

Christian Liberty

FRC Student Society – June 10, 2005

Introduction

It was eight years ago that I had the privilege of addressing the Student Society. I am honored to be invited back to speak once again, this time about a topic quite unrelated to that about which I spoke then. It is my sincere desire and prayer that our time together tonight may prove timely, relevant, and helpful to you, especially in a day in which what the Christian life “looks like” is so variously defined and seemingly subject to wide interpretation.

The topic for tonight, as you well know, is “Christian Liberty.” I’m quite confident this is an expression you’ve certainly come across in conversation or reading. I’m not as confident that any of us have as good a grasp as we ought of what the expression means or at least *ought* to mean according to the sacred Scriptures. So what I would like to do is begin a discussion with you about this rather important matter, and I’d like to do so by dividing our time together into six parts.

First, let us together try to get a sense of what “Christian liberty” means – a definition, if you will – and we’ll attempt to construct that definition using Scripture as our guide. Second, let us see what boundaries, if any, limit this concept and its application in our daily lives. Next we would like to see how a person actually applies this liberty to his daily circumstances and if, perhaps, it would sometimes be better to *forgo* one’s liberty rather than use it. Fourth, it might be prudent to point out, as Paul does, a few of the dangers that seem to attend this important Biblical principle. Finally, it would be only fitting to end by glorying a little in the beauty of this liberty which Christ affords us when we are in a saving relationship with Him.

Christian Liberty – A Definition

In the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 8, Paul uses the term “liberty” to describe the freedom of conscience some Corinthian Christians had with respect to eating food that had been previously offered (dedicated) to idols. The Greek word translated “liberty” in this passage means the “right,” “power” or “authority” to do something. In verses 4-6, Paul lays out the reason why such brethren enjoyed that freedom. It was clear in their minds, as it was in Paul’s, that there is but one true God and all idols are truly nothing. But there were other Christians, Paul went on to say, who lacked this clarity in their mind. Because they regarded the idol as an idol in their conscience, they felt constrained *by* their conscience not to partake of such food. In verse 8, Paul points out that neither those who partook of this food nor those who abstained were more commendable to God. So from this passage we may gather that Christian liberty has to do with matters about which genuine Christians may differ. One Christian might view something as sin while another, with good conscience before God, could conclude that it is

not.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul makes an almost passing reference to Christian liberty, and he does so with respect to a situation quite different from what we just considered. Toward the end of this chapter, Paul mentions that the unbelieving Jews of his day could not see, could not understand, that Christ had fulfilled (and therefore made an end to) the ceremonial laws, the many types and shadows that pointed to the coming Messiah. The apostle makes reference to a "vail," obviously referring to unbelief, that still blinds their eyes. But then in verse 16 he speaks of those who *would* turn to the Lord Jesus, and the vail would then be removed. He then adds this comment, "Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." Here the Greek word translated as "liberty" is that which is used in every other reference to Christian liberty in the New Testament, including the writings of James and of Peter. In this passage, it takes on the sense of being freed from the binding effects of unbelief.

A third meaning of Christian liberty surfaces in Galatians. In chapter 2 verse 4 we read, "And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage." This statement has to do with the whole dispute Paul had with the so-called "Judaizers." These were persons who insisted that Gentiles had to be subject to the Jewish ceremonial laws, in addition to faith, in order to obtain salvation. Paul correctly identified this attempt to mix law and gospel as another gospel, something abhorrent to God and accursed. After defending the pure gospel of salvation by faith in Christ alone, Paul summarizes with the famous words of chapter 5:1, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." We are not freed from our sins *by* obedience to God's law, but as sinners saved by faith in Christ, we are free to express our love and gratitude to Him by cheerful obedience to His Word. James captures this cheerful obedience with the wonderful expression "the perfect law of liberty" to which he refers as he exhorts us to be doers, as well as hearers, of God's Word. So Christians have freedom from the ceremonial manner of worship, all of which has been perfectly fulfilled in Christ.

Finally, there is the believer's freedom from the bondage of sin, described in Romans chapter 6 and elsewhere. This freedom from sin's bondage is so very meaningful to us who believe. Indwelling sin, stemming from the remnants of the old man within, is the chief source of our grief and that which so consistently opposes God's grace in our lives. Christ frees us from the tyranny of sin which enslaved us as unbelievers, though the warfare against sin remains to the very last breath.

