



The missionary challenge

Some people object to the use of the word "challenge" in relation to the gospel. However, used in this sense the word merely means "a summons to a contest". The gospel is more than a call to personal salvation; it is a summons to a contest — not a worldly one, in which for personal gain we pit our wits or strength against others, but a spiritual contest in which the struggle is against *"the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms"* (Ephesians 6:12). This contest is to take place not just on the personal level as we work out our own salvation, but on a cosmic scale, and the whole church must play its part.

Paul, the great missionary apostle to the Gentiles, provides us with much material on this subject. Too often we read his letters as theological treatises, intent on systematising the doctrine found there, forgetting that they were written with practical ends in view in missionary situations. I have chosen a passage in 1 Corinthians 9 to help us see how Paul met the missionary challenge in his own day.

Paul's concern in this chapter was to defend his apostleship against those who were attacking him and undermining his authority in the church in Corinth. Their reasoning probably went something like this: "Paul is not much of an apostle because he does not insist on being financially supported by the church. He even works with his own hands: Moreover, he is unreliable. We're not sure if he is going to visit us or not. We have other teachers who are just as good. And anyway we are getting on fine without him." And all this despite the terrible disunity and immorality which abounded in the Corinthian church.

Paul defended his apostleship not because he wanted to defend his personal reputation, but because he was concerned for the Corinthians. They were being led astray by others who were deriding Paul's claim to apostleship. Paul answered his critics by showing that whatever he did he did for the sake of the advance of the gospel. He was willing to be misunderstood and undergo personal attack and deprivation so long as this great end was furthered. What were the various challenges he faced and took up and which still lie before us today?

The challenge of the missionary commission

This challenge comes to us first of all in the clear command of our Lord recorded in Matthew 28:18-20 to *"go and make disciples of all nations"*. With his authority as risen mediator Jesus has commissioned his church to bring the message of his saving grace to all people everywhere. Paul took this command seriously. Indeed, he had his own personal commission from the Lord (Acts 9:15; 22:15; 26:17, 18). Paul was called to be an apostle, and we are all called to be witnesses for the Lord. Paul's attitude to the commission can be gauged from 1 Corinthians 9:16: *"Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel"*.

Paul felt he had no choice in the matter. God had laid his hand on him and saved him and now he was obliged to witness to others. Yet he did not do this grudgingly; he did it willingly and joyfully, giving up many privileges which were his by right.

Do you take the Great Commission seriously? Or do you leave its fulfilment to others? Surely each one of us has a responsibility to see to its fulfilment, according to our gifts and calling. Some are called to go to distant lands, but all are called to go to those around us and to support by giving and prayer those who have gone into specially difficult missionary situations at home or abroad.

The challenge of missionary compassion

While the greatest motive for missionary interest and work must be the Great Commission, another powerful motive must be the plight of the lost. We catch a hint of this in 1 Corinthians 9:22b and 23. Paul did everything possible so that even some people might be saved. The New American Standard Version catches the emphasis well in verse 23: "*And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow-partaker of it.*" His emphasis is not so much on his aiming to share in the gospel for himself but rather on his missionary work resulting in his sharing in the blessings of the gospel along with others who have come to believe. Paul was neither an individualist nor an isolationist, intent on saving himself while others perished. No, he had a burden for the lost which drove him in all his endeavours.

We see his missionary heart graphically expressed in Romans 9:1-3 where he says that he could wish himself cut off from Christ for the sake of his Jewish brothers. This he could say as the apostle to the Gentiles who had suffered so much at the hands of his fellow-Jews. In this he was doing no more than following the example of his Lord, who wept over Jerusalem, knowing full well that his own people would reject him and deliver him up to be crucified.

How do you face up to this challenge, the challenge to show compassion to the lost? If we really believe the Bible's teaching on the eternal punishment of those who die without Christ, what kind of people are we if we can regard this with equanimity? No doubt the time will come when we will rejoice in the punishment of the wicked, but meantime we must do all we can to save the wicked from their fate. "*For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!*" (Ezekiel 18:32). If we are to think God's thoughts after him, we must have his compassion for the lost.

