

## THE ROLE OF CONSCIENCE IN CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

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In the last issue of *Proclamation* we found five biblical principles that deal with conscience:

1. Our moral database may be deficient.
2. We should always follow our conscience.
3. When we follow our conscience thinking we are doing right, yet we end up doing the wrong thing because of an inadequately educated conscience, God overlooks our ignorance and will enlighten us.
4. Acting contrary to our conscience causes spiritual disaster.
5. Refusing to study and look at the facts can be as dangerous as going against our conscience, which can cause spiritual disaster.

The focus of this issue will be to discover how we are to relate to others who sincerely and honestly disagree on doctrinal and behavioral matters. For Formers these issues might include eating meat, eating unclean meat, drinking wine,<sup>1</sup> if or how one should observe the Sabbath, etc.

There is something within the human psyche that causes us to want others to agree with us. Perhaps subconsciously we need the affirmation that we are right. Whatever the reason, this desire to convince others seems to be present in most of us. This dynamic is seen when churches undergo theological or behavioral change. The people on the leading edge of change often feel frustrated with those who want to cling to the old ways and vice versa. This is an underlying cause at the root of many church splits and comes into sharp focus when Christians disagree on matters which some feel to be a necessary component of faith. There is a strong felt need to persuade others to accept our understanding, *whatever* that understanding may be.

In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul gives a number of principles that relate to freedom of conscience. While this chapter deals with food offered to idols, the principles brought out have direct application to Christians who honestly disagree over other matters of Christian behavior. Sometimes it is easier to grasp biblical principles that deal with controversial issues when the subject or illustration at hand is not the actual topic under discussion, as there is less personal prejudice and emotional involvement.

In New Testament times, pagan worship permeated all levels of Greek society. The pagans offered sacrifices to achieve the blessing of their gods. The meat offered on the pagan altars was usually divided into three portions. One portion was burned, the second was given to the priest, and the third to the worshiper who brought the sacrifice. Because many sacrifices were made, it was impossible for the priest to eat his entire portion. Therefore, the priest would take his meat and sell it at the local market.<sup>2</sup> In time enterprising priests incorporated restaurants or meat markets right into the pagan temples. People ate at Temple Restaurants because the food was good and/or they knew it had the blessing of their gods.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the Gentile pagans really believed in their idols. When they became Christians they renounced idol worship and refused to eat meat that was sacrificed to idols. However, as they continued to progress in their Christian life, they began to realize that the pagan deities were little more than a figment of imagination. They realized that these gods of wood and stone were nothing but ridiculous nonsense! From this position of enlightened knowledge they reasoned that

offering meat to idols of wood and stone really did not affect it any way; therefore, there was nothing wrong with buying sacrificial meat or even eating at a Temple Restaurant. And their conclusions, as we will soon see, were correct from a knowledge perspective.

The problem came, however, when a new Christian saw Deacon Bill eating at Temple Restaurant. Having just accepted Christ and having renounced idolatry, the new Christian looked at Deacon Bill and reasoned, "If it is O.K. for Deacon Bill to eat at Temple Restaurant, then it is O.K. for me." However, for the new Christian, whose conscience database was still deficient, eating there was understood to be an act of worship to the pagan gods. All the memories of years of idol worship filled the mind of the new Christian and his conscience told him that eating at Temple Restaurant was wrong, because it was worshiping idols.

It is against this backdrop that Paul writes.

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies (1 Cor. 8:1).

In this verse Paul says there are two ways of dealing with problems of conscience. One is *the way of knowledge* and the other is *the way of love*. He tells us at the outset, which is correct. Knowledge makes us arrogant but love edifies. Therefore, in solving Christian disagreements, we should follow the way of love, not the way of knowledge. While it is true that education in the Word of God, and the corresponding enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, is the *long-term solution*, the way of love should be followed *until* there is unity of conscience.<sup>4</sup>

If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know (1 Cor. 8:2).

In this verse Paul reinforces the truth we pointed out in the last chapter: our conscience database may be deficient. It is also of interest to realize that *the person who thinks his knowledge is complete is the often the very person who lacks knowledge*. We must, therefore, be careful not to force others to reach our conclusions.

Paul is now going to give the logic of the way of knowledge, which is the long-term solution.

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him (1 Cor. 8:4–6).

If this were all of Paul's instruction we would agree that it would be perfectly all right for any Christian to eat at Temple Restaurant. The pagan gods of wood and stone were nothing but ridiculous nonsense! Paul does not stop here, however. He goes on to show that:

...not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat (1 Cor. 8:7,8).

