

Christian Liberty

Christian liberty is an important subject in the New Testament. The basic principle is this: the Christian has been set completely free from every kind of bondage in order to do the will of God. The believer has been set free from the tyranny of indwelling sin (Rom. 6:7). Those who were once idol-worshiping Pagans have been set free from their bondage to Satan (Gal. 4:8). Those who were once Jews under law are no longer in bondage to law but are under grace (Romans 6:14). As those who are under grace, we have been liberated from the requirements of the Law, and every other "*yoke of bondage*" (Gal. 5:1). Having been set free in grace, there is liberty for the indwelling Spirit to act in our lives; "*the perfect law of liberty*" (James 1:25). When we are enjoying the liberty we have been brought into, our communion with God and our service for Him will be completely unhindered! In the whole wide world, the only people who are *truly* free, are the genuine disciples of Christ; "*If ye abide in my word, ye are truly my disciples; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free*" (John 8:31-32).

Legality and License both lead to Bondage. As those who have been set free, we need to be aware that *legality* is a hindrance to the working of the Spirit of God in our lives (Rom. 7). Whether we were formerly a Jew come out from legal bondage, or a Gentile come out from other forms of bondage (Gal. 4:8-11), we are not to be entangled with legal bondage. The Law is *not* our rule of life. We are to "*walk in the Spirit*" (Gal. 5:16) and so fulfill "*the law of Christ*" (Gal. 6:2). We have liberty to practice those things that were prohibited by the *ceremonial* parts of the Law (e.g. holy days and dietary restrictions), but that doesn't mean God's *moral* standards have changed at all. We must understand that *license* can be just as detrimental to liberty as legality. "*What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid.*" (Rom. 6:15). Moral sins in the Old Testament are still sins today. Confusing liberty with license leads a person into bondage; not bondage to the Law, but bondage to the flesh. Paul summarizes this nicely in Galatians 5 by saying; "*For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another*" (Gal. 5:13). To live for our own pleasure is an *abuse* of Christian liberty. We must understand that we have been "*bought with a price*" and our bodies are "*the Lord's*" (1 Cor. 6:13, 20). Therefore, *total liberty* for the Christian can only be enjoyed by *total submission* to the Lordship of Christ. A nice example of this is a kite. To fly a kite, you throw the kite up in the air on a windy day. You might think "ultimate liberty" for the kite would require you to cut the string. But if you cut the string, the kite will fall

straight to the ground. It is when the string remains firmly attached, anchoring the kite, that it can achieve its full liberty and soar high in the sky. In a similar way, the Christian can enjoy true liberty, not by casting off all restraint, but by offering himself or herself as a living sacrifice; which is our reasonable service (Rom. 12:1). Jesus was the one Man who enjoyed perfect liberty here in this world, and it was Him who said: "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me" (John 4:34).

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 Jewish Converts. There were a great number of things that were prohibited in the Old Testament; unclean animals, garments of composite fabric, unwashed hands, etc. For example, godly Daniel would not eat Nebuchadnezzar's meat. This meat wouldn't be an issue for a Christian. There were also certain holy days that had to be observed, such as Sabbath days and feast days. These "days" are not part of Christianity.

However, all these changes were *very difficult* for the converted Jew to accept. The Lord gave Peter - the apostle to the circumcision - a special vision three times over regarding the lifting of Jewish dietary restrictions. From Peter's response we see just how shocking this change really was. *"And Peter said, In no wise, Lord; for I have never eaten anything common or unclean. And there was a voice again the second time to him, What God has cleansed, do not thou make common"* (Acts 10:14-15). The trauma of Christian liberty became a point of attack for Satan, who raised up Judaizing teachers to leverage the weak consciences of Jewish converts to bring them back under the law! Paul's tenacious defense against the efforts of the Judaizers is proof of how successful this attack was.

Important note. To be clear, no Christian has liberty to be involved with things that are *morally* unclean. But we do have liberty in things that were *ceremonially* unclean in the Old Testament. Liberals have the idea that something is only wrong if it is wrong to me. In short, that is every man *"doing that which is right in his own eyes"*. God's moral ways never change. Fornication is wrong. Homosexuality is wrong. Murder is wrong. Any denial of fundamental truth is wrong (2 John 9-10). The change has to do with non-moral things; e.g. working on the Sabbath was wrong for a Jew under the law, it ceases to be wrong when he converts to Christianity.

Defending against Judaizing. There is a difference between those who are "weak", and those who are attempting to bring God's people into bondage. Paul was able to discern that difference. He was extremely patient with those who were weak (e.g. Acts 16:3; Rom. 14), but he had no patience for those who would put believers under the law. This distinction is seen the difference in tone of Galatians as compared with Romans. In the book of Galatians, we find the Apostle Paul defending the gospel of the grace of God. Judaizing teachers had come into Galatia trying to bring God's people under legal bondage. In Gal. 4:8-11, Paul shows that turning to the law as a rule of life is really idolatry.¹ In Gal. 5:1 he exhorts them to *"stand fast therefore, and be not held again in a yoke of bondage"* because *"Christ has set us free in freedom"* from every kind of bondage. By the time we come to 1 Tim. 4:3 we find that the Judaizing teachers had progressed to Asia, where they were *"forbidding to marry, bidding to abstain from meats, which God has created for receiving with thanksgiving for them who are faithful and know the truth."* The book of Hebrews was written to Jews who had made a profession of faith in Christ, and it was intended to completely deliver them from Judaism. In Hebrews 13:9 the writer says: *"For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein."* We need to have this same discernment; to be patient with the weak, and to defend the gospel of the grace of God!

