

## TWO PRINCIPLES GOVERNING THE USE OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

*8 Now concerning meat offered to idols. We know that we all possess knowledge. [Let us be aware that] knowledge “puffs up,” but love builds up. <sup>2</sup>If anyone thinks that he knows anything exhaustively, he does not yet know as he ought to know. <sup>3</sup>But if anyone loves God, he is known by [God].*

*<sup>4</sup>Now concerning the eating of food that has been offered to idols: We know that a worldly idol is nothing, and that there is no God except one. <sup>5</sup>Even if there are so-called gods—whether in heaven or on earth—just as indeed there are many such gods and many such lords; <sup>6</sup>nevertheless, for us [who have knowledge there is] one God—the Father—from whom all things come and for whom we live, and one Lord—Jesus Christ—by whom all things exist and by whom we live.*

*<sup>7</sup>But not everyone possesses this knowledge. When some people eat [meat] they [still] view it as an offering made to an idol, since they have been accustomed to idols until now, and [because] their conscience is weak, it is defiled. <sup>8</sup>But food does not commend us to God: we are not worse if we do not eat, and we are not better if we do eat. <sup>9</sup>Be careful that [the use of] your liberty does not in any way become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup>[This is what I mean:] If someone sees you—one who possesses knowledge—sitting in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, being weak, become emboldened to eat what has been offered to idols? <sup>11</sup>Consequently, by your knowledge the one who is weak perishes—the brother for whom Christ died. <sup>12</sup>By sinning against your brothers in this way and injuring their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ. <sup>13</sup>Therefore, if food causes my brother to sin, I will never again eat meat, so that I will not cause my brother to sin. (1 Cor. 8:1-13)*

### **Introduction**

Let’s say your company sends you to New York on a business trip. Sitting through one meeting after another all day long, when five o’clock arrives you are ready for a break. After supper your evening is free, so you and a few Christian colleagues decide to find some entertainment and divergence from the grueling day of meetings.

You scan the newspapers and discover that the Yankees are playing tonight. So you suggest that you and your Christian brothers go up to Yankee Stadium and attend the game.

It sounds like a great idea to the rest of the men, to all except one. To everyone’s surprise, this Christian brother explains that he has an “addiction” to baseball. If he goes out to the ballpark he becomes obsessed with the game and it takes control of his life.

Now you and your Christian colleagues all know that baseball is a perfectly legitimate form of entertainment for the average Christian to enjoy. But it has become evident that one of your colleagues is not an average Christian when it

comes to baseball: he has a spiritual problem when it comes to going out to the ballpark.

One Christian brother, who has been anxious for the opportunity to see the Yankees in action, protests that we have our Christian freedom and our Christian rights, and why should we allow one man with a strange hang up about baseball to spoil a perfectly acceptable evening at the ballpark!?!

Yes, you know that you have your Christian liberty and your Christian rights, but you are not so sure that this is the time or the place to exercise that liberty and those rights. You just happen to have read 1 Corinthians 8 this morning, and the Holy Spirit is now reminding you what this passage of Scripture has to say about the use of Christian liberty: We must be careful that we do not allow our use of Christian liberty to become an occasion for a weaker brother to sin by violating his conscience.

Because we are commanded to consider our weaker brother's well-being, we must be careful how we exercise our Christian liberty. 1 Corinthians 8 provides us with two principles that must govern the use of our Christian liberty.

### **I. Realize that Demonstrating Love is More Important than Exercising Your Rights (8:1-7)**

The particular problem that confronted the Corinthian Christians was how to exercise their Christian liberty when it came to the matter of eating meat offered to idols, (some contemporary questions concerning the use of Christian liberty center around the use of alcoholic beverages, or Lord's Day observance and recreation.)

The idolatry of the Roman world affected every part of the lives of the people: their amusements, their government, even the meat sold at the local market. The sacrificial animals were divided into three parts: one part was burned on the altar, a second part was donated to the pagan priest, and the third part was eaten by the worshiper. The portion donated to the priest, if not eaten by the priest, was sold to the local butcher for re-sale at the market. The worshiper's portion was either eaten at the temple or brought home to be eaten as part of the evening meal. Therefore, if a Christian bought meat at the marketplace, or if he was invited to dinner by a pagan friend, he would be confronted with the matter of eating meat that had been offered to idols (Charles Hodge, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, p. 137.)

In addressing this situation, the apostle begins by asserting: "*We know that we all possess knowledge*" (vs. 1.) What he means is that it is common knowledge among Christians that "*a worldly idol is nothing.*" As Psalm 115:4-7 indicates, no idol in the world has any power or life,

*... their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. <sup>5</sup>They have mouths, but they cannot speak; they have eyes, but they cannot see. <sup>6</sup>They have ears, but they cannot hear; they have noses, but they cannot smell. <sup>7</sup>They have hands, but they cannot handle [anything]; they have feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. (Psl. 115:4-7)*

Having taken note of this fact, it is also vitally important to remember that Paul cautions the church against the demonic power that lies behind the idol:

*Now then, what do I mean? [Am I saying] that meat offered to idols has [any] special significance? Or that an idol is anything? <sup>20</sup>[No! But what I am telling you is] that the sacrifices of the Gentiles are being offered to demons, not to God; and I do not want you to have communion with demons. (1 Cor. 10:19-20)*

But the point being made is the fact that no idol in all the world is a true and legitimate god.