Paul shows that intrinsically there is nothing wrong with eating meat offered to gods of wood and stone. Relationship with God is not dependent upon what we eat or do not eat. In other words, the way of knowledge is the way of freedom. How we use our freedom, however, must be limited when it might cause someone else to go against his/her conscience.

For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ (1 Cor. 8:10–12).

In this verse we find two more important principles regarding conscience. First, *we should never encourage others to go against their conscience*, even if their conscience is wrongly educated and what we want them to do is right.

Second, *when we use our Christian liberty in doing what is intrinsically right in a way that influences another Christian to do what he believes to be wrong, we not only cause the weaker brother to fall, but we sin against Christ*. Because of these far reaching principles Paul concludes:

Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble (1 Cor. 8:13).

Note that the reason for Paul's cessation of eating meat was not because of any biblical or health mandate, but rather, it was because of the inadequately educated conscience of another. Here we see yet another principle of conscience. *We should use the way of love and restrict our Christian freedom by not doing what would cause a weaker brother to violate his conscience, even though what we forego would not have been intrinsically wrong*.

There is yet one more principle of conscience we should list. This is not clearly stated, but is definitely implied. *Reeducating the conscience takes time*. For some this time may be short, for others much longer. For some people, all they need is to be shown clearly the teaching of God's word relative to the question under consideration and they are ready to make any needed behavioral or doctrinal changes. For others this time may be much longer. Some have many years of engraved habit patterns of certain religious behaviors that were thought to be right, and for them the transitional time may be long and emotionally painful. Some have the necessary time to study and get to the bottom of a doctrinal or behavioral issue. Others have little time to study, so the time required to reeducate or complete their conscience database may be much longer. The ultimate answer is the way of knowledge *combined* with the way of love. This is why we have the wealth of instruction in the epistles to young churches. But *while* a person is in the process of assimilating this knowledge, those dealing with him must follow the way of love. When we follow the way of love we have time for others to grow into the way of knowledge.

Must we then always restrict our legitimate Christian freedom when in the company of those who sincerely believe differently? No. Not when to do so would be to compromise the clarity of the gospel. In Galatians 2 Paul clearly demonstrates this principle. When the Judaizing Christians were spying out the liberty of Paul and Titus in regard to circumcision, Paul states "we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you."<sup>5</sup> Later on in the same chapter, Paul rehearsed how he had to confront Peter face to face.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how *is it that* you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal. 2:11–14).

One could argue that Peter was following the way of love so as not to cause these men from the conservative law faction of the early church to go against their conscience. Yet because Peter's actions compromised the clarity of the Gospel, Paul confronted him face to face in public. Therefore, we have this principle: *We should not restrict our Christian freedom when to do so would clearly compromise the foundational principles of the gospel*.

## Principles of conscience applied to Sabbath controversy

Now let us consider the implications of these nine principles of conscience to questions of Sabbath behavior. Allow me to share a personal experience. Some years ago I led a group through a seven-month study of the Sabbath. We all, with the exception of perhaps one or two, reached the conclusion that the observance of the Seventh-day Sabbath was not required or expected of new covenant Christians. It took us seven months of hard study to come to this conclusion. This, in itself, shows that it takes time to reeducate, or complete our conscience database. At the end of this time we *intellectually knew* what the Bible taught, but we then had to face how, or if, we were going to change our behavior relative to the Seventh-day Sabbath. Some were ready to make a clean break and start worshiping on Sunday. Others, while they intellectually wanted to make such a change, could not do so for emotional and relational reasons. They had many memory “tapes” that played in their minds—all the predictions of the dire consequences that would happen to those who left the Sabbath. Others had parents, children, or close friends who had not joined in our study, and who still felt the keeping of the Seventh-day Sabbath was to be the final test of loyalty to Christ in the last days. For these reasons, many were not ready to change their day of worship.

I remember the first time I went shopping on Saturday. The old tapes began to play. Had I really reached the right conclusion? When I went home I looked again at the evidence of Scripture and was convinced my conclusions were sound. I had to make a decision to follow the clear teaching of Scripture and not the tapes of years of “proof-text” indoctrination. Yes, the pages from the book of Galatians are well worn!

We all had kept the seventh-day Sabbath for years and it took different amounts of time for different people to make changes in their Sabbath behavior. Now, from the perspective of some sixteen years since that important seven-month study, and having reviewed the Biblical evidence on the subject numerous times, Scripture seems so clear that I wonder why it took me so long to see the light!

It seems to me that in congregations, or families for that matter, where a thorough, biblical study of the Sabbath leads to the conclusion that the Seventh-day Sabbath is no longer binding or expected of Christians, that great care should be followed in the transition. No one should be forced to go against his conscience. There is need for ongoing, thorough study and patience. While not neglecting the clear teachings of the word of God, the way of love should be followed until unity of conscience is achieved.

