

# Theology for Life

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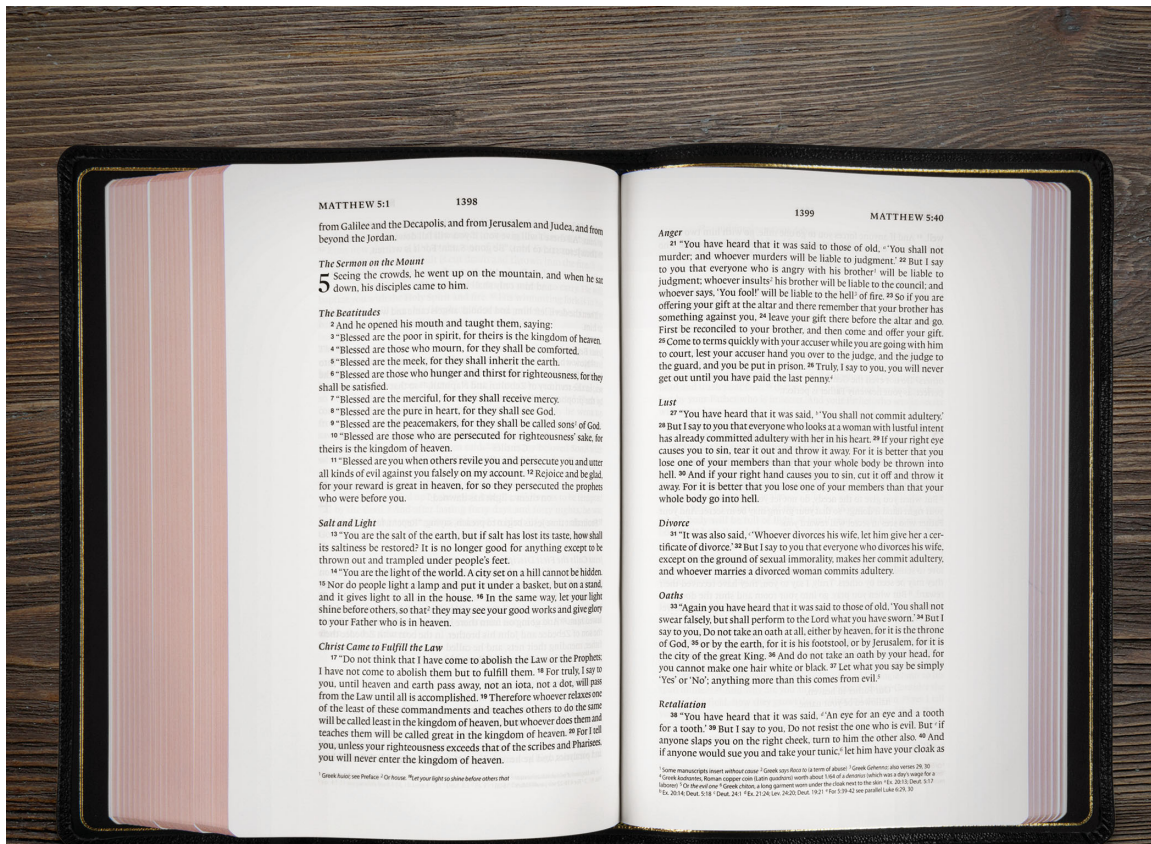
CHRISTIAN

LIBERTY

## **Inside this Issue...**

- **How Reliable is Your Conscience?**
- **Sing to the Lord: Why Music Matters**
- **A Word is Worth a Thousand Pictures**





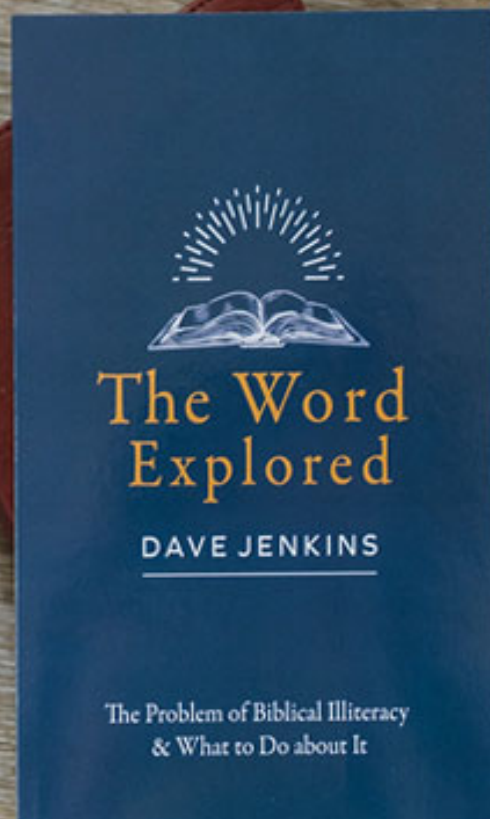
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## Editor's Corner

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Christian liberty and the exercise of the Christian conscience is a much-neglected teaching in the Church today; but it need not be. The Bible has much to say about the exercise of the Christian's liberty and the Christian conscience.

In Acts 15, the Jerusalem Council sought to answer theological and practical questions faced by the early Christians. There they wrestled with how Christians are to enjoy freedom from the Mosaic law without being stumbling blocks to the Jewish people. These were questions that Paul not only gave a great deal of thought about, but dealt with directly in his ministry. He was one of those appointed by the Jerusalem Council to circulate and explain the letter that summarized the Apostles' and elders' teaching (Acts 15:22; 16:4). With similar issues in the church of Rome at the time, Paul instructed them with principles that apply today also (Romans 14:1-15:13) on Christian liberty.

The first thing Paul taught them was that Christian liberty must never be flaunted (Romans 14:22). We are free in Christ from the Mosaic dietary laws because Christ has pronounced all food clean (Mark 7:18-19).

Christians do not need to exercise their liberty to enjoy it. Paul asks in Romans 14:19 and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:12 some very penetrating questions about our exercising of Christian liberty. He asks, "Does this build up others? Is this really liberating you, or has it begun to enslave you?"

Second, Christian liberty does not mean that you welcome fellow Christians only when they have sorted out all their views (according to you). The Lord has welcomed them all in Christ, and so should every Christian (Romans 14:1, 3). The Lord will not leave any Christian where they are, but neither will He not make their pattern of conducting the basis of the welcome, so neither should any Christian.

Every Christian has responsibilities towards one another, but the one that isn't in any of our job descriptions is judging one another. Christ alone is the judge (Romans

14:4, 10-13). Often, you might hear another Christian mentioned in a conversation, but their mention is in criticism. Such statements mark not discernment nor concern about them, but a judgmental spirit. To put a fine point on this, consider this question, "What is the measure we used to judge others that will become the measure used to judge us?" (Matthew 7:2; Romans 14:10-12).

The third point to consider is Christian liberty is never to be used in any way to be a stumbling block to a fellow Christian (Romans 14:13). Paul does not state this off the cuff. He states it as a settled principle which he practiced (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 8:13). Such teaching should guide our thinking and behavior as Christians. We are given liberty in Christ to be the servant of others, not to insist on our rights or preferences.

The fourth principle Paul lays out regarding Christian liberty requires grasping that we are to aim towards biblical balance (Romans 15:1-3). Such an understanding focuses on our love for the Lord and our desire to imitate Him, since the Holy Spirit indwells every Christian to conform them into the image of Jesus.

Christian liberty is not concerned with our rights, whether those rights are national, or legal, or any other right. The Christian recognizes, before the Lord, that they possess no rights by nature because we have forfeited all of our rights in our sinfulness. What this understanding helps us to do is to correctly view our rights and our privileges. Sensitivity to others, including spiritually weaker Christians, depends on our own unworthiness. If we think we can exercise our rights or privileges no matter the situation, we become lethal weapons in the fellowship of the local church; more interested in lobbing grenades than speaking the truth in love (Romans 14:15, 20).

This understanding Paul is outlining, however, does not mean we must become the slave of someone else's conscience. John Calvin explains that we restrain the exercising of our freedom for the sake of weaker Christians, not when we are faced with "Pharisees", who demand we conform to their likes and wishes. Instead, Calvin emphasizes where the gospel is at stake, Christian liberty needs to be exercised, and where the stability of the weak Christian is at stake, we need to restrain it.

All of this is why we are living between the times. In Christ, we are free, but we do not live in a world that can cope with our freedom. One day, Paul says in Romans 8:21, we will enjoy "the glorious liberty of the children of God." That day is not yet here. As Martin Luther says, "A Christian man is most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one." As it was with the Master, so it is with the servant. We are mere instruments and vessels to spread the honor of our Lord among the nations for His glory. Wherever you are at in your Christian life and ministry, I hope you will find help and hope as you read the pages of this issue of our magazine.

In Christ Alone,

Dave Jenkins

Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine*



## A Conscience Captive to God's Word

By John MacArthur



**When Martin Luther was summoned to the Diet of Worms in 1521 A.D. and asked to recant his teaching, he replied:**

*“Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience would be neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand, I can do no oth-*



er.”

Luther’s well-known formulation, “Scripture and plain reason”, is the only basis on which we can properly ground true spiritual discernment. *Discernment* is the ability to understand, interpret, and apply truth skillfully. Discernment is a cognitive act. Therefore no one who spurns right doctrine or sound reason can be truly discerning.

**Authentic spiritual discernment must begin with Scripture—revealed truth.** Without a firm grounding in divine revelation, human reason always degenerates into skepticism (a denial that anything can be known for certain), rationalism (the theory that reason is a *source* of truth), secularism (an approach to life that purposely excludes God), or any number of other anti-Christian philosophies. When Scripture condemns human wisdom (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3:19), it is denouncing not reason per se, but humanistic ideology divorced from the divinely revealed truth of God’s Word. In other words, reason *apart from* the Word of God leads inevitably to unsound ideas, but reason subjected to the Word of God is at the heart of wise spiritual discernment.

The Westminster Confession of Faith clearly recognizes the formula of *Scripture and sound reason* as the basis of discernment. The Confession states, “The whole counsel of God...is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (chapter 1, section 6).

In other words, sound and careful logic must be applied to Scripture to yield a full and mature understanding of the spiritual truth God has revealed. This is no denial of the sufficiency of Scripture. The formula is not Scripture plus philosophy, but Scripture interpreted by careful, sensible, thoughtful, Spirit-directed reasoning. That is the essence of discernment.

In short, anti-intellectualism is incompatible with genuine spiritual wisdom. Those who think of faith as the abandonment of reason cannot be truly discerning. Irrationality and discernment are polar opposites.

When Paul prayed that the Philippians' love would "abound still more and more in real *knowledge* and all *discernment*" (Philippians 1:9, emphasis added), he was affirming the rationality of true faith. He also meant to suggest that knowledge and discernment necessarily go hand in hand with genuine spiritual growth.

Biblical faith, therefore, is rational. It is reasonable. It is intelligent. It makes good sense. And spiritual truth is meant to be rationally contemplated, examined logically, studied, analyzed, and employed as the only reliable basis for making wise judgments. That process is precisely what Scripture calls *discernment*.

God's truth is a precious commodity that must be handled carefully—not diluted with whimsical beliefs or bound up in human traditions. When a church loses its will to discern between sound doctrine and error, between good and evil, between truth and lies, that church is doomed.

The apostle John drew a very sharp distinction between Christianity and the spirit of antichrist—and he zealously held the line. Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes

"True Christians cannot condone or disregard anti-Christian influences in their midst and expect to enjoy God's blessing."

to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds (2<sup>nd</sup> John 9-11). Thus, John commanded those under his spiritual oversight to be watchful and discerning—and to have nothing to do with Christ-denying error or the purveyors of it.

Contrast that with Christians today who soothe themselves with the opinion that few things are really black and white. Doctrinal issues, moral questions, and Christian principles are all cast in hues of gray. No one is supposed to draw any definitive lines or declare any absolutes. Every per-



son is encouraged to do what is right in his own eyes—exactly what God forbade (Deuteronomy 12:8; Judges 17:6; 21:25).

**The church will never manifest its power in society until we regain a passionate love for truth and a corollary hatred for error.** True Christians cannot condone or disregard anti-Christian influences in their midst and expect to enjoy God's blessing.

*“Now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light”* (Romans 13:11-12, KJV).

## The Dangers of “Cancel Culture”, Tolerating One Another, and Discussion

By Dave Jenkins

**One topic that isn’t often considered on the subject of Christian conscience and Christian liberty,** as we are

discussing in this Issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, is tolerating one another and the place of open discussion and dialogue. Through-

out the history of the Church, we see Christians having open discussions about theological matters—from the Council of Nicaea, Chalcedon, the White Horse Tavern, and many more examples.

The White Horse Tavern, also known as White Horse Inn (not Dr. Mi-





chael Horton's ministry), was a place for the English Protestant Reformers to discuss Lutheran ideas from 1521 onward. John Foxe describes the meetings in his *Book of Martyrs*. In attendance at these meetings, according to Foxe, were the future Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, Miles Coverdale, Matthew Parker, William Tyndale, Nicholas Shaxton, John Rogers, and John Bale, and also included Stephen Gardiner, the future Bishop of Winchester. These men met at the White Horse Tavern located on King's Lane to the west of King's Parade. It was in existence by 1455 and demolished in 1870 when the King's College Scott's Building was constructed. A Blue Plaque on the wall facing the

point where the King's Parade becomes Trumpington Street now commemorates the original location of the White Horse Tavern.

