

Conscience in Corinthians

M. W. Bassford

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Introduction.

- A. A week or two ago, one of my friends posted an entry on her blog about a dilemma that she and her husband were going to be facing over Christmas break. His aunt and uncle were supposed to be hosting the big Christmas dinner this year, but their house was too small to hold the entire extended family. These relatives are members of a denomination, and their denominational church building has a kitchen and ample space in which to eat. What they decided to do was host their family Christmas dinner in this denominational church building. So, my friend asked, what are she and her family to do: eat together with their relatives in this denominational church building, or stay away on the grounds that church buildings are not for eating in?
- B. I, of course, was utterly intrigued by my question, thought about it briefly, and fired off a couple of paragraphs in reply. Of course, I'm not the authority in issues like this, any more than any other human being is an authority. Instead, all of us need to learn to turn to the word of God and the comprehensive principles that it sets forth for us to use in deciding what to do in areas where God has not clearly spoken.
- C. Typically, when we deal with matters of conscience, we turn to Romans 14. However, the New Testament actually contains not one, but two extended discussions of this topic. 1 Corinthians 8-10 has as much to say on this topic as Romans 14 does, but too often, we don't realize it because we're not very good at following Scriptural arguments through chapter breaks. Let's remedy this failure this evening. Let's learn how God wants us to exercise sound judgment by looking at matters of conscience in Corinthians.

I. The Basic Principle.

- A. As is often the case, Paul's examination of conscience deals with the specific example of eating meat. Some Christians didn't believe it was permissible to eat meat because that meat may have been sacrificed to an idol; other Christians thought eating meat was acceptable because it didn't matter whether it had been sacrificed to an idol or not. Paul tells us, though, that in analyzing this or any other debatable question, we need to **BEGIN WITH LOVE**. That's the point he makes in 1 Corinthians 8:1-3. Paul's point here is not that knowledge is bad and that we should just go with our feelings in deciding questions like these. His point is that knowledge is insufficient. If we know that something is allowed by the law of Christ, that alone is not enough reason for us to do it. We also need to consider the effect that our decision will have on those around us.
- B. Let me give you an example. Let's say that we lived 75 years ago, back in the era where almost all Christians were convinced that going to see movies was sinful and wrong. I'm a good Bible student; I study the word from cover to cover and conclude that such an opinion can't be backed up by Scripture. It may be sinful to see a movie because of its content, but movies per se are not evil.
- C. If I'm only concerned about knowledge, at that point, I know all I need to know. I march off to see the movie in broad daylight, and I don't care whether half the church and half the town sees me doing it. However, that's not all we need to know to answer the question. We also have to pay attention to love. Love wants to know what effect my going to see the movie will have on others. Will I cause discord in the church? Will I tempt other Christians to do something they believe is wrong? Will I cause people in the community to look down on the Lord's people because they believe I'm sinning? What love tells us is that just because we can do something doesn't mean we should do it. We need to think about others, not just ourselves.
- D. Of course, just because knowledge is not everything does not mean it is not important. This is the point Paul makes when he tells us to **KNOW WHAT GOD WANTS**. We see this in 1 Corinthians 8:7-8. Here, we see him using knowledge to answer the meat sacrificed to idols controversy. There is only one God, so idols do not exist. God does not care what we eat, so He doesn't care whether we eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Some Christians have problems understanding that, but it's the truth.
- E. In the same way, friends, we need to know the truth about the law of Christ, and what it does and does not say. If we are going to take a stand on whether some action is lawful, we need to have a "thus saith the Lord." It amazes me how often Christians will confidently pronounce that some action is sinful when the Scriptural support for their declaration is tenuous or nonexistent. We get so interested in being the moral authority that we forget that the only true moral authority is God. When it comes to questions of righteousness, either we need to have book, chapter, and verse, we need to find it, or we need to say nothing.

II. Two Exceptions.

- A. However, this general rule of knowing what God tells us to do and then acting accordingly is subject to two exceptions. Unsurprisingly, both of these have to do with love. The first of them tells us to **TAKE CARE WITH OUR LIBERTY**. Paul outlines the reason why in 1 Corinthians 8:9-11. This stems from the general idea that we do not exist in a vacuum. Much more than we are often aware, people watch us, see what we

do, and then do the same. This is fine if what we're doing does not violate their conscience. However, when it does, that's a big problem. As Paul tells us in Romans 14, whatever is not from faith is sin, and if we violate our consciences in doing something that the Scripture allows, it is still sin to us. Thus, even by doing something that we are allowed to do, we can tempt others to sin.

