**The Church at Corinth**

**A Church Facing Inner Problems – #22**

**God’s Call in Christ and Human Freedom**

**1 Corinthians 7:17-24**

***1 Corinthians 7:17*** *Nevertheless, each one should lead the life that the Lord has assigned, as God has called each of you. So I order in all the churches.* ***18*** *Was anyone called when he was circumcised? He should not try to undo his circumcision. Was anyone called when he was uncircumcised? He should not be circumcised.*

***19*** *Circumcision means nothing, and uncircumcision means nothing; but obeying God’s commandments is what counts.* ***20*** *Each one should remain in the state in which he was called.* ***21*** *Were you a slave when you were called? Do not worry about it, but if indeed you can gain your freedom, take advantage rather of it.* ***22*** *For the one who was a slave when called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; so too the one who was free when called is Christ’s slave.* ***23*** *You were bought at a price; do not become slaves to human beings.* ***24*** *Brothers, each one should remain before God in the state in which he was called.*

**The Main Thrust**

1. Since all of us have a gift from God (7:7 “*each one has a particular gift from God*”) we have to consider the status to which God has called us and to remain in it, not try to change it. This is fundamental to the Christian vocation: Lead the life the Lord has assigned to you (7:17, 24). This is what Paul has insisted on in all the churches that he has founded. One’s ethnic, social, or legal status in life is of little importance, for believing leads to a higher way of life. Whether one has come from a Jewish or Gentile background makes no difference; whether one is a slave or a free person is of no significance. One can be a Jewish Christian or a Gentile Christian; one can be a Christian slave or a Christian free person. The all-important aspect of life is to recognize that one is a Christian. This is the very foundation of the life of a Christian who in Christ stands before God the Father on a different ground having a new relationship with God under the New Covenant. Even the change of the social or worldly status, such as marriage or divorce, should not distract from the fundamental goal that God’s call has the upper hand in our life.

2. Then comes the religious background and its marks such as circumcision or un- circumcision, and the [difference in] social privilege of being a slave or free. Paul gave baptism a prominent place in Galatians 3:26-28, “*For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith; for as many of you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” (See also 1 Cor 12:13) But here will not use baptism as the gift that abolishes differences but as God’s Call that eliminates all forms of distinctions of the above daily life.

3. These verses (17-24) form the theological foundation of the life of the church that organizes its relationship on God’s Call only. Paul was aware of his own background as a Jewish Christian and his call to become “*the apostle of the Gentiles*” (Rom 11:13). He was aware and must have seen slaves in every Roman City. These slaves were very often bought for the sexual pleasure of their masters in the ancient world where they were owned often for ***porneia*** (fornication). When they were converted to Christianity, these slaves faced many problems. Paul does not treat the problem of slavery nor does he say what these slaves can do if they are abused by their masters. Paul could not have attacked the institution of slavery, which was fully accepted in the Greco-Roman world in which he lived and worked, i.e., the legal ownership and manumission (freeing) of slaves. Interfering would have been taken as a capital offense, although slaves could gain their freedom. A manumitted (freed) slave became a freed person (Greek ***apeleutheros***, Latin ***libertus***), who normally lived in a certain relationship to the former master, now usually called a patron (Greek ***prostates***, Latin ***patronus***). In time, perhaps after a generation or so, such freed persons’ status or relationship disappeared or was forgotten, and their descendants were no longer so regarded and became Roman citizens. The possibility of manumission often colored the life, conduct, and obedience of a slave, and for many it became a goal. Paul considers the chance of manumission of a slave who has become a Christian as something to be accepted. The status of the Christian slave is mentioned; it is not the major thrust of these verses because it is just one topic among others. Paul’s reaction to slavery can be deduced from his letter to Philemon where the slave *Onesimus* was regarded as equal to Paul. Even though the sentiment expressed in this passage echoes in part the baptismal formula of Galatians 3:26-28, quoted above, Paul significantly omits one of the pairs, “*neither male nor female*,” revealing the status that it occupied in his thinking.