"With the rise of the internet, in particular, we would rather not meet and discuss topics in recent times."

From the Early Church Councils to the modern-day gatherings, Christians have been meeting to discuss issues related to the Church. Even in

Acts 15, the Church meets to settle whether Gentiles need to be circumcised or not. The Church has a long history of engaging one another both corporately and individually in various theological Christian traditions to discuss matters related to the Bible and theology.

With the rise of the internet, in particular, we would rather not meet and discuss topics in recent times. But as we've seen from the Early Church to the present even, traditionally Christians gather together to discuss matters. Christians aren't afraid of open, honest dialogue and discussion because we have the truth in God's Word. We gather around God's Word on the Lord's Day, in small groups, or at coffee shops and other places to talk from Scripture about issues in our lives.

A truly biblical understanding of speech and communication dic-

tates that we speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), seasoned with salt (Colossians 4:6). James warns that the tongue is a flaming fire (James 3). Christians *engage* with one another. We don't retreat from one another. When one of us errors, we confront in love to win back the brother or sister in Christ with the truth of Scripture (Galatians 6:1-2).

As we come to the idea of "tolerating one another", I need to be clear about the meaning. In our society today, the idea of tolerance means that we tolerate only one side or viewpoint of ideas. But Christians do the opposite of this. We don't accept every view-

"The sad thing is that our culture is blinded by the "god of this world" — Satan; this leads to forgoing truth for lies."

point as equally valid. For example, we reject the idea that Jesus is only a good teacher or a prophet, or that salvation is made possible through multiple paths, and so forth. We reject these ideas and more because they deny the teaching of Scripture. Even so, we tolerate the *person*. We aim to win them with the truth of God's Word because Scripture pierces the heart (Hebrews 4:12). As we proclaim the Word faithfully, the Spirit opens eyes, converts sinners, and teaches the saints the truth of the gospel.

In today's culture, it's often thought that Christians are the least tolerant people in the world, but that's not the truth. Christians are the first to start hospitals, care for the sick, start universities, start counseling others and caring for them, and more. Christians did and continue to do this because they love the Lord and understand that love for God fuels a love for other people (Matthew 22:37-40).

**True tolerance isn't the acceptance of *all* ideas as equally valid.** True tolerance is understanding the *difference* between *saying* that a person isn't entitled to his/her viewpoint (when it comes to the truths found in Scripture) and the *idea* that they are. Chris-



tians are *not against* free speech, but *for* it. A love for God demands that we treat every image-bearer made in the image and likeness of God with dignity, value, and respect. Such an understanding also informs our knowledge of religious liberty, freedom of religion, and conscience, such as that which was inscribed in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

As D.A. Carson notes in his book, *The Intolerance of Tolerance*, the sad thing is that we are dealing with a different definition of tolerance today. For example, we can consider the LGBTQ community and their influence on the modern definition of the word. They are given priority in our culture, and we are taught that we *must* respect their viewpoint. But no Christian is against the LGBTQ as a people group. We are against the ideology that says that we must be tolerant of their ideas and revere them. The reason why Christians must object is because the Bible teaches that marriage is between one man and one woman for life, under God; not to mention the biblical definition of this behavior as sinful.

The rejection of same-sex marriage is not due to a desire to withhold “rights” from these individuals, but rather because same-sex marriage denies the biblical definition of marriage and is therefore heretical in concept. Again and again, we see in our culture how Christians who believe in marriage between one man and one woman for life are shut down in dialogue, discussion, or debate. Our culture believes that upholding the concept of traditional marriage is outdated and wrong, therefore hindering the progress of society. The sad irony in all of this is that Christians have fought for the rights of the unborn (against abortion), started universities, and more because of love for God, which fuels a love for people.

**When you aim to shut down dialogue and discussion, you are *not tolerant*.** You are being intolerant of others' views and viewpoints. You are not hearing them, and you won't be able to engage them. The sad thing is that our culture is blinded by the “god of this world”—Satan; this leads to forgoing truth for lies. Satan wants

nothing more than for people to be blinded to the truth. Satan does not want discussion, debate, or dialogue. He wants to be believed and followed without question or qualification. The Christian faith, however, teaches us the opposite of this.

True Christians are not opposed to discussion and tolerance. We reject the idea of a cancel culture for this very reason. We neither reject people, nor their ideas, because we think we are “better than them”; rather we reject ideas (not people) because we know the truth of God’s Word and lovingly aim to show them the truth found therein. Rather than minimizing people and bombing with opinions, Christians have the truth. We are to speak the truth in love, seasoned with salt, because the Church is called to preach the Word and make disciples of the nations. Only Christians have a saving message that can rescue sinners from the gates of hell.

**Of all people, Christians should be loving.** We should be tolerant of others. We should display the fruits of the Spirit. We should also be open to dialogue and discussion. And we should do all of this because, not only does the Bible have much to say about our speech, but it has much to say about how we engage others with our speech. We will also be held accountable for every idle word out of our mouths because our words are to be used to edify and build up others (Ephesians 4:29).

So, true tolerance is vital for the Christian. It doesn’t mean that we have to agree with one another on every point, nor cross every “T” in our discussions. We can have a respectful conversation with one another where God’s Word is central on matters related to the Christian life and ministry with the understanding that what we believe about the finished and sufficient work is vital for real Christian unity and fellowship. The gospel is of first importance, Paul says in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15. We must stand up and defend the truth in love and contend for it with all that we are, but even so, to win those who error and to correct our opponents in love that they might know the truth and walk in it through saving faith in

Christ alone.

All of this requires rejecting the cancel culture, which emphasizes “me” and the idea that “all truth is about me”. All truth isn’t about how *I feel*, nor about *how I see things*. All truth centers on the Word of God, which declares the glory of the Son of God and Man—Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ and His Word are central to the Christian, and therefore, we are to engage in open discussion and dialogue with one another. We do this because we love the Lord and love one another, aiming to faithfully preach Christ to sinners entrusting our efforts to the work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit alone can draw sinners to faith in Christ by opening their eyes to the horror of their sin and the glory of Christ.

“Let’s trust the Word, Friends, to do what the Word does, and the Spirit to do what He does so well...”

Let’s trust the Word, Friends, to do what the Word does, and the Spirit to do what He does so well, and let us be tolerant in the true Christian sense of the word. Christians are for dialogue, discussion, and debate because we are for the life of the mind, which flows out of love for God and desire for the good well-being of our fellow image-bearers and society at large.

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# Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience

By Joey Tomlinson



**What is Christian liberty?** What does it mean to have liberty of conscience? How do we honor God in these particular areas? I find this topic to be one of the most undeveloped areas in the minds of

Christians. It seems to be a constant flash point in many congregations and all throughout evangelicalism. Now, for a good exegesis on all the passages related to conscience, I commend Andy Naselli and J.D. Crowley's book, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ*. But below you will find my short contribution to the subject and I pray that it is equipping to you.

### **Paul says to the church of Corinth:**

*"All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:23-11:1).*

Now let me give the setting of what is going on here otherwise we may have a difficult time tracking with this passage and Paul's instructions. The passage you just read is only a section out of a larger discussion on Christian liberty contained in chapters 8-11. And let me just give you an overview of chapters 8, 9, and the beginning of 10:

- In 8:1 we see the issue: food offered to idols.
- In 8:4-6 we see Paul state that idols (and by that he means pagan deities) do not really exist and that there is one God and one Lord, Jesus Christ.
- In 8:7 we see him say that there are younger, weaker believers that defile their conscience by eating food that was offered to idols. They think that their eating of the food somehow endorses idolatry.
- In 8:9 we see Paul charge the stronger more mature believers to not allow their liberty of eating food offered to idols to become a stumbling block to those weaker in the faith (and I will revisit this later).
- In 8:12 we see Paul say that the stronger brother sins against the weaker brother if the stronger makes the weaker defile (key word) his conscience.
- In 9:1-23 we see Paul state how he gives up his rights even as an Apostle to win people to Christ.
- Lastly, the first part of chapter 10:1-22 is really a warning to flee idolatry. I think this eases the mind of the weaker believers to know that eating meat offered to idols is *not* idolatry (or an endorsement of it) and it serves as a warning to the stronger believers not to be led astray through one's liberties into idolatry.

Now that we have a bit of the context, let me offer up a few points as it relates to the passage at hand.

## **Our Christian Liberty Should Build Up the Body of Christ**

*“All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are*



*lawful,” but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:23-24). Paul says something like this a few chapters earlier (6:12) when he writes: “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for*

“Seeking the good of one’s neighbor is connected to the phrase “build up”, which means to *edify*— that is, *to make one sturdy in Christ.*”

*me,” but I will not be dominated by anything.” And in chapter 8:9, when he reminds us, “But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”*

Our Christian liberty can fall into idolatry when we are so committed to it that we devour other believers. Our liberties are not engaged

with in a vacuum. In one sense, yes, we are individuals, but in a much truer and biblical sense, we are *not* individuals. We are a part of the body of Christ and to the unbelieving world we are *ambassadors* of Christ.

When Paul says that “*all things are lawful, but not all things are helpful*”, he is saying that just because we have the right before God to do something, doesn’t mean that we should do it, because it may not be beneficial or expedient as it relates to seeking the good of your neighbor. Seeking the good of one’s neighbor is connected to the phrase “build up”, which means to *edify*—that is, *to make one sturdy in Christ.*

The question Christians are good at asking is, “Can I do \_\_\_\_\_?” The question we are bad at asking is, “*Should* I do \_\_\_\_\_? Does it build up a brother or sister? Or does it cause them to sin?” Our liberty should build God’s church.

## **This World Belongs to Jesus—Enjoy Your Liberties in Light of That Fixed Reality**

*“Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.’ If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience” (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:25-27).* In this passage Paul quotes from Psalm 24 when he says, *“the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof”*. This means all things belong to God therefore what we have is given by Him alone. In fact, Paul says to young Timothy in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 4:4-5:

*“For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”*

What God has created is good and shouldn’t be called or treated as evil. Yet fallen men have made perversions of it by becoming slaves to it (which is what Paul is warning about in chapter 10) and then in an over-reaction end up calling what is good, “evil”.

For example, using meat as a pagan sacrifice is a perversion of what God has created that should be received with thankfulness. Take for another example—wine in the Bible. Wine is commended in Scripture (Psalm 104; Ecclesiastes 9:7; John 2; 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 5:27), yet men using it for wicked purposes and becoming enslaved to it (drunkenness, which clusters with the sin of self-pity and despair and slothfulness, etc.) is outright condemned (Proverbs 23; Ephesians 5:18; 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 4).

These are two biblical examples of how even Christian liberties can become idols that turn our devotion away from God, His glory, and His people. As a result, we end up shackled in sinful addiction. However, Paul’s point in verses 25-27 is that our consciences should not call evil

that which God has called good. We often call evil that which God calls good because we are blame shifters. Instead of taking personal responsibility for our excess, we blame a gift from God and thus blame God.

It is as old as the garden: Adam says to God, *“it was the woman you gave me”* (Genesis 3:12). Now, that gets us into another aspect to this section in verse 27:

*“If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.”*

“It is like being held hostage at your own dinner table.”

Here we see how someone with a perpetually weak conscience (which is one not being strengthened and informed by the Word) can put their undeveloped conscience (as it relates to the Word) before their role as being an ambassador of Christ by being inhospitable and un-

comfortable to be around.

This is just as detrimental as the strong conscience believer turning what’s good into an idol or even forcing the weak conscience believer to defile their conscience. Think of the picture Paul is giving here. A Christian, who thinks eating meat that was previously offered as a sacrifice to a pagan god is a sin, goes over the house of an unbeliever. One of the primary purposes for accepting such an invitation should be to influence that person toward Christ Jesus. Instead, what happens is the Christian sits down at the table and looks at all the food the unbeliever prepared and says “no thank you.”

The rest of the night the non-Christians have to endure getting a lecture from an uninformed Christian about a matter of liberty. It is like being held hostage at your own dinner table. It is inhospitable, it makes people uncomfortable, and it is a calling of “unclean that which God



calls clean". And when you constantly elevate a biblically undeveloped conscience and treat it as 'thus saith the Lord' (i.e., on par with Scripture), you limit your ability to advance the gospel and you hinder your own ability to grow. Humility is crucial here.

So, here we find a commendation of the good God has created, the importance of enjoying those things in light of Christ's Lordship (which means in moderation), and we see a potential pitfall for the weak believer.

## Love Limits Liberty

*"But if someone says to you, 'This has been offered in sacrifice,' then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of*

*conscience"* (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:28).

"Restraint, in this case, is a very loving thing to do, and we can see how unloving it would be to cause a brother or sister in Christ to suffer by sinning against conscience."

Now we see Paul turn to the stronger believer primarily. Paul is saying that the person informing the brother or sister who is eating meat that was offered to an idol is wrestling with that in their conscience.

Again, remember the setting. Christians have been invited over to a non-Christian's home. Some of those

Christians are perhaps recent converts and they converted out of paganism. They used to be the non-Christians that sacrificed meat to idols. The other Christians are more mature and they either do not have that as their testimonial background or they've strengthened their conscience over time. And Paul's instructions are clear: if someone says, "this food has been offered to idols, don't eat it for their sake."

