

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

I Corinthians 8

In this chapter the Spirit of God deals in a very remarkable way with the great theme of Christian liberty and brotherly care. It is almost impossible for us to visualize the exact circumstances in which the early Christians were found. They must have experienced great difficulty in maintaining Christian principles and practices in a pagan environment like that of Corinth. The business and social life brought them in contact with people whose standards were immeasurably inferior to the Christian standard.

Of course, Paul was grieved very much when he obtained the information that the church at Corinth had various factions in it. These divisions had no right to exist. They were the result of unnecessary differences. There are some differences that need not cause divisions. Some matters permit differences of opinion and independence of action.

We must bear in mind that the members of the church at Corinth had only emerged from heathenism approximately five years before and that they were still living in a very wicked city with all of the temptations appertaining thereto. One problem which arose among them was the question of whether or not it was right for Christians to eat meat which had been offered to idols and later sold in the public markets.

Naturally the quality of the meat was not altered in the least by the procedure of dedication to idols. The stronger Christians were convinced that it was not wrong for them to consume the meat simply to satisfy their hunger, since they were not involved in any way with idol worship. On the other hand, some weaker Christians believed that it was wrong to eat such meat.

When a sacrifice was offered in a temple, the meat was sometimes eaten in one of the rooms of the temple, but in other cases it would find its way into the public market and thence to the table of a private house. What was to be the Christian's attitude toward eating such meat? Was he to abstain from it, on the ground that by partaking of it he associated himself with idolatry? Or, was he to eat it without compunction, on the ground that the god for whom the idol had been made and to whom the sacrifice had been offered was a nonentity?

It is easy to understand that many of those early Christians feared that if they fed upon meat of this character they should be bringing dishonor upon the name of the Lord and possibly appear to countenance idol worship. It is not surprising that they had written to the Apostle and asked him, If we eat this meat, are we involving ourselves in the practice of idolatry? As we think about this we see that the question was more than an interesting one. It revealed that they were not sure, but they wanted to be certain. They were anxious not to compromise their witness in that pagan city.

What should be done? What was right and what was wrong? As it appears in this chapter, indulgence was not a case of absolute wrong nor was abstinence a case of absolute right. Both were a matter of conscience.

In dealing with this question, Paul started with a remarkable statement in the first verse. "We know that we all have knowledge." We Christians know the one true and living God. Moreover, Christians also know the folly of idolatry. Furthermore, they understand full well that there are no such beings in the world as those represented by the idols, but that does not do away with the fact that back of the idolatry is satanic power. They knew that such meat had no moral significance and, consequently, no defiling effect. But, Paul went on to show them that knowledge after all is not the main thing. He reminded them that knowledge alone puffeth up, that is, inflates or makes proud. Knowledge always has a tendency to make people proud and conceited. Paul makes that plain here. He told them that if they were only mastered by the fact that they knew, their knowledge

might make them proud, puffed-up and incapable of true discernment and judgment. "Puffeth up" indicates inflation, and anything that is inflated is liable to burst and collapse.

It is quite possible to be conceited and proud over the fact that one has a little knowledge that someone else does not have. "What hast thou that thou didst not receive?" (I Corinthians 4:7). We have a tendency to be proud even in the things of God. We get a smattering of His Word that some others do not have, and instantly we are lifted up in our own conceit. "Knowledge puffeth up." Some get to be like a swollen frog on a log, just puffed out with wind. They imagine that they have advanced wonderfully over others. Throw a rock and hit the frog, and he suddenly shrinks to a fraction of the size he first appeared to be. Yes, knowledge blows up the wind-bag of empty self-sufficiency.

Paul teaches that love, rather than knowledge, must be the arbiter. Knowledge inflates with conceit, but love moves us with concern. Knowledge blows up while love builds up. Knowledge does not necessarily lead one to be good or to follow the right course of action. Love carries with it such promptings of benevolence as to incline always to the good. Knowledge must always be accompanied by love. Mere knowledge does not make any substantial contribution to the church. That can only be done by love.

In these matters of divided opinion, it is important to discover the will of God. The cause of all our troubles is the lack of harmony between our wills and the will of God. When they are in accord, nothing can trouble us. It is from God's Word that we learn the will of God.