In summary, we see that Scripture defines Christian liberty as the freedom one believer might have in his Biblically-informed conscience with regard to some practice to which another believer might equally conscientiously object. It is also

used to describe liberation from unbelief. This expression also applies to freedom from obligation to the Jewish ceremonial laws due to their being fulfilled in Christ. And finally, there is the liberty from the bondage of sin that Christ gives believers. For our purposes tonight, the first meaning will be that upon which we focus most of our attention.

Christian Liberty – Its Parameters

In order to begin understanding how Christian liberty can function in our lives in a practical way, we need to consider the distinction between what we'll call commands, principles, inferences, and preferences.

When it comes to God's explicit commands in Scripture, there is no room for the exercise of Christian liberty. In other words, no Christian can appeal to Christian liberty when it comes to, e.g. adultery or idolatry. God's prohibitions against both are clear. Therefore none of God's express commands, whether they be prohibitions against something or injunctions to do something, are matters in which Christian liberty is operative.

There are issues, however, about which God has left no explicit instruction, and yet Christians may be quite confident about God's perspective on them. Consider gambling, for example. If you would look up the words "gamble" or "gambling" in a concordance, you won't find them in the Bible per say. But there are enough principles that pertain to the practice that Bible-believing Christians may know their duty with respect to it. You can sense, however, that matters decided by the application of Biblical principles might not be as unanimously agreed upon by all Christians as those addressed by explicit commands would. Nevertheless, one would hope that if straightforward Biblical principles were clearly and consistently applied to a matter, the possibility of one claiming Christian liberty with respect to it would be considerably low.

As we move from principle to inferences drawn from Scripture, the unanimity among Christians becomes reduced even further. Let me use, for an example, an issue that might be somewhat sensitive in your churches. In Deuteronomy 22:5 we read, "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God." Now there are Christians (and I happen to be one of them) who infer from this command that women today should not wear pants or slacks. Having said that, I recognize that not all Christians agree with that inference. We should all be able to agree that God *commanded* Israel not to interchange men's and women's garments, whatever they were in those days, between the genders. We would also agree, I trust, that the broader *principle* of women appearing feminine and men masculine is clearly emphasized here and in other passages in God's Word. But whether this command and this principle apply specifically to women wearing pants or slacks has been a matter of debate among Christians for some time. Some would claim that women's pants and

slacks are cut and designed differently from the men's and are therefore distinct and feminine. Others would counter that they *appear* the same or similar to men's attire and are therefore in violation of this command and principle. But without trying to decide the matter here, you can see how drawing inferences from commands and principles can result in less unanimity than from commands or principles themselves. Obviously, Christian liberty would therefore tend to apply more readily to inferences than to issues involving commands or principles.

Finally, we all have our preferences. For example, though I know of no Biblical command, principle, or even inference that would suggest that ministers should wear black suits when they preach, I would venture to guess most FRC and HRC ministers do. For myself, I inherited this practice when I entered the ministry, and knowing that doing otherwise might offend someone for whatever reason is enough for me to maintain the practice. But I use this as an example of mere preference as opposed to command, principle, or inference. In the realm of preferences, Christian liberty would typically have the widest expanse in which to operate.

Christian Liberty – Its Application

At this point I would like us to return to Scripture in order to trace something of how this principle of Christian liberty was applied. As we do so we will look for lessons that we can glean from and apply to our daily lives.

The classic passages that we should begin with are 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. It is important to remember, as we consider Paul's first letter to Corinth, that he is often addressing more than one matter at a time. In the case of chapter 8, Paul is indeed addressing the issue of food offered to idols, but he is also addressing Christian liberty and Christian charity. I would venture to say that his addressing even these issues is part of a larger, central theme that pervades the entire letter, namely the Corinthians' unhealthy use of spiritual giftedness and their astonishing self-centeredness. But for the sake of the topic at hand, let's trace through Paul's thinking in this chapter.