The person saying it is considered by Paul to be the weaker believer. He or she in this passage would violate their conscience to eat meat sacrificed to idols. It would feel like they were defiling themselves or denounc-

ing God. It would seem as if they were going back to their former way of life. And for the stronger believer to turn and say “eat it” would be detrimental to the weaker brother’s faith. It would cause them to feel as if they’re sinning. It would be a form of inner torment and restlessness. It would cause them to wrestle with their assurance of faith. So, Paul says do not eat it for the sake of the weaker brother (the one who informed you) and for the sake of their conscience.

Restraint, in this case, is a very loving thing to do, and we can see how unloving it would be to cause a brother or sister in Christ to suffer by sinning against conscience. Now look with me for a moment at Romans 14:13-23, because there we see Paul writing about the same issues to another church, and it helps shed light on the instructions Paul is giving here to the church of Corinth that will ensure we are biblically balanced:

*“Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has*

*doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin*" (Romans 14:13-23).

What is at stake here is causing another brother to stumble. And by "stumble" it genuinely means causing another brother to either actually sin (you can see the risk of this in drinking alcohol with an alcoholic, for example) or *believe* he is actually sinning thereby violating his conscience.

So, this weaker brother in our passage would think that he is sinning against God to eat the meat. That is what makes it unloving for the stronger brother to persist in his liberty. Now this is a lot different than someone disagreeing with you about your Christian liberty no matter how vehemently they disagree with you. If the weaker brother said something along the lines of "I wouldn't eat that if I were you—it was sacrificed to an idol" or "I cannot believe you would eat meat sacrificed to an idol, don't you know the world is watching" or "Don't you know that offends me? I am offended!" you are not bound to refrain from your liberty.

None of those sorts of rebuttals carry the weight of Scripture when it exhorts Christians to limit their liberty for the sake of another brother's conscience. None of those are legitimate excuses for a stronger believer to suspend his liberty. Believers are not to be held hostage by people who are perpetually offended about things God says we have liberty with no matter how much they protest.

### **D.A. Carson says it this way:**

"Incidentally, one should not confuse the logic of 1 Corinthians 8 [which is: 9 But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?



(1 Cor 8:9-10)] with the stance that finds a strong legalist saying to a believer who thinks that eating meat offered to idols is acceptable, “You may think that such action is legitimate, but every time you do it you are offending me—and since you are not permitted to offend me, therefore you must not engage in that activity.” The person who utters words to that effect, however, is in no danger of being swayed by the actions of those who engage in the activity. They are using a manipulative argument to defend a misguided position in which they are convinced that the act of eating meat that has been offered to idols is invariably wrong. In other words, they operate out of the conviction that this activity lies in [an] indisputable column—and thus they find themselves at odds with Paul’s wisdom and insight.”

So, we set aside our Christian liberty when we are dealing with a brother or sister who would stumble—who would join us in our liberty to the violation of their conscience or who has no self-control and would fall into gluttony or drunkenness. But we are not obligated at all to set aside our Christian liberty because it offends someone. The Scripture is clear: love limits liberty.

## **All Things Are for the Glory of God**

*“I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God”* (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:29-31). The Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 1 says: “What is the chief end of man?” Answer: “To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Paul, being clear about matters of conscience not being sin, charges believers to remember that all things are to be done to the glory of God. That is, in fact, what makes them fit. That is what makes them acceptable. That is what makes them acts of worship.

It's what makes your Sunday lunch or dinner fit—the fact that it is received with thanksgiving as a blessing from God.

Paul says in verse 30, *“If I partake with thankfulness why am I denounced?”* That word “denounced” means “spoken evil against”. We do not speak evil of those who honor the Lord in the way that they live. We don't speak evil of those who partake in those things which God has called good when they do it with thankfulness to Him.

And just as the strong believer should not cause another believer to stumble by force feeding them against their conscience, so should the strong believer be settled in his mind on issues of liberty. Just because you limit your liberty in love does not mean that you begin to call what your limiting sinful. That is legalism. The binding of one's conscience on matters that are not sin is legalistic. So, instead of being enslaved by legalism, Paul commends partaking with thankfulness to the Lord, who is King over all of His creation and is King over our liberties. That is how we “do all to the glory of God.” The glory of God is the goal in all things, including matters of conscience. And where the glory of God is the goal, the right balance will be struck.

## **We are Responsible to Not Give Offense for the Sake of the Gospel, But We Cannot Control the Reactions of Others**

*“Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ”* (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:32-11:1). With the glory of God as the goal, Paul gives some concrete handles: *“give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God—just as I try to please everyone in everything I do.”* Paul has in view non-believers when he says “Jews and Greeks” and believers when he says “Christians” (Christians are made

up of Jews and Greeks so that is the reason for the delineation here). Paul says, *“give no offense to unbelievers and believers”*.

That word ‘give’ is significant. That phrase *“give no offense”* means *“do not hurt or harm or cause anyone to stumble”*. That is different than people taking offense. We live in a culture that is in a perpetual state of outrage. The question is not whether there is outrage, just as the question Paul isn’t concerned about is whether non-believers and believers were offended.

The question that should be asked is, “Is it [the outrage] legitimate?” Is there something the stronger believer should repent of? Have you dishonored God in your liberties causing someone to stumble into violating their conscience? Then confession and repentance are required.

Now what we know Paul is NOT saying is, fear man—be a people pleaser. That is enslaving and ungodly. We are to fear God. What he is saying, and continually commending, is this idea of not being a stumbling block for non-believers or believers by causing them to violate their conscience. Paul wasn’t concerned about his personal liberties to the detriment of the lives of others and his model for that was Christ. He concludes the section by saying as much: *Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*.

## **And what sort of example is Christ in all of this? Paul answers that question in Philippians 2:5-11:**

*“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,*

*so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

The humility and love of Christ and His red-hot drive for the glory of God led to the salvation of His people. And He is our Savior and our example. Therefore, our humility and love for Christ should fuel a desire to ascribe glory to God that will in turn effectively build our neighbors up in Him.

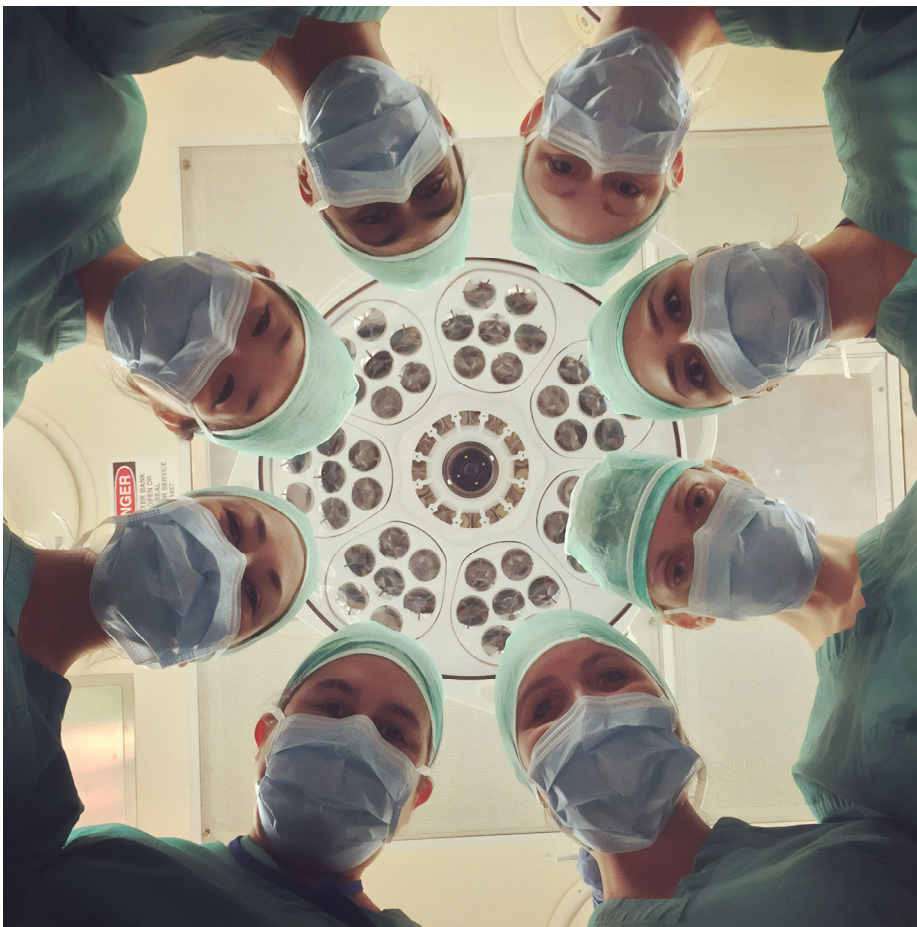
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## How Theological Triage Enhances Christian Liberty

By William Farley



**The Great Schism occurred on July 16, 1054.**

It permanently alienated the Eastern Orthodox Churches from the western Roman Catholic Church. What were the issues? Sadly, they were trivial—whether to use leaven or unleavened bread at the Lord's Supper, whether pastors could wear

beards, and whether Christians should fast on Saturdays during Lent. The most serious theological issue was whether the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father or by the Father and the Son.

One of the most harmful divisions in church history could have been avoided had those involved known how to triage doctrinal issues. Triage is the ability to sort the crucial from the important-but-not-

<p>“So, sometimes division is sinful, and at other times unity is sinful. Sometimes unity is virtuous. At other times it is sinful.”</p>	<p>crucial beliefs, holding fast to the first while giving liberty with regards to the latter. One of the problems with providing theological liberty, and its opposite, holding fast to crucial doctrines, is</p>
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that they can both be abused. Sometimes the church holds fast, dividing over issues that shouldn’t separate us. The Great Schism is a good example. At other times we give too much liberty and don’t separate when we should.

For example, in 1994 a group of Roman Catholic and Evangelicals signed a document to promote Christian unity. It was titled, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, (ECT), and some of its key signatories were J. I. Packer and Charles Colson.

Although ECT’s goal was admirable, it failed to address the main issues that had divided Protestants and Catholics since the Reformation—Justification by Faith Alone and a related issue, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. I have tremendous respect for Packer and Col-

son, but in this pursuit of unity they erred, and if men this solid can error, so can we.

## Unity and Division?

Unity is a worthy goal. Jesus prayed, *“That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me”* (John 17:20–21). But Paul recognized appropriate times for division. *“For there must be factions among you,”* wrote Paul, *“in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized”* (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:19).

So, sometimes division is sinful, and at other times unity is sinful. Sometimes unity is virtuous. At other times it is sinful. How do we know when to unify and when to divide? The ability to apply theological triage is the crucial tool that answers that question.

## Theological Triage

I shattered my left elbow in a bicycle accident. Because it was Memorial Day weekend the emergency room was packed. Drug addicts coming off highs, heart trouble, lacerations, and broken bones filled the waiting room. There were more patients than they could possibly treat. So, the intake nurse carefully *triaged* the waiting room. She admitted those with life threatening issues first making the less serious patients wait. I loaded up on Ibuprofen and sat patiently.

Theological triage works the same way. It equips us to sort the crucial doctrines from the trivial, the doctrines that we cannot compromise, (Justification by Faith Alone or sexual ethics), from those that don't mat-

ter (beards). Personally, I have found that understanding and applying the gospel has been intensely helpful here. Many have found it helpful to triage doctrinal issues into three levels. We stand immovable on level-one issues, while giving liberty on the other two.

### Level One Triage

The failure to believe level-one doctrines either compromises the gospel or compromises essential biblical ethics. These are examples of the

“first things” Paul references in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:3. We do not give Believers liberty on these issues. Should someone reject these they should be placed under church discipline. It is appropriate to divide from individuals, local churches, or denominations over these issues.

“This means that you should leave a denomination or church that quits believing in these truths.”

Here are my non-negotiables. Your list may differ slightly, but the important point is that we are asking this question: *What are the fundamentals without which we do not have the gospel or Christian ethics?*

- **The Bible:** Is it inerrant and trustworthy, or is it full of mistakes? Is it *the* Word of God or does it just *contain* the Word of God?
- **Creation Ex-nihilo:** Did God created space, time, and matter by His word out of nothing?
- **The Trinity:** There is one God existing in three persons. This implies the full deity and humanity of Christ.



- **The Incarnation:** God came to earth and took on human flesh.
- **Original Sin:** All men are born with a sinful nature which they inherit from Adam and which alienates them from God.
- **The Cross:** God forgives sin because Jesus died on the cross, in our place, absorbing the wrath that we deserve so that we can experience the reward that He deserves.
- **Justification by Faith Alone:** We are not saved by our works. We are saved by faith in Christ's works. This faith includes repentance from all known sin.
- **The Resurrection:** Jesus rose from the grave bodily on the third day. Someday He will also raise our bodies.
- **Eschatology:** Christ will someday return bodily to judge the living and the dead.
- **Holy Sexuality:** Adultery, fornication, pornography, homosexual acts, bestiality, pedophilia, incest, same-sex-marriage, and sexual transitions are fundamentally sinful and disordered. We do not give liberty here.
- **Abortion (Murder):** It is the sinful taking of human life.