The challenge of missionary commitment

If the missionary commitment remains as yet largely *unfulfilled* by the church at large and the challenge of missionary compassion highlights the *unfinished* nature of the task, the challenge of missionary commitment focuses on an *unfashionable* sacrifice. We will all readily agree that it is incumbent upon us to face the first two challenges, but when it comes to the challenge of personal commitment how do we respond?

Our response to the Great Commission depends on our attitude towards God. Is he sovereign in our lives? Then surely we must take this command seriously. Our response to the challenge of missionary compassion depends on our attitude to the lost. Do we share in our Lord's compassion for them? Our response to the challenge of missionary commitment will depend on our attitude to ourselves. Christ's attitude to himself was that he made himself nothing by taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7). In following his Master Paul made himself a slave to everyone (1 Corinthians 9:19).

This, of course, cuts right across the attitude to self which is characteristic of the world, especially in the age in which we live. Today the emphasis is on self-fulfilment, self-assertion, self-protection, self-promotion, self-assurance, self-satisfaction — in fact self-centredness, which is another word for sin. There is a scriptural doctrine for self-regard: "*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you*" (Romans 12:3). We have nothing to be proud of in ourselves. By the grace of God we are what we are. Our sense of self-worth comes not from our background, our abilities or our achievements, but from our status in Christ. He has taught us to deny ourselves, take up the cross and follow him. How did Paul put this into practice?

Self-denial

He expressed this commitment first of all in *self-denial*. No doubt Paul denied himself in many ways. But in 1 Corinthians 9:1-18 he highlights two ways in which he gave up his rights for the advance of the gospel. He denied himself the right to receive financial support from the church and

he denied himself the right to take a wife along with him who would also share in financial support. He makes it clear that he did this so that the gospel would not be hindered.

Now Paul sometimes did insist on his rights. For instance in Acts 16:37 we read that Paul insisted that the magistrates in Philippi come themselves and bring Silas and himself out of prison, because they had illegally beaten and imprisoned Roman citizens without a trial. Why did Paul do this? Presumably it was not to heal his wounded pride. He had had the joy of suffering for his Lord and of seeing the Philippian jailer being dramatically converted. It was not for personal reasons. It was rather so that the small Christian community would be encouraged and receive a boost in the public eye when the magistrates had to eat humble pie. Paul always had an eye for the advancement of the gospel and the welfare of God's people, not for personal advancement, comfort or prestige.

Self-denial is not popular today. The emphasis is on *my* rights, *my* privileges, *my* security. And as usual the church is affected by the spirit of the age. But we must not be conformed to this world, pressed into its mould, its way of thinking. No, we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds and have our way of thinking, our attitudes, patterned after the attitude of Christ.

We sometimes speak of someone sacrificing a career to serve God overseas or to enter the ministry. But let's be clear about this. Nothing that we give up should be regarded as a sacrifice on our part. Christ gave up everything for us. We are not our own, we are bought with a price. Self-denial should be the everyday lifestyle of each believer, not just a chosen few. If we all had this attitude, the Church would not be facing a deficit and missionaries on furlough would not be struck by the complacency and lack of missionary interest of many Christians. And more young people would be offering for missionary service.

Self-demotion

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 we see that Paul demotes himself from being a free man to being a slave. Not only was he willing to give up his rights, but he was willing to give up his freedom. He had shaken off the shackles of legalistic Judaism, the Pharisaism in which he had been born and bred. He considered himself free from Gentile idolatry and superstition. And yet, when the advance of the gospel was at stake, he was willing to sacrifice his freedom.

To the Jews he became like a Jew, to win the Jews. He willingly circumcised Timothy, whose mother was a Jew and father a Greek, so as not to offend the Jews of that area (Acts 16:1-3). Yet he refused to circumcise Titus, a Greek (Galatians 2:3), because a point of principle was at stake. How adaptable Paul was!