Another issue relative to Sabbath behavior comes into focus when those who have come to the conclusion that Seventh-day Sabbath observance is no longer required or intended for Christians visit those who still believe that it is. How should they act? I think the answer is clear, not only from the principles of conscience outlined above, but also from the life of Paul. During their Sabbath observance we should, it seems to me, behave in the same way as those with whom we are staying. We must remember that their conscience is still bound by the old covenant Sabbath law that said:

...but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your *sojourner who stays with you* (Ex. 20:10).

Therefore, if we use our Christian freedom and do something that they feel is a violation of Sabbath law, we cause them to violate their conscience because we are the “sojourner” who is

staying with them. They feel under obligation to cause us, as their guests, to keep the Sabbath. For this reason, then, we ought to be careful to honor their conscience even if we have to restrict our Christian liberty. We should remember that worshiping God is appropriate on *any* day, including the seventh day. When we are with Sabbatarian friends or relatives there is nothing wrong with resting and worshipping alongside them. We do this, not from the basis of old covenant requirement, but as an expression of love, not wanting to make them sin against their conscience. This, I believe, is why Paul kept the Jewish feasts, underwent the temple purification rites, etc., when he met with the Jerusalem church. He did not want to cause them to violate their conscience (See Acts 18:18; 20:16; 21:26, 27).

Paul was clear in stating why he observed the Jewish ceremonies on some occasions and not on others. Here is his rationale:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Here Paul spells out his activities as he follows the way of love in seeking to spread the gospel to his fellow Jews. May we share our faith with the same love and submission!

I also believe it is appropriate to lead Sabbath keepers into biblical study or leave with them something which will help complete their conscience database. Like Paul we should use the way of love but we should also seek to bring them to a full understanding of the biblical teaching of the covenants, the Sabbath and the gospel. In doing so, however, they should know we are Christians by our love!

### **Summary Principles**

1. We should all recognize that our own conscience database may be deficient. This should lead us to continued personal Bible study, regular church attendance, and if possible, involvement in a small group Bible study where we can interact with other Christians who may help us see our own blind spots (1 Cor. 8:2).
2. We should always follow our conscience (Acts 23:1; 24:16; 2 Cor. 1:12; 1 Tim. 1:5; 3:9; 2 Tim. 1:3).
3. When we follow our conscience, wanting to do right and thinking we are doing right, but end up doing wrong, God treats us with grace and mercy and enlightens us (Acts 26:9–15; 1 Tim. 1:12,13; Jn. 7:17; Jn. 3:21).
4. Acting contrary to our conscience causes spiritual disaster (1 Tim. 1:18,19; 4:1,2; Tit. 1:15,16; Num. 22:2–35; 31:16).
5. Refusing to study and look at the facts can be as dangerous as going against our conscience, causing spiritual disaster (Acts 7:54–58; Matt. 13:15; Rom. 11:8; Jn. 9:20).
6. In solving Christian disagreements, we should use the way of love, not the way of knowledge. While it is true that education in the Word of God, and the corresponding enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, is the long term solution, the way of love should be followed until there is unity of conscience (1 Cor. 8:1).

7. We should never encourage others to go against their conscience, even if we know their conscience database is deficient (1 Cor. 8:7–11).
8. When we cause someone to go against his conscience we cause him to sin, and in so doing *we sin against Christ* (1 Cor. 8:10–12).
9. We should restrict our own freedom rather than cause another to go against his conscience (1 Cor. 8:13).
10. Reeducating the conscience takes time. This is implied in 1 Corinthians 8:1–13 where Paul gave instructions regarding the nonexistence of idols, (the way of knowledge) but he knew this would not solve the current situation. This principle is proven in Christian experience.
11. We should not restrict our Christian freedom when to do so would clearly compromise the foundational principles of the gospel.
12. Those who believe that the Seventh-day Sabbath is not required or intended for Christians should be willing to restrict their Christian freedom in order not to cause their sabbatarian relatives or friends to violate their conscience.
13. Christians who know that they are not under the old covenant Sabbath law should feel free to rest and worship alongside sabbatarians while in receipt of their hospitality, as an act of love.
14. Christians should lovingly seek to complete the conscience database of other Christians, but should follow the way of love until there is unity of conscience.

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture is clear that we should not get drunk with wine.

<sup>2</sup> *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, General Editor, Vol. 10, p. 238.

<sup>3</sup> *New Testament Commentary*, Simon J. Kistemaker, 1 Corinthians, p. 273, 274.

<sup>4</sup> Here I am not saying that we ever leave the way of love, but that within the way of love the long-term solution includes knowledge from the Word of God and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>5</sup> Gal. 2:5.