

Dear Friends,

The dilemma of "Christian Liberty" sadly divides believers more than it enables them to unite in gracious long-suffering. Why should a supposedly Biblical principle create problems, not solve them? Paul confronted this question in 1 Corinthians 8. His inspired answer highlights a fundamental--meaning essentially important--principle that contemporary Christians either do not understand or fail to accept at all. For Paul, and for his teaching and example to the Corinthians, the deciding principle of acceptable conduct in any area outside the essential foundational truths of Scripture that allow no deviation (Character of God, how God saves sinners, and Christian morality, as examples) is not "Christian Liberty" at all. How we each deal with this question will manifest--it will trumpet--to other believers how we regard them--or not--as brothers or sisters in Jesus. Paul's teaching concludes that our final choice of conduct in such matters is to be measured by our love and care for other believers, other members of the family of God. Am I willing to knowingly do them harm in their faith to claim my supposed liberty? Even if--especially if--I regard them as "Weak," Paul never imposes a change of behavior on the weak believer in this chapter. His instruction goes specifically to the believer who self-professes himself/herself to be a strong believer. If you are truly a strong believer in Jesus, you will manifest the same focused grace and care for other believers that Jesus showed them in the gospels.

As a people, we practice literal feet washing according to Jesus' teaching the disciples in John 13. We claim this practice based on the details of Jesus' teaching in this chapter. No, what Jesus did was not a Jewish tradition of hospitality. Washing a guest's feet immediately upon their entering your home was their tradition. Jesus washed the disciples' feet late in the evening after the disciples had been His guests in the upper room for several hours. He taught this lesson to urge His followers to serve each other, not lord their ideas over each other. Paul taught the same lesson in Philippians 2, the whole chapter, but highlighted in Verse 3. Do you honestly regard your brothers and sisters in Jesus to be "better" than you? If so, prove it by how you treat them. Prove it by how you treat them when they disagree with you over some social issue. Prove it by how you treat them when you and they disagree regarding the latest political personalities or issues. Prove it by how you treat them when you and they disagree regarding the latest medical challenges in our culture. Avoid becoming a self-graduated board certified physician by claiming excessive knowledge about the question. Instead, study this chapter and strive to become that person's dearest and most precious brother or sister in the family of God. Show by words, attitude, and conduct your love and high--John 13--regard for them.

Are we willing to practice Paul's teaching in this chapter? To make those "Friend-dividing" choices based on our love for Jesus and for His people more than based on our personal opinions? Would that brother or sister who just had a long conversation with you agree with your self-assessment? Did you leave your conversation with them in a manner that left them convinced without question that you love and esteem them above yourself? Folks, at its core, this is what being a follower of Jesus is all about. Let's work long and hard to ensure that our faces, our voices, and our body language, as well as our moral choices shine the light of Jesus to those around us. Be a lens through which His light shines, not a mirror that reflects only your personal light.

Lord bless,  
Joe Holder

## **Ignored and Misunderstood Scriptures (1 Corinthians 8:9-11) Liberty's Limitation**

*But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? (1 Corinthians 8:9-11 KJV 1900)*

Legalism versus liberty of conscience is one of those slippery slope questions that we often face in this twisted world. Without question, Scripture clearly teaches us the truths and behaviors which the Lord has commanded us to believe and follow. Writings on Biblical hermeneutics (Systematic right interpretation of Scripture) often include a section on the "Perspicuity of Scripture," the clarity of its teachings on questions which God regards as important for His people to understand, believe, and practice. Simply stated, Scripture devotes sufficient "Ink" and clarity to those questions. The problem surfaces regarding other issues. One believer claims "Liberty of conscience" and insists that she has a Biblical right to think and do whatever she chooses regarding this question. Another believer feels sincere conviction regarding the same question, and therefore strives with those who disagree for agreement. Who is right? Ah, the slippery slope.

My wife occasionally nudges me for spending much of my teaching time with First Corinthians. I do so because this church had so many problems, problems of their own making, and Paul confronts and instructs them on the right and godly method of dealing with them. ***Many churches and individual believers in our world imitate the Corinthian Church far more than they imitate Jesus or Paul's teaching to this errant church.*** This lesson holds much potential to instruct and grow a safe godly church culture. It teaches a powerful lesson that is sorely ignored in our present world. We need to learn Paul's inspired teaching thoroughly.

What does Paul mean in his reference to "Meat offered to idols"? Were some of the Corinthian Church folks actually attending a pagan temple and eating meat as an act of worship to the pagan idol? At least some of them may well have gone this far astray, given Paul's language. In Verse 10 Paul specifically confronts a situation in which a weak believer sees the supposedly strong believer "...*sit at meat in the idol's temple.*" It is possible that Paul dealt with three different situations in this chapter.

A believer who regards himself as "Strong" enters a pagan temple and eats some of the meat which the idol's priests offered in sacrifice to their idol.

A believer sees a prime cut of meat in the local butcher shop, marked "Offered to. Idols," buys it as the very best cut of meat available, takes it home, cooks it and serves it to his family/guests.

A believer is a guest in the home of a friend who serves this meat.

May a believer eat the meat in each of the three situations? Or does God impose limitations on our conduct in one or more of them? More importantly, what is the governing, guiding principle that should inform and direct our conduct in such matters?

In this question of liberty of conscience, do you think this believer was acting in harmony with New Testament teaching in all three scenarios? Only some of them? Or did he cross the line of liberty into license? Paul answers the question. By entering the pagan temple and actively participating in idolatry, this believer crossed the line of acceptable conduct. Neither the unnamed believer in the Corinthian Church nor we may claim liberty for such conduct.

