

Liberty & Responsibility with Regard to the Consciences of Others

1 Corinthians 8

Christian Liberty is Regulated by Love. The Christian enjoys full liberty from every kind of bondage, but there is a danger to be *selfish* in the practice of that liberty. We must consider our responsibility toward our fellow believers. The use of our liberty is to be regulated by *love* (Gal. 5:13). Christian liberty has to do with taking off the "chains of thought" that once bound us. We may have been liberated from old beliefs and superstitions, but our brethren may not be. A person's conscience is calibrated by what they know or believe to be true. If a person believes that working on the Sabbath is sin in God's sight, then it goes against their conscience to work on the Sabbath. If a person believes that eating food that was sacrificed to idols is wrong, then it goes against their conscience to do it. It can be very difficult for them to see others do what they think is wrong, and to reconcile it in their mind. In Rom. 14:10 the "weak brother" is warned against *condemning* his brother who has liberty in these things, and the "strong brother" is warned against *belittling* his weaker brother for his superstition. It can be a real privilege to help our weaker brother come into his full Christian liberty; but it cannot be done roughly by scorning them or forcing them against their conscience. We must consider that our brethren coming out of a *legal background* may have extra-biblical convictions, and it would be harmful to them if we flaunt our liberty before them. We must also consider that our brethren coming out of a *Pagan background* may be struggling with superstitious notions about things, and it could be harmful if we flaunt our liberty before them. In all cases, love for our brother should to regulate our actions. This great subject of the *regulation* of Christian liberty is taken up in Rom. 14:1 - 15:7 and in 1 Cor. 8 - 10.

- In Romans the awareness is with regard to extra-biblical *convictions* imported from *Judaism*.
- In 1 Corinthians the awareness is with regard to *superstition* imported from *Paganism*.

The Trauma of Liberty for Pagan Converts. Pagans were steeped in idolatry, and there were a number of consequences due to their previous lifestyle which made their transition into Christianity difficult.

- For one, there were many sinful or unprofitable activities in the Pagan world that were being practiced by new converts. There were certain habits that the Pagan converts had given up that might easily become an addiction if taken up with again

(i.e. fine foods). Also, there were outright sins (i.e. immoral sex) that could easily become a snare to them. Paul addresses these issues in 1 Corinthians 6. There needs to be carefulness in using our liberty so that we do not form time-wasting habits or become addicted to something that could ruin our life, and dishonor the Lord.

- Furthermore, they had false ideas about idols; chiefly that the idol was a real entity. In Christianity, it is known that there is only one true God, and all others are false. However, some found this hard to accept, and continued for some time under the premise that the idol was real, and that all food sacrificed to an idol was property of the idol. Paul writes of this issue in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. Those who do have knowledge (therefore liberty) need to let love for others regulate the use of their liberty, so as not to stumble a weaker brother.

Paul addresses all these issues so that Pagan converts to Christianity might better understand Christian liberty, and what ought to regulate it.

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The Difference Between Knowledge and Love (8:1-3)

CHAPTER 8

¶ But concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know, (for we all have knowledge: knowledge puffs up, but love [*'agape'*] edifies. v.1 In the western world, it is very unlikely that we will encounter the circumstances described in this chapter, but the underlying principles are very applicable. In ch.8 Paul takes up Christian Liberty with regard to “things sacrificed to idols”. This was a hot topic among the Corinthians because many of them had been saved out of paganism, and naturally would have an aversion to everything connected with idolatry. Before getting in to the technical details, Paul first establishes the difference between knowledge and love. Paul and the Corinthians (“we all”) had knowledge about the

idols, that they were really nothing. The Corinthians were very knowledgeable in general (1 Cor. 1:5), but it was an outward, objective, intellectual knowledge ['gnosis'], not necessarily a inward, deep, conscious knowledge of conviction. Head-knowledge can make us proud, but heart-knowledge makes us humble. Objective knowledge has the tendency to "puff up" in pride. Love, on the other hand, has the tendency to "build up". We need knowledge, but it must be coupled with and regulated by love. Without love, knowledge is empty. Love actually lays a foundation of relationship, but knowledge can exist (though not necessarily) as a façade for self-will.