This means that you should leave a denomination or church that quits believing these truths. For example, the 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Nathaniel W. Taylor, was the first head of Yale's Divinity School. Although trained by Jonathan Edwards' grandson, Timothy Dwight, Taylor eventually rejected Original Sin and the doctrine of Imputation. Labelled

New Haven Theology, his teaching ultimately split the Presbyterian denomination in the U.S. We rightfully hate denominational splits, but in this case the split pleased God. Taylor and his followers rejected level-one doctrines.

## **Triage Level-Two**

We can give other Christians liberty on level-two issues. By this I don't mean that there are unimportant Bible teachings. All of the Bible is God's Word. It *all* matters. But some doctrines are more foundational and clear than others. These teachings tend to be the boundaries that define local churches and denominations. We may not admit a brother who differs on one of these into membership in our local church, but we still consider him or her a Christian in good standing. Here are some examples:

- **Church Government:** Is your church governed by elders, bishops, congregational vote, or by a single pastor?
- **Age of Baptism:** Does your church baptize infants or just adults, who can make a public statement of their faith?
- **The Lord's Supper:** How is Christ present in the Lord's supper? What is the meaning of the Lord's Supper?
- **Church Membership:** Do you practice or ignore it?
- God's sovereignty and human freedom. How do the sovereignty of God and human responsibility work together? Do you emphasize God's sovereignty or human responsibility?
- **Eldership:** Can women serve as pastors or elders?

- **Divorce and Remarriage:** Are there any valid grounds for divorce, and if so under what grounds is remarriage permissible?
- **Cessationism:** Did the supernatural spiritual gifts end with the formation of the New Testament cannon or does the Holy Spirit still distribute them at will?

On these issues sincere Bible-loving Christians can disagree. However, for practical reasons it is difficult to function in a church where there is major disagreement on one of these issues. Church government is a good example. We extend liberty to those who disagree, but we may graciously encourage them to join another congregation that shares their convictions.

### Level-Three Triage

Members of the same congregation should be able to disagree on level-three issues without damage to local church unity. Here are some examples:

- **Church Music:** Do we sing psalms, hymns, or more modern praise music (or all of the above)?
- **The Second Coming of Christ and the Rapture:** Are you premillennial, postmillennial, or a millennial?
- **The Food/Drink Used in Sacrament:** Wine or grape juice at communion? Leavened or unleavened bread?
- **Frequency of the Lord's Supper:** weekly, monthly, or quarterly?

- **Alcohol:** Is the moderate and non-addicting consumption of alcohol permissible?
- **Modesty:** What does modesty look like? Can women wear makeup or jewelry, etc., and how much is too much?
- **Smoking:** Is smoking a sin?
- **The Sabbath:** Should it be literal? If so, what does “rest” look like?

“We should expect disagreements with fellow Christians about third-level matters,” writes Andrew Naselli, “and we should learn to live with those differences. Christians don’t always need to eliminate differences, but they should always seek to glorify God by loving each other in their differences.” For example, you should be able to disagree with your spouse over these issues and still have a happy marriage.

### **Triaging Tools**

Proud people find triaging difficult. Consider the Pharisees. Because they lacked God’s perspective, they could not effectively triage. They made theological mountains out of molehills. They tithed “*mint, and dill, and cumin but neglected the weightier matters of the law*” (Matthew 23:23). Hmmm...? Because we can do the same, let me close with three triaging tools.

The first is a question: Is the Bible really clear about this issue? Sadly, the church often divides over level-two or level-three issues that are not as clear as we would like. For example, the timing of baptism, how Christ is present in the Lord’s Supper, or our understanding of the



millennial reign of Christ. But we fail to divide over issues that are crystal clear—the necessity of repentance, or the Trinity.

The ancient creeds—the ones that have stood the test of time—are a second triaging tool. Examples would be *The Apostles Creed* and *The Nicene Creed*, *The Heidelberg Confession*, or *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. Notice what these creeds emphasize and de-emphasize. They aren't perfect, (only scripture is), but they are a great place to start.

Thirdly, and most importantly, we learn to triage by understanding and applying the gospel *to ourselves*. When a Believer sees and *feels* the

“...those who follow these rules will not repeat the tragedy of the Great Schism.”

horror of their personal sin, and what it cost God to forgive them, their attention shifts to level-one doctrines. Whenever I find a Christian obsessed with level-two or level-three doctrines, I almost

always find someone that doesn't really get the seriousness of their personal sin, the wrath of God, or the horror of the cross. Feeling the weight of sin and redemption gives us the perspective that enables us to triage the other doctrines. As Jack Miller once said, “The love of God is shallow unless there is a depth to which it reaches.”

In conclusion, those who follow these rules will not repeat the tragedy of the Great Schism. They will effectively triage level-one from level-two and level-three issues. They will not separate over whether our communion bread is leavened, whether clergy can marry, fasting on Satur-

days during Lent, or whether pastors can wear beards. **But they will resolutely separate over level-one doctrines—gospel-destroying doctrines, and crucial ethical issues that can never be compromised.**

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- i. Paul also urged unity. "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to ... bear with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1–6).
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- iv. Michael A. Graham, Cheer Up! What Has Happened to All Your Joy? (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2021) pg. xiv

## Sphere Sovereignty: The Relationship Between the Church, Society, and the Christian

By P.J. Mills

**Abraham Kuyper once famously remarked,** “There is not a square inch in the whole of creation over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: “Mine!”” Down through the ages, the nations have constantly raged against Jesus Christ in an effort to overthrow His rule and claim to absolute sovereignty. Their goal has long been to throw off the yoke of Christ’s rule and to establish their own rule and absolute sovereignty (Psalm 2). The goal of godless men throughout the ages has been to replace Christ’s all-sovereign claim of “Mine!” with the globalist and atheistic claim of “Ours!”

In the last two years, this rage has been exerted in a new and peculiar manner in the West: specifically, in an



overt persecution of the Church during a time of global pandemic. The Western Church has seen a new and focused type of persecution in the form of forced church closures, fines, and in some cases, the imprisonment of pastors. While the western church is not yet being persecuted by a “hard” tyranny at the barrel of a gun, it is most certainly suffering under a rapidly evolving and insidious form of “soft” tyranny. The Western Church presently finds herself under attack from governments who have adopted a rabid form of globalism, which seeks to establish the State, rather than the Church, as the pillar and ground of the truth. Day by day, the sovereignty of God is derided by the ruling class, and an army of so-called “experts” and “fact-checkers” seek to control, establish, and—in many cases—re-define what is true.

The Western Church presently finds itself in a watershed moment. It now struggles for freedom from globalist, tyrannical, and secular forces, which overtly make known their hate for God and wish to cast off all forms of His rule and reign in society. During such hostility and pressure, there have sadly been far too many Christian leaders who have succumbed to Nebuchadnezzar’s tyrannical concert and bowed down under the pressure to obey the State without question. Many have dressed their behavior in Christian lingo and so led entire congregations to follow grossly unbiblical mandates. There are others who, while having not yet bowed down, have indicated a willingness to unquestioningly yield to the authority of the State no matter what. Recently, a well-known Christian radio host stated, “If the government tells me to put pinwheels on the side my head every time I go to Publix, I’m going to put pinwheels on the side of my head.” This quote was not merely said in jest, as the host went on to argue that this was the correct and historic position of the Church. But is this actually a healthy, historically accurate, or bibli-

“What are we to do when the demands of the State are in conflict with our consciences and Biblical convictions?”



cal relationship between Church and State? In this short article, I will argue that it is not. Sadly, there is immense confusion on this issue today, resulting in similar attitudes among many Christians in the west. However, these views that will bear devastating results if they are not rebuked and refuted.

## **Importance of Sphere Sovereignty**

Lord Acton once famously remarked, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The doctrine of total depravity confirms this statement to be one of profound truth. So, how are we then to live in a world where various forms of corrupt power constantly clash with Christian values? What are we to do when the demands of the State are in conflict with our consciences and Biblical convictions? More appropriate to the scope of this essay, it should be asked: how do we resolve the tension between the authority of the Church and the authority of the State? When should the Church respectfully submit and obey God-ordained civil authorities, and when must the Church engage in civil disobedience?

The best answer to this question is found in a right understanding of what Abraham Kuyper labeled “sphere sovereignty.” According to this theory, Christ alone possesses complete sovereignty over all things (Matthew 28:18). But while Christ alone possesses complete sovereignty, He has delegated sovereignty to different entities to exercise in their particular spheres.

Kuyper speaks of life being “divided into spheres, each with its own sovereignty.” The three most well-known spheres of sovereignty are the Church, the State, and the family. Each of these spheres of sovereignty has been given roles and responsibilities by God with each sphere having sovereignty over its area of jurisdiction. Jonathan Lee-man, in a helpful essay on the Church and State, writes:

“God has given the *power of the sword* to governments and

the *power of the keys* to churches, and he intends for them to work separately but cooperatively toward the greater end of worship. Governments should employ the sword in order to protect life, enable the cultural mandate, and provide a platform for the work of the church...Churches should exercise the keys of the kingdom in order to testify to King Jesus, his message, and his people. They are witnesses of the age to come. To summarize the relationship between church and state in a sentence, we could say, God has given the *power of the sword* to governments and the *power of the keys* to churches, and he intends for them to work separately but cooperatively toward the greater end of worship.”

According to Romans 13, civil authorities derive their authority from God. They do not possess a self-derived sovereignty, nor are they a law unto themselves. In fact, they would have absolutely no authority if it did not first come from God (John 19:11). They are not to be a terror to good works, but rather, a terror to evil, as defined by God’s standards.

“The State does not get to dictate to the Church how, when, or where it can worship.”

When functioning properly within its sphere of sovereignty, the civil government is God’s deacon—an armed servant of God that upholds, protects, and executes justice in a particular jurisdiction. The civil government has thus been given the unique stewardship of sovereignty over a nation’s justice system.

This means they hold a responsibility to prosecute criminals and execute sentences for law-breaking up to and including the death penalty. On the other hand, when the State becomes a terror to good works and permits, approves, or sanctions evil, then it is no longer legitimately operating within its sphere of sovereignty.

The moment a government begins terrorizing good and approving or sanctioning evil, it has unlawfully overstepped the boundaries of its sov-

ereignty. It is vital to remember Kuyper's words when it comes to sovereignty—that there is not one square inch over which Christ does not say 'mine!' When governments begin overstepping their rightful spheres, even if seemingly well-intended, they, in essence, set themselves up as the supreme authority in the place of God. When this happens, all manner of tyranny may result.

Recently, many Christians have asserted that government overreach during the time of global pandemic is understandable, temporary, and acceptable since it is meant well. The words of C.S. Lewis stand as a firm rebuttal to such an idea:

“Of all tyrannies, a tyranny exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It may be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience.”

Over the last two years, the Church has had to wrestle with whether the State has the right to mandate masks during worship, forbid singing during worship services, limit attendance for worship, and soon, it will wrestle with whether or not vaccine mandates are a legitimate barrier to entry for worship services. Some have argued that such mandates must be followed because the State has good intentions and is trying to protect the civil good. Others have argued that such mandates are an encroachment upon the Lordship of Christ over the Church. The answer to the dilemma lies with reclaiming the boundaries of sphere sovereignty.

The State does not get to dictate to the Church how, when, or where it can worship. Jesus Christ, not Caesar, is Lord of the Church. The notion that if the government told every member to wear pinwheels on their head, they must be obeyed or Romans 13:2 is being violated, is preposterous! Why? Because the government possesses no authority to dictate the manner in which the Church worships. The power of the keys is giv-

en to the Church and, consequently, falls under the Church's sphere of sovereignty, not the sovereignty of the state. It is Christ who dictates how, when, and where His Church worships Him.

Pastor Steve Richardson from Ontario Canada rightly notes that the churches who are relinquishing the power of the keys to the State are paving the way for apostate state churches. He writes of these churches:

“They give lip service to the authority of Jesus Christ but honour instead the dictates of the premier. They gather when they're allowed and how they are allowed. They sing if allowed to sing and stop when told to stop. They excommunicate, too, but now they do it upon the authority of the premier rather than on the authority of King Jesus. How do I know? If vaccines are required they will require vaccinations. If masks are required they require masks. If 10 are allowed they will turn away the 11<sup>th</sup>. And this will not stop... because the principles that once governed the Church have already been given up.”

This is a dreadful state of affairs indeed. But it is a state of affairs that I believe is correctable if men are willing to humble themselves, reflect on their failings, and repent. What would repentance and healthy correction look like in our present times? It would be churches opening their doors wide for all in defiance of tyrannical closures. It would be defying forced compliance with mask mandates when they violate consciences. Generally, it would be the Church standing upon the sovereignty of her Lord come what may, rather than cowering before bureaucratic bullies who are on the wrong side of history.

When the State crosses the lawful boundaries of their sovereignty, even if some argue it to be well-meaning, it remains a Christian duty to resist their advances, because such an overstep is an encroachment upon the sovereignty of Christ Himself. Such resistance is not a violation of Romans 13; it is actually an affirmation and upholding of it. It is the

Church asserting that all authority comes from God, is delegated, not self-derived, and has boundaries that must be kept.

## **The Church Militant**

In closing, it must be resolved how the Church should deal with the present state of affairs. This is no small matter, and the decisions that Christian leaders make in the years ahead will be of monumental significance. The relationship between church and state today is immensely unhealthy and misunderstood. The State has grossly overstepped its God-given boundaries, and the Church has largely failed in its witness as the pillar and ground of the truth.

