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# Understanding Christian Freedom

## SCOTT HOEZEE

During the COVID-19 pandemic, if there was one topic we heard a lot about, it was personal freedom. When stay-at-home orders were issued, when masks were mandated, when certain businesses were told they couldn't safely operate for the time being, people rebelled. They chafed; especially in a place like the United States, where freedom is deeply ingrained in the public consciousness, we rebel against having our freedom clipped; and so, governors and mayors who had to curtail that freedom for a season came in for stinging criticism, and sometimes even death threats. Well, freedom is a topic that comes up in the New Testament quite often, too; and today, from 1 Corinthians, we will see what the Apostle Paul had to say about Christian freedom. Stay tuned.

## DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, this is now episode number five of a planned seven-part series on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. We have covered about half the letter now, and so now we are going to turn to some material kind of near the middle of the letter in things that Paul wrote in Chapters 9 and 10.

## DARRELL DELANEY

It is pretty clear that there was never a dull moment, Scott, in the church at Corinth.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

## DARRELL DELANEY

There were plenty of issues that they had to address, and Paul is just nailing them one by one.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we have mentioned that scholars are almost universally in agreement. Paul is replying to a letter the Corinthians sent him, and that letter was studded with questions, controversy after controversy. Like you said, it is never a dull moment in Corinth; but now, as we go into Chapter 9, it seems less a controversy in Corinth and more something that involved Paul personally.

## DARRELL DELANEY

So, Paul was a missionary—of course, we know this—and he would go from place to place planting churches and raising up leaders; and so, there would be these groups of people who would try to discredit his name whenever he left. I mean, he wasn't present there. It wasn't like he had a plane and could fly back. So, he had planted churches in many different places, and there were people who would go behind him and try to make it hard for the people to receive the message of the gospel.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Sometimes it was the message itself that got messed up...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

There was this group called the Judaizers, who kept trying to undercut grace. That happened in Galatia, where the Galatians kind of after Paul left were told: No, no, no; Jesus doesn't save you fully, you have to help. Other times, though, it was Paul himself who got criticized; and you know, on *Groundwork* a while back, Darrell, we did a series on 2 Corinthians. We noticed there that in a lot of that letter, Paul is in a defensive posture, defending himself against people who said that Paul was a charlatan, that he was just in it for the money, or other nasty things; and that looks like what must have happened already when Paul was aware of *this* letter.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

There were people who questioned his apostleship because, I mean, he wasn't there with Jesus when he was walking around the earth; and so, there were some people who had problems and questions with that, and it looks like in this verse that we are about to read that he addresses that.

<sup>9:1</sup>Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? <sup>2</sup>Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am an apostle to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>This is my defense to those who sit in judgment of me.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

So, yes, Darrell; it is pretty clear there Paul is upset and he is defending himself, but this...actually, as Paul goes on, it is going to lead to a wider discussion on the nature of Christian freedom; but maybe before we get to what Paul says about what it means to be free, and how to use your freedom in Christ, maybe we should remind ourselves why this was sort of an issue in the early Church in the first place.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes; so, we need a context to help understand why it is important. I know that in this current age and day...because we are in the United States...that Christian freedom is something we dig deep into as part of our identity and our psyche, but in order for us to understand the context of what Paul is getting to, based on his background as a Jew first, and then a Christian second...

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

We need a little bit more context.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; and so, one of the things that Paul had to deal with in particularly Jewish context was the fact that a lot of the rituals and ceremonies that were dictated by Israelite law, particularly restrictions on what kind of food you could eat, for instance...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Kosher.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

The kosher laws, right? All those food laws, all those purity laws, and so forth that were in Leviticus, right? They are all over the place...those were the big theological word...it's not that big a word...but the

theological word is those were *abrogated* in Christ—they were set aside; but the danger was always that people then could kind of then go too far in ignoring the law, right? I mean, you sort of say: Well, you don't have to do that anymore. Now they think: Well, I can do anything; and that was a problem in Jewish circles.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

So, there were two different ditches, Scott. One is that you followed the law far too closely and became a legalist...

