

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

January 28, 2018

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Christian Liberty Seeks Only to Benefit Others

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Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

One thing pastors do at conference is discuss questions of casuistry. Casuistry is about things that are neither right nor wrong but need some consideration before action. We lay down the Scriptural principles involved and then make the application. One example would be the question of how much instruction someone needs prior to baptism as an adult. Or, how to benefit a member who believes something the congregation is doing is sin when it is not sin.

The Corinthians had a question of casuistry. Paul answered their inquiry in his first letter. Many of the Christians previously had worshiped in temples prevalent in the city. Pagan worship included meat offerings. Merchants sold the leftovers from those rites in the marketplace.

Could Christians buy and eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols? Or, did this constitute participation in pagan worship? Did such eating compromise their new Christian faith?

Paul established the underlying Scriptural principle. **Christian Liberty Seeks Only to Benefit Others.** We understand and appreciate our Christian liberty. We restrict our freedom when love requires it.

It would be helpful had God given us a rule book that covers every situation we meet in our Christian lives. Actually, it just seems that way. We do not live our lives under rules and regulations. Even the Ten Commandments are not a rule book that enslaves us. The commandments are a guide for our willing obedience to our Father as free expression of thanksgiving and praise. Martin Luther defined our Christian freedom from man-made commandments this way. "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none."

We apply this Scriptural principle to what we call adiaphora. Remember that word from catechism? God neither forbids nor commands those things. Christian freedom allows varied applications. We understand and appreciate our Christian freedom either to enjoy those things or set them aside because they are not beneficial.

Paul answered the Corinthians' question by telling them they were free to eat meat offered to idols. Since idols are nothing, worship of idols is nothing. The only true worship is worship of the only true God. Many of the new Christians understood and appreciated that. Now they were free in Christ. Food does not bring us closer to the true God. Paul's answer made perfect sense. "We do not lack anything if we do not eat, nor are we better off if we do."

You likely will not have to confront exact parallels to the Corinthians' situation. You will need to apply the same principle in other areas of your daily Christian lives. When you understand and appreciate your Christian liberty, you will be able to avoid any burden of conscience from things that are not sins. You will be able to choose those things that benefit others in a willingness to put others before self.

Here is the second underlying part in the use of Christian liberty that seeks only to benefit others. We restrict our freedom when love requires it.

Paul prefixed this section by making clear the distinction between knowledge and love. This is important in exercising Christian freedom. I may have knowledge about what I can or cannot do. More importantly, there is the love in how I apply that knowledge for the benefit of others. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone supposes that he knows something, he does not yet know what he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, this person has been known by him."

Let's make one thing clear. Christian freedom is not license to go against God's revealed will. I know that doing God's will always benefits my neighbor. Loving God is doing his will. That kind of freedom comes from being known by God and recognized as his own.

Christian freedom in adiaphora means more than knowing something is all right. It also means not doing it if it does not benefit others. It may be permissible to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but it is not right to exercise my freedom if it "becomes a stumbling block to the weak." There were those new Christians in Corinth whose consciences did not allow them to eat.

The other half of Luther's statement about Christian freedom in his treatise, "The Freedom of a Christian" goes this way. "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Luther means that I set aside my

knowledge that I am free to act without offending God, and in love not act because it would offend a Christian who is weaker in their understanding.

Were I to exercise my freedom without love, I may cause my brother or sister to sin. He or she may think they need to go along with me to be a Christian when they are not ready. They have sinned not in the eating but in going against their conscience. Paul adds that to cause them to do so means “you sin against Christ.”

We might say the apostle was ready to become a vegetarian if eating meat again would harm the faith of an immature Christian. That is love. There is the underlying principle for us. Will my words and actions about a particular thing in my private or corporate Christian life build up other Christians, or harm their faith?

Paul is not talking about whether or not I like or approve of something. And if I don't like it, I start claiming I am offended. That is a different issue. Paul is speaking about genuinely hurting someone's faith, or causing them to sin against their conscience. Or, cause them to fall because of my lack of love for them. What a grave danger to the early faith of new Christians is the simple lack of love by other Christians.

We know we need none of this toward our own righteousness and salvation. There is only one God. There is only one Lord, “Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist and we exist through him.” Our righteousness and salvation are Christ's. It is Christ's love for me that has set me free from the power of sin. Sin is essentially the lack of love. Sin is disobedience of the one commandment, to love. Christ has set us free as Christians to serve and benefit others in all we do. It is our freedom as perfectly free lords of all that makes us dutiful servants of all to consider nothing except the needs and advantages of our neighbor. Amen. <SDG>