

The Purpose for Christian Liberty

“What Kind of Meat Can I Eat?”

I Corinthians 8 – 10

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I Corinthians 9:22b *“I am made all things to all men, that I might by some means save some.”*

Introduction:

Christian observers of modern American culture are becoming increasingly alarmed at the growing secularization of evangelical Christendom. Some culture watchers such as Doug Leblanc even claim that American Christians are now living in a “post-Christian” culture (Moody, 1994). Modern culture has permeated the American church to the point that there is often no identifiable difference between the lifestyle of a professed believer and that of a non-believer. Modern Christians most clearly display this permeation through the choices they make in their personal conduct. Believers of past generations influenced the world around them by maintaining a distinct identity as children of God. They differed from members of the surrounding society in certain areas of personal conduct. Sadly, modern believers have often failed to preserve this distinct identity, making choices in their personal conduct that do not distinguish them from the secular world around them.

Although the majority of conservative evangelicals still feel that issues such as abortion and immorality are unacceptable behavioral choices, it is alarming to note that these same conservative believers are making behavioral choices that the previous generation viewed as unacceptable. This trend is evidenced by a survey of behavioral norms among evangelical students that revealed that 93% of those surveyed disapproved of smoking in 1951 compared to 70% in 1961 and only 51% in 1982. 98% disapproved of drinking in 1951 compared to 78% in 1961 and only 17% in 1982 (James D. Hunter, *Evangelicalism, The Coming Generation*, 59). These alarming trends have continued to degenerate since 1982 (Scaiacca, *Generation at Risk* and Barna, *The Barna Report*, 1992-1993).

Frequently, believers defend choices in these areas by arguing that such choices fall within the legitimate bounds of Christian liberty. Furthermore, many prominent evangelical leaders and preachers have widely advanced and defended this argument through their teaching and writing ministries. The leading champion for this new teaching emphasis is Charles Swindoll whose bestseller, *The Grace Awakening*, issues a decisive call to arms against those who would in any way oppose a believer exercising his Christian liberty to engage in behavior that many conservative believers consider worldly. It is not surprising to discover that many evangelicals defend their liberty by appealing to Paul’s teaching in I Corinthians 8-10, and they often appeal to one specific verse: “*I am made all things to all men*”(I Cor 9:22).

Is this really the case? Do such choices really fall in the arena of legitimate Christian liberty as presented in these passages? Clearly, a thorough and careful examination of Paul’s teaching in this pericope is in order.

I. The Problem Stated: “What kind of meat can I eat?”

Real problem here has to do with establishing the bounds of the proper and improper practice of Christian liberty.

A. Contributing Factors: Why was this such a big issue at Corinth?

1. Polytheistic culture permeated by idolatry
2. Diverse backgrounds (Jews/Gentile pagans)
3. Different levels of spiritual maturity
4. Pervasive carnality
5. Personal selfishness rather than servanthood mentality

Note: All of these are present in the modern evangelical community

B. Central Flaws: There were two things that added to the above:

1. These believers were not operating out of selfless love but out of selfish arrogance – “knowledge” and “rights”
2. These believers failed to understand the basic nature and purpose for Christian liberty – this lack of understanding resulted in its misuse! (It produced division and destruction rather than advancing the gospel)

Nature of Christian Liberty: God’s gracious gift through the Gospel whereby men are no longer obligated to fulfill certain aspects of the ceremonial law. (Acts 10-11)

Purpose For Christ. Liberty: To allow the Gospel to spread beyond Jerusalem into the Gentile world (Acts 15).

Responsibility in Use of CL: Use it as a tool to advance the Gospel. Use it selflessly!

Problem at Corinth: They saw it primarily as a right or for pleasure or self enjoyment or convenience. God wanted them to use it strategically – they were using it selflessly. Result was division and destruction!

NOTE: When liberty is accompanied by spiritual destruction and division, then it is not being used properly! This is a sure sign that liberty is being misused!