**Belongs to the Lord**

Paul’s main stress is that the Christian belongs to the Lord, whether one be a freed person or a slave, because “*you were bought at a price*” (7:23a), repeating a notion already expressed in 6:20, and meaning by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is now the slave’s ***kyrios,*** “master/Lord.”

**Text Study**

**VERSE 7:17 –** *Nevertheless, each one should lead the life that the Lord has assigned, as God has called each of you.*

Literally, “but, as the Lord has allotted to each one, as God has called each one, so let him walk.” The repetition of “each” is important: God’s call is a personal call, and Paul wants the Corinthians to realize the divine concern is for each individual. God’s gracious call to all Christians comes to individuals as they are. This call explains in fact what Paul meant by “***idion charisma***,” or “particular gift” in verse 7. Greek Mss. (manuscripts) vary considerably between ***ho kyrios***, the Lord, and ***ho Theos***, God, so the Lord or God has called and this is not a problem. Lord here equals God.

**The Call**

The Greek verb ***kalein*** denotes not merely a “call” to salvation or to faith, as in (1Cor: 9; Gal 1:15; Rom 8:30; 9:24), but a call here is belonging to certain ethnic group (Jew or Gentile) or social status (free or a slave), repeated in verses 20 and 24. The same verb “to call” is in verses 18, 21–22. We are called to be part of particular social or ethic life to carry God’s message to the group to which we belong.

**VERSE 7:18 –** *Was anyone called when he was circumcised? He should not try to undo his circumcision.*

Literally “*let him not pull (the foreskin) over,”* and this would refer to what some Palestinian Jews had tried to do, when games played in the nude were introduced along with the Hellenistic gymnasium in Jerusalem in the secularizing reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanies, as recorded in the first book of Maccabees 1:15 (“they made for themselves foreskins”). This is also noted in Jewish Historian Josephus, *Antiques of the Jews*, (12.5.1). Our physical condition has no bearing on the grace of vocation; to try to alter that condition would be a misunderstanding of God’s call and election.

**VERSE 7:18 (cont.) –** *Was anyone called when he was uncircumcised? He should not be circumcised*.

The Gentile converted to Christianity has no need of circumcision, as Paul recognized in the case of Titus (Gal 2:3).

**VERSE 7:19 –** *Circumcision means nothing, and uncircumcision means nothing.* Christian vocation is not related to our physical life. As a Jew, Paul would have thought otherwise, for he knew that God commanded Abraham and his descendants, “*Every male among you shall be circumcised*” (Gen 17:10; cf. Josephus, Antiques of the Jews, 1.10.5; 1.12.2). Here Paul repeats in effect what he had written to the Galatians, “*If you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you*” (Gal 5:2; cf. 5:6; 6:15). The religious/biological sign of initiation to Jewish religion is no longer of any relevance to Christianity.

**A Note from Philemon**

**Regarding 1 Corinthians 7:19 and Circumcision**

How did Paul utter these words (in 1 Cor 7:19 about circumcision)? Our Lord did not give us a word about abolishing circumcision. Truly the OT spoke of the circumcision of the heart (Deut 10:16, “*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked*”, Deut 30:6 “*And the Lord thy God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your seed, to love the Lord thy God with all your heart, and with all thy soul, that you may live*” and Jer 4:4 “*circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart, ye men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem*”). But Paul speaks of this mark of the old covenant as though it has no value at all. Do you know why? I tell you. The Incarnation of our Beloved Jesus fulfilled the union of God and humanity and that union made Jesus the only Mediator, thus there is no other means that can mediate between God and us. Jesus is the only Mediator, and our bodies can bring nothing and can take away nothing from what God the Father gives us in Christ. The new covenant did not demand any ritual or offering from us. Christ is the new covenant.”

