

Rights and responsibilities: 1 Corinthians 9.1-18



Some reflections from about-to-be-licensed Reader Christopher Graham on the awesome responsibilities of being licensed for public ministry in the church. Don't forget to pray for Chris and the other Readers as they are licensed on Sunday (including Rachel, our very own new Reader at St Philip & St James) — and for the new priests and deacons who will be ordained by Bishop Mark on Saturday.

9 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? ² If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. ... ⁴ Do we not have the right to our food and drink? ⁵ Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife,^[a] as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who pays his own expenses for doing military service? ¹² Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Arguments about Rights and Responsibilities are nothing new. The Corinthian Christians thought they could do pretty much what they liked. And they didn't appreciate being told different by Paul. Who did he think he was?

Today, it's all about who has the right to tell us what we can and cannot do in the face of Covid-19. Government? Parliament? Or should we be left to make our own assessment of the risks and responsibilities? And does anyone know what the rules are anyway?

At first sight, ch.9 looks like a completely new topic, a digression in which Paul turns aside to defend his own apostleship. But in fact, apostleship is just an example of the tensions that Kate highlighted yesterday — tensions between my rights as an individual and my responsibilities to the community I belong to. My “rights” can be seen in terms of Christian liberty from outworn rules and superstitions, like the right to eat what one likes (8.8). Christian liberty is an issue dear to Paul's heart (Gal 5.1). But here he uses himself as an example to argue that “rights” must sometimes be subordinated to wider responsibilities.

The first part of the chapter sheds a fascinating sidelight on the finances of the early church. It is clear that there was a developed support network for the travelling apostles, and that Peter and others made good use of it (9.5). Apostles (and their wives) had a right to be supported by the churches in their full-time travelling ministry. Paul builds up an unassailable case, with arguments from natural justice (9.7 & 10), from OT law (9.8-9), from the Temple (9.13), and from Jesus himself (9.14 -- one of the rare occasions when Paul actually quotes a saying of Jesus).

Despite this -- and this is the point of the digression -- Paul chose not to use this right where he felt it might hinder the advance of the Gospel (9.12, 15-18; cf. Acts 18.1-3). Quite why Paul refused to accept support from the Corinthian church we shall never know (though it became a cause of friction later: cf. 2 Cor 11.7-11). Maybe the richer members of the church were attempting to use their financial power as a means of muzzling the apostle's prophetic challenge. (It happens!) He prefers to use the language of “partnership” (Philippians 1.5, 4.14): though even here it is clear that Paul does not find it easy to be dependent on other people's generosity.

Last Saturday, five of us Lay Reader candidates met at St Philip and St James church in Alderley Edge for a socially-distanced Quiet Day ahead of our Licensing next Sunday (4 October). The scheduled Retreat had been cancelled because Foxhill had been closed to visitors. Then the replacement Quiet Day in Runcorn was cancelled because Halton borough was locked down. But we weren't going to be defeated by a mere pandemic. So we split into two groups of six, starting the day with a Zoomed Morning Prayer and then forming two bubbles – a Zoom bubble and an Alderley bubble. Many thanks to your Vicar Robin and the Church

Wardens who made it all possible.

The Quiet Day helped us to focus our thinking on the Declarations and Promises we have to make in the cathedral on Sunday. And, as of today, it really is in the cathedral and not just on Zoom. But, with a maximum of only 30 people allowed in the cathedral, friends and family will have to follow proceedings on YouTube via the cathedral website www.chestercathedral.com, either live streamed at 3.30pm or later as a recording. And, then again, things might change.

The day before, Saturday 3 October, will have seen the Ordination of Priests and Deacons. Also in Chester Cathedral.

Ordination, of course, is a much bigger responsibility altogether. And Foxhill is opening specially, after months of closure, to host Ordination Retreats for our new Priests and Deacons – on Thursday and Friday. One day at Foxhill and one day at home. Half the Ordinands on Thursday and half Friday. We should hold all of them in our prayers tomorrow, Friday, and on Saturday.

I know my Reader candidate colleagues and I are very much aware of our coming responsibilities as Licensed Lay Ministers. Licensing will give us the right to hold forth – and the right to wear that blue scarf (with which, under social-distancing rules, we will have to vest ourselves – rather than being vested by our incumbent as in the usual Licensing ceremony). But the responsibilities of Ministry, Lay or Ordained, are only doable, as the declarations and promises make clear, ‘by the Grace of God’.

That Quiet Day in church set me thinking and praying about, and for, God’s Grace. The start of a week-long countdown to our big day - a wonderful launch pad for the final seven days of preparation. Preparation for the road and the years ahead.

Cathedral Evensong on Sunday celebrates St Francis of Assisi. The example of Francis, as well as Paul, reminds us to focus on the responsibilities of service, and not any status that might be sought. The service will end on a highly relevant note, with the hymn ‘Make me a channel of Your peace’

Oh Master, grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love with all my soul
Make me a channel of Your peace
It is pardoning that we are pardoned

In giving to all men that we receive
And in dying that we're born to eternal life

Christopher Graham