

The Conscience

STUDY FIVE - Conscience & The Community of God

Ray Bell ~ 29th September, 2016

Today we consider how we are to relate and function together as the people of God who have received the gift of a cleansed conscience, yet who have a diverse range of histories, habits and 'hang-ups', all of which affect how each of us live.

Through the specific issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols, Paul addresses this matter and provides some much needed and helpful instruction to the church. In doing so, he offers clear principles to consider and adopt when it comes to matters of conscience and liberty to be worked out among the community of God.

SOME BACKGROUND

The first words of 1 Corinthians 8, "Now concerning..." indicate the church has previously written to Paul regarding this matter of eating food offered to idols (Cf. 7:1, 25; 12:1; 16:1). In Corinth, during the first century, it would have been common place to eat food which had been offered to idols. In fact, it would have proved rather difficult to purchase food which one could be certain had not been offered to idols. Social functions took place in and around the temples of idols and much of the food sold in the marketplace was 'left-overs' provided and sold by the priests of these temples. Therefore, new believers were asking the question as to whether they should be eating such food.

Paul addresses this specific matter, but also expands the scope of his instruction to include the broader subject of Christian liberty in regard to general conduct in the community of God.

Knowledge is not enough

Paul begins by saying that 'knowledge', on its own, is not enough when it comes to matters of the conscience, liberty and the community of God. Such knowledge only serves to *puff up* egos - it does not *build up* the body of believers. Not only is knowledge not enough, they do not have enough knowledge to keep their consciences in check and conduct themselves in a way which is helpful and edifying to the whole church. It is not knowledge, but love, which needs to be governing principle here (8:1-3).

What We Do Know

In vv4-6 Paul tells us some of the knowledge the Corinthian believers do have- or at least, some of them have. Again, probably quoting from their earlier letter to Paul:

- there is only ONE God;
- an idol HAS NO real existence.

We exist not for ourselves, but for this one God, the Father. This is, and should be, a significant factor and principle to be considered in the exercise of our freedom in Christ.

But Not Everyone Knows

"However," says Paul in verse 7, "not everyone knows this." There are some who still believe (and therefore, 'know' in their own minds and conscience) that idols are real. To them, the religions and idolatry surrounding them remain powerful elements in their consciences and lives. *Their* conscience needs to be taken into account when it comes to this matter and other matters of conscience and liberty in the community of God's people. They are fellow saints, members of the body of Christ, members of the same family of God that we are members of. Christ died for them, as he did for us! And so, they need to be considered and loved as we endeavour to exercise our freedom in Christ.

Food Makes No Difference - Don't Let It Destroy You

When it comes to eating or not eating, either way, we are no better off. Whether our conscience allows us to eat or keeps us from eating, neither way will commend us any more to God. We are not to turn a matter of conscience, into a matter of righteousness. Afterall, it's not the food that really matters here, it's our fellow believer. We must not use our freedom for our own benefit, to the detriment of others (Cf. 10:23-24). Our liberty in Christ is not a license to assert our rights, especially if this means doing harm to others.

It is easy to rejoice in our new found freedom and rights but at the same time, ignorantly or not, to put a stumbling block in the way of others. This kind of conduct, Paul asserts, could lead us to sinning against both our fellow believer and against Christ. Paul warns us that causing a brother or sister in Christ to act against their own conscience may bring about their 'destruction'. As wonderful as our liberty and clear conscience in Christ are, they can be powerfully dangerous if they are not exercised with wisdom and love. Love must take priority ahead of any rights or liberty we have in Christ.

Free Enough Not To Be Free

Personally therefore, Paul makes a vow never to eat meat if it causes his brother to stumble. He continues in Chpt 9 by giving an example of his own life where he has waived his own freedom and rights to "live off" the gospel, for the sake of the gospel and for winning as many as possible to Christ!

Any personal knowledge or freedom we have in Christ must be subject to love for our fellow believer, and to the salvation of unbelievers when considering matters of the conscience. If we are ever in doubt as to the best way forward in such matters, Paul instructs us to imitate Christ in sacrificial love (11:1; Cf. 8:11; 10:31-33 & Romans 15:1-2) and presents his own example as one who exercises great self-control in all things, with any short-term pleasure or immediate gratification giving way to the long-term, imperishable gifts and treasure in heaven (9:23-27).

***"God is able to make all grace
abound to you,
so that having all sufficiency,
in all things,
at all times,
you may abound
in every good work."***

2 Corinthians 9:8