**God’s Commandments**

**VERSE 7:19 (cont.) –** *But obeying God’s commandments is what counts.*

Paul’s statement is elliptical; one has obeyed the commandments and that is something, which is the opposite of nothing. Paul is referring to other “commandments” than that of circumcision ordered in Genesis 17:9-13. “*Keeping the commandments*” was a technical expression (Matt 19:17; 1 Tim 6:14) for the Jew, but Paul’s attitude (stated in Gal 5:2, 6; 6:15) was confirmed in the “council” of Jerusalem (Gal 2:1-10; cf. Acts 15:5-12). For a Christian who is a “*new creation*” (Gal 6:15), guided by “*the commitment of faith*” (Rom 1:5; 16:26), that is all that is required. Some commandments of the Mosaic Law have become obsolete apart from the 10 commandments that continued to be guide even for Christians.

**VERSE 7:20 –** *Each one should remain in the state in which he was called.*

Literally “*in the call in which each was called, in that let him remain.”* The call to faith as in Philippians 3:14 (cf. Eph 4:1; 2 Tim 1:9), which is also the sense of the verb “call” (*to call, or called)* in this verse. The noun (“the” call) has to be understood, however, in a broader sense to include the “status” or “condition” of being a Jew or a Gentile, slave or free, in which the call to faith has come to the individual involved.

**VERSE 7:21 –** *Were you a slave when you were called? Do not worry about it.*

Literally, “as a slave you were called; let it not be a concern to you.” To be a Christian and a slave at the same time is a call to appreciate better the call to freedom given by Christ rather than gaining a freedom from the society. A slave could be a good Christian, as Paul recognized in his Letter to Philemon but now Paul seeks to offer slaves to a better understanding of their social condition.

**Slaves**

The Greek word in common use for “slave” at that time was ***doulos***, which is used here and in verses 22-23 and 12:13). A slave was called a “living tool” (see, Aristotle, *Nicom. Ethics* 8.11.6). A slave had no rights and no obligation to serve anyone but the master (*Digest* 50.17.22). The slave had, however, certain advantages at times, and these made some of them prefer to remain in slavery.

**VERSE 21 (cont.) –** *But even if you can gain your freedom, take advantage rather of it.*.

Literally, “gain freedom” means “if you can be manumitted *[freed]* in a legal procedure”

Four different interpretations have been given to these last two phrases of verse 21:

1. Some would take them as they stand, without an object understood to mean, “be all the more useful,” i.e., work all the harder; or even though a freed person, be as industrious as a slave (BDAG, 1087).

2. But if, indeed, you become manumitted, by all means (as a freedman) live according to [God’s] calling.

3. Make better use of your slavery,” i.e., make better use of your present condition (as in the RSV, note, NRSV, NAB, SBJ, so also the Syriac translation known as the Peshitta and John Chrysostom [Hom. in I Cor. 19.4; Theodoret of Cyrus Commentary on 1 Cor. 7.21)

4. Take advantage rather of (such) freedom,” i.e., make the most of the opportunity to be freed (so RSV, REB).

**VERSE 7:22 –** *For the one who was a slave when called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman.*

Literally, “the slave called in the Lord is the Lord’s freedman.” Paul is contrasting the Christian status of a slave (***doulos***) and that of a freed person (***apeleutheros***). In the Greco-Roman world of Paul’s time, a slave who was manumitted became apeleutheros or ***libertus*** and entered a new relationship with his former ***kyrios***, who became his ***patronus***. So Paul draws an analogy: a slave called to Faith in Christ may be a slave of the earthly master but in fact enjoys the status of ***apeleutheros***, “freed person,” as far as the Lord is concerned, because he is liberated from the powers of darkness, the slaveholders of this age. (Cf. 1 Pet 5:10, “*the God of all grace, who has called you in Christ*”; also Jn 8:36).

