

REVISITING PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

INTRODUCTION

- This issue of Christian liberty has become a significant issue within the church over the last few years with believers landing in very different places on a variety of preferential issues including elections and politics, covid responses, vaccines, racial issues, etc.
- The rapid accumulation of gray area issues in recent days has forced believers to know how to respond to other believers who approach the issues with a different perspective
- As the church continues to navigate through troubling times, it is imperative that believers know how to respond to such issues in a godly manner in order to preserve the unity of the church

1 Corinthians 1:10 ~ Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Ephesians 4:3 ~ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Philippians 1:27 ~ Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;

Philippians 2:1 ~ Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

- Since the church's corporate witness is tied to its unity, navigating the gray areas together wisely is critical

WHAT ARE CHRISTIAN LIBERTIES?

- Before defining what constitutes a gray area, we must first determine what they are not
- They are not theological or biblical issues which the Scriptures speak very clearly to: the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, the resurrection, the exclusivity of salvation in Christ alone, the inerrancy of the Word, the sovereignty of God, six-day creation, the sinfulness of man
- They are not moral issues which the Scriptures also clearly address: lying, cheating, stealing, adultery, sexual immorality, homosexuality, etc.
- The Bible speaks authoritatively on those issues and, as a result, they are black and white
- But there are many issues that aren't so black and white; they are the gray areas of the Christian life, issues that involve Christian freedoms and matters of preference
- They are morally neutral (*adiaphorous*) in that they fall in between the "black and white" of Scripture
- They, therefore, require believers to apply biblical wisdom
- But how do we make wholesome, wise, and Christ-honoring decisions when the Bible seems less definitive?
- It is not enough simply to ask, "What's wrong with it?" or to reason "I haven't found a Bible verse prohibiting it; therefore, it's okay."
- There are numerous examples of Christian freedoms: drinking alcohol, educating children, dancing, music, clothing, how to spend free time, tattoos, celebrating Halloween/Christmas, movies, playing cards, yoga...

PRINCIPLES FOR NAVIGATING THE GRAY AREAS¹

Will It be a Spiritual Advantage to My Life?

- Will it enhance your spiritual growth and maturity, helping you to become more like Christ?
- Will it build up, rather than tear down, your spiritual life?

1 Corinthians 10:23 ~ All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify.

Will It Slow Me Down with Excessive Baggage in the Christian Race?

- There are certain activities or behaviors which may not be wrong but could become excess distraction and temptation for some
- Living a faithful life for the Lord requires diligence, perseverance, struggle, and focus
- Thus, we should avoid behaviors and activities that add bulk to an already challenging set of spiritual priorities

Hebrews 12:1-3 ~ Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 ~ Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ²⁶ Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; ²⁷ but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

Will It Potentially Enslave Me?

- Our primary aim as believers must be complete and total submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ and to be controlled and filled with the Holy Spirit
- Thus, we must stay away from anything that will bring us under its power
- Because of the lusts of the flesh that still reside in us as believers, we must be careful to avoid coming under the bondage of even good things the Lord has graciously given us to enjoy
- We often rationalize by conveniently overestimating our spiritual ability to say no—as in the case of Demas, who “loved this present world” (2 Tim 4:10)

1 Corinthians 6:12 ~ All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.

Will It Hypocritically Cover My Sinful Desires?

- Are we doing it “in the name of” true biblical freedom when the truth of the matter is we are really satisfying sinful desires?
- We must be careful to not turn liberty into license

¹ Adapted from Grace and Granite, Appendix 1 – Navigating the Gray Areas of Life

- If you spend a good bit of time defending your “privilege” to exercise a Christian liberty, perhaps you ought to let go of it for a time as a means of testing your motives
- Is it truly a “freedom”? If so, it should be easily dispensed with for the sake of maintaining integrity before the Lord

1 Peter 2:16 ~ Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God.

Galatians 5:13 ~ For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

Will It Violate Christ’s Supreme Rule in My Life?

