

Matters of Conscience

M.W. Bassford
12-31-06

Introduction.

- A. Last Sunday, December 24th, was Christmas Eve, a time that many in the religious world celebrate. I suspect that in churches of Christ throughout this country, the time of year did not go unnoticed. Some preachers explained why we do not celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday. Other preachers maintained that Christians should not celebrate Christmas in any way, religiously or not. On the other extreme, some preachers ignored the Christmas controversy entirely and just preached a sermon on the birth of Jesus.
- B. We recognize, of course, that celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25th is a denominational tradition and not something that we have authority to observe as a church. That leaves open the question, however, of whether as individuals, Christians are allowed to celebrate Christmas as a private, non-religious holiday. Many Christians sincerely believe that such a private celebration is acceptable; other Christians just as sincerely believe that it is not. This difference of opinion often leads to conflict.
- C. My intent this evening, though, is not to solve the Great Christmas Controversy. I'm interested in something much broader—the way that we as a congregation are to address it and other matters like it. God's word has the answers we need, so let's turn to the Bible to learn how we should address matters of conscience.

I. Background.

- A. In order to understand the New Testament church's solution to this problem, though, we first need to get some background on the controversy of conscience that consumed them. It had to do with the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. This doesn't make much sense to us, but 2000 years ago, it was a big deal. Back in the day, in the pagan religion, it was common for the pagans to offer an animal sacrifice to their idol and then either eat the meat in a religious feast or just sell the meat in the marketplace. The apostles responded to this practice during the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, and, in Acts 15:28-29, they forbade the eating of this meat.
- B. When the churches received this apostolic command, though, they saw two different ways to take it.
 1. First of all, it's possible to read that command in a more restrictive way, as saying that sacrificing meat to an idol taints the meat and makes it evil for Christians to eat it, even not knowing what they're eating. Christians who felt this way stopped eating meat altogether, just in case it had been sacrificed to an idol.
 2. The other way, though, is less restrictive. It argues that the command is just meant to keep Christians out of pagan worship services, so it's OK to eat the meat itself as long as you don't know it's been sacrificed. Christians who felt this way had no problem eating meat as long as they didn't share in the pagan worship.
- C. As a result, in the first century church, Christians were divided into meat-eaters and vegetarians, and just like Christians do today, they argued back and forth about who was right. We see the apostle Paul, though, discuss who actually IS right in Romans 14:14. Paul makes two important points here. First, he says that meat is just meat. Because of his understanding of the law of Jesus, he believes that no meat can be inherently unclean. The meat-eaters are right. However, Paul also recognizes that because the vegetarians believe that meat is unclean, to them it is unclean, whether in reality it's unclean or not.
- D. Those are the terms of the conflict, and throughout Romans 14, Paul describes the meat-eaters as the strong in faith and the vegetarians as the weak in faith. We need to be careful, though, in the way we use those labels. Paul's point is not that anyone who takes a more restrictive interpretation of a passage is weak in faith. Instead, he's just calling the vegetarians "weak in faith" because they were. They didn't believe in the power of Christ to make all foods clean. Sometimes, though, brethren interpret Scripture restrictively for reasons BESIDES weakness of faith. For example, when we argue against church support of human institutions, we don't do so because of weak faith, we do so because of our respect for the authority of Jesus. The "weak in faith" label doesn't fit non-institutional brethren, it doesn't fit in many other church controversies, and it has a nasty connotation besides. Let's leave "weak in faith" language in Romans 14 and not apply it to each other.

II. Receive One Another.

- A. Now that we have the background out of the way, we can turn to what we should actually do in times of controversy, and the first thing that Romans 14 tells us to do is receive one another. This is Paul's point in Romans 14:1-3. The central idea here is that we cannot make a shared belief in matters of conscience a test of fellowship. In order to understand what this means, we have to understand the difference between a Scriptural command and a matter of conscience. Let me give you some examples:
 1. For starters, I am firmly convinced that fornication is a sin. I believe that because 1 Corinthians 6:18 says so in as many words. It's a black-letter command, there is no other honest way to read the text, and all Christians are required to obey the command. Romans 14 does not require me to receive fornicators.