**VERSE 7:22 (cont.) –** *So too the one who was free when called is Christ’s slave*.

The one who is “free,” has the freedom of the society and its social and political status, however, by accepting faith in Christ, becomes a slave of Christ. ***Doulos Christou*** is a designation that Paul often uses of himself (Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10; Phil 1:1; cf. Eph 6:6), as did other early Christians (Jas 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1). The reason for this designation is the freedom they have gained from the Risen Lord who is the Kyrios who gave them life.

**Christ’s Ownership of our Life**

**VERSE 7:23 –** *You were bought at a price*.

The use of the passive voice and the whole context of slavery prove only one main point that Christ is the Lord of our life. Paul is saying you are slaves of Christ, bought for the service of the Kyrios, because “*you belong to Chris*t” (3:23). In this way, both slaves and freeborn are equal in the Christian community.

**VERSE 7:23 (cont.) –** *Do not become slaves to human beings.*

That is, do not subject yourselves to the values and the behavior of pagans of Roman Corinth, among whom you live. As Christians, their bondage is to the Risen Christ, who should be the master (***kyrios***) of your lives, and in no sense should they become like their masters.

**George’s Letter to a Prisoner**

*Jabber was a convert from Islam and was in prison for three months in Cairo, he left Egypt and he was living in Cleveland Ohio until 1973.*

My beloved Jaber,

May the Lord Jesus give you peace while you suffer pain and tortures in the darkness of that demonic prison.

I know how hard is the loss of freedom, and how difficult it is for anyone who is innocent to be beaten daily by the guards and to be tormented by long days of hunger.

All of these are done for one reason and that is you have become a Christian who gave up Islamic confession which I don’t call it faith because faith is a free choice that leads to freedom and love. I can’t see these two great qualities that shaped our life in Islam.

We have tried to come to see you but the police deigned that you are in their custody.

I was there in these cells before you and in these cells I have discovered the greatness of Jesus. I have seen Fr. Philēmōn and he asked me to write this letter that we hope to smuggle to you.

Behind the high walls, I discovered my freedom. I was in chains just like the guards who are locked with us but without chains. They beat us every morning and when the new ones come later in the afternoon we would get our second beating. We would not shout or cry and that made them go mad. We enjoyed seeing them losing their temper because this makes them get tired quickly and beat us less.

I learned in my solitary cell how to be with myself, alone with my Maker and to recite Psalms that I have learned since I was 11 years and have neglected but now they have become my best book that the guards can’t take away. This filled me with joy as I reread all the books that I have read and have been buried in my memory.

From the key-hole of the door of the cell I used to speak to the inmate opposite to my cell who was there for a year without being out not even once. He was a Communist and an atheist. But he lives by the hope that all dictatorships will come to their tragic end. His hope gives the energy to resist. Now I think of that hope of being in prison to learn how to be free inwardly from needs and from desires and let reason and good will govern my life.

Fr. Philemon asked me to write one line for you: “Any one of us can be free or a prisoner only from lusts.” Then He added: “no one can imprison any human in any prison unless the prisoner has surrendered his mind to his jailers.” You know how hard it is to understand Fr. Philemon, but what he wanted to say is that you are free till you submit your mid to someone.

Inner freedom comes from a mind that has lost dependence on all: food, sleep (one of guards used to come and spray me with cold water to deprive me of sleeping) and cold water made my wounds hurt more. But in this misery I used to think of summertime and the walks at the banks of the Nile just to forget about the cold water. How powerful are our memory and our imagination that they can make us live on another level that the brutality of the guards was no longer there. A free mind can live in the darkest pit and transcend the darkness to the light of wisdom and the freedom of the spirit where there are no walls that can keep us from being alone with God our Father.

May our Lord who was nailed on the cross but was free give you that freedom and that your imprisonment may be a witness to Christ.

George Bebawi

June 1957

**VERSE 7:24 –** *Brothers, each one should remain before God in the state in which he was called.*

Literally “each one in what one was called, brothers, let him remain in that before God.” This conclusion seems to be the final reminder of the readers that God has called us and we have to “remain” in our calling.

***Pope’s Notes***

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