Right On!
by Fletcher L. Tink

For years, I lived with the misconception that, in order to serve God, I would have to surrender everything. God, being chintzy, would hoard my blessings for the future life, while I lived a life of self-deprivation and sacrifice.

Perhaps it was appropriate at that stage, when I had nothing, and precious little future promise, to feel that way. At least I was malleable!

My adult paths took me through Peace Corps, inner city ministry and missionary service before the light bulbs flashed! And I uncovered my new orientation in I Corinthians 9 where Paul struggles with the issues of personal "rights," what gets surrendered, when and why. Until we get this one right, our attitude towards personal rights is completely wacky.

He asks himself in verse one: "Am I not free?" Implicit is his right to personal liberty. Conversion does not snuff it out. By asking this question heteristically, he implies that the answer is a bold "YES!"

The rest of the chapter follows the same line of thinking. "Am I not an apostle?" Of course, yes, I have the right to status, religious respect. "Don't we have the right to food and drink" (4)? Yes, we have the right to fulfill our physiological needs? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us" (5)? Yes, we have the right to companionship, to marital fulfillment. "Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?" (6). Yes, we have a right to leisure.

"If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?" (12). Yes, I have a right to adequate compensation for my services. "I make myself a slave to everyone" (19). Yes, I have the right to social status, to personal liberty. "To the Jews I became like a Jew" (20). Yes, I have the right to my ethnic, racial, religious and denominational identity. "To those under the law I became like one under the law" (20). Yes, I have the right to living by grace and not bound by antiquated legalisms. "To those not having the law I became like one not having the law" (21). Yes, I have the right to walk in a world of black and white but choose to walk in the grays when necessary.

"To the weak I became weak to win the weak" (22). Yes, I have the right to pull rank, to show strength, to exhibit power but choose not to under certain conditions.

Lots of other rights are implicit in his discussion---the right to privacy, to possessions, to security or, in Abraham’s Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: love, affection and a sense of belonging, esteem and self-actualization, that is, being involved in a cause outside of one’s own skin.

Paul acknowledges that, in God’s economy, these are indeed real needs built into the fabric of our being, that cry out for the right of fulfillment.

But he introduces us to a superior right. He never suggests that we surrender these rights once and for all, but rather that there is a supreme right, unique to the Christian, based on the new paradigm of purpose he has discovered. Repeatedly he says that "we did not use this right" (12), or "I have not used any of these rights" (15) not because God is depriving him, but because he conscientiously has suspended one or several of these rights for a limited period of time in a specific context when they get in the way of his consummate purpose, that is “to win as many as possible” (19) to the cause of Christ.

In other words, if a right becomes an obstacle to the integrity of the Gospel in terms of the perception of the target audience that can be motivated towards Christ, Paul will put that right aside, either until the mission is accomplished or the opportunity has been closed.

Adopting Paul’s perspective, it is entirely appropriate for us to pursue all necessary and reasonable rights built into our human needs. However, as God calls us to minister to specific people around us and across the world, we need put ourselves into others’ moccasins to understand sensitively what gets in the way of clear communication of the Gospel. If our lifestyle, titles, habits, political perceptions, denominational affiliation become obstacles, we temporarily lay them aside until the mission is accomplished or rejected.
Our ultimate "right" is our power to set aside lesser rights, in other words, become all things to all people, so that by all possible means we can save some (22).

One further note, a Portuguese professor of mine exploded in class one day in a diatribe against the American Bill of Rights. "Your constitution is a lie, he said, and your whole society is neurotic because of it!" The class woke up with a start!

"It say that every American has the right to 'the pursuit of happiness' and that's a lie! Don't you realize that one does not pursue happiness, that it is not a government-mandated right. Think of the horrors perpetuated in this society on that theme---child abuse, divorce, injustice and the piling up of materialism with no end---all in the elusive search for a happiness that becomes more evasive the harder one tries."

Since then, I've been meekly asking myself, What prompts happiness, if not the constitution or government mandate? In Christian terms, it is dying to self and living for Jesus. It can be in service. It can be in suffering. Paul, I believe, found its secret, "I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (23). And, at the end of the day, the rights that Paul suspended, introduced a gospel to the Western world that opened successive generations and millions to the accessibility of rights that even permits us this discussion. Thank you, Paul! You were "right on!"