
Instruction on Christian Liberty

1 Corinthians 8

Introduction When we come to the topic of Christian liberty, we must underscore the fact that no particular text stands alone. The proper and Biblical exercise of liberty involves an understanding of all the major texts involved. We studied together the Romans 14-15 text last week. The manuscript from that study is available on the Chapel Web Site. Now we are going to consider the three chapters Paul devotes to liberty in the Book of 1 Corinthians.

Now, let go back with me into the first century to the church gathered in Corinth. Here is a church whose self-perception is of marked spirituality, deep knowledge of the Word, powerful expressions of ministry, openness and tolerance. The truth is that the church was carnal, divided and cliquish, self-absorbed, tolerating of sin, misusing and misrepresenting spiritual gifts and legalistic on peripheral issues. In the midst of their mess, chaos and confusion, the church wrote to Paul seeking his counsel on many issues.

The issues they spoke of echo in our culture in different ways. If we are not careful, the truth and applications of the text will be left in the mists of obscurity leaving us to repeat the mistakes they made. So, we will need to exposit the passage in its context, to develop principles from which we make application for our place in redemptive history.

The Mutual Concern

(v.1-3)

Paul's approach to this problem makes it evident that the Corinthians were dealing with symptoms and not diseases. They were concerned with buying meat. Paul is concerned with more primary and basic issues.

Introduces the Subject

(v.1a)

One of the issues they were concerned about seems almost incomprehensible to us today. You see, there were two ways to buy meat in their day. You could go the open market and purchase your meat there. Or you could go to the smaller markets run by the pagan temples. Now the price at the temple markets was much lower due to the fact that the meat being sold had once been part of an offering to a pagan deity or idol. Many Christians went to the temple meat market to purchase their meat. Many Christians felt that was sin in that it was a compromise of their standards. How would people know if they were there to buy meat or worship at the temple? And is not the meat contaminated by the use it has been put to? This was the question before them.

Quotes their Letter**(v.1b)**

The quote is “we know that we all have knowledge.”

In their letter they spoke to a number of issues by way of statements and questions, which Paul quotes back to them in his response. (Part of our problem today is that reading the book of 1 Corinthians is somewhat like hearing one side of a telephone call.)

In other words, the Corinthians are in essence saying that those who are saying we should not buy our meat at the temple market ought to know better. We all have a shared knowledge about this thing.

Evaluates their Attitude**(v.2-3)**

The (ESV) captures this very well, “This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up.”

Now why does he say this to them? Paul, who is often deeply concerned about the ignorance of Christians, is here seemingly concerned about the dangers of knowledge. Well, those dangers are very real. Paul is not saying that we are not to seek knowledge, but rather we must be carefully evaluating ourselves to see if *knowledge gained is elevating self-importance*. In fact, the bottom line (if I may pre-empt the study a bit) is that they were using right knowledge and doctrine in wrong ways.

Galatians 5:6 reflects the principle of this passage. Paul writes, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.” In other words, the mark of true Christians is faith—(a body of belief or seeing with our understanding the reality of spiritual truths)—going to work in the sphere of or in the factory of love.

The strongest evidence, according to verse 2, that a person does not know what he ought to know is when he thinks he knows everything he needs to. What is needed is a love for God which affirms, not that we have arrived in our knowledge, but that God knows us.

The Majestic Concepts**(v.4-6)**

These verses are recognized by most scholars as a creedal summary of a larger body of teaching.

The Evaluation of Idolatry**(v.4)**

Here again, he seems to be quoting them. There are two propositions here:

- Idols have no objective reality in the world. In essence, idols are material representations of spiritual illusions. They are the smoke and mirrors of error.
- There is only one God. This is asserting that God is not like Zeus, who is the chief among a pantheon of gods. No, God is the only God there is. The huge array of gods and goddesses represented by the statutes and idols were figment of men’s imaginations.

Paul does not leave this discussion here. Later on, he will point out that the enabling influence behind the ideas are demons.

