

Christian Liberty

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The New Testament is very clear and emphatic that Christians are free from legalism, traditions of men, religious ritual, and the ceremonial/cultural religious laws of the Old Testament Israel. Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia that “no one is justified by the law...Christ redeemed us from the law.” (Gal.3:11), meaning that our salvation is not based on keeping the Mosaic Law, but it is based on the atoning work of Christ on the cross. In Galatians 5:1, Paul wrote that “It was for freedom that Christ set us free”. This freedom in this context is the freedom from traditions, ritual, and religious practices not ordained by the New Testament. Nevertheless, Paul even qualified this freedom of living by saying, “only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for sin, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one statement, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Gal.5:13). The point here is that when it comes to morally neutral issues that the Bible does not address, you are free to do as you please as long as you don’t offend anyone or cause anyone to act against their conscience. The governing principle in this is LOVE.

Recurring Issue in the N.T.

In the polytheistic Greco-Roman culture of the first century, offering animals for sacrifice to pagan gods was an every day occurrence. They had a god for every activity, every circumstance, and every occupation that they needed to appease with a sacrifice. The meat from the sacrificed animals was divided into three parts. One part was burned on the altar, one part was given to the offerer, and the largest part was given to the priests. The priests would take some home, but most would be sold in the market place. The meat was considered premium because it was cleansed of evil spirits and blessed by the gods. Thus the pagan priests were in the meat packing business.

In addition, weddings, parties, festivals, trade guilds, and most social events were held in Temple banquet halls and this sacrificed meat was always served. Therefore, it was nearly impossible to live in Gentile cities like Corinth or Rome and avoid this meat sacrificed to idols. This situation produced a dilemma for new Christians, especially Jewish Christians. A Christian had to either make excuses for not attending social gatherings, or go to pagan temples and be served this meat. Many sensitive believers refused to buy meat or attend temple gatherings because it seemed wrong or brought back memories of past pagan lives. The elders at the church at Corinth wrote Paul asking about this issue. Apparently they were confident in their knowledge that pagan deities did not exist and meat was simply meat, so they were eating without concern. Paul wrote back in 1 Corinthians 8 that this was true, their knowledge was correct, but their freedom should be limited by their love for fellow believers. Paul said that their knowledge made them arrogant and insensitive to the concerns of the brothers. Paul said, What “if someone sees you dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience...be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?”(1 Cor.8:10). Paul was saying that if the leadership of the church ate there, the peer pressure could lead the immature to do something against their own conscience. Paul said that because it is against their conscience, for them it is a sin, and makes them feel guilty. He likened it to putting out a stumbling block for their brother in Christ to fall over.

They must have had a similar problem in Rome as well because in Romans 14 Paul went over the same issues. If one believer is weak in faith and understanding that he can eat whatever he wants, don’t pass judgment over him, but instead be kind and don’t offend him. In Romans 14:14, Paul wrote “I know that no food is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.” He went on to say that if you hurt your brother over these kind of neutral “grey areas” you are no longer living according to love, “for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” All things are clean and fine to eat, but they are evil for the people who still feel guilty about them. The overriding principle is to allow Love to govern what you do or say.

Sacrificial Living

I have taken a poll of my disciples asking the question, “What if there is a person in your Sunday School class that thinks drinking and dancing is wrong, and you are having a party where that will be done? One hundred percent said “Don’t invite the dummy”. This is exactly why Paul included the issues on Christian liberty in at least three of his letters. Paul meant that love required that they not only invite the “weak brother”, but give up their freedom to drink and dance. Granted this seems outrageous in our society of independent free thinkers who are used to getting their own way. Frankly, it takes a godly love

that is unnatural to mankind to give up your personal rights in deference to someone who is causing the problem out of their own lack of understanding. That is why Paul said in Gal.5:13-16, "don't turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh...But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." It takes the leading and control of the Holy Spirit to love in this way that you would give up your rights in deference to their guilty conscience.

Paul's Example

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul used himself as an example of a mature Christian who willingly gave up his rights. When Paul came to Corinth in Acts 18:3, he supported himself as a tentmaker and preached the gospel at night and on weekends. Paul, as an Apostle, had every right to be financially supported by the church in Corinth, but Paul gave up that right so that no one would question his motives for being there and preaching the gospel. His goal was to win people to Christ, and he was willing to be deprived to max out in this quest. In v.15 he wrote that he would rather die than hinder the gospel in any way. In v.19, he reiterated that he was free to demand his rights, but "I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more to Christ." This is a great play on words to say that he is free but has made himself a slave out of love for the people that he was witnessing to. Paul was motivated by his love for Christ and his fellow man that so needed Christ in their life. His argument to the Corinthians is one from the greater to the lesser---If I would make the greater sacrifice to work 16 hours a day making tents and preaching the gospel, surely out of concern for your brother you can eat vegetables on the night the weak brother is sitting next to you at the banquet.

I Have Become All Things to All People

You have heard this saying before, and now you know that it came from 1 Corinthians 9:22. Paul was saying that when he was with Jews he ate kosher food, dressed as a Jew, and complied with their traditions. When he was with Gentiles, he ate whatever they put in front of him, and conformed to their lifestyle. This in no way implies that he compromised the truth in any way. His eating habits may have changed with each group, but the gospel never changed. The delivery may have changed, but the message never changed. Again, his motivation and his purpose were "so that I may by all means save some...I do all things for the sake of the gospel". Some evangelists call this PRE-EVANGELISM, meaning that he built relationships, and made people feel comfortable so that they would better listen to his message about Jesus. Paul adapted to their culture, eating, and traditions without ever compromising the truth. He would be as Jewish as necessary or Gentile as necessary in order to open doors to the gospel.

Mixed Metaphors

Paul used two images of a famous event of the time in Corinth that his audience would relate to. He compared the hard work and self denial to a famous race at the Isthmian Games which took place every other year in Corinth. The greatest athletes in the Roman Empire competed there. Contestants had to do rigorous training, and make great sacrifices just to qualify for the race. Every Christian should be running his own race to win souls for Christ by setting aside any hindrance to receiving the gospel.

Part of the battle is against your own body. Just as an athlete in training has to punish his body, make it sore, and deny it certain foods; the pride, ambitions, and desires of your body need to be beaten back and brought into subjection. Paul used the metaphor of Boxing for this idea, "I box in such a way, as not beating the air, but I buffet my body and make it my slave...so that I myself will not be disqualified." By this, Paul means disqualified from being a witness for Christ.

Society bombards us with a demand for personal rights, and my pride leads me also to expect those rights, but Paul gave us a higher law and purpose that should govern our personal prerogatives. A Christian's first priority is not to exercise their freedom, but to care for the welfare of the whole body of Christ. All knowledge and gifts and freedom must be governed by love. "If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, but do not have LOVE, I am nothing." (1 Cor.13:2)

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