- We must ask ourselves, “For me personally, is this something the Lord would be pleased with?”
- If we have any doubts, we should not do it
- However, if you believe that the Lord’s will for your life would not be violated, then you’re free to proceed
- But we must be careful here: Paul warns us to be completely free from doubts
- We should not be involved in some gray area without having sought counsel, studied God’s Word, prayed, and scrutinized all possible pros and cons before proceeding
- If important issues are bypassed and the conscience is violated, the result is sin

Romans 14:5 ~ One person regards one day above another, ~ another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

Romans 14:20-23 ~ Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. 21 It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. 22 The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. 23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

Will It Impair My Judgment or Hinder the HS’s Control of my Will?

- We are to be completely yielded to the direction of the Holy Spirit

Romans 8:6, 12-14 ~ For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—13 for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Galatians 5:16-17 ~ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.

Ephesians 5:18 ~ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,

- Any activity that may diminish our ability to remain alert and sensitive to the things of God should not be taken lightly
- We must be careful to avoid, wherever possible, all potential hindrances to the influence of the Holy Spirit

Will It Build Up Other Christians by Its Example?

- We must never exercise a Christian freedom at the expense of another’s faith

- What we do in front of others is not simply a matter of our freedom in Christ to live as we choose, but rather an issue of building up other believers in their spiritual maturity
- Thus, we must be careful not to unwittingly encourage others toward a behavior that may violate their conscience, thereby putting a stumbling block in their way

1 Corinthians 10:24-29 ~ Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor. 25 Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake; 26 FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS. 27 If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. 28 But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake; 29 I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?

Will It Lead Others Toward Christ?

- The Word is clear that we should never engage in innocent behavior that could be spoken of as evil
- If what we are doing (even though it is not sinful) could misrepresent the Lord, His church, His people, or His truth to the world—then we should avoid it
- Not only should we build up less mature believers in the body, but also we should have character that is above legitimate question in the eyes of unbelievers
- Some things are not evil but can easily be associated with questionable elements of society or even worldliness
- Thus, if Christian freedoms are truly freedoms then we should be just as ready and willing to give them up as to enjoy them

1 Peter 2:12 ~ Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.

1 Peter 3:13-16 ~ Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, 15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; 16 and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.

Will It Be Consistent with Christlike Character?

- We want everything we do to exalt and imitate our Savior
- Thus, we must consider whether the Christian freedom is consistent with who He is
- We must also consider whether others will see what I'm doing and question my commitment to follow Him

1 John 1:6 ~ If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth;

1 John 2:6 ~ the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

Will It Magnify the Glory of God?

- We should live in such a way that God's glory is always on display in our lives
- Thus, we must ask if the activity or behavior could detract from God's glory
- We must avoid anything that could detract from bringing Him thankful praise for everything we have the freedom to enjoy

1 Corinthians 10:31 ~ Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

PRINCIPLES FROM ROMANS 14-15 ON LIBERTIES AND UNITY IN THE BODY

- There are two categories of believers when it comes to Christian freedoms

1. The strong

- These are the more liberated brothers and sisters in Christ who understand what it means to be free in Christ
- They are not hung up on traditions, legalism, rituals, routine, or old forms of religion
- They fully understand that they are free from sin and death and that the price of their redemption has been fully paid for in Christ
- Thus, they are free to make choices dependent on the Holy Spirit working in them

2. The weak

- These are believers who don't have that same sense of freedom in their consciences
- Perhaps it's due to how they were raised, past experiences, or growing up in a heritage of strict legalism
- They still feel threatened by certain religious or cultural taboos and practices that were deeply ingrained parts of their lives before coming to Christ
- They are not weak in character; rather, they do not fully understand their freedom in Christ and, thus, lack the liberty of conscience
- They tend to want to make what their conscience perceives as sinful a universal standard for everyone because their conscience is strongly affirmed by strict avoidance of such activities
- The temptation of the weak is to judge the strong by thinking they are being sinful in their apparent abuse of liberties
- The weak condemn the strong for freedoms they think betray a loose commitment to Christ
- On the other hand, temptation of the strong is to look down on the weak as legalistic and faithless
- The strong might treat the weak with contempt because they think the weak are too rigid and restricted
- The strong might be inclined to mock and ridicule the weak for their self-imposed constraints
- 3 specific "Christian liberty" issues are mentioned in Romans 14:
 - Diet (the eating of certain foods) – v. 2
 - Days (religious special days) – v. 5
 - Drink (the use of wine) – v. 21
- In light of these potential threats to the unity of the body, Paul exhorts believers to accept one another regardless of their views on Christian liberties
- This section begins and ends (an *inclusio*) with a plea to accept each other:
 - Rom 14:1 ~ Now accept the one who is weak in faith
 - Rom 15:7 ~ Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God