Paul begins by identifying one of the issues the Corinthians appear to have raised with him – things offered to idols. Instead of getting right to that issue, he begins by comparing and contrasting knowledge and charity (love). Paul is not categorically stating that all knowledge necessarily makes people proud. He is saying, however, that those who possess a vast store of knowledge are more likely to become proud on account of it. Love, on the other hand, and especially love toward God, is an indication that God knows (and consequently loves) us. Let's not lose sight of this contrast as Paul continues.

In verse 4, when the apostle actually addresses the issue of the food offered to idols, he first sets forth what every believer knows – that there is but one true God and all others are imposters and fakes. We know this God. He is our

Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, His Son, is our Savior. In verse 7, however, Paul says, "Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge." We should not interpret this to mean there are believers who really think there are truly more than one God. Instead he seems to be saying that not all Christians know "that an idol is nothing in this world" (see verse 4). In other words, some Christians merely ignore idols and idolatry æ something empty and vain and altogether unworthy of their attention, while others are very conscious of the practice and its potential influence on themselves and others. For those whose conscience is weak, as Paul puts it, their eating of food offered to idols, in their own mind at least, would be a sin. They would think they are somehow participating in, promoting, or otherwise inappropriately associating themselves with the idols. If they would eat, their conscience would become defiled. In their own mind, they would have sinned.

Now I don't know about you, but I recall reading this chapter many years ago and wondering to myself, "Well, who is right? Surely Paul will, by the end of the chapter, say one or the other Christian holds the correct view." I suppose I never thought that something that was truly sin for one person might not be sin for another. Surely sin is sin. How can there be any so-called "grey areas" when it comes to sin?

In verse 8, however, Paul writes, "But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse." He is saying that neither Christian is more commendable in God's sight. However, the apostle then goes on to make his main point, "But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak." Paul explains that the brother to whom eating is sin, because of the example of he who eats, might also partake and thereby sin against his own conscience. Note Paul's poignant statement in verse 11, "And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?" He goes so far in verse 12 as to actually charge the stronger brother with sin against the weaker *and* against Christ by exercising his Christian liberty to the detriment of his weaker brother.

What can we learn from this passage?

First, in verses 4-8 we find sound, Biblical reasons why both the stronger and the weaker brother would hold to the position they do. Neither, Paul says, is wrong with respect to their standing before God in this matter. So that as long as we have Biblical principles to support our participation in or abstention from a certain activity, our conscience may be clear before God. This, of course, is assuming the activity in question is not a matter explicitly commanded or prohibited by Scripture.

Second, we also learn from these verses that it is possible that true Christians can sincerely and conscientiously disagree with regard to our stand on certain matters and yet be equally accepted in that matter before God.

So I could envision, for example, one Christian objecting to classical music as something that doesn't, in their view, glorify God or edify his soul. At the same time, I could image another Christian, equally devout and Godly, thanking God for such music and claiming real benefit from its melodious strains.

Now does this mean that Christians having differing views ought never to discuss, or perhaps even debate in a friendly way, their differences? Does this mean that everyone does that which is right in his own eyes? No, certainly not. But let us do so in love, striving together (not against one another) to find Biblical principles that are applicable to the issue at hand, realizing that, absent of clear commands, prohibitions, and principles, there will be certain matters about which we can and may disagree. Keep in mind that disagreement about such matters does not necessitate disunity.

Christian Liberty – Its Dangers

Interestingly, Paul returns to the matter of food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians chapter 10. As is typical in this epistle, the reason he does so relates to the overall point he wants to make in this chapter. The food issue is used merely as an example to illustrate this point.

Chapter 10, just like chapter 8, is not about food. Chapter 8 was about the right use of Christian liberty and chapter 10 is about associations. Paul begins chapter 10 by comparing Israel with the New Testament Christians to whom he was writing. Israel enjoyed immense privileges. So do we. Israel squandered these privileges through a variety of sinful means. Most of God's covenant people perished in the wilderness. They are warning examples to us. It is after he makes this poignant warning that Paul reintroduces the subject of food offered to idols.

Perhaps surprisingly to us, Paul in verses 20 and 21 expressly forbids the Corinthian Christians from partaking of food offered to idols in the idol temples. At first this seems shocking. Didn't he just write a short while ago that neither eating nor abstaining from such food commended us to God? Has he somehow changed his mind as he is writing chapter 10? No. In fact his rhetorical questions in verse 19 prove that he is very conscious of what he wrote before and remains consistent in his thinking about it. But his point in this chapter is that Christians ought not to *associate* themselves with evil. God is jealous over His people (v. 22). He Who calls us out of sin would have us avoid the very appearance of evil.