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.

The principles that regulate Christian liberty. In his epistles, Paul takes up a number of exhortations relative to Christian liberty. There are many dangers connected with it, and he devotes a number of chapters to the subject.

First of all, in 1 Corinthians 6 - 10, we have many of these principles unpacked:

1. Is it profitable for me? *"All things are lawful to me, but all things do not profit."*
2. Could I become addicted? *"All things are lawful to me, but I will not be brought under the power of any."*
3. Could it render a bad testimony? *"For it were good for me rather to die than that any one should make vain my boast."*
4. Does it have evil associations? *"Ye cannot partake of the Lord's table, and of the table of demons."*
5. Does it glorify God? *"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatever ye do, do all things to God's glory."*
6. Does it build up others? *"All things are lawful, but all do not edify."*
7. Could it stumble others? *"Give no occasion to stumbling, whether to Jews, or Greeks,*

or the assembly of God.”

In Romans 14 we get a thorough examination of this subject in the context of Jewish converts. He refers to those who understand their Christian liberty as “strong” and those who are still in a measure in bondage to the law as “weak”. The danger for the weak brother is to *condemn* the strong because he interprets those liberties as license to sin. The danger for the strong is to *belittle* the weak, because he can see that the convictions are unscriptural and unnecessary.

Paul goes over several important principles with regard to Christian liberty, and the problems that can come up between the “strong” and the “weak”. First of all, the strong could harm the weak if they were to flaunt their liberty in the face of one to whom such actions run against conscience:

1. A weakened conscience. Their conscience could become weakened by seeing another believer living at odds with what they believe to be right. They could interpret our liberty as license, and be tempted to go against their own conscience in other areas.
2. A wounded conscience. Their conscience could be wounded because they think we are walking in sin carelessly. It could discourage them.

It is possible to be technically right, but to not have a Christ-like attitude. Paul goes on to explain three things that must be considered along with Christian liberty:

- We are each individually responsible to the Lord for our actions.
- It might not be sin to us, but if it goes against our weaker brother’s conscience, it is sin to him (i.e. “*not of faith*”).
- To have a *knowledge* of Christian doctrine is good, but to have *love* for our brother is better.
- We should be willing to sacrifice our Christian liberties for sake of our brother’s conscience, after the pattern of the meekness of Christ.

Is it hypocritical or dishonest to change our behavior around certain people? It depends on our motives. This is a common question with regard to Christian Liberty, and it is a good one. In the chapters that deal with Christian Liberty, Paul gives himself as an example of one who would use his liberty or not use it depending on the circumstances. Wherever the Word of God would permit, he would be flexible. To the Jew he became as a Jew, to those without law he became as one without law, to the weak he became as weak, etc. He was careful to guard against doing anything that would compromise the truth of the Gospel, and he had discernment to know when certain liberties

were or were not appropriate. For example, Paul circumcised Timothy but not Titus, and he took money from the Philippians but not the Corinthians. He summarized it by saying, "*I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake...*" (read 1 Cor. 9:19-23). Should our behavior change depending on who is around? Definitely, if it is for "*conscience sake*" or for "*the sake of the gospel*" (see 1 Cor. 10:25-30). Yet this doesn't mean we are to live for the eye of man; "*not with eye-service as men-pleasers; but as bondmen of Christ, doing the will of God from the soul*" (Eph. 6:6). If our motive is to avoid persecution, gain popularity, or the praise of men, the motive is all wrong. There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution. Each scenario requires careful discernment.

What about conflicting influences? When we begin to put these principles of Christian Liberty into practice, we may encounter conflicts. For example, one brother thinks it is sin to hold a life insurance policy, because insurance is not trusting the Lord. However, let's say you believe that, in today's economy, life insurance is part of providing for one's family (1 Tim. 5:8), and you would have a bad conscience if you did not purchase a policy. Love for your brother would have you avoid life insurance, but conscience before God would have you buy it. What do you do? This is where the higher principle of obedience comes in. "*We ought to obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29). The motive is key. You would buy the life insurance out of a sense of obedience to God, not out of careless indifference to your brother's conscience.

Christ is the ultimate example. In both Romans and Corinthians, the Lord Jesus Christ is set forth as the ultimate example for regulating the use of liberty. Read Rom. 15:1-6 and 1 Cor. 11:1 (see also Phil. 2:1-12). Christ had the right, as the creator and sustainer of the universe, as the Son of God, to be exempt from every kind of suffering. He had the right to pray at any moment to His Father, and He would presently give Jesus more than twelve legions of angels (Matt. 26:53). Yet Jesus did not insist on those rights or liberties! Why? He could not "save" Himself, and come down from the cross, because, in the words of Albert Midlane, "*Love's stream too deeply flowed, in love Himself He gave, to pay the debt we owed. Obedience to His Father's will, and love to Him did all fulfil.*" This is our pattern: to let love for God and love for others set aside every notion of self-interest, that we might fully do the will of God.

In summary, we find that proper Christian liberty is enjoyed by having a proper understanding of grace. If we have a shallow understanding of grace, we will either become *legal* or *loose*.

References:

[1 Cor. 6:12 - 11:1](#); [Romans 14:1 - 15:7](#); [Galatians 5 - 6](#); [John 8](#)

Footnotes

1. *For the converse of this principle [forbearing with the weak, Rom. 14], when these observances are used to destroy liberty in Christ, see Galatians 4, where the apostle shows that, if the observance is taught as a principle, it is really turning back to Paganism.* - Darby, J.N. *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*. Romans 14.