

THE CHRISTIAN FREEDOM AND ITS BOUNDARIES IN 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12 AND 10:23

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Abstract: The Pauline statement “all is lawful for me” found in 1 Corinthians is intriguing in several ways. First, it appears two times. Second, both the context in 1 Cor 6 and 10 contain various prohibitions, which seem to contradict an absolute freedom. Third, it is not immediately clear and explicitly pointed out whether the statement is an expression of Paul’s own belief or a Corinthian slogan the apostle tries to debunk. Therefore, this paper raises several questions. The first one is what does “it is lawful” mean? The second one is whose statement is this? The third one is what the Christian freedom really is and what are its boundaries? The research brings in dialogue linguistic, literary, and socio-historical approaches that enhance the quest for an informed answer. In light of the perspectives just mentioned the arguments seem to favor that “it is lawful” is quite a precise legal term, which cannot therefore be joint with the word “all” and be expressive, at the same time, of Paul’s thought. It is rather a Corinthian catchphrase and belief influenced by philosophical schools of the time and the societal standards at large. Christian freedom seems to be bound to God’s principles and laws on one side, and the negative impact my freedom could have upon other believers. I recommend a study that will discuss the same phrase from an exclusively rhetorical perspective.

Keywords: Christian Freedom; Law, Prohibitions, 1 Corinthians

Introduction

This is a study about the freedom of the Christian in the perspective of the phrase πάντα ἔξεστιν “all is lawful”, four times used by Paul in his Corinthian correspondence. Throughout this research there are three

questions which are particularly addressed. The first one is what the assertion “it is lawful” means. The second is whether this is a Pauline statement, that is, an affirmation of the apostle’s own belief. The third question is what the limits, if any, of the Christian freedom are in the context of 1 Cor 6:12 and 10:23. The quest for an answer to the questions posed brings in dialogue linguistic, literary, and socio-historical facts.

Backgrounds of the study

The Church fathers assumed that πάντα ἔξεστιν is Pauline while they tried to draw the territory within which this principle operates. The first direction of interpretation is associated with Irenaeus (*Adversus Heresis* 4.37.4), Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyr who defined πάντα ἔξεστιν as referring to the human freedom of choice (Bray, 1999, 56). They inferred that there are good as well as bad decisions. The second type of interpretation was to confine the word πάντα to things of the natural law to which moderation is advisable. Thus, Church Fathers discuss about being free to eat, but not with gluttony (Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 2.1), being free to possess but not luxurious (Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 2.13), having exceptional ecclesiastical rights (to baptize as a lay person) but not working against the church hierarchy (Tertullian *On Baptism* 17), and being free to own a wardrobe but choosing cloths that exhibit modesty (Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Woman* 2.10. Cyprian, *On the dress of virgins* 9).

To Luther (2008), the Christian liberty is justification without the Law, but not careless or bad life. Anticipating that some would distort his teaching about the freedom he wrote upon, Luther clarifies that the faith of Christ does not set us free from works, but from the belief in works as means of justification. Calvin (2012, 52) believed that πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν are words “spoken in the name of the Corinthians” and πάντα refers to “outward things,” which must be touched with moderation. Lange (1976, 131) discards the idea that Paul replies to a Corinthian slogan, stating that πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν is a fundamental Christian principle formulated as “all things are in my power,” which the antinomian in Corinth would use to justify a licentious behavior. It appears that more often than not scholars favor the non-Pauline origin of the affirmation, whether this means that the phrase is a quote utterly foreign from the apostle or a

misuse of Paul's own words and gospel (e.g., Zerwick & Grosvenor, 1974, 508; Conzelmann, 1975, 109; Horsley, 1998, 90; Williams III, 2003, 28; Heil, 2005, 107). With regards to the source of this slogan, if not local, then there might have been Cynic, Stoic (Conzelmann, 1975, 109), and Gnostic (Pagels, 1975, 66-67) influences behind.

From the above overview of opinions the reader can observe that the Church Fathers were not concerned with the quest for the origin of πάντα ἔξεστιν. They simply took the expression as being Pauline and either interpreted it as "I am free to choose" or tried to assign its limitations to the natural law and desires. With Luther and Calvin the discussion moves towards a necessary decision, which is whether the phrase was penned by Paul's belief or only repudiated by the apostle's replies. Not only the two reformers, but the majority of the later commentators deny Paul's origin of the phrase. Irrespective of its original voice, it appears that πάντα ἔξεστιν is disowned in 1 Corinthians 6 and 10. We shall now proceed with the analysis of the meaning of ἔξεστιν.

