

## **The Pastor and Christian Liberty**

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### **I. Introduction**

- A. The purpose of Christ's ministry is to bring liberty.

"And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" Luke 4:17-21

- B. The fruit of the gospel is freedom for the Christian. We are free from sin's dominion (Rom. 6:6-8), the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2), ceremonial regulations (Gal. 4:4-6), and the traditions of men (1 Cor. 8-10, Rom. 14). We will be free from the fallen creation (Rom. 8:18-21), death (1 Cor. 15:54-56), and the presence of sin (Rev. 21).

"Christian liberty" is a term related to the believer's freedom through the gospel. It does not mean that a Christian can do whatever he pleases. Rather, Christian liberty is freedom of practice in matters that the Scripture does not clearly define as right or wrong. Liberty is to be exercised for the glory of God and the good of others.

### **II. A Primary Text Addressing Christian Liberty: Romans 14:1-15:7**

#### **A. Background**

The previous two chapters have addressed love, and in ch. 14, Paul offers a practical application of "walking in love" (v. 14) in the church. Two categories of Christians are distinguished here: the strong and the weak.

1. The “weak”

- a. Weak in faith, not character. “As for the one who is weak in faith...” (v.1)
- b. His weak faith limits his ability to act freely in certain areas. His conscience forbids what God has not forbidden (e.g. eating meat and drinking wine in v.21 and treating all days alike in v.5).
- c. Given that Paul raises issues of eating and observing days, he is likely defining as “weak” those Jewish Christians who maintain some of their former regulations.

“So if we are trying to picture a weaker brother or sister, we must not envisage a vulnerable Christian easily overcome by temptation, but a sensitive Christian full of indecision and scruples. What the weak lack is not strength of self-control but liberty of conscience.” (John Stott, Romans, p. 355)

2. The “strong”

- a. The “strong” are those who are free in their conscience to exercise liberty where Scripture mandates no requirement or prohibition. The strong are not free to sin but to exercise Christian liberty regarding “disputable matters.” (14:1, NIV)
- b. Paul believes the strong are correct (14:14), and thus he includes himself in this group. (15:1)

3. Current issues that may fall in the category of disputable matters or “adiaphora” (things indifferent): Examples of appearance, fads, entertainment, food, drink, parenting, worship, holidays, stewardship.

Many have the idea of “strong” and “weak” reversed.

“In Rome the strong were those who felt free to eat and drink and use all days alike. Today Christians who have scruples in these different areas (or others, for that

matter) tend to regard themselves as having *strong* consciences, and regard those who exercise freedom as having *weak* consciences." (Sinclair Ferguson, Children of the Living God, p.99)

## **B. The Nature of Christian Liberty (vv. 1-12)**

1. Scripture approaches Christian liberty as a community issue. This passage is bracketed with a call for the strong to "welcome" the weak. (14:1, 15:7)
  - a. Application for leaders: responsibility is first placed on the strong. The weak are addressed in this passage as well, but the clear mandate is for the strong to serve the weak.
  - b. God's emphasis in this passage is not personal rights but "to live in harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus." (15:5)

"...the problem is how to handle conscientious differences in matters on which Scripture is either silent or seemingly equivocal, in such a way as to prevent them from disrupting Christian fellowship." (John Stott, Romans, pp. 358-59)
2. We are to welcome one another in light of Christ's Lordship. As Christians, we each belong to him.
  - a. The gospel is central in considering Christian liberty. Christ died and rose as our Lord so we are to live for him. (14:7-9)
  - b. It is vital to keep the servant/Master distinction in view when relating with others about disputable matters. Our brother belongs to the Lord. "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?" (14:4)
  - c. The strong and the weak should each act from a fully convinced mind that seeks to act or abstain in order to honor and thank the Lord. (14:5-7)

- d. We should always relate to our brothers recognizing that God is their judge, not us. (14:12)  
We are not judged on our brother's conscience or his actions.