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Or you didn't follow the law at all and said: It's all out of there so we can do whatever we want; and the two imbalances there really were a part of the problem, and Paul is trying to give them a middle line of how to govern themselves according to the faith so that they don't confuse each other or hurt each other.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; and you know, one of the earliest controversies in the Church...and there were some pretty significant arguments about this...in Acts 15, they convened a whole council...sort of the first synod or general assembly of the Church...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Led by James in Jerusalem...the controversy was if you are going to be a Christian, you have to become a Jew first. So, Paul preached to the Gentiles...the Corinthians were Gentiles, they were not Jews...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And so they said: Well, you have to become a Jew first and then become a Christian; and the Jerusalem council said no; you are saved by grace alone. You don't have to become a Jew first. We don't follow those laws. Circumcision doesn't mean that anymore. The kosher food laws...all that is set aside. So again, for the Jews, like you said, Darrell...the one ditch...don't go too far and now just ignore everything and just live it up however you want. For the Gentiles, who never had the law in the first place, Paul also had to say: You are free; you are free in Christ, but not totally free...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Because there is going to be a larger principle involved here, which he is going to take a while to talk about; but certainly, Paul would make clear: Look, the Ten Commandments are still important—not in order to get saved, but because that is like the blueprint...the owner's manual for creation. It is just the wise way to live, but there are other issues as well.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

So, in our Reformed accent, we would say: Because Christ perfectly fulfilled the law, we are grateful for what he has done. Out of that, we get to live according to the Ten Commandments. We have a guideline and a frame. The Gentiles needed some sort of framework. They couldn't just be willy-nilly with this faith...

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

They had to know that there were some guidelines that they could use; but when you have cultural practices coming in, this is where it gets confusing.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right, because...I mean, Paul... In the previous program in this series, Darrell, we talked about food sacrificed to idols; and obviously one of the questions the Corinthians asked in their letter to Paul was: Hey, you know, some of the food in the market that we can buy...some of the fruit and vegetables and stuff...meat...some of that had been, you know, dedicated to a false god. Can we buy that and take it home and eat it? Paul said: Of course. The idols are nothing. They mean nothing. So, you can eat whatever you want, but there were some of these cultural practices that were controversial, and some Christians really thought you shouldn't do certain things, and other Christians said: Look, we can do that; but when that happens...when there is a controversy...when one believer is offended, then what? Does your freedom in Christ mean you don't care about the other person, or is there more involved and going on here?

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Well, in the next segment we are going to hear more about what it means specifically, and we will talk about that subject, so stay tuned.

*Segment 2*

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this program number five in a seven-part series; and Darrell, let's dig right back into 1 Corinthians Chapter 9. We read some of the early verses earlier, but now let's ponder the following words from Paul:

<sup>19</sup>Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. <sup>20</sup>To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. <sup>21</sup>To those not having the law, I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law, but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. <sup>22</sup>To the weak, I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. <sup>23</sup>I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

What is interesting to me about that verse, Scott, is that if you look at it at first glance, you could think that Paul is trying to be like a chameleon, who...well, the blue team is telling me to be blue, so I am going to be blue with them. The red team is here now, so I am going to be red now; and I don't think that is what Paul is getting at, because it is not about him losing his identity or forsaking Jesus, but it is about him doing what is necessary in order to love and care for folks, that they may be won to Christ.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; you know, you could kind of say: Boy, Paul is wishy washy. No spine; no backbone, man; stand up! But, right. He is making it clear that he does that because the number...way more important than any personal freedom that he might have...which is kind of what we are talking about in this episode...more important than his being a servant, being a servant to other people. He is not wishy washy; and of course, he wouldn't go along with just anything, right? If he with people who denied Jesus is Lord, he wouldn't say: Oh, I deny Jesus is Lord...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

No way.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

No; he wouldn't sin, but when it is not important, when it is just a matter of preference or practice or perspective, then Paul is going to have empathy with people—he will relate to them at their own level so that the gospel has a chance to stick, because nothing is more important to Paul than saving people, or having the Holy Spirit save them through Paul.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

That word that you just said there, Scott: Empathy; I think it takes great empathy to do this. I think it also takes humility and consideration for your neighbor, which is, in essence, how you love them. In this Corinthian context, he is telling them you need to love your neighbor by maybe abstaining from something you feel free to do. It is going to be a personal inconvenience to you, but it is not going to be that serious, so that you could do that for your neighbor, right? You could do that.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Exactly; and let's point out what may be fairly obvious here. This is what Jesus did. I mean, this is what Jesus did all through his ministry, but this is what Jesus did in becoming incarnate and becoming a human being, right? Jesus had existed from all eternity as the Son of God...

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

Right.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Well, the Son of God cannot get beat up, cannot get cut and bleed, he cannot die; but Jesus took on real flesh that could be cut and would bleed, that could be whipped and would bleed, that could die and it did. His feelings could get hurt. He became what we were to meet us at our level so as to save us, right? That is all Paul is saying here. He is not being wishy washy or a people pleaser. He is having empathy, and he is relating to people so that he can serve them as Jesus did.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