*For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols.* In this case, your claim of liberty of conscience emboldens the weak brother's ignorance and misunderstanding of your actions. He wrongly thinks that you regard worshipping this idol as equivalent to worshipping Jesus. Being

so deceived, he may participate actively in idolatry, thinking he does nothing wrong. Your false claim of liberty became license, and your ungodly example caused your weak brother to sin.

Much of Paul's teaching in this chapter likely refers to a lesser question that apparently was a real dilemma for the Corinthian believers. A prime cut of meat was offered to a pagan idol in the idol's temple. In the mind of the priest this meat is offered to his god, so it must be the very best meat available. Then the pagan priest would immediately sell it to the local butcher. The butcher, wanting to gain maximum profit, would advertise the meat "Offered to idols" as his assurance of its quality.

Now the question obviously shifts significantly. May a believer in Jesus purchase that cut of meat and feed it to his family and/or guests in his home? Because the meat was offered to the idol, does eating the meat constitute idolatry in the believer, merely because of its history?

It seems that Paul answers both questions in this chapter. Should a believer enter a pagan temple and actively participate in the worship of the pagan god? And the answer should be no. May a believer purchase this meat from the local butcher, take it home, cook it, and serve it to his family and/or friends? The answer to this question reveals the dilemma. The idol is nothing outside the imagination of those who believe in it and worship it. That the meats was offered to this imaginary idol before being sold to the butcher does not alter the reality that it is part of God's creation and fully acceptable as food. However, Paul does not leave the question so readily. For Paul, and for the wise and godly believer, **liberty of conscience ends prior to becoming a stumbling block to another believer**, even—especially—for a weak believer who might be inclined to misinterpret your conduct.

*And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?* Paul's question; can we as supposedly strong believers defend our conduct when we knowingly harm the faith of a weaker believer who observes us, who looks up to us as a strong believer and good example for their conduct? Paul rejects the idea. Loss of eternal salvation is not the point. But Paul does voice grave concern that the self-proclaimed strong believer may over-claim his liberty and do grievous harm to a weaker believer's conscience. Based on Paul's model for measuring the appropriateness of our conduct, if we do harm to a weak believer "*for whom Christ died,*" we offend Jesus. Our conduct is simply not acceptable to Him when we cross this line. Paul takes this point still further.

***But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.***  
(1 Corinthians 8:12)

Clearly for Paul, a higher ethic than his personal liberty became his deciding principle. If we follow his teaching—if we follow Jesus' example—that same principle shall also guide our choices and conduct.

What governing principle should believers observe in weighing such questions. For Paul in this lesson, the final and decisive principle is not about his personal right or liberty. It is not about "Bowing to a legalist." He puts meat on the bones of Christian grace and Christ-like love. He does not defend his right to personal liberty. **He chooses his conduct based on its potential influence on another believer**, especially a weaker believer. The King James Commentary quote below rightly captures the true spirit of Jesus and strong Biblical faith.

(King James Version Bible Commentary) Wherefore directs us to the conclusion of the matter. It is not knowledge which forms the basis of the conclusion, but love. Hence, Paul says, I will eat no flesh while

the world standeth. The latter half of this phrase is intended for emphasis. The apostle does not qualify this. He does not say he will refrain in public and exercise his liberty in private. In order to avoid offending a brother, he would permanently exclude the eating of meat from his diet. An additional comment that needs to be made on this subject has been very succinctly stated by S. L. Johnson. "In the first place the passage does not refer to legalists desirous of imposing their narrow-minded scruples on others. Such are not weak brethren, but willful brethren desirous of glorying in the subjection of others to their tenets (cf. Gal 6:11–13). This is tyranny, and Christianity must always be on guard against this. In the second place, it should be noted in this verse that the decision to follow the path of love rests with Paul, not with the weak. The strong are to yield to love's appeal voluntarily, not because the weak demand it, legalists always demand subjection to their laws." (Wycliffe Bible Commentary, p. 1242).

The final decisive principle which should guide our choices, according to Paul, is not what we may claim as our right under liberty, but how our conduct may impact another believer. Simply, the guiding principle is not what I have a "Right" to do or not do, but love for my brothers and sisters in the faith. How might my conduct impact them? Am I willing to venture into Christian "tyranny" to defend my right to liberty? Or am I truly strong enough in my faith to follow Jesus' example and ensure that my conduct will not—indeed, cannot—either offend a weak believer or cause a weak believer to misunderstand my conduct and fall into sin thereby? ***The true New Testament guiding principle is not "Law" or "Right" or "Liberty," but "Love."*** How much do I love Jesus? How clearly do I manifest that degree of love for Him by showing His grace to other believers?

*Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend. (1 Corinthians 8:13)*

The controlling decision rests with the believer who regards himself as "Strong," not with the person whom he regards as the weak believer. How much are you willing to give to your brothers and sisters to serve Jesus, truly and pervasively? How does Philippians 2:3 impact your thinking? If such questions push you to explain, rationalize, or justify your "Liberty," you likely need to spend some serious time with Jesus on your knees in a quiet corner. Paul's teaching dictates selfless love for others, not my personal right, as the controlling factor for personal liberty. How does my conduct impact my brother or sister in Christ? If at all negatively, the love of Jesus compels me to forgo any claim to personal liberty in favor of serving God by serving my brother or sister. Are we willing to live by this rule?

Elder Joe Holder