The meaning of ἔξεστιν

The verb ἔξεστι is an impersonal verb which forms from the unused in the New Testament ἔξειμι ("to go out") and should be translated "it is lawful." It is used 21 times in the Gospels, three times in Acts, and twice in 1 Corinthians, in our two passages. Basically, when something is lawful or not in the Gospels it is related to a law: God's law, including the mosaic law (Cf. Matt 14:4; 19:3; Mar 2:26; 6:18; 10:2; Luke 6:4; John 18:31), the rabbinical-pharisaic *halakah* (Cf. Matt 12:2, 10, 12; 27:6; Mar 2:24; 3:4; Luke 6:2, 9; 14:3; John 5:10), and some social or governmental law (Cf. Matt 20:15; 22:17; Mar 12:14; Luke 20:22). The other three instances from Acts divide into two categories. Two texts allude to the Roman law and customs (Cf. Acts 16:21; 22:25), while the third text is a general request for a permission to speak (Acts 21:37). The last two occurrences are from 1 Cor 6:12 and 10:23.

Philo uses ἔξεστι twelve times. In half of the occurrences he alludes to the law of Moses three of which we can refer here. Thus, Philo writes about the interdiction to eat on the Day of Atonement (*Moses* II 24), about the right of the priests to partake of the things offered on the altar, which were not consumed by fire (*Special Laws* II 183), regarding

the relationships between parents and children and what is allowable of the former when the latter need correction (*Special Laws* II 230). There are also two usages in the Apostolic Fathers. The first one comes from Ignatius who in addressing those in Smyrna, he says: "It is not permissible (οὐκ ἐξόν) either to baptize or to hold a love feast without the bishop" (*Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans* 8.2). Here the reference is to the law of the Christian church, in the sense of working policy. The second occurrence is found in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12.2. Being asked by the multitude to release the lions to kill Polycarp, Philip the Asiarch "said that it was not lawful (μη̄ εἶναι ἐξόν) for him to do so since he had already brought to a close the animal hunts." The allusion here goes to the rules the proconsul was subject to. It is clear from these witnesses that ἐξεστί is mostly a legal term. It appears that the predominant meaning of ἐξεστί in the Bible, Philo, and the Apostolic Fathers is that of a religious law. This makes necessary to analyze the context of the statement in order to see what law is being alluded in both 6:12 and 10:23.

The unfolding of Paul's argument

The first epistle of Paul sent to Corinth was motivated by the problems the Christians faced there. The first four chapters unfold one of the main issues the Corinthian church had, which is, divisions among its members, particularly by preferring and supporting one leader over against the other. Chapter 5 is completely devoted to a second moral issue, which was an incest tolerated by the church. Paul commands that the man (a member of Christ's body) is a sinner and should be expelled from among them (5:13). The third problem was that the church members used to solve their disputations with one another in the pagan tribunals (6:1-6). Apparently, some parties in order to achieve their ambitious goals were doing wrong (ἀδικέω) and defrauding their fellow Christians. Here Paul makes a point that none of the wrong doers (ἄδικοι) will inherit the kingdom of God (6:9-10). After beginning v. 11 with the statement "some of you were these [ἄδικοι]," the writer continues with three verbs, each introduced by the strong adversative conjunction ἀλλὰ, "but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified." This triple repetition is meant to emphasize all three actions in the hope of convincing the addressees that they were made different and they are supposed to behave in a righteous way.

When 1 Cor 6:12 begins with πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν, it is not clear whether this points back or starts a new topic. Blass, F., Debrunner, A., & Funk, R. W. (1961, 242) argue that here we have an asyndeton between paragraphs and that 6:12 represents the beginning of a new thought. That from 6:13 onward a new topic is introduced is evident but this does not imply that 6:12 has nothing to do with the previous topic. In fact, the first πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν seems to go back to vv. 10-11, in which case “all is lawful for me” may be an allusion to those being at issue with one another. It may be a reference to the part which believed that the law was on its side. This seems confirmed by the second clause of the first sentence: ἀλλ’ οὐ πάντα συμφέρει, which literally reads “but not all [that is lawful for me to do] bring together.” But this adversative clause Paul would warn against the fact that even when the law may be on one’s side, the trial would have side effects upon the relationships between the parts.