II. The Pericope Examined (I Cor. 8-10)

A. *The Contextual Background Surveyed:*

1. Galatians/Colossians: Defending the Nature/Content of the Gospel
2. I Corinthians 8-10: Defending the Work/Result of the Gospel
3. Romans 14-15: Defending the Peace/Harmony of the Gospel

A. *The Specific Issue at Corinth:*

1. The Question Raised – Idol meat (📺 ⓘ ❤️ 🍷 ✨ 🏰 🗿 📺 📺 ✓)
 - This is the general term for meat that had been offered in sacrifice to idols.
 - This concept refers to the broad aspects of eating meat offered to idols including but not limited to temple meals.
 - Food sacrificed to idols and sold in macellum
 - Food eaten at idol feasts and sometimes on temple grounds.

Point – this was a way of life and Paul’s answer would have great impact and implication for many areas of every day life.

2. ***The Problem Revealed – Stumbling***

- There were believers at Corinth who were being enticed into sin and spiritual ruin by the actions of others in the name of liberty.
- These believers were absolutely convinced that they had a right to do this – and Paul at first seems to concede this point. (He is going to make a surprising comment in chapter 10)
- However, their exercise of this so called liberty was really and truly bringing other believers into spiritual ruin.
- The liberty that should have been used to advance the work of the gospel and build the lives of believers was in fact being used in such a way that it was destroying them and bringing them to spiritual ruin. This is a sure sign that the liberty was being misused.

3. ***The Solution Rendered – Limit Your Liberty!*** Stop using it selfishly and start using it strategically!

- Problem at Corinth involved the misuse of liberty.
- They were using it for selfish gratification or personal convenience.
- It should have been used strategically to advance the Gospel in the lives of others.

C. *The Flow of Paul's Argument – His Case for Limiting Liberty*

1. *Chapter 8 – Principle Taught* (Theological instruction leading to ethical obligation)

- Paul's general practice is to start with doctrinal instruction before moving on to applicational exhortation. We generally tend to start with the behavior we want to modify (application), Paul started with the truth he wanted them to grasp!
- Right doctrine leads to right living. This is part of the problem in the modern church – Fundamentalism has generally attempted to modify behavior first and then teach doctrine/theology second!
- This chapter is basically going to lay a theological foundation related to Christian liberty that will then lead to ethical obligation.
- Paul is going to challenge the belief/practice of the Corinthians that they set forth in their slogans. “We know (8:1)”; “No such thing as an idol (8:3)”; and “Food will not commend us to God (8:8)”. He is going to later reveal that their knowledge indeed is flawed but that is not where he starts.
- He starts by reminding them that knowledge alone leads to arrogance. The reason that other believers are being ruined spiritually is that these Corinthians are acting arrogantly and defending a right they perceive they have in going to the idol temple to eat a sacrificial meal. They defend their position based on “knowledge” – Paul refutes it by pointing out their lack of love.
- “You are exactly right – food has no ability to commend you to God. So why are you defending it so strongly? If it really doesn't matter, than why is it such a big deal to you that you are willing to destroy a brother over your right to eat? This in fact is sin! (Note terminology)
- Before I sin in such a way (destroying my brother) over such a minor issue (eating and drinking), I will eat no meat!

2. *Chapter 9 – Example Presented* (Illustration leading to exhortation)

- Note Paul's tact and wisdom in choosing this route.
- I have a legitimate right that you and all the rest of the believers concede I have. (He has three rights: to eat and drink, to lead about a wife, to make a living from the Gospel/forbear working.)

- I will pick one of them (forbear secular work) and defend it with five irrefutable proofs)
- {Apostleship, Standard human practice, OT law, Standard religious practice, Christ himself commanded}
- However, here is what I did with that right – I did not use it!
- Why? For the Gospel's sake (9x) – That I might reach men!
- I am willing to be made all things to all men – this is in fact a willingness to give up a right – not to hold on to one!

Note: Paul goes to 3 specific examples/illustrations!

Runner – be appropriate

Boxer – be careful and legitimate (some things disqualify)

Israel – They were blessed. They had knowledge. They were inappropriate and not careful. They were disqualified!