### **C. The Practice of Christian Love (vv. 13-23)**

- 1. We are not to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of our brother.

- a. The issues in view here are not sinful according to Scripture- "...nothing is unclean in itself" (v. 14)  
However, if the weak think a certain food is unclean, and they eat, then it is unclean for them.

- b. If the strong exercise their freedom in a way that leads the weak to participate, then this will cause the weak to stumble and fall. (See 1 Cor. 8:9-13)

- c. "Walking in love" requires the strong to limit their freedom at points when it will serve the weak.

"For love never disregards weak consciences. Love limits its own liberty out of respect for them. For to wound a weaker brother's conscience is not only to distress him but to 'destroy' him, and that is totally incompatible with love." (John Stott, Romans, p. 365)

"Liberty is wonderful, but love is even greater."  
(Douglas Moo, Romans NIVAC, p. 468)

- 2. We are to pursue peace and edification in the church. (4:19)

- a. There are higher goals than expressing Christian liberty.

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Romans 14:17

- b. For the sake of peace and building others up, it may be necessary to keep our liberty private.

“It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.” Romans 14:21-22

#### **D. The Example of Christ (15:1-7)**

1. The strong are not to please themselves but bear with (carry or support) the weak.
2. Christ did not live to please himself but bore our reproach. (15:3)
3. We are to welcome each other in the same way that Christ welcomes us. (15:7)

### **III. Pastoral Implications of Christian liberty**

- A. It is difficult to overestimate a pastor’s influence in the congregation regarding practices that may stumble or hinder the weak. The following questions can help navigate our practices in order to glorify God and serve others.

- Is this particular practice/activity prohibited in Scripture?
- Am I “fully convinced” in my conscience that this practice is acceptable to God? (Rom. 14:5)
- Am I able to participate “in honor of the Lord” and “give thanks to God” for it? (Rom. 14:6)
- If this disputable practice is done with or before others, do I know how these brothers and sisters regard this activity? If I don’t know their conviction, how will I find out?
- If no “weaker” brothers or sisters are present, will others potentially become aware of my practice?

- If my practice will not lead anyone to stumble currently, can I envision a time where I might limit this freedom for the purpose of loving others?
  - Are any of my “freedoms” untouchable? If so, I may be enslaved to my freedoms rather than Christ.
  - How do I respond when someone (potentially a weak Christian) questions one of my freedoms? Is my heart entreatable, compassionate, humble, caring toward them?
  - Are there any weak Christians in our church that I secretly despise? (Rom. 14:10)
  - How could our pastoral team (where applicable) grow in leading our church to greater unity regarding differing practices among the strong and weak?
  - How can I give greater care to my example and influence among God’s people? (1 Cor. 8:13, Rom. 15:2)
- B. There may be issues in which a pastor has a weak conscience. If so, we can set a tone as a “weak” brother in the life of the church that can equally harm the fellowship. Where necessary, we should seek to strengthen our consciences with the gospel
- C. Through biblical teaching, pastors are to educate the church about freedom in Christ. Look for opportunities to make practical sermon illustrations when the text warrants it. Helping the church understand the distinction between essentials and non-essentials in doctrine and practice is a prime pastoral responsibility.
- D. The thrust of 1 Cor. 8 and Rom. 14 is toward the strong limiting the exercise of their freedom for the good of the weak. But the weak are to be instructed as well so that their consciences are strengthened. Their practices are not to be adopted by default in the church. We are not to allow the weakest consciences to rule the church.

- E. We must model a liberty that frees us to serve God and others.

“A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”  
Martin Luther, “On the Freedom of a Christian Man,” 1520

- F. Strive to teach and lead the church into a unity based on a common commitment to Christ and his gospel, not based upon identical practices in non-essentials. Christ is glorified when the weak and strong walk in love together in spite of their differences.

“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Romans 15:5-6

“In essentials unity; In non-essentials liberty; In all things charity.” Rupert Meldenius