The second part of 6:12 seems rather to point forward. Πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐγὼ ἐξουσιασθήσομαι ὑπό τινος means “all things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.” This anticipates the discussion in the second part of chapter 6 about sexual immorality in the context of pagan religions. It is very clear that πάντα μοι ἔξεστιν does not include immorality, and because this is so, I infer that πάντα excludes any other act against the moral law of God. In other words, “all is lawful for me” cannot refer to sinful conduct, which the moral law of God condemns. I think Paul reprehends the moral-free thinking of some of the Corinthians.

The last part of chapter 6 influences the advices and commands that Paul gives in 1 Cor 7. One can refer particularly to the idea of marriage. Because the time is shortened (ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν, 7:29) it is preferable the unmarried (or widowed) to remained unmarried. But if we are to choose between marriage and fornication, by far, marriage is the option (7:2, 5, 9, 28). Chapter 8 is totally devoted to the issue of eating of the food sacrificed to idols. Paul states that “an idol is nothing” (8:4). However, he cautiously admonishes his readers not to use this knowledge and liberty to the detriment of fellow Christians, who coming from a pagan background within which an idol is a reality, would defile their conscience by eating food sacrificed to idols (8:7-11). Both the issue of marriage (ch. 7) and of eating food sacrificed to idols (ch. 8) operate under the same principle in 6:12. It is lawful to get married and to eat food sacrificed to idol,

but in the first case it may not be the best decision considering to difficult times they were in, while in the second case eating should be avoided when one's conscience may be affected, especially in public places (ἐν εἰδωλείῳ, 8:10). Perhaps it is in this context that the reader can understand why Paul does not pretend his remuneration as he amply discusses the matter in chapter 9. This also was lawful, but considering the prejudices found in his audience, Paul prefers to lay no claim to it.

On the paradigm of the old Israel's failures in the wilderness Paul asks of his addressees not to crave after the things they craved (10:6). Then the apostle proceeds with a few examples of sins that Israel fell into: idol worship, sexual immorality, tempting Christ, and grumbling (10:7-10). Between 10:14 and 10:22, Paul contextualizes these four failures within the context of pagan festivals, wherein one could find idol worship, sexual immorality, food sacrificed to idols, the attendance to these festivals being a sort of rebellion against Christ's leading. In 10:22, Paul leaves no doubt that attending a pagan festival in a pagan temple is forbidden because worshipping idols is worshipping demons. Now, when 10:23 is introduced, πάντα ἔξουσιν cannot refer to the prohibitions previously mentioned. From a pagan festival, a Christian could only take part of the food, provided that it was offered in a private context and the participation was not an obstacle for the conscience of fellow Christians (10:27-31).

The Corinthian freedom

The previous section showed that Paul elaborates on the interdictions he has for the Corinthians. Assuming the principle of consistency, it is clear that πάντα ἔξουσιν is a slogan (O'Connor, 2004, 164-165), foreign from Paul's moral thought, which includes things to be avoided. The eleven criteria of Smith (2010, 68-88) by which a slogan is identified in 1 Corinthians are almost entirely met by πάντα ἔξουσιν. There are five other slogans in 1 Corinthians (1:12; 3:4; 6:13; 15:33, 34). Like πάντα ἔξουσιν, the last three are introduced without telling the reader that they are catchphrases. Like πάντα ἔξουσιν, all five are refuted by the apostle with some adversative sentences. Lastly, it appears that just as Bion, Epictetus, Seneca, Philo, and later Clement of Alexandria, Paul uses the diatribe, a dialogue with and a refutation of an imaginary opponent, 1 Cor 6:12 being one example (Turner, 1976, 81-82).