Accept Those Who are Weak in Faith

Romans 14:1-4 ~ Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. 2 One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. 3 The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. 4 Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

- In this passage, the area of Christian liberty pertained to food, specifically the strong who had no problem eating anything (including meat offered to idols) and the weak who were largely Jewish believers who struggled to eat food that was unclean (v. 2)
- Verse 3 describes the tendency of each group: the “strong” are prone to have contempt for the weak and the weak are prone to judge the strong
- But Paul doesn’t resolve the issue about who’s right; it’s not the “eating or not eating” that really matters
- The issue is how believers treat one another
- The strong must respect the opinions of the weak...and the weak must not condemn the strong
- The reason for this is because “God has accepted” both types of believers (v. 3b)
- As a result, believers are not to “judge” one another because the Lord upholds both (v. 4)
- The idea here is that servants are responsible to their own masters and to no one else so if a servant is acceptable to his master, then it doesn’t matter what his fellow servants think
- Believers are answerable only to Christ because God alone is the judge of his servants

Romans 14:5-9 ~ One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. 7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 8 for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

- Whereas the first issue of Christian liberty was diet (v. 2), here the issue is days (v. 5)
- The weak value some days more than others; the strong made no distinction among days
- But “each person must be fully convinced in his own mind” (v. 5)
- Paul doesn’t commend or command one practice over the other but exhorts believers to act in accordance with their conscience
- What side of the issue a person was on meant nothing to Paul
- His concern was that each one of them would act in accordance with his own convictions
- Each of them must not ignore or violate their conscience for to do so would be sin
- Both groups must respect each other because both are doing what they do to honor the Lord (v. 6)
- Both are doing it out of devotion and commitment to the Lord...so it’s possible to serve the Lord either way
- That’s because we are ultimately accountable to the Lord (vv. 7-8)
- The entirety of our existence (from life to death) is lived for the Lord and regulated by the lordship of Christ
- So, it doesn’t really matter where someone else lands on a gray area since our aim is to please Him alone
- And therefore we must accept fellow believers who have different convictions we do about personal preferences
- We must remember that Christ is Lord of both the weak and the strong (v. 9)
- Only Christ earned the right (through His death and resurrection) to be Lord over all
- But when we judge others for not having the same view as we do on some gray area, we act as if we purchased the right to judge them

Romans 14:10-12 ~ But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written, “AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.” 12 So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.

- In vv. 10-12, Paul’s point is that we must not judge a fellow brother or sister in Christ in regards to the gray areas because we are all going to be judged
- Again in v. 10, Paul notes the temptation of each group: the weak are tempted to respond to the strong with judgment; the strong are tempted to respond to the weak with contempt
- But this must not happen in the body of Christ, since “we must all appear before the judgment seat of God” (v. 10)
- All believers will one day stand before the Bema seat (not the Great White Throne judgment) where rewards will be given to believers (not punishment for sin for unbelievers)
- Every believer will bow the knee to the Lord (v. 11)
- There, every believer will give an account to God (v. 12)
- Paul’s point is: Don’t judge a fellow brother or sister in Christ in regard to the gray areas because, when you do, you have assumed a prerogative that is God’s only
- And you must remember that you yourself are going to be judged

Avoid Placing Stumbling Blocks in the Way of Each Other

Romans 14:13-15 ~ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way. 14 I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. 15 For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.