In verse 23 Paul acknowledges that to eat this meat, if it were just a matter between his conscience and the Lord, would be a lawful activity for him. But it might not be expedient. It might not be the most edifying. The word edifying tells us Paul has his eye on the *rest* of the body of Christ, the church. Would my

doing this or that build up or perhaps break down other Christians? This brings us to the potential dangers of Christian liberty.

In general, we in the West have imbibed a rather unhealthy attitude of individualism. We hear much about rights – individual rights, minority rights, the rights of the disenfranchised. There is a growing intolerance to any notion of absolute values. It is almost considered criminal to suggest that God’s Word holds authority over non-Christians as well as Christians. The church has not remained insulated from this individualism. Every now and again you will hear a Christian say, “But I am free in my conscience to do this. I do not believe I am doing anything wrong.” Perhaps you have said something like that yourself in defense of a practice that was being questioned. How must we protect ourselves from misusing Christian liberty?

First, we must make sure our liberty is truly Scriptural. What do I mean? We should not be too quick to conclude in our mind that this or that practice falls under Christian liberty without careful thought. It may be true that the Bible does not *expressly* forbid or condone something, but are there Biblical principles perhaps that do, after all, bear on the issue but that we might have not taken the time to consider? What if someone brings such principles to our attention? Are we prepared to be instructed or corrected even though we may have grown somewhat attached to our point of view? I would submit to you, dear young people, that aside from the matter of being made right with God through Jesus Christ, the next great business of our lives should be studying out the precepts and principles of God’s Word and laboring with wisdom from above over how they might and ought to apply to our lives. How else can we expect to walk in a manner well-pleasing to the Lord? Do we apply as much studious effort to Biblical principles as we perhaps did the principles of math or science or other pursuits in school? So we must first be clear in our mind that what we are doing, our point of view, is truly a matter in which Christian liberty can legitimately function.

But second, by very definition, things indifferent (or “adiophera” as our Fathers termed them) should be matters the presence or absence of which in our lives would not negatively affect our relationship with God. In other words, Paul pointed out that eating meat offered to idols did not commend one to God. This is why he could so readily forgo his liberty, his right to each such food if he knew that eating it would prove a detriment to a Christian brother. This is why, dear friends, it is so important that we hold our Christian liberties with tender hands, especially if our exercise of them offends Christian brethren.

Some months ago I completed a considerable study on the use of head coverings in worship. I’m quite sure it is not so well researched and argued that it will convince everyone of the position I believe Scripture teaches. But I did urge women readers who might not be convinced of the headcovering principles themselves to at least seriously consider another Scriptural principle, namely,

whether their *not* wearing a headcovering in worship might cause offense to fellow Christians who are convinced from Scripture that they are still mandated by God's Word. If wearing a headcovering does not interfere with my relationship with the Lord, then I ought to be willing to wear one simply because I know not doing so would cause offense to a fellow Christian with whom I worship.

Let me, however, briefly insert a word of caution concerning the "weaker brethren." Remember how we heard earlier that there are differences between commands, principles, inferences, and preferences. If a fellow Christian is offended by something you do or say, they ought to have quasi-Biblical reasons, principles preferably, why they are offended and believe as they do. I say *quasi*-Biblical because you are not obliged to agree with their reasoning, but only recognize that they have thoughtfully sought to align their conscience to what *they* believe the Bible is teaching about the matter. In other words, we are not bound by Scripture to conform our lives to everyone else's preferences. But if they do have Scriptural reasons, whether you necessarily agree with them or not, that ought to be enough for you to forgo your liberty for their sake, that is as long as doing so doesn't negatively impact your relationship with the Lord.

Finally, both Paul and Peter sound one more sobering warning about Christian liberty. In Galatians 5:13 Paul writes, "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another." In similar fashion, Peter warns, "As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God" (1 Peter 2:16). Sadly, there are some who try to defend that which they know to be sin under the title of liberty. This is nothing else than base selfishness. Paul asks in Romans 6:2, "How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" and warns in Romans 13:14, "...make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof." Never claim Christian liberty for something against which your own conscience speaks and certainly never for something clearly prohibited or commanded by Scripture

Let us now conclude our brief time together by considering the beauty of true Christian liberty.