At times we are baffled regarding our conduct in certain instances. What shall we do? There is no law against it. There are no stated restrictions. The Scriptures do not state the right and the wrong. In that case it becomes something for the individual conscience. In acting conscientiously, we must consider the effect of our actions in relation to others. It is not the innocence of the act which is altogether the determining factor of liberty, but the effect of it on others. While it is right as far as the effect of his act on himself is concerned, it might not be right as far as the effect of his act on others is concerned. Shall he then go ahead and exercise his liberty to satisfy himself, or shall he limit his activities to help others?

Where the Scriptures do not specifically regulate our conduct, what should we do? It is to be regulated by love. We must see to it that our behaviour is edifying to others. We must not only consider our pleasure, but the profit of others. If our pleasure is a hindrance to others, then our liberty which is good becomes evil. If our ideas are right and our examples are wrong, we should be willing to suspend our ideas and surrender them for the sake of our examples. A Christian must not do that which is injurious to others.

In attempting to help the Corinthians in the solution of their problem, Paul enunciated a principle which has been very beneficial to multitudes in their solution of similar problems. He taught that, in the exercise of their Christian liberties, believers should be thoughtful and considerate of the welfare of others. The Christian should consider how others will be affected by his actions. He should be willing to forego his actual rights rather than to cause others to stumble. If his rights become hindrances to others, he should not exercise them. Christian consideration for others will cause us to refrain from doing the things that would lead others into temptation and cause them to do wrong. Let us be most considerate of the well-being of others, striving to provoke them to good works, rather than to cause them to stumble and to sin. If needs be, let us make personal sacrifices in order that we may be positively helpful to others. Let us be very careful about our influence and ever see to it that it is always helpful. Let us guard against anything that would cause our weaker brethren to stumble and fall.

As for himself, Paul said that he had determined to regulate his life by a principle which both reverences God and respects others. He said, "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother's weakness." He was perfectly willing to limit his strength in order to aid in his brother's weakness. In all questions of conduct he was willing to regulate his liberty by love. If this matter will trouble someone else, said he, then I will put it out of my life. I will not use my liberty if it causes another to stumble. I will not use my liberty merely to gratify my own desires.

I close these remarks with the following story which was related by Dr. H. A. Ironside: "I was preaching in a gospel hall in Detroit. A former Mohammedan from India was there who was at the head of a tea business, and he had been brought to know the Lord Jesus Christ. On one occasion when holding a meeting there, the Sunday School had its annual outing and we all went over to a beautiful spot, and spent the day together. I was chatting with this brother, Mr. Mohammed Ali by name, when a young girl came by passing out sandwiches. She said, "Won't you have a sandwich?"

"Thank you," I said, "what kind have you?"

"I have several different kinds."

"I will help myself to several of them."

And then she turned to Mr. Ali and said, "Will you have one?"

"What kind are they?" he asked.

"There is fresh pork and there is ham."

"Have you any beef?"

"No, I do not."

"Have you any lamb?"

"No."

"Fish?"

"No."

"Thank you, my dear young lady, but I won't take any."

Laughingly she said, "Why, Mr. Ali, you surprise me. Are you so under law that you cannot eat pork? Don't you know that a Christian is at liberty to eat any kind of meat?"

"I am at liberty, my dear young lady, to eat it," he said, "but I am also at liberty to let it alone. You know I was brought up a strict Mohammedan. My old father, nearly eighty years of age now, is still a Mohammedan. Every three years I go back to India to render an account of the business of which my father is really the head, and to have a visit with the folks at home. Always when I get home I know how I will be greeted. The friends will be sitting inside, my father will come to the door when the servant announces that I am there, and he will say, 'Mohammed, have these infidels taught you to eat the filthy hog meat yet?' 'No, Father,' I will say; 'pork has never passed my lips.' Then I can go in and have the opportunity to preach Christ to them. If I took one of your sandwiches, I could not preach Christ to my father the next time I go home."

Of course the young lady understood. He was acting exactly as the apostle is suggesting here. We have liberty to refrain from doing these things if they will trouble other people. Love is to be the dominating motive.