

IV. Knowledge and Conscience, v. 7-8

- A. Unfortunately, not all believers have this level of certainty about the true knowledge of Christianity, at least not yet. Some of our new believing friends are confused because of all the bad programming they have had throughout their lives. They have not yet reached escape velocity with old worldly ideas, superstitions, scruples, etc. We who are more mature should bear with those scruples of the weak as we instruct them more perfectly in the way of God (Rom. 15:1, Acts 18:26).
- B. When conscience is mis-informed and thus operates based on bad knowledge, then there is a problem. We correct that through sound Bible teaching. But the conscience cannot be transformed overnight by the infusion of knowledge. Meanwhile, life must go on. Whether mature or immature in the faith, you must live, and make decisions and carry on the best way you know how.
- C. Whether you find it hard to believe or not, the fact is that some people in Corinth had a belief that the idol was a real thing and that the meat offered to it was spiritually contaminated. Maybe they had “real” experiences with the idols, whether coincidental or some other explanation could be offered. They could not eat of that meat in good conscience because in their mind it was defiled. The problem was not with the meat, nor with the truth of God, but with the uninformed and weak conscience of the brother. They thought that by eating it they were sinning against God. Now, that was not exactly right—if they ate the meat with the proper understanding and a good conscience, then it would not be sin to them.

BUT, in thinking that they would be eating a defiled thing, and then violating the impetus toward holiness—*that* itself was displeasing to God. If you think, “I’m going to violate what God wants me to do,” then you are in a big problem, whether or not your present understanding is deficient. The problem is that you set yourself up to be the arbiter of whether you can override your conscience to do wrong. That authority complex does not bode well for your future decision-making. You evidently believe that you are the sovereign and you can do what you think *is not right*. When you puff yourself up like that, *that* is a sin. When you do things outside of the realm of faith, it is sin (Rom. 14:23).

The conscience is *so important* that God instructs us that we must not violate it, even if we are unsure that it is completely and properly informed. We should pursue proper instruction to align its judgments of right and wrong with God’s judgments of the same issues. But until then,

we must be very careful not to violate the conscience based on a hunch that we can get away with it. When we address others on issues like this, we should encourage them to truly learn first, and then modify their choices. The reverse approach—to get them to modify their behavior *in an attempt* to change their thinking—is wrongheaded because of the damage it causes to the conscience.

- D. The truth is that food does not make us more spiritual one way or the other. If we eat, we are not better, and if we do not eat it we are not worse. It is food. It goes in one end, hopefully nourishes us, and the remnant comes out the other end (Mark 7:18-19).

V. Liberty, Knowledge, and Love, v. 9-13

- A. Christian liberty is the last item on Paul’s list. *Liberty* means *freedom*. We are not talking about **freedom from sin**—though that is a real thing in the Christian faith (compare John 8:34 with Romans 6:18-22, 8:2). We are also not talking about **freedom from the Law of Moses**—though that too is true for the Christian (Gal. 3:25, 5:18; Rom. 6:14). What Paul is speaking about is another kind of freedom—the freedom to choose in areas that—in isolation from other concerns—are not moral issues.

Examples: doing any work on a Sunday, whether paid or at home; owning and using a television or computer; or eating shellfish. These are matters that in themselves, in isolation from other considerations, are not moral issues with a “thou shalt not” attached to them.

As soon as these matters of liberty collide with other factors, however, then there can be problems. Examples: Working instead of going to church; using the television to view nakedness or wasting hours in front of the computer; or eating shellfish in front of a Jew who keeps kosher for religious reasons. These additional factors move the issue from the realm of liberty to the realm of morality and sin.

- B. Many issues are falsely claimed to be liberty issues. Some examples:
1. Attire. Modesty is a moral issue, not a liberty issue.
 2. Alcohol. Drunkenness is a sin, and it sets in *very* soon after starting.
 3. Voting. To choose to vote or not vote *may* be a liberty issue (say, you believe you should not participate in the kingdom of this world). But voting for a pro-abortion, pro-atheist, pro-homosexual, anti-God, anti-church candidate is a sin.
 4. Clear doctrinal issues. It is not a matter of liberty to “believe whatever I want” in terms of creation and other things.