To those under the law he became like one under the law. Thus for the sake of those who still observed Jewish rites and ceremonies, he willingly took part in such a ceremony when he deemed it necessary (Acts 21:20-26). He makes it clear that he was now free from the demands of the ceremonial law, but he sometimes subjected himself to it in order to avoid offence. That his attempt on this occasion to win the favour of the Jews was unsuccessful does not invalidate the principle.

To those not having the law he became like one not having the law. Thus he accommodated himself to Greek thought forms when preaching to Greeks. For instance he based his address against idolatry to the rustic Lycaonian Gentiles not on grounds of the second commandment but on the grounds of creation and common grace, categories they could understand (Acts 14:8-18). Likewise he addressed the more sophisticated audience in Athens with an appeal to their own writers and in thought forms they would appreciate (Acts 17:22-31).

Under Christ's law

He ate and drank freely with Gentiles and at one point stood alone in this regard (Galatians 2:11 ff.). He considered himself free from the law, yet under the law of Christ, a far more demanding law than the Old Testament ceremonial law and all the scribal additions. Christ reiterated the principle of the second part of the Decalogue, "*Love your neighbour as yourself,*" and widened and

deepened our understanding of it by showing that it included even one's enemies and applied to our thoughts and not just our actions. We fulfil the law of Christ by bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) and by doing to others as we would have them do to us.

To the weak he became weak. In 1 Corinthians 8 he has dealt with food offered to idols. Of course an idol is nothing and therefore food offered to an idol can be eaten without the eater being involved in idolatry. However, to avoid hurting the conscience of a weak believer who really thought the idol was something, Paul was willing to forego his freedom to eat meat offered to idols.

Thus he became all things to all men and opened himself to the charge of inconsistency. Yet he did it with a clear conscience because he never compromised on matters of principle. The advance of the gospel and the welfare of God's people were always at the forefront of his mind. What a lesson for us! How flexible are we in our relationships with others at a personal or at an ecclesiastical level? Do we elevate to the level of a principle matters which are negotiable?

Are we willing, as Paul was, to leave our own cosy cultural patch, and lift our eyes to the "regions beyond", including the subcultures around us with which we feel we have little in common? Are we willing to make ourselves slaves to others, giving up our own freedom so that we may identify with them to win them for Christ? Are we willing to clothe scriptural doctrines in thought forms and language which will appeal to other groups?

Self-discipline

The final aspect of Paul's missionary commitment shown here may be seen in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and may be summed up as *self-discipline*. He borrowed his illustration from the Greek games, of which there were several, the best known at Corinth being the Isthmian games. He challenged the Corinthians to disciplined, holy living. As an athlete goes in to strict training, denies himself and brings his body into subjection single-mindedly, so must we subdue our sinful natures and say no to selfish desires. Paul did this so that he, who had acted as a herald calling others to the contest and setting forth its rules, would not be himself disqualified from receiving the prize. If Paul, the most disciplined and dedicated of men had to exert himself so much, how much more should we!

Self-discipline is just as unpopular today as self-denial and self-demotion. Many Evangelicals have reacted quite rightly against an ascetic and world-denying pietism which was once popular and is still highly regarded in some quarters. However, I fear the pendulum has swung too far. Entertainment, worldly success, enjoying the "good things" of life and having a good time have replaced the previous emphasis on withdrawal from the world and denying oneself "worldly" pleasures. As a popular song has it, "Let's get together and feel all right" — with the emphasis very much on "feel".

I believe both extremes are wrong. They both lead to selfish self-absorption and stunted Christian growth and witness. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness of it. God has given us everything richly to enjoy. Everything God created is good and is to be received with thanks giving. But we must exercise the freedom we have in Christ within the limits of his law — the perfect law of liberty — which teaches us to deny ourselves, to become as slaves in the service of others and to put to death the sinful nature which is still within us. It is only as we do this, that we will become effective witnesses for him.

I believe that it is at this point of responding to the challenge of missionary commitment that we as a church fail. We are orthodox with regards to doctrine. We would never dream of arguing that the Great Commission is outdated or that compassion for the lost is misguided. But we do not let this doctrine so grip our lives that we commit ourselves fully to the missionary task. In what ways can you respond to the missionary challenge?

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