There is a great need for the Church to correct course and renew resistance against the ongoing tyranny it faces. The Church must repent for its cowardice and resolve to once again stand upon the ultimate sovereignty of Christ. Jesus Christ, not Caesar, is Lord.

Kuyper once stated, “*Deus Christus* or *Divus Augustus* will be the shibboleth that will determine the fate of the world.” Sadly, the Church of our day has given far too much authority and sovereignty to the State that it never was meant to possess.

The choice before us today is simple: will we stand for the Lordship and absolute sovereignty of Christ? Or will we stand by while Caesar runs roughshod over the Church with endless governmental overreaches and abuses, far exceeding the sphere of sovereignty God has granted to the State? Will we choose *disaster*? Or will we choose *dominion*?

Will we choose to bow to Nebuchadnezzar and all the increasing power of statists? Or will we bow to the Lord Jesus Christ alone? Will we desire the praise and approval of men, and so justify our obedience to the State’s abuse of the Church out of a so-called “love for neighbor?” Or will we exercise proper dominion in our sphere of sovereignty and answer with Peter, John, and the Apostles, “We must obey God rather than



man.”

The Church must stand up and say “NO!” to mask mandates, “NO!” to vaccine mandates, “NO!” to singing bans, and “NO!” to attendance limits. Why? Because these matters fall entirely outside the State’s sphere of sovereignty and the State has no biblical right to dictate these matters to the Church.

**The choice is ours.** The Church can continue in its present course of compromise and apostasy. It can continue to claim love for neighbor, all the while dishonoring God by giving over the rightful authority of the Church to the State. Or, the Church can exercise dominion in the sphere of sovereignty given by God, say *no* to tyranny, and by so doing, turn the world upside down once again. It can choose to be salt and light in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation and carry on with the great commission. The choice is simple: pinwheels, or resistance; dominion or disaster; obedience or apostasy; Christ or Caesar. The call of Christ to the Church of our day is this: Choose this day whom you will serve.

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# Christian, What are You Watching?

By Craig Cabaniss



**Consider a day in the life of a typical American adult.** The waking moments begin with the radio alarm reporting weather, traffic, and headlines. Breakfast is gulped down with a side of

business news and features from the morning newspaper.

Then the commute to work, where the companion for the drive is a radio talk show host lathered into a political frenzy, or a shock jock whose tongue releases a barrage of crude humor.

At the office, checking e-mail presents opportunities throughout the morning for a bit of extracurricular web-surfing to shop for a birthday gift, check out a favorite blog, and catch up on the latest celebrity news. Lunch in the breakroom is spent connecting with a favorite sports magazine, while a TV talk show blares overhead, showcasing the latest claimants to fleeting fame. Back in the cubicle's afternoon boredom, virtual adventure can be found on an Internet video game offering a quest for world domination.

When the work grind ceases, the drive home provides a reprieve from thinking and a nostalgic unwinding as the oldies stream in on satellite radio. The trip down memory lane is interrupted by a stop at soccer practice to pick up a young daughter, who eagerly buckles up and warmly greets the Disney character coming to life on the DVD screen that descends in the backseat.

After a welcome-home kiss from the wife—and a friendlier kiss from the dog—comes the irresistible beckoning to collapse into the La-Z-Boy, grab the remote, and scan all three hundred digital cable channels to take the edge off the workday weariness. Following dinner, the TV illuminates the family room as all gather to enjoy the hottest sitcoms, reality shows, and crime dramas. The day concludes with a drift into slumber to the soothing voice of a newscaster recapping headlines on the bedroom TV.

## **Surrounded by Media**

For most Americans, media is the omnipresent backdrop of life. Even if you don't find yourself in every scene of the previous day-in-the-life scenario, you're nevertheless surrounded. Whether at home, in the car, at the store, in a restaurant, or even at the gas station (I've seen

CNN piped in via a small screen built into the pump), the perpetual media lifeline continues. We're never beyond its ubiquitous reach. We're so engulfed that media seems like a second atmosphere; in fact, one author terms our cultural surroundings the "mediasphere."<sup>1</sup> We give no more thought to it than we do to the air we breathe.

But give thought to it we must. As followers of Christ, we cannot afford to take lightly the media's pervasive presence in our lives. Think about the power of video entertainment, for instance.

Whether viewed on computer, a portable player, or a traditional TV set, television and film are without peer in their cultural influence. Ken Myers, an astute Christian observer of popular culture, notes that television is not only "the dominant medium of popular culture", but also "the single

"We must evaluate the content of media messages and the consequences of their influence."

most significant shared reality in our entire society." He compares television's impact to that of Christianity centuries ago, when "Christendom" defined the Western world:

*Not all citizens of Christendom were Christians, but all understood it, all were influenced by its teaching...I can think of no entity today capable of such a culturally unifying role except television. In television, we live and move and have our being.*<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, pastor Kent Hughes offers this alarming appraisal:

*Today the all-pervasive glow of the television set is the single most potent influence and control in Western culture. Television has greater power over the lives of most Americans than any educational system, government, or church.*<sup>3</sup>

But it's not enough to acknowledge the dominant, nearly godlike authority exercised over our culture by TV, the Internet, and the rest of the media. We must evaluate the content of media messages and the consequences of their influence.

We begin by recognizing that the media's messages are nothing new. Essentially, our world puts forward the same allurements that the apostle John's world did some two thousand years ago: *"the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions"* (1<sup>st</sup> John 2:16). Christians in John's day didn't have the Internet, cable television, or iPods, but the desires of the flesh have been around since the fall. To be sure, the packaging and delivery of the world's offerings have advanced technologically, but their substance has remained as primitive as a talking serpent.

"Glorifying God is an intentional pursuit."

Christians of all ages have been required to soberly assess the temptations found in the surrounding culture and to respond in a God-glorifying way. We are no different. Our calling as Christians involves resisting the seduction of a fallen world.

Although this article is focused on television and film media, the principles are relevant for evaluating all forms of media, all of which, to some degree, embody values of our fallen world. If we're faithful to resist the ever-present "desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions," we'll need to sharpen our biblical discernment and wisely evaluate our media intake, for the glory of God.

### **Watching 'Unwatchingly'**

Many of us don't think about actively filtering our viewing. As long as we avoid the obvious traps such as pornography, we don't consider deliberate evaluation necessary. Though we may faithfully apply the Scriptures in other areas of life, we may not consciously think about how God's Word applies to our entertainment choices.

All too often, we think about neither what we watch nor how much. Our watching is just inevitable. We watch by habit. We watch because we're bored. We 'unwatchingly' watch as the TV stays on for background noise.



We watch alone or with others. We gather with friends on Friday night and rent a DVD because there's nothing else to do. We watch because others watch. Everyone at school or at work is talking about a popular movie or TV show. It's a must see—so we must see it. Without researching its content, without thinking about its effect on our hearts, without comparing an evening at the movies with other options, we go, and we watch.

Please don't misunderstand—I'm not saying it's wrong to watch television, rent a DVD, surf the Internet, or spend an evening at the cinema. The hazard is *thoughtless* watching. Glorifying God is an intentional pursuit. We don't accidentally drift into holiness; rather, we mature gradually and purposefully, one choice at a time.

In the Christian walk, we can't just step onto the right path and figure all is well. Christian discipleship is a lifelong journey consisting of a series of countless steps. Each step matters, and thus our viewing habits matter.

A lifestyle of careless viewing should concern us. At best, careless viewing reveals an ignorance of the media's power of temptation. It probably indicates a degree of laziness as well—and we can't afford to be lazy in what our minds absorb. Biblical discernment involves critical thinking, which often leads to costly action.

It's true that we grow in sanctification by God's grace, but this doesn't deny that our growth involves work. To mature, we need engaged minds asking biblically informed questions about the media's messages and methods. What's more, we need perseverance to travel against the cultural current.

To change the metaphor, detecting and avoiding temptation is a battle; every time we pick up the remote or glance at the movie listings or go online, we take up arms. Ken Myers describes this battle in strong terms:

*I believe that the challenge of living with popular culture may well be as serious for modern Christians as persecution and plagues were*

*for the saints of earlier centuries...Enemies that come loudly and visibly are usually much easier to fight than those that are undetectable.*<sup>4</sup>

It may seem that Myers exaggerates the danger. Pop culture as deadly as persecution and plagues? But I think he's right. When it comes to waging the war of sanctification, severe trial usually alerts us to battle, rousing us to our need for God. Popular culture, especially entertainment media, often lulls us to ignore our battle with the flesh.

In this conflict, how many Christians are waving the white flag of surrender by disengaging their discernment when it comes to media? But passivity is no option. We're called to live purposefully. That means we must watch on purpose and resist the lifestyle of passive viewing.

### **Watching with Immunity?**

Unlike those who watch thoughtlessly, many Christians recognize the tempting influence of media, yet assume they're immune from danger. They end up watching just like everyone else.

"After all," they'll argue, "I'm not going to watch a murder on TV and then go out and murder someone." This misses the point. Our sanctification aspirations should be loftier than avoiding murder. Just because we don't instantly mimic all we see doesn't mean our hearts aren't negatively affected by the programs or films we watch. Tugging like a subtle undertow below the surface, the media can tempt us to drift toward love of the world.

The drift toward worldliness may be slow, its symptoms not immediately apparent. This drift is usually a sign of a dulling conscience. The conscience doesn't function like a light switch—one moment the lights are on, then everything is dark with a flip of the switch. Instead, the sensitivity of our conscience dulls over

"You don't need a sophisticated statistical analysis of that survey to realize a lot of us don't have a clue about our viewing habits."

time as it is resisted or ignored. Paul charges young Timothy to “wage the good warfare” by holding on to a good conscience, and warns him that rejecting a good conscience can lead to shipwrecking one’s faith (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 1:18-20). Over time, a good conscience that once was sensitive to the holiness of God and the conviction of the Spirit can become seared (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 4:2), losing all feeling.

The drift toward worldliness is subtle, gradual, and internal. And if we assume we’re immune to it, that’s a sure sign the drift has begun. The media has great power to influence, but most people—both Christians and unbelievers—presuppose that their worldview, desires, and opinions are safe from media sway. We’re convinced we’re beyond reach. How revealing, then, that advertisers spend \$215 billion annually just on television commercials. These marketing dollars are not charity gifts; our thinking is influenced by what we watch, and advertisers know it.

We also tend to think of ourselves as minimally exposed to media, especially compared to everyone else. In a Roper survey that reveals as much about human nature as it does about media consumption, 96 percent of people polled claimed they watched less television than the average person. You don’t need a sophisticated statistical analysis of that survey to realize a lot of us don’t have a clue about our viewing habits.

**These examples illustrate what the Scripture teaches about our hearts.** They’re sinful, and as a result, we’re prone to self-deception. *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”* (Jeremiah 17:9). We’re more easily tempted than we know or are willing to admit.

## Learning From Job: How to Raise Kids in the Modern World

By Justin Huffman

**Sometimes the best way to learn how to live in our modern age is to travel back several millennia.**

Because there truly is nothing new under the sun. And because the convenience of a church on every

corner and family-friendly legislation is almost a historical anomaly of our recent western culture.

As we face increasing challenges across the globe to Christian ideals, and as it becomes especially difficult to insulate one's family from competing worldviews, it is helpful to ask, "How did saints in the past



deal with these difficulties?”

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the best father figures in Scripture comes from one of the most ancient figures in the Old Testament. Interestingly, he is not often mentioned because of his parenting, although that is precisely what God notes about him even as he is introduced to us in the book that bears his name.

Christian parents, have you considered Job—a God-fearing father? Although over 40 chapters are dedicated to Job’s trials and his handling of them, it is striking—to say the least—that only *one verse* is given to illustrate his godly character, which led up to the trial (and which gave rise to God’s commendation of him, that there was “*none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil*”). That verse is completely concerned with the kind of father that Job was!

*“And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and consecrate them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, ‘It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.’ Thus Job did continually” (Job 1:5).*

Let’s consider this ancient figure Job to learn how we might parent well in our modern world.

## **Job Was Parenting in the Midst of Prosperity**

Job was a busy businessman. This was not some monkish believer who had nothing else to do than spend quiet time with God and raise his kids. The verses preceding our introduction to Job’s parenting give us a look at his family situation, his wallet, and—by extension—his work calendar.

First, we are told that Job had ten children (1:2). Just pause and take that reality in for a minute. We are not talking about a Western



family with 1.5 kids. Job had seven sons and three daughters to protect and provide for.

Then we are also afforded a picture of Job's immense wealth in Job 1:3: *"He possessed 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 female donkeys, and very many servants, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east."* In other words, Job was not just a busy man: he was a wildly successful man of business. He was more like a corner-office CEO, in our day, than a cubical-working supervisor.

"Before every other desire for our children, we should pray that they love, obey, and trust in the sufficient grace of the one true God."

The challenge of raising kids in the midst of work obligations that vie for our attention and affection is not new. In fact, almost none the temptations we face are really new: to root one's identity in one's personal success, to pursue greater wealth at the expense of family, or to be so distracted by putting food on the table that we forget to pray around it. Job, like many today, was parenting in the midst of great personal prosperity.

Yet, Job is commended for the attention he gave his children's spiritual welfare, even as a hardworking and successful businessman. Parents, this is the one great assignment given to us as parents in both the Old and New Testaments. We are to teach our children to know God and to set their hope in Him (Deuteronomy 6:4-12; Psalm 78:5-7; Ephesians 6:4).

