rightly be argued that a missionary has just as valid a right to rich and attractive food as any of his fellow believers in the homeland. But there may be times when he may need to live at subsistence level if needy people



are to be reached with the good news. His first priority must be the glory of God in the winning and discipling of souls.

John Wesley emulated the apostle Paul in his determination not to be enslaved by appetite. In order to gain this mastery, he lived solely on potatoes for two whole years. Apparently that did not affect his health adversely, for he lived to be eighty-nine years of age. He was no ascetic, but he would not tolerate being bossed by his appetite, especially if it would hinder the gospel of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:12).

### **THE RIGHT TO NORMAL MARITAL LIFE**

"Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us," Paul asked, "as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?" (1 Corinthians 9:5). This raises the much-debated question: Had Paul been married?

This is probably a question that cannot be answered decisively. But there is presumptive evidence that he may have been married. He stated that when Stephen was condemned, he had cast his vote against him. This would imply that he had been a member of the Sanhedrin, a qualification for which was that one had to be a married man. If that was indeed the case, his wife may have predeceased him or left him when he embraced Christianity. But whether married or not, Paul asserted his right to a normal marital life, having his wife accompany him; but he added, "We did not use this right" (v. 12).

Many married people who are called to the ministry of the Word, either at home or overseas, voluntarily release their partners for longer or shorter periods, in the interests of the gospel. Others voluntarily renounce the right to romance and marriage so that they can give themselves with greater abandon to the ministry entrusted to them. Such costly sacrifices are not forgotten by the Lord, and they will have their own reward.

In the realm of romance Paul had his priorities right. To him the will of God and the winning of souls were of greater importance. His paramount concern he stated in a single statement: "to win as many as possible" (v. 19). All else



must take second place. Romance in the will of God is wonderful, but out of the will of God it is tragic. Experience proves that the crucial point of our surrender to Christ often lies just here.

When William Carey shared his missionary call and vision with his wife, she was totally unresponsive. He wept and pleaded with her in vain. At last he urged: "If I were called to government service in India, I would have to make arrangements for you and go. I am called by a higher One. I will make arrangements for you and go."

In the event, the captain of the ship refused to take him, and he had to wait for another ship. In the interval his wife changed her mind and decided to accompany him. Carey put God first in his marital relations, and God honored his faith and dedication.

Let it be said with all confidence that it is utterly safe to commit our plans for romance and marital life into the hands of the God who cares. For the single missionary this is often a recurring problem that needs sympathetic understanding. For a minority it will be God's will for them to remain single. Where that is the case only unhappiness will result from taking romance into one's own hands.

Here, as in all else, difficult though it may be, peace lies in the acceptance of the will of God. He never penalizes those who surrender their rights in this sphere.

### **THE RIGHT TO NORMAL REST AND RECREATION**

"Is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?" (1 Corinthians 9:6). The question here is the disciple's right to refrain from manual labor and, instead, be supported by the church as were the other apostles. Once again he renounced this right. "If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?" he asked. Then he adds: "*But we did not use this right*" (v. 12; emphasis added).

There were cogent reasons for his refusing support from them. He did not want to be classed with the greedy priests who exploited their office to their



own advantage. Then, too, he desired to maintain his own independence. He could exercise his apostolic authority more freely when financial considerations were not involved. Too often those who give the money want to call the tune. If he took no money, they could not dictate to him on matters of policy, and he would be freer to act in matters of discipline.

The principle involved here could be widened to include the right of the disciple to normal rest and recreation or the missionary to normal furlough. In Old Testament times God made provision for regular rest and recreation in the various festivals of the Lord. They were occasions for physical as well as spiritual renewal.

There is a place for recreation in the life of the disciple. A good test of the validity of our recreation would be this: Will it make me a better and healthier servant and a more effective winner of men?

Many Christian workers, including myself, have paid a heavy price for failing to allot adequate time for rest and recreation--as did the saintly young Scottish minister Robert Murray McCheyne. He lay on his deathbed when only twenty-nine, completely worn-out by his unremitting labors. To the friend sitting at his bedside, McCheyne said, "The Lord gave me a horse to ride and a message to deliver. Alas, I have killed the horse and I cannot deliver the message!"

It must be acknowledged, however, that in the course of our Christian work, whether at home or overseas, occasions will arise when, in the interests of the gospel and the ungathered harvest, recreation or furlough will need to be forgone for a period. The disciple must hold himself in readiness to have his rights set aside where needs of fellow men are involved.

### **THE RIGHT TO APPROPRIATE REMUNERATION**

"If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? *But we did not use this right*" (1 Corinthians 9:11-12; emphasis added).



In support of his contention, the apostle cites the generally accepted principle that the farmer who produces the crop has the right to a share of it, as also the vintner his share of the wine. In other words, there is nothing wrong in being a paid preacher. Even the ox is not muzzled when he is engaged in threshing the grain. "In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (v. 14).

Throughout his ministry Paul was meticulous in his financial dealings. He refused to allow monetary considerations to influence his decisions or actions. Money is an acid test of character. Our real riches are what go into our character, and these abide with us eternally. In his attitude toward money Paul was "clean"--something that cannot be said of all Christian workers. He had victory in the realm of finance, and he renounced his right to be supported by the church in order that he might win more souls to Christ (v. 12).

Whether we possess much money or little, it is our attitude toward it that is revealing. There is no moral quality in riches or poverty per se, but our attitude toward it is a test of true spirituality. In a world in which material and financial values are paramount, it is not easy to escape their taint.

Discover a person's attitude toward money, and you will learn a great deal about his or her character. Not every Christian worker has mastered the problem of financial stewardship, and as a result many have lost spiritual effectiveness. Paul did not fall into that trap.

### **THE MOTIVATION**

The voluntary renunciation of our rights in the four sensitive areas discussed above will require more than ordinary motivation and dedication. Some may find the price too steep and draw back. We should be grateful that Paul not only set the standard but shared the motivation that enabled him to make such costly renunciations with joy.

First, the positive factors: "That in preaching the gospel I may offer it free





of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it" (1 Corinthians 9:18). "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (v. 22). "I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (v. 23). "We do it to get a crown that will last forever" (v. 25).

He supports this positive motivation by strong, though negative, motives: "We did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ" (v. 12). "I have not used any of these rights.... I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of this boast" (v. 15). "I beat my body and make it my slave so that ... I myself will not be disqualified for the prize" (v. 27).

Taken together, these motives make a powerful appeal to the disciple who is zealous in the cause of Christ, prepared to pay the price of true discipleship, and has a passion for the spread of the gospel. In the history of Christian missions especially, we have not been without many whose renunciation of rights has paralleled that of Paul. Who will follow in their train?

### FOR REFLECTION

Personalize Oswald Chambers' statement quoted on [page 134](#). Is this a challenge or confirmation for your life?

Which of the four areas of "rights surrender" on [pages 136-141](#) (appetites, marriage, rest/recreation, and remuneration) present the greatest challenge for you? Why?

How do your present motivations compare with Paul's (see [pp. 141-142](#))?