If πάντα ἔξεστιν is not Paul's belief, then what is the background of this freedom? It may be the principle of ἀναιδέια, the shamelessness of the Cynics (cf. Shea, 2010, 18), whose favorite place in Greece was Corinth alongside Athens (Dudley, 1937, 143). It may also echo the Epicurean's notion that "everything that is right or wrong depends upon the community's particular circumstances" (Brown, 2009, 195). "All is lawful for me" may be the result of a pessimism like Seneca's who said "we are bad, we have been bad; and, I hate to add, we will go on being bad" (Seneca, Book 1, 10.3). Lastly, πάντα ἔξεστιν may be an expression of the Gnostic libertinage (Klauck, 2000, 497).

Beyond the philosophical definitions of freedom in the first century Corinth, the society at large encouraged a limitless moral autonomy in some domains of life. For example, the Augustan marital law, which was in effect by the time Paul writes 1 Corinthians, promoted marriage (Grubbs, 2002, 83-84) albeit it did not repress or condemn the extra-marital sex if there was no high-rank or married woman involved (Harrington, 2002, 199). With Roman prostitution legalized and cheap and Plutarch's *Moralia* (*Advice to Bride and Groom* 16) trying to convince married women that the debaucheries of their Greek husbands with courtesans at their banquets are a form of respect to the wives, it is imaginable how the Corinthian mores became lax. It seems clear now that "Paul deftly employs the language of ancient ethics to answer objections in 6:12-14" (Keener, 2005, 57). By "ancient ethics" Keener refers to various philosophers, moralists, and the Roman law.

Paul's freedom

In the larger context of his epistles, Paul never considers himself as being without law, whether this is called the law "of God" (Rom 7:22), "of Christ" (1 Cor 9:20-21), or "of the Spirit" (Rom 8:2). He likes this law and he wishes to bring fruits that do not contradict the requirements of this law, but result in sanctification. In Paul's thought, the faith of the believer does not nullify the law, but upholds the law (Rom 3:31). However, faith does affect the believer's relationship with the law in the sense that within the relationship with Christ based on faith, the law cannot and does not produce righteousness (Gal 2:16-21).

In 1 Corinthians, “all is lawful for me” does not include immoral praxis, idolatry, attending pagan festivals, and eating food sacrificed to idols in a private context when this would affect someone’s faith and conscience. If this freedom would have no barriers than Paul’s limitations have no power. To say “It is lawful for me to commit immorality, but this may not be useful, may not edify, or it should not master me” it is contradictory and against all morals. If, as I argued, it was the Corinthians who believed in a law-free lifestyle, could Paul’s limitations do any good? The answer is no. That is why the apostle speaks plainly against the moral sins, condemned by the law of God. It is interesting to note however, that Paul could refer to lawful things that should be avoided when they do prove to be unprofitable, do not edify, and tend to subject or master the heart. In this category Paul includes lawsuits, marriage, consumption of food sacrificed to idols, and earning a salary from the Church funds. All these were lawful, but not bringing much of a benefit, either personal or relational.

In recent research scholars distinguish between “freedom *from*” and “freedom *for*.” In order to be meaningful, the “freedom *from*” must find a purpose (“freedom *for*”) and, apparently, Paul emphasizes the latter, because for him belonging to one another prevails to the self-interest (Garland, 2003, 229). Others discriminate between “freedom *from*” and “freedom *to*.” The former is freedom from sin and is absolute, while the latter, which is “freedom to act,” was wrongly taken by the Corinthians in absolute terms, too (O’Connor, 2009, 205).

Conclusions

The first question this article raised was what is the meaning of ἔξεστιν. The answer found is that this is a legal term, which in 1 Corinthians and much of the NT in general conveys a permission from the standpoint of God’s moral law. The second question considered whether or not πάντα ἔξεστιν is a Pauline belief. Based on textual, contextual, and stylistic reasons I argued that the answer is negative. Therefore, the expression “all is lawful” ought to have originated from another background, which could include either of the following sources: the philosophy of the Cynics, Stoics, Epicureans, Gnostics, and the Greco-Roman societal mores. The last question was what the limitations of the freedom in 1 Cor 6:12 and 10:23 are. It was shown that as a Corinthian slogan “all is lawful for me”

is absolute, while Paul's amendment is twofold. On the one hand, idolatry, sexual immorality, and attendance in a pagan festival is not lawful and must be avoided. On the other hand, there are lawful things such as eating food which was sacrificed to idols, a freedom to be used with caution, that is, when fellow Christians' faith and consciousness would not be affected by one's freedom.

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