Before every other desire for our children, we should pray that they love, obey, and trust in the sufficient grace of the one true God. Every other command, including the duty to provide for one's family, is toward this one great and all-encompassing goal. Yet how easily our at-

tention is drawn away, or our obligation crowded out, by the busyness of seeking success in other places or ways.

Job had all the temptations that luxury, entertainment, and status bring; but he remained focused on his role as a God-fearing parent.

## **Job Communicated His Spiritual Priorities to His Children**

We are not specifically told what worshipful rituals were involved in “consecrating” his children in this pre-law setting. But it is clear that, even before God commanded in Deuteronomy 6 for parents to diligently disciple their children, Job recognized how crucial it was to communicate to his kids their need for God.

Like Joshua who boldly and publicly declared, “*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*” (Joshua 24:15), and like David taught his son Solomon, “*Know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind*” (1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles 28:9) — Job made certain that his family was regularly reminded of their dependence on God.

When was the last time you had a conversation with your son or daughter (or grandchild, or a young man in church) about the greatness of God and their duty to follow and obey Him? Solomon would later write, concerning his father David’s parenting, “*When I was a son with my father...he taught me and said to me, ‘Let your heart hold fast my words; keep my commandments, and live’.*” Could your children say the same of your instruction?

Job’s diligent consecrating of his children reminds us of the wise counsel in J.C. Ryle’s *Thoughts for Young Men*: “Never be ashamed of letting men see that you want to go to heaven.”

## Job Rose Early in the Morning, Making Time for What Mattered Most

As parents, we can find time for hobbies, sports, movies, gaming, social media, gadget shopping, and even napping. Yet when it comes to the spiritual needs of our own heart and the hearts of our children, we often make the excuse that we just don't have the time.

"Perhaps this is why our text emphasizes,  
*"Thus did Job continually."*  
 That's the hardest part of parenting."

This seems to be sadly and especially true of many fathers. I recently read the sad statistic that roughly 80% of those who buy Christian books are women. Men will often study a manual or hunt down a YouTube video in order to trouble-

shoot a car repair, but we can't be troubled to read a book about God?

Christian Parent, your family is your first priority and your first field for evangelism. Notice the connection that is specifically made between reaching your own family and reaching the nations in Joshua 4:22-24: *"Then you shall let your children know...so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever."*

This means Peter's admonition—to always have a ready answer for anyone who asks the reason for your hope—applies first to your own family. Job, we are reminded, *"would rise early in the morning"* in order to take time to prepare himself and to pray for his family.

### Job Prayed for His Children

We are specifically told that, as a parent, Job was mindful of each of his children—he would rise early and make an offering (pray) for each

of his children “according to the number of them all.” Job was busy, but not too busy to care about his kids. Not too busy to remember them each before the Lord regularly.

Job was praying proactively and preventatively. Clearly nothing was inherently sinful with his children’s busy social schedule, but Job saw the danger lurking behind even family fellowship and plentiful dinners, and so prayed for God to protect and forgive his children as needed.

We as parents too often wait until our children are far down the wrong road before waking up to the danger and damage that sin is bringing to them. We ought to be asking, rather, “How can we shepherd our children’s hearts in such a way that they never have to walk down the road of great regrets or sinful sorrow?”

I love David’s preemptive prayer for Solomon in 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles 29:19, “*Grant to Solomon my son a whole heart that he may keep your commandments, your testimonies, and your statutes, performing all.*” It seems Job shared this same concern for his kids.

## **Job Did All This Continually**

It’s easy to force a single conversation with our children about the Lord. Or to farm our kids out to the church to disciple on our behalf. But the difficult thing is to parent diligently—day in and day out—in the ups and downs of life; in the nitty-gritty of hockey practice and homework assignments and hard questions.

Perhaps this is why our text emphasizes, “*Thus did Job continually.*” That’s the hardest part of parenting. This need for faithfulness in the daily grind is built into God’s instruction in Deuteronomy 6, no doubt precisely because we tend to forget. It’s easy to start off well, and be well-meaning; but it is a different thing altogether to continue and finish well. I know this from experience since not long ago I offered to

help my wife with a particular task in raising our four kids, and then found that I had faltered already after only a week!

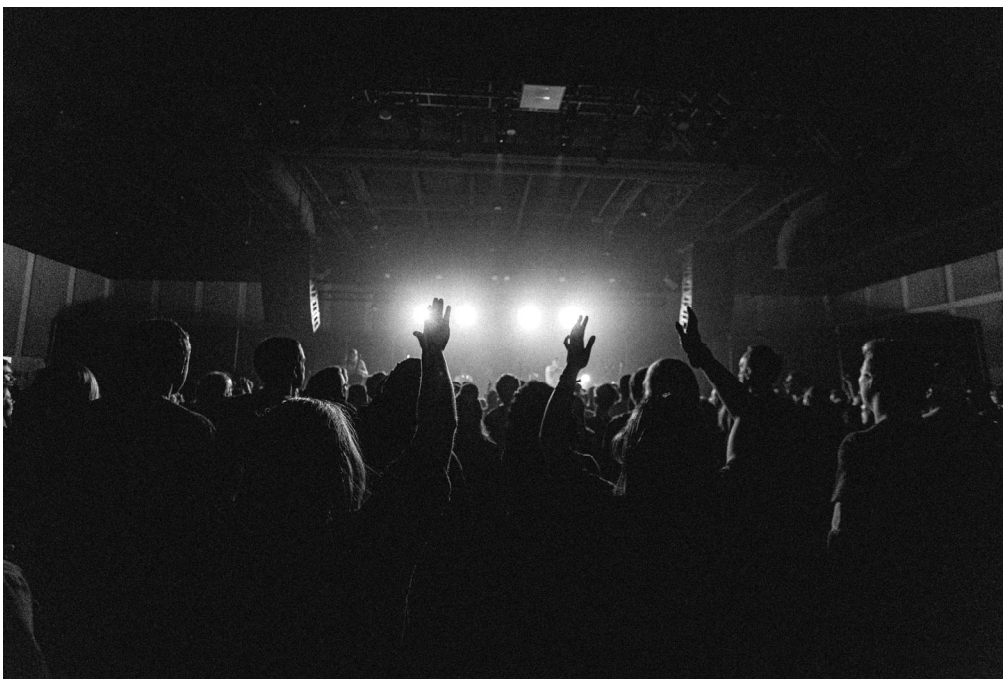
We get distracted or discouraged in this marathon effort. It is easy to give up, or even to completely forget what we're about as parents. But the actual difficulty of diligent parenting should drive us back to God for grace and help continually.

Because, of course, as the rest of the 40 plus chapters of this biblical narrative will remind us, Job himself would face dark days of loss, pain, opposition, and crises of faith. **Above all else, then, Job reminds us all of our need for God in order to press faithfully through to the end.**



# Sing to the Lord: Why Music Matters

By Scott Hurst



**Does music matter?** Imagine the *Lord of the Rings* movies without the score. The epic journey the film captures so well, evaporates without the music. We want people to show up for the entire worship service and not just pop in when the sermon starts. We

want them to sing, even if they are tone-deaf, and not sit watching the band perform. We want their Spotify playlists filled with music that will awaken them to the glory of God. We want all this because music, in God's hand, is powerful. Music matters because God is the great composer, using music to complete His people and display His glory.

## Singing and Salvation

The Israelites sing immediately after God saves them. When the

door of the Red Sea slams in the face of the Egyptian army, the Israelites immediately grab their instruments. *“Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, ‘I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea’”* (Exodus 15:1). They sing because God saves.

Later in Israel’s history, Zephaniah prophesies that once again, God will save his people. In response, he calls Israel to: *“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem!”* A couple of

“The songs we sing in worship services and the songs created by Christian artists help us grow as Christians.”

verses later, Zephaniah says even God will sing. *“The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save, he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing”* (Zephaniah 3:14, 17). Not

only do the people sing because God saves, but God Himself sings. People whistle while they work, God sings while He saves.

I have only met one person who claimed not to enjoy music. Twenty minutes later, he left work wearing headphones enjoying Pink Floyd. From singing in the shower, to movie soundtracks, and to singing with the congregation on the Lord’s Day, the notes of our lives are musical. God made music an important part of life, especially our life in Christ.

## **Music Helps Us Grow in Christ**

Paul connects music to growing in Christ in two places. In Colossians 3:16, he exhorts Christians to: *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts*

to God.” Ephesians 5:18-19 likewise says, *“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.”* Singing is one outcome Christ’s word dwelling in us and being filled by the Spirit. When we sing, we admonish one another to know the will of the Lord (Ephesians 5:17) and put on the character of godliness (Colossians 3:5, 12).

I love hip-hop music from the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. During my early twenties, I listened, almost exclusively, to artists like Mos Def and Wu-Tang Clan. I wrote and produced music then, and tried to capture the sound and style of those artists. At the same time, I went through a crisis of faith. As I tried to capture their sound their music captured my heart, forcing me to take a hard look at my music choices. Paul says in Galatians 6:7, *“Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.”* Songs sow seeds in our minds and our hearts. My music choices had sowed a bad seed and reaped a crisis of faith. Christians can listen to, and enjoy, and even be helped by music that is not explicitly Christian, but remember that what we listen to inevitably shapes us. Music is *not* neutral. Music is formative.

We reap good things from the seed of good music. Robert S. Smith observes that “the words of a song not only enable the communication and reception of the cognitive content of the song, but the singing of them facilitates the expression and evocation of the emotional reality of that content.” Good music helps us know God, feel affection for Him, and rightly express that in worship. Music helps us think about what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, filled with excellence and worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8) and moves our hearts to cherish beauty and goodness.

The songs we sing in worship services and the songs created by Christian artists help us grow as Christians. They also serve as a wit-

ness to the gospel. Music testifies to God's glory. Specifically, it testifies to His glory in uniting diverse people into one body in Christ.

## **Music Testifies to God's Glory**

Creation glorifies God by singing His praise. *"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork"* (Psalm 19:1). The sun rises and sets in a rhythm of joy-filled praise (Psalm 19:5). When some Pharisees rebuke Jesus for allowing people to praise him, he responds that, *"if these were silent, the very stones would cry out"* (Luke 19:40). Even if the crowd closes their mouths, creation rumbles, ready to explode in song, praising His glory.

All creation gladly joins the song, except for sin-filled people. While everyone else sings, we turn and run. We want to play football, not join the choir. Fallen humanity refuses to sing, but Jesus refuses to let us sulk and stay silent. The gospel brings humanity back into the song. Revelation chapters 4-5 open the curtain to the praise in heaven. Kicking-off at the four living creatures around the throne (Revelation 4:8, 5:8-9) heaven's praise cascades over the twenty-four elders (Revelation 4:10-11, 5:8-9), myriads of angels (Revelation 5:11-12) pouring over every creature *"in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them"* (Revelation 5:13). Together they sing, *"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"* (Revelation 5:13). The Lamb who is worthy of glory because He can open the scroll is the Lamb who was slain for the salvation of sinners. Now those saved by the blood of the Lamb unite with all of heaven in a song of praise to God.

Singing is a good, pleasant, and fitting response to receiving the special mercy of Christ (Psalm 147). When Christians sing God's praise, they testify to the gospel of the glory of Jesus Christ who saves (2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4:4).

## **Music Testifies to the Harmony of God's People**

Jesus has accomplished unity between people of diverse ethnicities because “[He] is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14). Yet division and conflict often fall along ethnic lines. The banner of ethnic superiority supported some horrifying crimes in history. Whether Hitler’s campaign to exterminate the Jewish people or the apartheid in South Africa, history gushes with examples of how fierce this hostility can become. The gospel, though, gives believers a powerful voice, because this is the exact hostility Jesus died to destroy. Jesus reconciles us to God and each other. The gospel, therefore, is the only hope for racial harmony and hope is sure because Jesus creates “in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace” (Ephesians 2:15). He kills the hostility and makes peace (Ephesians 2:16). More than merely tolerating other people, in Christ there is harmony where once there was only hostility.

“Gospel-saturated music binds people together in Christ.”

The melody of gospel unity sounds forth from the church’s hymnody. When we sing together, our voices unite in one sound of praise. The Book of Revelation shows one people, from every tribe and nation, in one voice, praising one God, through one Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ (Revelation 7:9-10). In a world composed of division, Christ’s Church sings in harmony. Shai Linne summarizes it well, saying, “There are few things in this world more powerful than a gathering of Christians joyfully and passionately singing God’s praises together, submitting themselves to the truth of God’s Word and reminding themselves that they are united around Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and exalted.”

Gospel-saturated music binds people together in Christ. When we sing with other Christians, a divided world sees the supreme glory of Jesus Christ, who alone tears down the wall of hostility.



## It is Good to Sing

Reading the Psalms, we hear a call to sing almost every page. We don't read Scripture's songbook passively. These calls are when the conductor turns, inviting us to "*sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth*" (Psalm 96:1). Singing expresses and deepens our joy in Christ. "*For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy*" (Psalm 92:4).

**With music from many cultures and spanning many generations, God has blessed us with a rich history and variety of music.** Allen P. Ross says it well, "When we think of the thousands of hymns that have been written, the grand musical compositions, and the variety of sounds and expressions, it is overwhelming. What devotion! What jubilation! There is so much available to make worship glorious, so much to make praise new every morning, if we would just step out of our set patterns and away from our favorite songs from time to time to discover it." Turn on some music, sing with God's people, and enjoy the wonder of worship.