Furthermore, every Christian knows *“[there is] one God—the Father—from whom all things come and for whom we live, and one Lord—Jesus Christ—by whom all things exist and by whom we live”* (vs. 6.)

However, as verse 7 indicates, this knowledge—or at least the practical implications of it—was limited to the spiritually astute (in this case no doubt the Jewish Christians) and was not shared by all Christians. All Christians possess an intellectual knowledge that idols are not gods and that the Lord alone is God, but this knowledge does not have the same liberating impact on the lives of every Christian. Those Christians who had just recently been converted out of a pagan background had been so long accustomed to regarding the eating of meat offered to an idol as an act of worship offered to an actual deity that they were having difficulty disassociating themselves from that erroneous conception. Intellectually, they had come to know and accept the truth, but emotionally they were still affected by their former pagan misconceptions. Consequently, their conscience, being weak, was defiled; that is to say, whenever they ate such meat they felt as though they were still engaging in an act of pagan worship, and thus by eating the meat they were violating their conscience.

The scenario with which the Corinthians were confronted went something like this: A Jewish Christian, brother Levi, protests, “Doesn’t brother Alexander (a Gentile Christian) know that idols are nothing?” Paul replies, “Yes, he does. But that knowledge has not yet made a life transforming impact on him; and don’t you know, brother Levi, that love is more important than knowledge?”

So it is that the apostle goes on to distinguish between knowledge and love and the relative importance of each. *“Knowledge ‘puffs up;’* the possession of knowledge has the tendency to inflate a man with pride. When we possess a greater degree of knowledge than our brothers, we are prone to exhibit an

attitude of arrogance and a sense of superiority. *“But love builds up.”* Love seeks the welfare and the building up of our brothers and sisters. Love will seek to employ knowledge for our brother’s benefit and spiritual development, rather than for our own personal good at the expense of our brother.

In verse 2 Paul gives this warning to those who are tempted to pride themselves on their superior knowledge: *“If anyone thinks that he knows anything exhaustively, he does not yet know as he ought to know.”* The Greek term, γινώσκω, occurring in the perfect infinitive form, indicates that the man in question thinks he has a definitive, exhaustive knowledge of a given subject. Paul explains that the man who thinks he possesses an exhaustive knowledge of a given subject, (especially a subject relating to the things of God,) actually does not yet possess the necessary knowledge of the subject. As finite, and sinful, men, we do not possess definitive knowledge in this present world, note what Paul will confess in 1 Corinthians 13:12, *“At present we see an obscure image in a mirror, but then [we will see] face to face. At present I know [things] partially; but then I will know fully, just as I am fully known.”* Consequently, this should lead to humility and the practice of love.

In verse 3 we are reminded of this vital truth: If any man loves God, that man is known by God. What is of greater importance than intellectual understanding, and the use of Christian liberty stemming from that knowledge, is love for God. As our Lord Himself declares, *“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind”* (Matt. 22:37.) The presence of such love is the evidence of the gracious saving love of God in the man’s life—that man is known by God, as the Apostle John informs us, *“We love, because he first loved us”* (1 Jn. 4:19.)

The first principle that must govern our use of Christian liberty is the realization that exercising love is more important than exercising our rights. The thing that is of greater importance than intellectual understanding is love for God. One way we demonstrate and express our love for God is by showing love for one another, note 1 John 4:20-21,

*If anyone says, I love God, but hates his brother, he is a liar—for anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup>And he has given us this commandment: Whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 Jn. 4:20-21)*

One important aspect of loving one another is being concerned for the welfare of each other and putting the other’s welfare ahead of our own personal interests and desires: *“Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others”* (1 Cor. 10:24.) That is to say, we must never put our own good ahead of the welfare of others, especially in matters of Christian liberty.