Christian Liberty – Its Beauty

I do not know of too many people who have a flower garden with only one kind of flower in it. Nor do I know too many people who enjoy eating the same food for breakfast, for lunch, and for supper each day. I do value opportunities to visit Christian brethren in other places and very much appreciated my visit to our brethren and sisters in the Lord in Moldova a year ago. Do they worship quite the way we do? There are similarities and there are differences. Do all Christians believe the same or live the same? In essential matters, yes. In adiophera, no. Some people see these differences as a threat. I see them as

something beautiful. I didn't always think this way.

Some people say people who get older tend to mellow, tend to become less strident in their views. Everyone knows about the stereotypic grandmother who spoils all her grandchildren to the utter dismay of the children's parents. But there's another perspective to view such matters I would like you, young friends, to consider.

As we age, as we mature, we tend to develop more discernment. This is particularly true of the Godly. With discernment comes a greater recognition of those things that are truly essential to the existence and wellbeing of the Christian church. At the same time, we also begin to see that some matters are important but not essential to the wellbeing of the believer. We labor to persuade in such matters. But there are other matters that truly can be called things indifferent over which well-meaning and God-fearing Christians have and will disagree. I have come to appreciate the diversity. I know perfect unity awaits us in heaven, but I still expect to see diversity there. The very fact that we will be judged according to our works tells me that some will receive greater glory than others, though each will be perfectly content.

So as we wind down the lecture part of this evening together, let me simply say three things.

First, make sure Scripture really does allow you liberty in the matters that seem indifferent. Be open to instruction about Biblical principles you might have overlooked that could and maybe should change your view on things.

Second, always value edifying other Christians over your own personal liberty and pleasure. Hold your liberty loosely around others. If you are truly free in your conscience before God in a matter, and that freedom rests on solid Scriptural grounds, you do not need to explain or defend it to others. However, if it causes a fellow Christian unnecessary offense, you also do not need to explain your liberty to him. Instead, do ought to do what Paul did. Forgo your liberty for the benefit of your brother or sister in the Lord.

Finally, enjoy Christian liberty. It is God's gift. We are no longer bound by the scripted kind of worship the Israelites had. Instead we may enjoy Him Who has fulfilled the ceremonial law in its entirety. Besides, believers enjoy a far more valuable liberty that can never be taken from us— we have been freed from the bondage of sin by the very Son of God Himself. That is a liberty we can always rejoice in and must never to surrender to anyone.

But regarding the liberty we've been discussing tonight, learn to enjoy the variation in God's garden, the church. I don't know of many people in our congregations who argue about justification by faith in Christ alone, about the necessity and beauty of holiness, about the doctrine of the Trinity, and similar

essentials. Instead, and sadly, our tendency to quarrel among ourselves seems to increase in proportion as we attempt to codify matters of indifference into matters of law, holding them as if they were Scriptural imperatives. We're not the first who've tried doing so. Our Lord Jesus sternly warned the Jewish leaders of His day in this regard, quoting from Isaiah, "In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." The proper order, after all, is summarized by these simple words, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself."

Appendix ***Christian Liberty – Some Exercises for Discussion***

What good is theory without practice? I would like to first list some topics, some issues, to see how you would categorize them – explicit commands of Scripture, principles of Scripture, inferences from Scripture, or preferences. Before answering, please be prepared to explain why you would categorize an item the way you do.

1. The kind of music to be used in worship?
2. The doctrine of infant baptism?
3. Killing another human being?
4. Providing material support for ministers?
5. Whether to use a piano or an organ in church?

Which of the following do you think might legitimately fall under the category Christian liberty? Again, be prepared to discuss your answer.

1. How long church services should be.
2. What version of Scripture someone uses in private study.
3. Exceeding the speed limit on the highway when one is late for church.
4. Using or not using the tax incentives for declaring one's charitable donations on their tax forms.
5. Going to the consistory about someone's sin after first going alone to the person to seek his repentance.
6. Going to a fellow Christian who we know has something against us.