The Exaltation of God (v.5-6)

Paul expands on the brief statement with the intent of showing that they missed the point of asserting these truths. He establishes two categories and draws the implications from them.

- One God - The Father. Note the importance of the prepositions: *from Him* are all things and *for Him* we exist. God is our ultimate frame of reference.
- One Lord - Jesus Christ. Again note the different prepositions: *by whom* are all things and *through whom* we exist. There is only one supreme authority and that authority is upheld by the fact that He created and sustains us in our very existence.

↳ Now, why deal with this now? Why are these facts so important? Because they were the true statements of doctrine being wrongly used.

The Needed Correction (v.7-8)

Paul shifts the focus from the mind to the conscience. The Corinthians had knowledge, but not understanding. So he goes on to expand their knowledge so as to cultivate understanding.

Understand the Role of the Conscience (v.7)

Not everyone understands these facts the same way as you do. The role of the conscience is to pass judgment on the rightness or wrongness of choices. It is never to be used to determine if something is morally right or wrong. The conscience is like logic. Logic only tells us if our argument is valid. It cannot tell us if it is true. The conscience is that voice in your soul which evaluates right and wrong and then accuses us establishing guilt. "Let your conscience be your guide" usually is too late. Now, does this contradict what we said last week about not violating our conscience? No, it means that our conscience responds to what we believe to be true. Further, Paul's point here is that the *can be weakened by being defiled*. In other texts, the conscience *can be callused by constant exposure to sin*.

Because of their past experience with the pagan temples and the idolatry, their conscience is defiled by the weakness of thinking of the food as having been offered to idols. Their conscience is like the old computer screens which bore the lasting imprint of images left on them.

Understand the Unimportance of Food (v.8)

Second, they must come to grips with the fact our relationship with God is not enhanced or destroyed by what we eat. There is an interesting play in words here. The food they were arguing over had been presented to an idol in order for the worshipper to be accepted by the idol. They were concerned that the food they were arguing over was preventing them from being accepted by God. It does not matter whether you eat or do not eat the foods under discussion.

In other words, because of their past, their conscience is saying something is wrong which is not sinful in and of itself.

The Loving Caution (v.9-12)

Paul says that they had better be careful. No one (on both sides of the issue) was to assume that they could proceed ahead without some careful consideration of the consequences.

The Exhortation (v.9)

Be careful that the exercise of your rights does not cause another to stumble. The word freedom or liberty here might better be rendered *right*.

The Explanation of the Consequences (v.10-12)

Paul points to what can happen when we insist on the full exercise of our rights and liberties.

- Weaker Christians may be encouraged to violate their conscience by the example we set.
- Your knowledge will then be used to destroy the weaker Christian. Here is right doctrine used in the wrong way.
- You sin against Christ when you callously ignore the spiritual condition of weaker Christians. In other words, horizontal violations of love for Christians become vertical transgression of righteousness of Christ.

So, if all this is true, then what?

The Proper Conclusion (v.13)

Paul here commits himself to not eating. It is an inevitable conclusion, is it not? If the issue causes by brother to stumble—that is to do something which violates his conscience, then I resolve not to do it ever again. See the flow? Problem → Promise → Purpose

There is a sense in which Paul is indulging in over-statement here. He is, in a way, playing to the tendency of the Corinthians to over state and over respond to everything. But we still get the point.

- Conclusion**
- When we cause weaker Christians to violate their conscience on the grounds of superior knowledge:
 - We ruin someone Christ has redeemed
 - We sin against Christ our ruler.
 - Here are a series of **errors** and **self-justifications** we must guard against.
 - My knowledge of the truth gives me the right to do anything that is not sin.
 - I am not responsible for others response to my liberty.
 - Christian individualism and independence are positive and desirable traits.
 - Do some self-examination:
 - How do I feel about my rights (liberties) as a Christian?
 - Which concerns me more: protecting my rights or preserving another's purity?
 - In what areas may my conscience be defiled and therefore needs to be purified and retrained?
 - In what areas am I using truth or doctrine in a wrong way?

Notes