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## Why You Shouldn't Ignore Your Conscience

By J.D. Crowley



**What happens if your finger accidentally touches an extremely hot object, like a stove or a dish that just came out of the oven?** If your nervous system is function-

ing correctly, then you would reflexively pull back your hand to avoid more pain and harm. Your nervous system is a priceless gift from God because it saves you from danger. It's a built-in system that instantly

communicates, "Warning! Pull back!" It's a gift from God.

"When you ignore your conscience, it is more foolish than ignoring the searing pain you feel when you accidentally touch a hot stove."

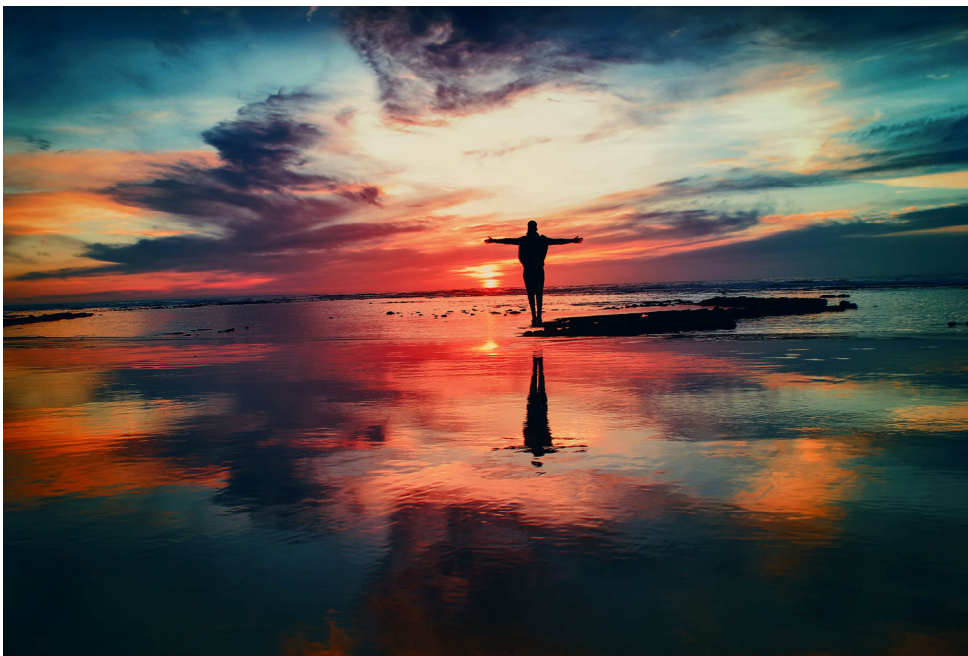
Your conscience can function like a moral version of your nervous system. The guilt that your conscience makes you feel when you sin should lead you to turn from your sin to Jesus. That sense of guilt is for your good. And it is something that God—not your mother or father or anyone else—gave you.

Or here's another example: some vehicles have bumper-mounted sensors that beep when the vehicle is getting close to another object. For example, if you are backing up your car and are about to crash into a wall or another vehicle, your car would warn you by beeping more and more loudly and quickly.

**When you ignore your conscience, it is more foolish than ignoring the beeping from your car's bumper-mounted sensors.** When you ignore your conscience, it is more foolish than ignoring the searing pain you feel when you accidentally touch a hot stove. When you ignore your conscience, you foolishly reject God's priceless gift and thus defy the God who made you.

# A Word is Worth a Thousand Pictures

By Jim Newcomer



**The Creator's visuals convey a valuable message we all need to**

**hear.** But to learn the lessons that matter most, nothing beats His words! Who needs to read the instructions when you can just look at the pictures?

As a kid I often got toys that needed to be assembled. The instructions on the box were big pictures with very few words. I remember well the Ready Ranger backpack, the G.I. Joe Jeep, and a cutting-edge water rocket. Boom...I had these treasures put together in minutes. Life was good.

I miss the simplicity of childhood. Assembling a complex piece of furniture or electronics is a whole new ballgame. Sure, they usually come with some technical diagrams and detailed instructions, but I prefer to look at the pictures on the box. The result is usually hours of



frustration and dark thoughts of just returning the whole thing to Amazon. Even in my late forties, I'm still trusting my own intuition instead of the manufacturer's instructions.

Sometimes I try to approach God the same way. But there are no shortcuts to knowing Him. Pictures are helpful, but instructions are vital.

## General Revelation—Helpful Pictures

God reveals Himself in two ways. Theologians call these *general revelation* and *special revelation*. General revelation does not come as nouns and verbs; it comes to us through the splendor of creation.

“Every book of the Bible gives us crucial information the “pictures” of general revelation do not provide.”

Whether we are looking through a microscope or a telescope, the message is clear—God is real! “*The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork*” (Psalm 19:1). This is happening every moment of every day, and no place on earth or in the cosmos escapes this message (Psalm 19:2-4).

Revelation also exists *inside* people, through their conscience. “*The work of the law [is] written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness*” (Romans 2:15).

## What do These Helpful Pictures Communicate?

*The Creator's Existence* (Psalm 19:1)—He is here and everywhere. He leaves His providential fingerprints on everything, every day.

*The Creator's Glory* (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20)—He is not like us and we are not equal to Him. His attributes, eternal power, and divine nature are exalted above all creation and eternity.

*The Creator's Authority* (Romans 2:14-16)—this Creator will judge human beings against His standard, not theirs.



As helpful as the pictures are, they are insufficient to answer the urgent questions they raise in our hearts—questions like: “How can I be rightly related to this Creator? Can I be free from my guilty conscience? General revelation is very informative, but it does not give us the complete story. We need to read the instructions.

### **Special Revelation—Vital Instructions**

Just as God reveals His glory through creation, He also reveals His will through language. Hebrews 1:1-2, *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”*

In other words, the Old Testament (the words of “the fathers, the prophets”) and the New Testament (“His Son” speaking by His Spirit and through the authors) give us the vital specifics (special revelation) that the pictures (general revelation) can’t provide. They give us specifics about the history of creation, Fall, rescue, and restoration. According to 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3:15-16 the Bible tells us: *how to be saved* (wisdom that leads to salvation); *what to believe* (doctrine); *what is wrong* (reproof); *what must change* (correction); and *how to live* (training in righteousness).

Every book of the Bible gives us crucial information the “pictures” of general revelation do not provide. Take Genesis as an example. It shares the details of creation (Genesis 1); the placing of mankind at the pinnacle of creation and the institution of marriage (Genesis 2); the Fall into sin and the promise of a Savior (Genesis 3); the cause and global extent of the Flood (Genesis 7-9); the beginnings of nations and languages (Genesis 11), and much more. The truths of Genesis lay the foundation for the rest of special revelation. We cannot truly understand our world and why things are as they are without the specifics that the Bible provides.

*No vital detail* is left out of the instructions. Period. When it comes to any necessary spiritual instruction, the Bible—God’s special revelation—is *all we get* and *all we need*. As Peter puts it, *“His divine power*

*has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue” (2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 1:3).*

**So, we can’t just marvel at the helpful pictures of nature; we need to press further into the vital information.** Every day, believers should work their way through the timely truths of Scripture. No shortcuts.

## 12 Principles for Disagreeing with Other Christians

By J.D. Crowley

### Welcome those who disagree with you (Romans 14:1–2).

Concerning any area of disagreement on third-level matters (i.e., disputable issues that shouldn't cause disunity in the church family), a church will have two groups: (1) those who are “weak in faith” (14:1) on that issue and (2) those “who are strong” (15:1). The weak in faith have a weak conscience on that matter, and the strong in faith, a strong conscience.

Don't forget that “faith” here refers *not* to saving faith in Christ



(14:22 makes that clear), but to the confidence a person has in their heart or conscience to do (or abstain from) a particular activity, such as eating meat (14:2). The weak person's conscience lacks sufficient confidence (i.e., faith) to do a particular act without self-judgment, even if that act is actually not a sin. To him it would be a sin.

What this means is that you are responsible to obey both Paul's exhortations to the weak and his exhortations to the strong, since (1) there are usually people on either side of you on any given issue and (2) you yourself likely have a stronger conscience on some issues and a weaker conscience on others. This brings us to Paul's second principle when Christians disagree on scruples.

**Those who have freedom of conscience must not look down on those who don't (Romans 14:3–4).** The strong, who have freedom to do what others cannot do, are tempted to look down on—and even despise—those who are more strict. They may say, “Those people don't understand the freedom we have in Christ. They're not mature like us! They're legalistic. All they think about are rules.” Paul condemns this attitude of superiority.

**Those whose conscience restricts them must not be judgmental toward those who have freedom (Romans 14:3–4).** Those who have a weaker conscience on a particular issue are always tempted to pass judgment on those who are freer. They may say, “How can those people be Christians and do that? Don't they know they're hurting the testimony of Christ? Don't they

know that they are supposed to give up things like that for the sake of the gospel?”

Paul gives two reasons that it's such a serious sin to break these two principles—that is, for the strong to look down on those with a weaker conscience and for the weak to judge those with a stronger conscience:

1. *“God has welcomed him”* (14:3). Do you have the right to reject someone whom God has welcomed? Are you holier than God? If God himself allows His people to hold different opinions on third-level matters, should you force everyone to agree with you?
2. *“Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?”* (14:4). You are not the master of other believers. When you look down on someone with a weaker conscience or judge someone with a stronger conscience, you're acting as though that person is your servant and you are his master. But God is his master. In matters of opinion, you must let God do His work. You just need to welcome your brother or sister. God is a better master than you are.

**Each believer must be fully convinced of their position in their own conscience (Romans 14:5).**

Should Christians celebrate Jewish holy days? This issue, which Paul is addressing here, illustrates the principle that, on disputable matters, you should obey your conscience.



This does not mean that your conscience is always right. It's wise to calibrate your conscience to better fit God's will. But it does mean that you cannot constantly sin against your conscience and be a healthy Christian. You must be fully convinced of your present position on food or drink or special days—or whatever the issue—and then live consistently by that decision until God may lead you by His Word and Spirit to adjust your conscience.

**Assume that others are partaking or refraining for the glory of God (Romans 14:6–9).** Notice how gener-

ous Paul is to both sides. He assumes that both sides are exercising their freedoms or restrictions for the glory of God. Wouldn't it be amazing to be in a church where everyone gave each other the benefit of the doubt on these differences, instead of putting the worst

“Free and strict Christians in a church both have responsibilities toward each other.”

possible spin on everything? Paul says that both the weak and the strong can please the Lord even while holding different views on disputable matters. They have different positions, but the same motivation: to honor God.

**Do not judge each other in these matters because we will all someday stand before the judgment seat of God (Romans 14:10–12).** If we thought more about our own situation before the judgment throne of God, we would be less

likely to pass judgment on fellow Christians. On that day we'll be busy enough answering for our own lives; we don't need to spend our short lives meddling in the lives of others. In these matters, where good Christians disagree, we just need to mind our own conscience and let God be the judge of others.

**Your freedom to eat meat is correct, but don't let your freedom destroy the faith of a weak brother (Romans 14:13–15).**

Free and strict Christians in a church both have responsibilities toward each other. Strict Christians have a responsibility not to impose their conscience on everyone else in the church. It is a serious sin to try to bind someone else's conscience with rules that God does not clearly command.

But the second half of Romans 14 places the bulk of responsibility on Christians with a strong conscience. One obvious reason is that they are strong, so God calls on them to bear with the weaknesses of the weak (Romans 15:1). Not only that, of the two groups, only the strong have a choice in third-level matters like meat (sacrificed to idols), holy days, and wine (alcohol). They can either partake or abstain, whereas the conscience of the strict allows them only one choice. It is a great privilege for the strong to have double the choices of the weak. They must use this gift wisely by considering how their actions affect the sensitive consciences of their brothers and sisters.

**Disagreements about eating and drinking are not important in the kingdom of God; building each other up in righteousness, peace, and joy is the important thing (Romans 14:16–21).** The New Testament clearly and repeatedly lays down the principle that God is completely indifferent to what we ingest. First and most important, the Lord Jesus Himself memorably proclaimed all foods to be legitimate for eating in Mark 7:1-23. Since Peter didn't seem to get the memo, the Lord Jesus had to give him a vision three times to show him that Christians must not make food an issue (Acts 10:9-16). Then in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 8:8, Paul comes right out and says it: *"Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do."* And just in case we still didn't get it, God gave us Romans 14:17, which shows that the kingdom of God has nothing to do with food and drink. Nothing. God doesn't care at all about what we ingest in moderation.

This might seem mistaken. Doesn't God care if we take poison? Not if the purpose is to cure. Every day Christians take poison into their bodies to cure themselves of cancer. But if we take in poison to kill ourselves, that's another matter entirely. In Christianity, why you do things is more important than what you do.

**If you have freedom, don't flaunt it; if you are strict, don't expect others to be strict like you (Romans 14:22).** This truth applies equally to the strong and the weak. To those with a strong conscience you have much freedom in

Christ. But don't flaunt it or show it off in a way that may cause others to sin. Be especially careful to nurture the faith of young people and new Christians.