- God blessed them, provided for them, freed them, then gave them restrictions designed to help them live as free people. They rejected and rebelled and were cast out in the wilderness.
- They committed immorality and idolatry!

3. **Chapter 10 – Application Demanded** (Warning leading to authoritative command)

- Hey Paul, wait a minute! Who is talking about Idolatry? We would never do such a thing! I mean they committed idolatry and we are not even in the same ballpark! We know that there is no such thing as an idol – remember?!
- Let him who thinks he stand take heed lest he fall. Your problem is in your thinking! You think you are not committing idolatry but in fact you are participating in sacrifices offered to idols/demons and that makes you a participant! You are tempting the Lord!

Application 1: No more idol feasts! (10:14-22)

Slogan/Response: All things are lawful! (Not all things profit or edify)

General Principle 1 Stated: Let no one seek his own good but the good of his neighbor! (This is how Christian liberty is to be used!)

Application 2: Eat what is sold in the market place with no

question for conscience sake. (10:26)

Application 3: If an unbeliever invites you to a private meal, go and don't ask questions.

Application 4: If another brother discretely points out that the food is idol sacrifice, don't eat! Protect your brother! He is your highest priority! (By this shall all men know you are my disciples if ye have love one for another!)

General Principle 2 Stated: Whatever you do in eating or drinking to all to the glory of God (I have already told you what glorifies God!)

General Principle 3 Stated: Give no offense either to Jews, Greeks, or to the church of God!

III. The Principles Derived

- A. Theological knowledge (doctrinal orthodoxy) and legitimate liberty can never by themselves determine the permissibility of an action. (8:1-3)
 - Paul constantly differentiated between the permissibility of an action and its profitability.
 - Love must guide my action along with my knowledge.
- B. Believers must use liberty with a view to profitability rather than personal self gratification. (10:24)
 - Note the present tense – ongoing practice of life
 - “Good” – that which is profitable or benefits others.
 - “Other” – someone who has a different position on the matter than ours (eteros)
- C. **Individual actions must be evaluated from a Corporate perspective.**
 - Does the activity in question lead me to something that is unacceptable.
 - Some actions have this corporate effect: ie., Lord's Supper, OT sacrificial meal
- D. **The effect of an action on the Gospel must regulate the exercise of that action.**
 - I am to limit my rights (not revel in them) in order to advance the gospel!
 - The winning of a lost man is not to be done at the expense of a brother!
- E. **The effect of an action upon the spiritual well being of the individual himself must limit the exercise of the action.**
 - This is not always readily understood by the individual. These Corinthians were initially convinced that all they were doing was eating meat. Paul is

later going to rebuke them for tempting God by being involved in idolatry!
Knowledge is not always reliable!

- It is possible that my action that I think I have a right to do is actually causing me to sin before God.

F. *The effect of an action on the Honor of God must regulate that action. (I Cor. 10:14-22; 31)*

- I must learn to identify God's true concerns and protect them.

G. *The legitimate interpretation of my freedom/action by another must regulate the exercise of that action. (10:27-30)*

- Don't eat the meat if questioned by another believer!

IV. Misconceptions Refuted

A. *A particular activity not expressly forbidden by scripture is permissible permitted no violation of his conscience occurs.*

- No specific prohibition for eating meat – Paul gives a general principle of loving your brother and then a specific application – don't eat meat!

B. *To challenge another believer in his exercise of liberty is judgmental and unloving. (Swindoll's statement of Haggai)*

- Only part of Paul's appeal to Corinthians was on his authority as an Apostle. Much of what he stated was based on OT passages that he used to bring authority to the words he was stating.

C. *At times the scruples of the weak must be violated in order to win the lost.*

- Not what Paul commanded in 10:28-30. Do not adopt an end justifies the means practice when it comes to this area.

Conclusion:

1. The incorrect use of knowledge in Christian liberty == arrogance
2. The careless use of knowledge often leads to real spiritual danger in the life of a believer (ie., idolatry of the Corinthians)
3. An improper focus on liberty results in self gratification rather than service!