- In vv. 13-23, Paul focuses on how the strong are to use their liberty
- In vv. 13-15, Paul says that we must not cause fellow believers to stumble because it violates the law of love
- We must be willing to curb our liberties out of love for the weaker brother or sister
- We are free to eat food since everything created by God is good (1 Tim 4:4); however, if it encourages a weaker believer to violate their conscience, we must give up our freedom out of love for them
- While it would be better for the weaker believer to have a more mature, liberated conscience in that area, we must never force someone to act against their conscience as it would be a moral shipwreck for them
- Thus, there are times when we must be willing to relinquish our freedoms for the sake of serving the Lord and others (cf. 1 Cor 8:9-13)
- It is not loving to harm someone spiritually by the use our liberty (v. 15)

Romans 14:16-19 ~ Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; 17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. 19 So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

- It also misses the heart of God’s kingdom to cause another brother or sister to stumble
- The focus of God’s kingdom is not the exercise of Christian liberty...not diet, drinking, or days (v. 17)

- The primary focus of the kingdom must be righteousness, joy, and peace (v. 17)
- This shows why it is so absurd to insist on our preferences in the non-essentials
- For this reason, we must pursue the things that really matter: making of peace and building up others (v. 19)
- There can be no unity in the body of Christ if its members are more concerned to practice their private convictions than to live in love

Romans 14:20-21 ~ Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. 21 It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.

- Placing stumbling blocks in the way of other believers tears down God's work
- Paul says "make sure the exercise of your Christian liberty doesn't result in undoing what God is wanting to do in the life of that believer. Instead, get behind what God is doing in their life and encourage that."

Romans 14:22-23 ~ The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. 23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

- Paul gives advice here to the strong in v. 22 and to the weak in v. 23
- Paul tells the strong that they are free to maintain their personal preferences in the privacy of their own home or with other believers who share their convictions (v. 22)
- They should keep their preference between themselves and God
- Paul tells the weak that if they are not fully convinced that they are free to engage in that liberty, then it is not from faith and their conscience is not free (v. 23)
- So, they shouldn't do it because "whatever is not from faith is sin"

Put One Another First as Christ Did

- Paul is primarily dealing with the strong believers in vv. 1-6, showing they must put others first

Romans 15:1-6 ~ Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. 2 Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. 3 For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED YOU FELL ON ME." 4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- The strong ought to bear with the weak...they have a special responsibility to put the exercise of their liberty in perspective
- Those who truly understand their liberty in Christ are to subordinate it to the weaker believer
- Those who are free in Christ have a duty – not to defend their right to exercise their freedom – but rather to pursue the far more important task of building up and edifying others
- The strong have an obligation to the weak...to practice some self-denial so they can accept each other
- This is what Paul said he did in 1 Cor 9:20-23 ~ To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; 21 to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. 22 To the weak I

became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. 23 I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

- Paul was willing to give up the full exercise of his liberties if it meant the salvation of others
- On the one hand, he refrained from exercising his liberty around the Jews to win them...he condescended to them and practiced self-denial
- On the other hand, he was more willing to engage in his liberty around the Gentiles to show them freedom in Christ that might lead to their salvation
- This is how we please other believers and encourage their sanctification (v. 2)
- This requires a selflessness that leads us to forgo a Christian liberty that we are perfectly entitled to
- We sacrifice and forfeit our liberties, even when they are legitimate, when we know that exercising them would harm a weaker brother or sister
- We do this for the sake of unity and edification in the bride of Christ
- In doing so, we are merely following the example of Christ (vv. 3-4)
- This is what Paul prays for (vv. 5-6)

Receive Each Other as Full Members of Christ's Body

Romans 15:7-13 ~ Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. 8 For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, 9 and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME." 10 Again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE." 11 And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM." 12 Again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE." 13 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

- Paul's conclusion in this matter is that we must "accept one another" (v. 7)
- This doesn't mean to simply tolerate them or put up with them; rather, it means to receive them with warmth and true fellowship, with all the love and concern that should exist between brothers and sisters
- We must accept each other like this because Christ accepted us (v. 7)
- Christ is the model in that He has welcomed us and received us into fellowship with Him
- Now we are to fully embrace our brothers and sisters in Christ in the same way
- Paul provides the theological reason this in vv. 8-12: Christ accepted the Jews by dying for them in fulfillment of the OT and Christ accepted the Gentiles by dying for them and including them in His redemptive work
- Christ came to bring together people from all kinds of races, nations, backgrounds, and prejudices
- As a result, they are now together in one body, cemented together in unity
- There is an inherent unity within the body of Christ already built in by the work of Christ on behalf of both Jew and Gentile
- So, there is no room for not accepting each other!