2 If any one think he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know it. v.2

Knowledge, as the Corinthians had it, was opinionated knowledge or presumptive knowledge. It was knowledge viewed as a possession. If our knowledge is that way, our knowledge is really incomplete; "he knows nothing yet as he ought to know it". Why? Because we can have knowledge and never be brought into the presence of God. We can have knowledge and never have our conscience engaged, or our heart. And if the conscience has not been reached, the knowledge is not real knowledge.

3 But if any one love ['agape'] God, "he" is known of him): v.3 True knowledge is not gained in my own mind by making conjectures about God, but by getting into the presence of God where I am judged of Him! Those who "love God" value more being known by God than knowing God. Knowing God is incredible, and important, for it is eternal life (John 17:3; 1 John 4:6-18). But you cannot know Him without first being known by Him. What do we mean? God knows everything. True. But to "be known" by God is to be known in a personal way. Have you opened up your heart to Him? Have you let Him commune with you? Have you let His Word judge every corner of your life as you sit in His presence? If not, you don't know anything as you ought to know it! It is love for God that causes us to set our own knowledge aside and put His interests first, and thereby obtain true knowledge, which is His perspective on things. And we will see in this chapter that it is love for our brother which causes us to set our own knowledge aside and put our brother's interests before our own. But love for God is what will sustain and maintain love for our brethren.

The Difference Between False Gods and

the True God (8:4-6)

4 — concerning then the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that an idol *is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God save one.* v.4 Now getting into the details of the issue, the idol is nothing. Mr. Kelly says the translation should technically be “there is no idol,” because the point is they are false gods, and therefore have no existence. Later in ch.10 Paul will show that there are demons behind the idols, but here the point is the idol is a false god. There is only one God... the God of the Old and New Testament! This is a foundational tenet of Christian theology; there is only one God (i.e. monotheism). This of course does not set aside the fact that there are three Divine Persons in the Godhead (see article on [the Trinity](#)).

5 For and if indeed there are *those* called gods, whether in heaven or on earth, (as there are gods many, and lords many,) **6** yet to us *there is one God, the Father, of whom all things, and “we” for him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and “we” by him.* v.6 Paul refuses to even call the idols “gods”, so instead he refers to them as “called gods”. They aren’t real! But in the pagan world, there was a pantheon of many gods and lords (hence, *poly*-theism). Not so in Christianity. For us there is only one. One God, the Father, source of all good and blessing, the true object of worship, and the one on whom man must depend on for blessing. One Lord, Jesus Christ, who risen from the dead has taken the place of administrator (Lord) of all things. Notice that Paul addresses two things in the Pagan world: gods and lords. A god is a worship-figure, but a lord is an authoritative-figure. I am to worship the Father who remains in simple Godhead, but I am to submit to Christ as my Lord because He alone became a man, and “God hath made him... both Lord and Christ.” The Son remains both God and man, but this verse brings out His position as Lord; for He could say “all power is given to me in heaven and on earth”. Notice this distinction: when it is the Father, all things are “*of Him*” and we Christians are “*for Him*”. But when it is the Son, all things are “*by Him*” and we Christians are “*by Him*”. This tells us that of the Persons in the Godhead, the Father is more like the mind and source, but the Son is more the agent or accomplisher.

Knowledge Must Be Regulated By Love

(8:7-13)

7 But knowledge *is* not in all: but some, with conscience of the idol, until now eat as of a thing sacrificed to idols; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. v.7 In v.1 we read that “all have knowledge”, but here we find that not all have it in fullness. Among the Corinthians there was a range, just as there is a variation among any group of believers. They all gave mental assent that the “idol is nothing” and that “there is only one God”, but for some, the conscience was not on the same page as the brain. The Bible might say I have liberty to do something, and my brain might acknowledge that to be true, but I still feel that it is wrong in my conscience. This is called a “weak conscience”. A Jewish convert can have a weak conscience with regard to things they were prohibited from doing under law (Rom. 14:2), or a Gentile convert can have a weak conscience with regard to things they formerly did in paganism (1 Cor. 8:7). In both cases, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with those things, yet they still have a conscience about them. But here the weak Gentile converts would go along with the rest of the brethren who did have liberty to “eat of a thing sacrificed to idols”, and thereby acted against their own conscience; for “whatever is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23).

