

Introduction

How do Christians respond to varying views on what is right and wrong on things the Bible does not address directly or appears ambiguous on? Some respond with establishing standards and convictions which erect fences far away from any approach to sin. Others respond by enforcing only the Biblical demands and then try to work out one's own practice as they see it. It does not take long for both responses to become polarized over an issue.

Take the Biblical argument over eating meat purchased at the cut-rate butcher shop operated by the pagan temples. Some felt that it was a serious compromise to be seen entering and purchasing that meat. Others simply saw it as a frugal way to put meat on the table and were largely unconcerned about the fact that this meat was once part of idol sacrifice.

Take the modern discussion over any number of issues: length of one's hair, men wearing an earring, attending movies or almost any discussion of music in the church. These are issues where our backgrounds, religious or pagan upbringing, the culture around us and our first experiences as a Christian have molded our thinking.

Now, the problem and polarization is unavoidable. And if I understand the Bible correctly, it may even be desirable in the context of a community of believers who understand the concepts governing Christian liberty. This study is dedicated to that end.

I must be very clear on one fact. Where the Bible is clear in its precepts, we are to be obedient. The matters of holiness have commands in the Scripture directing us into a godly walk. These are not the issues over which liberty have control. One cannot plead liberty of conscience in order to avoid a clear Bible command. To do so is to turn our liberty in license. As one of my mentors once pointed out, you cannot always tell where the ocean begins and the shore ends due to the shifting tides and rolling waves—but you always know when you are on dry beach or in over your head.

May God give us grace to know how to stand where the waves roll and the tides shift.

Introduction to Christian Liberty

Romans 14:1-15:6

Introduction This text is dense with logic, illustrations, principles and practices. Almost sentence by sentence, Paul develops his argument with a tightly woven fabric. The best approach to this is to get a sense of its general structure and then to deal with specifics by carrying on a dialog with the text. We want its sense and then its specifics.

Getting the Big Picture

Vertical Dimension of Christian Liberty (v.1-12)

The focus is on how our relationship to God governs our liberty. Paul's argument turns on the following:

The command to accept one another because God has accepted us.

The concept that we are accountable to God because God is our master and Lord.

Horizontal Dimension of Christian Liberty (v.13-21)

The focus is on how our relationship to one another governs our liberty. Paul's argument turns on the following:

The commands not to tear down the people or the work of God because we are brothers in the faith.

The concept that the Kingdom of God is rooted primarily in character, not in convictions.

Inward Dimension of Christian Liberty (v.22-23)

The focus is on how our faith governs our liberty. Paul's argument turns on the following:

The conviction that matters of conscience are between me and God.

The concept that faith without doubt must govern our convictions.

The Outward Dimension of Christian Liberty (15:1-6)

The focus is on how our love governs our liberty. Paul's argument turns on the following:

The command to please one another because of the need for edification and unification.

The concept of the primacy of the example of Christ's sacrifice and the instruction of Scripture.

The conclusion that all is done so that the diversity of views blends together in a symphonic harmony of glory to God.

Digging into Details

Let's sort out the details of the passage by carrying on a dialog with the text.

Who are the two groups of people in this passage? How does Paul refer to them?

Fill in the chart as we go through the questions.

Strong in faith	Weak in faith
eats everything including meat	eats only vegetables and fruit
honors special religious days	sees all days as the same
? OK drinking	wine ? not OK
look down with contempt for living such a narrow life	judge others for their lack of standards

What is the responsibility of the whole congregation?

To accept the one who is weak in faith

In accepting one another, what are we to guard against?

Passing judgment on their opinions, disputing over these areas.

Why does he use the word *opinions*?

Because those who have strong convictions in these areas have opinions, not doctrines. Paul is purposefully distinguishing between doctrine which is non-negotiable and opinions which are.

What two areas were under dispute in the church at Rome (in fact, in many of the churches of the day)? Match them up with their respective groups.

The issue of eating meat versus vegetarianism and the issue of a religious calendar or holidays.

What are the tendencies of each group?

The strong look down on the weak and the weak judge the strong.

What are we supposed to do about it?

Do not do it. If you are free in your conscience, do not look down on those who have many standards and convictions. If you have many convictions, you must not judge those who do not live by the same standards. (Remember, we are not talking about our obligations.)

Why are we supposed to accept one another when it comes to these issues?

Because Christ has accepted us. The essence of the argument here is that we have been accepted as one while maintaining diversity. The Bible seeks after unity and uniformity.

To whom are we NOT accountable in areas of liberty? To whom are we accountable? Why?

Not accountable to one another. We are accountable to the Lord. We are not one another's master and slave. We are servants to the Lord because He is the Lord. There will come a day when we will give an account in these areas to the Lord. The Lord is the lord of our conscience and convictions, not other believers.

What does it mean to "cause a brother to stumble?" or "to put an obstacle in his way?"

