

## THE RIGHTFUL CLAIM

*A Bible study: I Corinthians 9:1-18*

**W**hen Paul declares in the third verse, “*This is my defense...*” we are reminded that much of the content of Paul’s letters is written in response to problems or

issues that have been raised. After the eighteen months Paul had spent in Corinth (*Acts 18:1-17*), we know of three ways in which he had received feedback from the young church. Chloe’s people had talked with him (*I Corinthians 1:11*). Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus had come to him (*16:17*). And a letter had been sent (*7:1*). Frequently, the specific question, concern or issue is quite clear. Here in the ninth chapter, however, the issue calling for defense is not so clear. Had Paul’s refusal to accept an income from the church at Corinth called into question the very nature of his call and commission? Had some denigrated his message because he received no income? Although we cannot be sure of the question which called for Paul’s response, his answer is strong.

*First, he proclaims his authentic status as an apostle because he had seen Jesus, the Lord (9:1) and because the church at Corinth was itself a sign and seal of his calling (9:12).*

*As an authentic apostle, he claims and proves his right to be accompanied by a believing wife (9:5) and to an adequate income (9:4, 6-14), finally calling it “this rightful claim” (9:12).*

*Then Paul asserts his freedom and reason for not accepting the support from the church at Corinth (9:15-18).*

**P**aul is very clear that he, as an apostle, has a right to claim support from the church. He also claims “the right to be accompanied by a believing wife,” but never develops the assertion. Paul’s argument for the “rightful claim” moves on four fronts: 1) the customs of the day, 2) the tradition of scripture, 3) the parallel to temple practices, and 4) the injunction of Jesus.

Paul uses three examples that were common in that culture (9:7) to illustrate the principle. The government paid the military who served them. Those who worked in the vineyard ate of the fruit. And shepherds drank of the milk from the flock. In our day we would cite different examples, but the principle of compensation for service is also part of our culture.

The scriptural base Paul builds is based on *Deuteronomy 25:4*, where it is forbidden to muzzle an ox working at a treadmill. The unmuzzled oxen is thus free to eat of the grain at the mill. Paul stretches the meaning to include those who labor in God’s mill are entitled to be supported. He continues the analogy by citing an unknown source which asserts that other farm workers do their labor in the hope for a share of the crop. He concludes, “if others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more?” (9:12).

The parallel to temple practices would have been more clear to Paul’s friends in Corinth than they are to us. Of all the food offerings brought to the Temple, only the Burnt offering was completely destroyed by the fire; even with the Burnt offering, the priests kept the hides and did a lucrative trade with them. The other offerings were only partially consumed and the priest used the meat, flour, wine, oil, grain and fruit from the other offerings. Paul was saying that this practice supported the concept of compensating the leadership of the church.

Paul’s final argument was to invoke the commandment of Jesus that “those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (9:14). Although Paul could not have had the current form of the gospels in front of him, his citation mirrors the meaning of *Luke 10:7*, “...for the laborer deserves to be paid.”

Having established that compensation is due, Paul then turns the argument in another direction to justify his choice of not receiving pay from them. In this letter Paul makes clear that he chooses to work without compensation so that nothing will get in the way of communicating the gospel...so that “no one will deprive me of my ground for boasting” (9:15). Paul seems to be arguing that nothing should become an obstacle to the fulfillment of his calling. This is an illustration of Paul’s desire to be “all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (9:22).

In the final analysis Paul is saying that ministers of the gospel deserve to be compensated for their work, but that he chooses not to be in order to keep his focus clearly on his calling.

While this was most often Paul’s pattern, he did not hold exclusively to it. From his letter to the Philippians (4:14-18), it should be clear that Paul was grateful for their giving in order to meet his needs. Apparently Paul received from the church at Philippi what we today would call a salary or income.

How then shall we reconcile these seemingly contradictory messages—that the messenger is worthy of being paid but that Paul (at least most of the time) does not accept such compensation? We cannot argue from silence about Paul’s financial status as making that more or less possible. Some have argued from a psychological perspective about Paul’s decision. But it is probably more productive to hold to both teachings—that the one who proclaims is worthy of adequate compensation and that there are potential dangers if there is too much emphasis or it becomes an obstacle to the proclamation. Those who are called have a right to receive compensation, so that their focus can be directed upon the task to which they are called. Paul, on the other hand, has a right to turn down compensation, so that he can keep that focus in his life.

**I**n sum, the point of Paul is that the teachers and preachers of the gospel deserve to receive adequate compensation, so that they are able to give themselves wholeheartedly to their calling. Adequate compensation is built on a biblical foundation.

What does this say for us? In our day there are many pastoral leaders who are so inadequately compensated that their financial stress hinders the fulfillment of their calling. Far too many churches and pastoral leaders are so uncomfortable with the whole area of finances that they function as though Jesus did no teaching about money or stewardship, and as though neither Jesus nor Paul affirmed that the “laborer deserves to be paid.” Far too many of our pastoral leaders have been impacted by the low level of compensation in ways that have lowered their self esteem, and thus their ability to be good witnesses for Jesus Christ.

Pastoral leaders need to be willing to take the whole biblical account—including Jesus’ strong teachings about money and stewardship and Paul’s teaching about compensation of the called—as the basis for teaching in the church. We find support in the New Testament for the payment of designated church leaders. This lays the foundation for putting forth a “rightful claim.”