8 But meat does not commend us to God; neither if we should not eat do we come short; nor if we should eat have we an advantage. **9** But see lest anyway this your right *to eat* itself be a stumbling-block to the weak. vv.8-9 Now Paul makes a further point. Meat (sacrificed to idols) is not wrong for a Christian, but on the other hand there is no spiritual benefit to it! There is no commendation gained by eating or advantage lost by abstaining. The same can be said of many “liberties” (e.g. drinking alcohol). But there is another factor here that the Corinthians were missing. They were missing it because their operating system was Knowledge 1.0, and love did not factor into their calculations. By insisting on our “right to eat” we might create a “stumbling-block to the weak”.

10 For if any one see thee, who hast knowledge, sitting at table in an idol-house, shall not his conscience, he being weak, be emboldened to eat the things sacrificed to the idol? **11** and the weak *one*, the brother for whose sake Christ died, will perish through thy knowledge. vv.10-11 Now Paul gives an example, and from ch.10 we know it was a realistic example in Corinth. Some of those who had knowledge that the idol was nothing were going right into the idol-houses to eat food sacrificed to idols. The weak brother would see that, and be emboldened (not spiritually enlightened) but wrongly encouraged to go against his own conscience. We have already remarked that “whatever is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). This could cause the weak brother “to perish”, or make shipwreck of their life! You

might say, “come on, what’s the big deal?... those gods aren’t real!” But scripture characterizes an action by its tendency. The weak brother might get into the habit of going against his conscience, and then overstep in an area that is not only wrong relative to his conscience, but morally wrong. The result could be total loss of that brother’s life. The shame of it all is that he was a “brother for whom Christ died”. We need to think of our brethren in that way; i.e. as those for whom Christ died. And if we do that, our knowledge will be regulated by love.

Eating at idols’ tables. Some in Corinth were not only eating food sacrificed to idols, but eating the food right at the tables themselves. They had knowledge that the idol was nothing, and they exercised their liberty to the limit of what their knowledge would allow. But their knowledge was not complete. In ch.10 Paul goes on to show that while the idol is nothing, “the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with demons” (1 Cor. 10:20). There are demons behind those idols, and demons are associated with all who eat of those tables. Therefore, not only was it an abuse of their liberty that would stumble a weak brother, but they themselves went a step too far without even realizing it. What a lesson! Let’s be careful about taking our liberty to the max... because we might not “have all the pieces”, so to speak. There may be an aspect of the particular activity that we have not considered.

12 Now, thus sinning against the brethren, and wounding their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. v.12 Paul takes it one step further: wounding the conscience of a weak brother is not only a sin against that brother, but against Christ... because he is “a brother for whom Christ died”. Let’s be so careful that we always let our Christian liberty be regulated by love.

13 Wherefore if meat be a fall-trap to my brother, I will eat no flesh for ever, that I may not be a fall-trap to my brother. v.13 Finally, the conclusion of the matter. If something in my life could stumble a brother, even though I have perfect liberty to do so relative to the Word of God, I ought to put it away for good. This might seem a bit extreme; “I will eat no flesh forever”. Such is the pattern set out by the Lord, and repeated here by the apostle Paul. Total self-sacrifice for the good of another. It is noteworthy that it doesn’t say “I will eat no flesh unless my brother isn’t looking”. Or, “I’ll do it with these brethren but not with those.” No, if there was even the slightest possibility of becoming a “fall-trap” (camouflaged pit with sharpened sticks or lances) to a weak brother, Paul would put it away for good. Is it really worth the risk?