He specifically said, Scott, in another one of his letters—Ephesians—to imitate Christ's example, and that is exactly what he is doing; and I know he wasn't there for the foot washing, but the essence of the foot washing is here. Jesus himself washed the feet of his disciples and became the servant, and he is showing everyone who follows him, whether they were present with him or not, this is how you serve one another, and that is the example that Paul was trying to set.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Exactly; but now let's move on, Darrell, to the next chapter, to 1 Corinthians 10, because Paul is going to tease this out a little bit more...this whole idea of being a servant, and of relating to people where they are so as to have a chance to save them, and he is going to now, in 1 Corinthians 10, starting at the 23<sup>rd</sup> verse, it looks like Paul is quoting something back to them. Again, we think he is responding to a letter. So, now he is going to say you wrote this, and here is what I think about that. Let's hear those words.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive. <sup>24</sup>No one should seek their own good, but the good of others. <sup>25</sup>Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, <sup>26</sup>for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." <sup>27</sup>If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. <sup>28</sup>But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. <sup>29</sup>I am referring to the other person's conscience, not yours.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right; so, this gets a little tricky...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

A little bit.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; on the one hand, don't get hung up on all kinds of rules and what you can eat and what you cannot eat. You are not walking a spiritual tightrope, Paul says. We are saved by grace; we have freedom. You are not going to get condemned by Jesus for something you eat...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

On the other hand, if your host says: I dedicated this to my god...you know, whatever...and if you get the sense that if I eat this it will sort of be like I am endorsing your religion...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Allegiance.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Then, don't do it, Paul says. Maybe have a conversation with them about why you don't want to eat it, or you are going to eat it, but you are not honoring his god on account of it; but, you know, for the sake of the other person, don't give the impression that maybe their god is as legitimate as Jesus...don't do that, then. Be smart about it.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

I think, too, that if there is a situation where this person is informing you that the food is sacrificed to idols, now it becomes a witnessing opportunity with the theological statement that you are making by not eating the meat.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Exactly.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

But, before that, if it is just meat offered to you and you give thanks to God, because God owns the meat, and their idols aren't real, so you don't have to have that internal pressure that you carry...you don't need to carry it, is what I am saying.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Exactly; and so, yes, it can get a little dicey, but the core idea is don't seek your own good, seek ever and only the good of others; and I did like that with the passage you just read, right, where twice Paul says: I have the right to do anything. Clearly, somebody wrote him that. He is quoting...you know, sometimes our kids say that: I got rights! I got the right to do anything! Yes, you have a lot of freedom, but not everything is beneficial—not everything is constructive. Yes, you can do that, but you are going to hurt somebody else's feelings, you are going to offend somebody, you cannot do that. That is not being Jesus-like, and that is the real principle here.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Right.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

You know, somebody once said that there is a whole lot more to being a Christian than being nice, but Christianity is not less than that either...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Exactly.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Be considerate. That is the thing we say to our kids: Be considerate of others.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

That is true, and Scott, I was thinking about when you were saying that, that our freedom is not designed to be a bulldozer to push everybody else out of the way: Well, this is what I get to do...this is what I have the right to do...and just totally have no regard for those who are around you. When we live our faith in community, we just cannot do that. So, we have to be more responsible, and that takes a mature step to defer and to deny yourself of some things that you think you have the right to have.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And you know, even outside of a church context, Darrell, I mean, none of us really like inconsiderate people, right? So, okay; this guy is in his own driveway, washing his own car, and he is playing his own radio, but he blasts the music so loud that it is waking up the baby next door, the whole neighborhood has to listen to his music. We don't really care for people like that; it is just being inconsiderate...sure, he has the freedom to do what he wants in his own driveway, but come on, we don't like inconsiderate people outside of the Church; but in the Church, this gets magnified so much more because we are supposed to be like Jesus; and as we close out this program, we are going to think about some practical implications for all of that, so stay tuned.  
*Segment 3*

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I am Scott Hoezee; and let's now go to the last words Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians Chapter 10: <sup>31</sup>So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. <sup>32</sup>Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks, or the Church of God—<sup>33</sup>even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

So, Paul is basically giving us, Scott, his bottom line of why he is doing this. Number one, it is for the glory of God, and he does it also for the benefit...the salvific benefit...of the neighbor who needs the witnessing of Christ. So, if he can say yes or no to meat at that moment or whatever he is doing, it may win this person to Christ, or give him an opportunity to at least have a further conversation. We should be living that way as well.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Exactly; and as we said earlier, you know, when we talk about somebody as a people pleaser, it is never in a complimentary way; and of course, Paul would be the first to admit that, of course, there were a lot of activities he wouldn't go along with just to go along to get along. He wouldn't laugh at certain jokes just to help him fit in. There are prudent limits here, but short of going along with sinful behavior, keeping the needs of others in mind, acting in ways that will serve them, benefit them, help them, that is just the second...what did Jesus say is the second great commandment? Love your neighbor...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Love your neighbor as yourself.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

As yourself...that is exactly what Paul is saying.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