- B. To pick a seasonal example, let's say that we're OK with celebrating Christmas as a family holiday, which is not something that the Scripture forbids. We invite Brother Zedekiah over for Sunday dinner. Brother Zedekiah believes that it is wrong for a Christian to celebrate Christmas. However, while over at our house, the brother is very impressed by our gorgeously decorated tree, the heaps of presents scattered about, and the generally festive air of our family holiday. Inspired by this, Brother Zedekiah rushes out and buys himself a Christmas tree with all the trimmings, even though in his heart of hearts, he believes it to be wrong. We didn't sin in the act of celebrating Christmas itself, but we did sin by tempting a brother to sin against his own conscience.
- C. That's something that we need to do whatever we must to avoid. Look at Paul's take on this in 1 Corinthians 8:13. Paul says that if he had to never eat meat again so that his brother would not stumble, that's exactly what he would do. We need to have the same attitude. Souls are more important than any earthly delight. If we are left with the choice between celebrating Christmas and keeping a brother from temptation, that's not a tough decision. By next Tuesday, Santa and Rudolph need to be out on the curb.
- D. However, our choices need not only to reflect a love for one another, but also a love for God. That's Paul's point when he instructs us to **RUN TO WIN**. See his comments on this in 1 Corinthians 9:24, 10:14. Let's notice in passing that both the bulk of 1 Corinthians 9 and the first half of 1 Corinthians 10 are just illustrations that Paul is using. In 1 Corinthians 9, he cites his own refusal to accept money from the Corinthians for his preaching as a liberty he gave up to save souls, and in 1 Corinthians 10, he cites the wicked behavior of the Israelites as a warning against idolatry. It's this latter point that we're focusing on now.
- E. In general terms, here's what Paul is saying. Even though we have liberty in Christ to do many things, we can't allow that liberty to entice us into sin. We can't become so comfortable with meat sacrificed to idols that we let ourselves be drawn into out-and-out idolatry. In more modern terms, we can't become so desensitized to watching movies that we start watching trashy movies that will rot our souls. We can't get so used to Santa and snowmen that we start celebrating Christmas as a religious holiday in our churches. Don't think it doesn't happen, friends, because it does. 200 years ago, most Protestant churches in this country did NOT celebrate Christmas. What happened, though, is that Christmas pageant by nativity scene, the idea of a religious holiday crept in, until now, the idea of Christmas is so firmly entrenched that they'll never give it up. We need to remember that despite our liberty, our goal is going to heaven, and not let ourselves be seduced by Satan.

III. Practical Applications.

- A. Now that we've got the basic principles and the caveats down, we can look at what, exactly, we are supposed to do with all of this. Paul's first piece of advice is to **SEEK OUR NEIGHBORS' GOOD**. This is the general rule he states in 1 Corinthians 10:23-24. He begins with the point that all things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. This is a summation of what we've just looked at. It is lawful for us to celebrate Christmas, but it is not profitable if that celebration will either tempt others to sin or will tempt us ourselves. Paul focuses on the first possibility in the next verse where he urges us to look out for the well-being of others, not ourselves.
- B. Paul then gives three applications of this in 1 Corinthians 10:25, 27, 28. It's fine to eat random meat we buy in the market, and we don't have to ask questions. If we go to dinner with an unbeliever, we can chow down on the prime rib without asking pointed questions about where it came from. However, if someone tells us that the meat IS sacrificed to idols, that's where we have to draw the line. In that case, we may not eat the meat for the sake of the one who told us, because if we do, we may be teaching the other person that we believe idolatry is acceptable. We need to do what will edify others, not tear them down.
- C. Likewise, in the choices we make in these difficult areas, we need to remember our responsibility to **GLORIFY GOD**. Paul speaks to this in 1 Corinthians 10:31-32. His basic point here is that all of us are people with a mission, and that mission is to get everybody we come in contact with to go to heaven. If they're outside the church, they need to be brought into it, and if they're inside the church, they need to be kept in it. Everything that we say and everything that we do needs to be measured against these two life purposes. We need to ask, "Will God be glorified if I go see this movie, or will Christians be tempted to sin and non-Christians be tempted to call me a hypocrite?" We need to ask, "If I put up this Christmas tree, am I bringing people to Christ, or am I driving them away?" What matters is not ourselves and our desires, but God and His desires.
- D. Of course, these can be extremely complex questions to answer. We might not know that Brother Zedekiah is opposed to Christmas before we invite him over. We might not know who sees us going into the movie theater. Obviously, we're going to have a harder time making good decisions if those decisions are not informed. That means that we need to inform ourselves. We need to know who feels what way about what. Beyond that, though, we just need to use the best judgment that we possess, seek help from God, and then humbly make the best decision we can. It's hard, but it's what God expects.

Conclusion. If you haven't been living up to God's expectations, tonight is the night to change that.