5. Work to support the family. It is not a matter of liberty for a man to choose to sit at home and receive government assistance all the time. An able-bodied man is commanded to work, thus this is a moral issue. The usual exceptions apply, but they are *exceptions*.
6. Women in the pulpit is not an issue of liberty. It is a moral issue which is forbidden in Scripture (1 Tim. 2:12).
7. Mothers' role in raising their children and keeping the home. This is not something that can be hired out. It is a moral issue (Titus 2:4-5).
8. Music preferences. If the music contains lyrics of ungodly beliefs or behavior, this is not a liberty issue. It is a moral issue. If the music is sourced in rebellion and drug culture, it is not a liberty issue.

A big reason that liberty issues are interpreted broadly is to provide *license* or justification for sin.

- C. There were actually two issues going on in Corinth. One was the problem of food purchased at market that was sacrificed to idols. That could be eaten with no problem. It was enough of a distance away from the worship of the idol that there it was not necessary association. But then there was a more sinister problem—eating idol food *at the idol temple in cultic (worship) meals*. Some believers were saying that because they could eat the meat with no effect, that they can also attend functions at the idol's temple where the food is eaten. Paul is teaching them in this section *that is not* a matter of liberty! To cause a brother to do this would be to cause him to sin. To do this yourself would be a sin. Instead, they are to flee from idolatry (10:14, see also 10:21). There, the eating is so closely associated with the idol that the stain of sin cannot be avoided.
- D. Paul is concerned with the case at hand about eating meat when “my liberty” is valued over love for others. Then you become a stumbling block to others (a cause of offense). In this section, then, the apostle is not talking about how you yourself process a decision about your own behavior. He is discussing how *you* with your “strong conscience” can affect others by misusing your knowledge, love, and liberty.
- E. You know that you can eat the meat sacrificed to an idol. That is correct because an idol is nothing in this world. There are no wicked spirits in the meat, etc. Eating or not does not earn merit with God. You have the knowledge, and therefore you know you have the liberty. Knowledge of truth creates space for liberty on the matter.
- F. But the question is this: do you have the **love** to do the right thing with your **knowledge, well-informed conscience, and liberty**? If you just plow

ahead and eat without regard to your brother, you can become an unnecessary cause of offense to that brother. Worse, if you partake *at the temple*, you are really confusing the brother with your actions. Paul will deal with this more later when he tells the believers to flee actual idolatry—to not have anything to do with it.

- G. Your behavior can induce your Christian brother to conduct himself to violate his own conscience. That is bad for *him*, and the fact that you caused it is bad for *you*. If this is the case, you may ruin your brother. (*Perish* is too strong of a translation in this context.) The ruination here has to do with the fact that you are encouraging him to do bad things with his conscience. Do you not care for that brother, for whom Christ died to redeem? Do you love him enough to constrain your liberty until he is more well-informed?
- H. The bottom line is that unloving, liberty-elevating behavior is a sin against the brother because it harms the operation of his conscience. Remember, you are not to violate your own conscience, and God is so serious about this principle that he enjoins you not to induce another brother violate *his* conscience! If you cause another to violate the conscience, you also sin against Christ.
- I. Paul takes from this the application that if a particular brother is going to be offended by your eating the meat sacrificed to idols, then you should resolve to not do so again so as to avoid causing a sin. Get your meat from elsewhere!

Conclusion

1. We are assured there is only one true God who ever has or will exist in this Universe (and there are no other universes!). We know sound doctrine—or should.
2. Consequently, we could eat meat offered in sacrifice to an idol because the idol is nothing.
3. But not everyone grasps that truth. So they have a problem of conscience to eat food sacrificed to an idol.
4. We cause problems by over-emphasizing knowledge which has informed our conscience and thus opened to us a window of liberty. Instead of over-emphasizing knowledge and liberty, we need to emphasize love toward our brothers. *Love* is the guardrail to excess in liberty.

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