Does not mean to offend or cause the brother to be upset about what we are doing. This results in binding everyone's conscience to the one who has the weakest faith (narrowest convictions).

It does mean that we are not to encourage someone to violate their own conscience. We are not to exercise our freedom so that others are encouraged or emboldened to violate their convictions (1 Cor. 8:9-10).

What does verse 14 mean?

The "right or wrong" of things not ruled on by the Bible is determined by the faith and conscience of the one who must decide whether to do or not to do for himself.

What principle is to guide us when our convictions rub against another's (and not having a conviction about something is still a conviction)?

Walking according to the principle of love.

What two commands in verses 15 & 20 come from this principle in verse 15?

Do not destroy the people of God (v.15)

Do not destroy the work of God (v.20)

What does Paul mean by verse 16?

Those who have a conviction or convictions about these areas must not be allowed to dictate those to the whole by making those things evil for everyone. Just because you have a conviction about jazz does not mean that makes it wrong for everyone.

Why is the doctrinal statement in verses 17-18 important in this argument?

First, the relationship we have as believers is grounded in our internal union by the Spirit not in external, visible uniformity.

Second, the governance of the church is not in the areas of what or what not to eat or drink, but in the spheres of righteousness, peace and joy.

Third, the essence of God's kingdom consists of Holy Spirit produced character, not in personal preferences of conduct.

When does something which we believe is OK become wrong for us? (v.20b)

When as a result someone will be encouraged to sin by doing something they believe is wrong. Example: If you believe that drinking wine is wrong, we would not serve it to you at our house for dinner. And it is one of the reasons we do not

serve it at communion. Now that may startle you, but the drinking of wine is an area under liberty (v.21).

What two cautions emerge from verse 22?

Be sure that your belief is a conviction that will stand before God

Be sure that you do not condemn yourself in what you approve.

What role does doubt and faith (belief) have in the convictions we hold?

It is determinative. We are to live by our convictions. We are to base our convictions on Biblical teaching (that is why this is called faith). And we are not to do things we have doubts about. For in the areas of liberty, if we violate our convictions or conscience, we sin.

What are we to make every effort to do?

What will lead to peace between Christians in the church and what will build up Christians in their faith.

How does 15:1-3 flesh this out?

We are to please others and not ourselves. Imagine in all these areas if we just followed this principle. We followed our convictions, we allow others their freedom, we encourage others to follow their convictions, we teach one another the basis for our convictions and we work hard at pleasing our brothers and sisters in Christ.

What two motivations does Paul use to close this discussion?

The Scriptures are given to instruct us and in studying them we are given endurance and encouragement.

We exist, individually and corporately to bring glory to Christ.

Developing the Guidelines

The following principles can be gleaned from this text.

- We must develop convictions for ourselves based on the Bible and live by them.
- We must accept others whose convictions are different from us.
- We must, by word and deed, encourage others to live by their convictions.
- We must never pressure someone to violate their convictions. We must acknowledge other's convictions in our fellowship with one another.
- We must not hold others hostage to our convictions. We must allow them to exercise their liberty even while we are following our convictions.
- We must not judge those who do not hold our own convictions and we must not look down on those whose convictions are narrower than our own.
- We must bend every effort to give up our own rights and work to please other Christians.

Observations in the Light of the Principles

- As in all but a very few areas, this is not a matter for a democratic vote. This is a time where the majority rule actually will violate the Scripture.
- It is also not a matter for policy. The elders should not legislate in these areas. These are not matters for church governance.
- It is the responsibility of the elders to bring these principles to bear on issues in the congregation. Just as in Romans 14-15 and in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul taught these principles and then outlined how to practice these principles, so we have a parallel responsibility.

Now, let us do just that.

Personalizing the Principles

There is some interesting discussion and debate among good Christian people about responding to musical ministry and specials by applause. Listen to how liberty applies to that issue.

4:1 Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on whether applause is right or wrong. 2 One man's faith allows him to applaud, but another man, whose faith is weak, does not applaud. 3 The man who claps must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not clap must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. 4 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.

5 One man considers applause dishonoring to God; another man considers all responses to be the same. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 ... He who claps, does it the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who does not, says AMEN to the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives to himself alone

and none of us dies to himself alone. 8 If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

9 For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. 10 You, then, why do you judge your brother who claps? Or why do you look down on your brother who doesn't? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. 11 It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God."

12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. 14 As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that applause is not wrong in itself. But if anyone regards it as wrong, then for him it is wrong to clap. 15 If your brother is harmed because of your applause, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your clapping destroy your brother for whom Christ died. 16 Do not allow what you consider good, that is applause in response to specials, to be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of clapping or not, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, 18 because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of applause. Applause is OK, but it is wrong for a man to respond in such a way that causes someone else to violate their conscience. 21 It is better not to clap or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall by doing what he believes is wrong.

22 So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. 23 But the man who has doubts is condemned if he claps, because his applause is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

5:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." 4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.