## II. Recognize that Your Use of Christian Liberty Must Not Cause the Downfall of a Christian Brother (8:8-13)

Because the question pertinent to the Corinthian church centered around the eating of meat offered to idols, Paul reminds them of the spiritual insignificance of food in itself: food will not commend us to God (vs. 8.) As an act in itself, neither the abstinence from meat nor the partaking of meat will affect our relationship to God, note Romans 14:17-18,

*... the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy by the Holy Spirit; <sup>18</sup>because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. (Rom. 14:17-18)*

Having granted that in itself the act of eating meat is spiritually insignificant, the apostle now shows that love (a self-regulating, self-restraining love) for our weaker brother is of great significance (vs. 9.) Paul grants that the Christian with a strong and enlightened conscience has the “*liberty*” to eat, (literally, he has the “*authority*” to eat.) What he means is that no one has the right to impose their own personal scruples (arising from a weak conscience) upon their Christian brother. This is an aspect regarding the use of Christian liberty that the apostle will deal with more fully in his epistle to the Romans:

*... the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the LORD is able to make him stand. (Rom. 14:3b-4)*

But at the same time Paul warns that the stronger Christian must not use his “*liberty*” (“*authority*”) in such a way as to cause the weaker brother to stumble. We have a responsibility to our weaker brother and must not allow our use of Christian liberty to cause him to violate his conscience:

*One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup>The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not ... <sup>13</sup>... make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way ... <sup>15</sup>If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. (Rom. 14:2-3a, 13b, 15)*

Some general guidelines to be gleaned from Scripture with regard to the use of Christian liberty are as follows: First, If a thing is not necessary, it should not be demanded. By way of example, we are not commanded by God to participate in the eating of meat; therefore, the strong should not insist that the weak must partake of meat—this is something the strong must remember in their conduct toward their weaker brothers. Second, if a thing is not forbidden, it should not be condemned. By way of example, the eating of meat is not forbidden by God;

therefore, the weak must not insist that the strong abstain from eating meat—this is something the weak must remember in their relationship with their stronger brothers.

Paul now presents a scenario demonstrating how the stronger brother must be cautious in his use of Christian liberty for the sake of the weaker brother (vs. 10.) Note: The **stronger Christian** is the one whose conscience is governed by the Word of God; he is able to discriminate between sinful and acceptable conduct, and while rejecting the former, he confidently engages in the latter. The **weaker Christian** is the one whose conscience is governed by his own personal scruples, which may not necessarily be biblical.

The weaker brother observes his fellow Christian dining in a pagan temple. To the weaker brother such dining is tantamount to participating in idolatrous worship; he still has trouble distinguishing between eating the meat and worshipping the idol, he still views the eating of meat as an act of communion with the idol. The weaker brother proceeds to draw the conclusion that participation in idolatrous worship is acceptable conduct for the Christian. Therefore, he becomes emboldened to participate in his former pagan idolatrous practices, reverting back to the very lifestyle of paganism out of which Christ has so recently saved him. By way of a contemporary example: A weaker brother sees you purchasing wine for an evening dinner. He associates the drinking of wine with the drunken orgies that characterized his life prior to his conversion. Seeing you purchase wine, he wrongly concludes that the sinful conduct he has always associated with the drinking of wine is acceptable for the Christian.

Paul now proceeds to outline some of the potential consequences of an insensitive and careless use of Christian liberty by the stronger Christian (vs. 11-12.) *“By your knowledge the one who is weak perishes.”* If, through the misinterpretation of the stronger Christian’s exercise of Christian liberty, the weaker brother reverts back to his former idolatry, (or any other aspect of his former sinful lifestyle), he will perish, note 1 Corinthians 6:9-10,

*Do you not realize that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor those who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup>nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9-10)*

We are confronted here with the fact that the sovereign redeeming work of God does not preclude human responsibility. We are responsible for our actions, and we must take into account how our actions affect the lives of fellow Christians, as our Lord warns His hearers, *“And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck”* (Mk. 9:42.)

We must remember that the weaker brother is a “*brother for whom Christ died*”—he is not just an obstacle standing between us and what we have a right to do. The careless and selfish use of Christian liberty at the expense of a weaker brother is identified as sin (vs. 12.) It is sinning against the weaker brother—when our careless or selfish conduct may be misinterpreted as condoning sin, or when our conduct pressures a fellow Christian to violate his conscience, we are sinning against our brother. Furthermore, it is sinning against Christ, note Matthew 25:40, “*The King will reply, I tell you the truth, whatever you did unto one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did unto me*” (Matt. 25:40.)

Paul concludes by giving his own personal resolution (vs. 13.) He resolves to abstain from the exercise of his Christian liberty when and where it will cause a fellow Christian to stumble. In 1 Corinthians 10:32-11:1, as an apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ, Paul instructs us to imitate him in this resolution:

*Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, or Greeks, or the church of God—<sup>33</sup>even as I try to please everybody in every way. [I do so] because I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. <sup>1</sup>Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Cor. 10:32-11:1)*

Here, then, is a second principle that must govern our use of Christian liberty: We must recognize that the use of our Christian liberty must not cause the downfall of a Christian brother.

## **Conclusion**

Because we are members of the body of Christ we do have a responsibility towards one another. This responsibility also pertains to the way in which we use our Christian liberty. In obedience to Christ and for the good of one another, may our use of Christian liberty be governed by the two principles presented to us here in 1 Corinthians 8: 1) Let us realize that exercising love is more important than exercising our rights; and 2) Let us recognize that our use of Christian liberty must not cause the downfall of a Christian brother.