2. On the other side of things, let's say I am also firmly convinced that it is a sin for Christian women not to wear a covering in the assembly. I'm not, but let's say I was. The covering is a different topic from fornication. Even if I have no doubt about my position, I have to recognize nonetheless that it is possible for honest Christians to look at 1 Corinthians 11 and make a different application. It's the same thing as first-century Christians making different applications of the principle "Don't eat meat sacrificed to idols." Because this is so, Romans 14 does require me to receive those who believe differently on this than I do.
- B. As part of this receiving process, we must avoid "disputes over doubtful things." Now, this doesn't mean that we shouldn't ever talk about anything that's a matter of conscience. That's not the way to find the truth and serve God. Ignorance only helps the devil, not the Lord. We need to discuss controversial subjects, but we must avoid letting that discussion become a dispute. Our priorities need to be serving God, finding the truth, and loving one another, and not proving how right we are and making the other guy look foolish.
 - C. Beyond this, the last part of receiving one another is learning neither to judge nor despise one another. This is easy to say, but it's hard to do. When we see someone who believes something is acceptable that we do not, our first instinct is to judge them. We say, "Look at those Christians with the Christmas tree in their living rooms! Don't they know that's a pagan symbol? They're not any better than pagans themselves!" Friends, we have to throttle that instinct and not judge. Likewise, though, we have to avoid the equally strong temptation to despise Christians with a more restrictive conscience. We can't talk bad about people who don't believe that celebrating Christmas is OK, and sneer at them, and ask why they don't worry about something important like saving the lost. That's just as bad as judging. We need to learn to love and respect instead.

III. Understand Our Responsibility.

- A. In addition, we also need to understand where our responsibility, and indeed where every Christian's responsibility, lies. Paul explains in Romans 14:4-6. We are responsible not to each other, but to God. This here, friends, is the reason why we should neither judge nor despise. When we start judging another Christian based on our opinion, based on our own individual conscience, we're claiming God's position for our own.
- B. However, just as we need to see that others aren't responsible to us, we need to understand what it means that we are responsible to God. We need to be fully convinced, and we need to act to the Lord.
 1. Being fully convinced means that in these areas, we need to be sure that the stand we're taking doesn't violate our conscience. It's not enough to be kind of OK with "O Little Town of Bethlehem" on the stereo. If that's the best we can do, we need to stay away, and only do what we are fully convinced is right.
 2. Second, we need to make sure that our thoughts and actions are directed to the Lord. This is critically important. In these doubtful areas, we have to make sure that our conclusions are based on an honest reading of Scripture and a desire to serve God, and not a desire to excuse what we want to do anyway. If a Christian woman is willing to wear the covering, yet studies the subject honestly and concludes that she doesn't have to, that's one thing. On the other hand, if another woman is determined not to wear the covering no matter what, and does not come to the word with an open mind, and only looks for passages that justify what she has already decided, that's another thing. Her actions are not to the Lord.
- C. We cannot afford to be spiritually dishonest in the area of conscience, brethren. We have to make sure that our hearts and our actions are right in all that we do, and Paul explains the reason why in Romans 14:10-12. We can judge one another, and be judged by one another, all we want, but there's still only one judgment that matters. All of us shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and we are going to have to give an account to Him for how honestly we dealt with His word. God knows our hearts, and we can't fool Him.

IV. Pursue Peace.

- A. Finally, though, friends, we have an obligation to pursue peace in these matters. That's the point that Paul makes in Romans 14:17-19. We are charged with doing all we can to be at peace with one another, and we are also charged with doing all we can to edify one another, and both of these duties continue even if we don't agree with one another. We cannot be people who love to dispute with each other. We cannot be people who are indifferent to each other's spiritual welfare. We must be guided by love and the truth.
- B. This appears in two main areas. First, we must not grieve one another. Paul makes this point in Romans 14:14-15. As we all know, there's no trouble like church trouble, and if any church gives in to the temptation to bicker endlessly about a matter of conscience, it makes life miserable for everyone involved. There are many such issues, everything from Christmas to the covering to Sunday-evening communion to a hundred other things besides, and we need to use wisdom in all of those areas, because they are all potentially church-destroying. Let us instead look for ways to be a blessing in each other's lives, rather than a curse.
- C. Second, we also need to avoid causing our brother to stumble, as Paul says in Romans 14:21-23. Friends, we may believe some activity is Scripturally right. We may well be correct in our belief. However, if a brother is uneasy in his conscience, and we lead him to do something that is right, but that he believes is wrong, to him it is still sin. We need to respect each other's differences of conscience for the sake of their souls and ours.

Conclusion. If you recognize from your study of the word that you are engaged in sin, repent and return to God.