And it is interesting that the Corinthians have to be reminded of this with all of the things that are going on. The fact that they need to practice this way, to be empathetic, to be compassionate, and not worry about what is self-seeking; that is the best way to love your neighbor.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

You know, we opened this program mentioning the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, and how a lot of people rebelled against having their freedom curtailed, even for a season, for the sake of others. We would like to be able to say that the Church rose above all that, but unfortunately many of us have experienced it personally or we have heard reports about where, yes, you know, when the church council said we cannot meet in person...or you know, when we start meeting, you have to wear a mask in church; and some people didn't like that; other people, you know, would take to Facebook and say: Look, you wear masks so you don't accidentally infect another person. This is love your neighbor as yourself. That is just very simple, and if it means that you have to give up your freedom...you say: Well, I have rights, you know; I don't have to wear a mask. Well, maybe you do have to give that up for a season, but this happens a lot in the Christian life, not just related to COVID or the pandemic.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

I do know that I speak for myself in this case, Scott. There are some things that I would like to say to people that I know that I feel is honest to say, and I want to speak truth to them, but if I don't speak that truth in love, if I don't speak it in a way that is tactful...that is winsome...then #1: I am going to bulldoze them, like I said we shouldn't do earlier, and #2: You have lost your opportunity to win that person for Christ or show the example Christ gave, because when you receive a word or a correction from someone, you want it to be a compassionate word...you want it to be a word filled with love; and if that doesn't happen, then they pretty much lost you as a hearer; and that person, if I am speaking to them, I have lost them as a hearer.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

Exactly; yes, you are free. You have lots of things you can do, but in your freedom, be considerate...be considerate of others. Make it your goal to serve others, and that means...you know, again, maybe I don't have any problem drinking a glass of wine or having a beer or a cocktail, but if I am in the presence of a fellow believer who is offended by that, or maybe, you know, they have a history of alcoholism in their family and that really bothers them, then I say: Okay, I know I have the freedom to drink this, but for your sake, on this occasion, I won't. I am not going to do it, for you. Because what does Paul say here? Don't be a stumbling block...a *skandalon* in the Greek...

**DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes.

**SCOTT HOEZEE**

A scandal. Don't trip other people up, right? It is like sticking your foot out and purposely tripping somebody on the sidewalk. Don't do that; that is not what you are free to do in Christ.

**DARRELL DELANEY**

I think it is important for us to know that when you bring up, like the drinking thing, or something like that, it is that if we are thinking about ourselves, and we are self-seeking, then we will think about how our freedom—what we have the right to do—and if we are not careful, we could move into a prideful place...

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Right.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

Like, I am stronger than this person...this person is weaker than me, so I am going to be strong and this situation is not going to hurt me or affect me. That could be challenging when you are trying to fellowship with someone.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

What you just said. Sometimes...it is not here per se, but in Romans and in other places in the New Testament, Paul refers to this as, you know, the strong and the weak, right? And if you are strong in the faith, and you are mature and you know that there are certain things you can do, but others who are maybe earlier in their walk in discipleship, or they are more easily offended, you know, Paul might call them the weak, but you become weak with the weak so that you don't offend them. Of course, the problem is none of us like to think we are weak, right? We always think we are strong. I am leaning into my convictions; and you don't want to condescend to somebody and say: Well, listen; you know, I know this offends you, dear, so I am not going to... No, no, no. That is not being loving either. But think of other people first, right? And if you know as a fact that such and such is going to bother them...trip them up...upset them, do the Jesus thing and become their servant and say: I am going to put my freedom in my back pocket so I can love you and we don't have to have this issue between us.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

So, because freedom doesn't need to become the main thing, we need to make sure that the main thing is the main thing, and the main thing is salvation in Jesus Christ, and since these are not salvation issues, we have room to talk, we have room to communicate and try to find some agreement. So, that is why it is really tricky, because you cannot just have: This is the rule! Especially when you have case by case situations like Paul is addressing.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Paul sometimes in the New Testament refers to this with the Greek word *adi?foros*, which people who have gone to seminary maybe remember. It is often translated as things indifferent. They are not salvation issues. This is not denying Jesus is Lord or something. These are just cultural issues, practices that differ community to community, but they are not a big enough deal to cause controversy. Just leave it aside if it means maintaining the peace; and ironically, of course, when everybody does this...when I am deferring to you and you are deferring to me and we are all deferring to each other, we get this lovely Christ-like dance going on of mutual love. And you know what? That is when we look like the body of Christ.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ is the verse that actually comes to mind when you say that, Scott.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Exactly; for the sake of each other, we submit to each other, out of reverence for Christ.

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we dig deeper into the book of 1 Corinthians and look at the issues Paul addresses in Chapter 11 to 13.

Connect with us at our website, [groundworkonline.com](http://groundworkonline.com). Share what *Groundwork* means to you, or tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

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