Those of you with a weak conscience in a particular area also have a responsibility not to "police" others by pressuring them to adopt your strict standards. You should keep these matters between yourself and God.

**A person who lives according to their conscience is blessed (Romans 14:22–23).** God gave us the gift of conscience in order to significantly increase our joy as we obey its warnings. One of the two great principles of conscience is to obey it. Just as God's gift of touch and pain guards us from what would rob us of physical health, conscience continually guards us from the sin that robs our joy.

**We must follow the example of Christ, who put others first (Romans 15:1–6).** This principle doesn't mean that the strong have to agree with the position of the weak. It doesn't even mean that the strong can never again exercise their freedoms. On the other hand, neither does it mean that the strong only put up with or endure or tolerate the weak, like a person who tolerates someone who annoys him. For a Christian, to "bear with" the weaknesses of the weak means that you gladly help the weak by refraining from doing anything that would hurt their faith.

Romans 15:3 emphasizes the example of Christ. We cannot even begin to imagine the freedoms and privileges that belonged to the Son of

God in Heaven. To be God is to be completely free. Yet Christ “*did not please himself*”, but gave up His rights and freedoms to become a servant so that we could be saved from wrath. Compared to what Christ suffered on the cross, to give up a freedom like eating meat of some kind is a trifle indeed.

**We bring glory to God when we welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us (Romans 15:7).** With this sentence, Paul bookends this long section that began with similar words in chapter 14, verse 1: “*Welcome him...*” But here in 15:7, Paul adds a comparison— “*as Christ has welcomed you*”—and a purpose— “*for the glory of God.*” It matters how you treat those who disagree with you on disputable matters. When you welcome them as Christ has welcomed you, you glorify God.



## A Tangled Web: The Science of Lying Agrees with God's Word

By Avery Foley



**“Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive.”**

True to the old saying, one lie becomes two lies, which become four lies, which can quickly spiral into a web of deceit. New research shows that the more we lie, the easier it is to continue lying.

The authors of the study noted that most people feel bad when they intentionally deceive someone, but eventually this feeling goes away. It seems we become desensitized to lying over time. Here's what they discovered: brain scans showed that the first lie was associated with a burst of activity in the amygdalae, areas involved in emotional responses. But this activity lessened as the lies progressed. The effect was so strong that the team could use a

person's amygdala activity while they were lying to predict how big their next lie would be.

## A Seared Conscience

This research is intriguing. It explains the science behind something the Bible has said all along:

*“Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith...speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron” (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 4:1-2).*

These people are described as liars, and their consciences have been “seared”. Sin has a way of doing that. What starts out as seemingly just a little bit of sin can quickly snowball into an avalanche of sins. How does this happen? Well, little by little, with each new sin, the conscience is seared. Sin loses its *seriousness*, and more sins become *acceptable*. Scientists showed that at least part of this response is because our brain's emotional response is lessened each time we lie.

“But science can't explain why lying is wrong in the first place.”

## Where Does Morality Come From?

Science can explain, at least in part, why people tend to be okay with lies after telling a few. But science can't explain why lying is wrong in the first place. Science involves testing, repeating, and observing with our five senses. But morality is immaterial. You can't study it with your senses.

So, how do we know lying is wrong? You have to appeal to an ultimate foundation. But in our secular culture, many people have bought into the idea that man determines morality. Their starting point is man's opinions. But what if my opinion is different from yours? If lying benefits me, why shouldn't I lie? Without appealing to an ultimate authority, you can't tell me lying is wrong. And if you start with man's opinions, you

don't have an ultimate authority.

There is an ultimate authority—it's God and His Word. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), and—as Creator—He has the authority to set the rules. We cannot explain morality apart from the authority of God's Word because morality isn't based on what we think. We know lying is wrong because the Creator says, "*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor*" (Exodus 20:16) and "*do not lie to one another*" (Colossians 3:9). Sadly, we have been disobeying those rules ever since the Garden of Eden. It was there that Adam and Eve ate the fruit against God's command, after being tempted by Satan, the father of lies (Genesis 3; John 8:44). Because of the Fall, we're all born with that sin nature, which includes lying. As Psalm 58:3 says: "*The wicked are estranged from the womb; They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.*" Only Christ, God born as sinless man, is able to defeat sin and its consequence of death, and restore us to fellowship with a holy God.

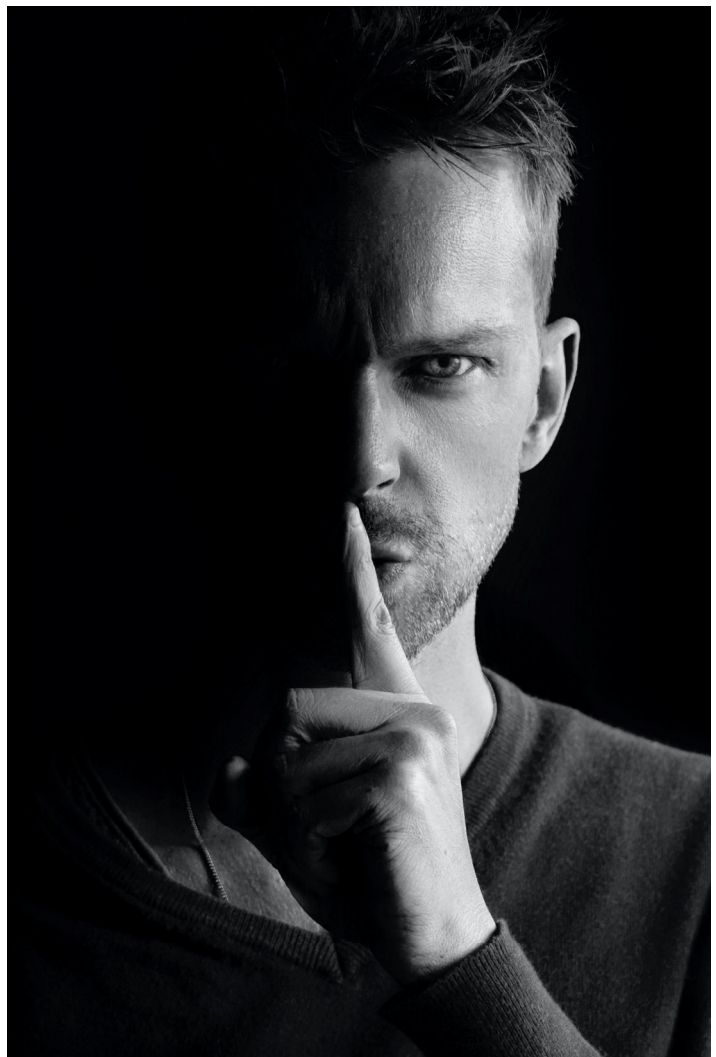
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## How Reliable is Your Conscience?

By J.D. Crowley

**Martin Luther believed that maintaining a good conscience was worth going to prison for and even dying for.** That great Reformer discovered in the Bible that God justifies sinners by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The Roman Catholic Church excommunicated Luther and demanded that he recant his writings, but at Luther's hearing before the Diet of Worms, he refused to go against his conscience, even if it meant death: "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—*my conscience is captive to the Word of God*. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for *to go against conscience is nei-*



*ther right nor safe.* God help me. Amen.”

Luther offers a timeless principle: you should maintain a good conscience, even if it means you’ll suffer prison or death. It’s *that* important. And that’s why it’s so important that you learn how your conscience works and how you may need to adjust it. It would be a shame to go to prison or die because you held a conviction based on a misinformed conscience.

### **Is Your Conscience Perfectly Reliable?**

No one’s conscience perfectly matches God’s will in this life. Nevertheless, we believe that you should generally always follow your conscience. “Generally, always?” Yes, that’s the general rule, so that’s what we should emphasize. God didn’t give you a conscience so that you would disregard it or distrust it. Romans 14:22-23 teaches that a person who lives according to their conscience is “*blessed*”. So, the general principle, especially for Christians who have the Holy Spirit and the holy Scripture, is that you should listen to and obey your conscience. As a general rule, you should assume that your conscience is reliable, even if it isn’t perfect. And since conscience is usually right, the Bible says that we should do what our conscience says until we are convinced from Scripture that it needs adjusting.

But your conscience is not identical to the voice of God. That voice in your head is not necessarily what God would say. So how do you cultivate a conscience that aligns with God’s voice?

### **Calibrating Your Conscience**

You probably know what it means to calibrate an instrument such as a scale or clock or speedometer. After ten years as a one-car family, my wife and I (Andy) recently joined the “swagger wagon” club and bought a minivan. I soon noticed that the van’s speedometer routinely reads about four miles per hour faster than the speed that our GPS indicates. I discovered that the manufacturer intentionally calibrates the speedometer to read three or four miles per hour faster than the actual speed. Even more frustrating, I can’t find a way to recalibrate the speed-



ometer other than buying larger tires. Not even the dealership will touch it. Or let's say you weigh 110 pounds. If you step on a scale and that scale reads 115 pounds, then that scale is off by 5 pounds. Someone needs to calibrate it so it functions accurately.

That's essentially what calibrating is: aligning an instrument with a standard to ensure that it is functioning accurately. Your conscience is a part of you that functions like an instrument, and it doesn't always function accurately. So, you need to calibrate your conscience to align it more closely with the standard of God's Word.

"Conversely, error, human wisdom, and wrong moral influences filling the mind will corrupt or cripple the conscience."

## **The Example of Peter**

Does the Bible include any examples of someone calibrating their conscience? Yes. This is exactly what Peter had to do—rather quickly!—in Acts 10:9-16. God gave Peter a vision of certain kinds of animals that the Old Testament forbade Jews to eat. But in the vision, the Lord Jesus said, "*Kill and eat.*" Peter's weak conscience revolted against this command: "*By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.*" Clearly, Peter's faith in Christ was not weak; he was an apostle who understood and believed the gospel. Thousands had converted under his preaching, and he had even suffered for the gospel. Yet when it came to eating unclean animals and fellowshiping with Gentiles, Peter's faith was still very weak indeed, in the sense that he lacked confidence to do these things. But because Christ Himself was commanding him, he had to calibrate his conscience so that he would have the faith (confidence) to accept food and people that he was previously not able to accept.

## **How Do You Calibrate Your Conscience?**

So how should you calibrate your conscience? We suggest two basic principles:

- **Calibrate your conscience by educating it with truth.** As best you can, try to discern why you hold certain convictions. Is it based on truth, especially the truth God has revealed in Scripture? Here's how John MacArthur puts it in his book, *The Vanishing Conscience*: "The conscience reacts to the convictions of the mind and therefore can be encouraged and sharpened in accordance with God's Word. The wise Christian wants to master biblical truth so that the conscience is completely informed and judges right because it is responding to God's Word. A regular diet of Scripture will strengthen a weak conscience or restrain an overactive one. Conversely, error, human wisdom, and wrong moral influences filling the mind will corrupt or cripple the conscience. In other words, the conscience functions like a skylight, not a light bulb. It lets light into the soul; it does not produce its own. Its effectiveness is determined by the amount of pure light we expose it to, and by how clean we keep it. Cover it or put it in total darkness and it ceases to function. That's why the apostle Paul spoke of the importance of a clear conscience (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 3:9) and warned against anything that would defile or muddy the conscience (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 8:7; Titus 1:15)."
- **Calibrate your conscience with due process.** This is a wisdom issue. Sometimes it will take a lot of time to work through a particular matter. The example of Peter in Acts 10 is unusual because God directly commanded him to do something that his conscience previously prohibited him from doing. As a mature Christian, Peter was able to calibrate his conscience on the fly. But sometimes it can take us years to calibrate our conscience on a particular issue. And Peter's failure many years later to eat with the Gentiles in Antioch when under pressure reminds us that sometimes recalibration is necessary (Galatians 2:11-14).

**This education is not something you do in a vacuum or all alone.** God has put you into a community and given you various relationships of accountability, especially your family (if you're young) and your church. Godly church leaders will help you discern the difference between issues of right and wrong and issues of preference or scruple.

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## To Vax or Not to Vax? The Place of Conscience in the Christian Life

By Parker Reardon



**The Apostle Paul reminds the saints at Ephesus that they are at**

**war.** And not only at war, but a spiritual one; such that even as we conduct life physically in this body, we engage in this battle which is spiritual.

And not only are we in a spiritual battle, we're expected to stand firm, no matter how evil the day and no matter how complicated the issue of life are. We stand by clothing ourselves for spiritual battle in the armor of God, armed with the Spirit of God and the Word of God (Ephesians 6:10-17).

There is really no question that we are at war. All you have to do is listen to the interaction between two parties that are on opposite sides

of whether to vaccinate or not. Often there is no irenic tone and the conversations are often seriously lacking in charity. Not to mention that there appears to be more emphasis on fear rather than faith. *Brethren, these things ought not to be so!*

In this battle of beliefs, we must remember the issue of *conscience* and Christian liberty. When we at Grace Bible Church (where I pastor) opened up our church building last summer, after the COVID-crackdown, having been told we were on the cusp of a pandemic (in which millions were supposedly going to die), we engaged in a brief study on conscience and Christian Liberty.

We look to the Bible, which clarifies and simplifies issues of life by dividing many actions into clear moral categories of either sin or righteousness. The Bible is the standard for establishing what, according to God, transgresses His Law. But what about issues that are neither sin nor righteousness; actions that true believers can engage or not engage in and still be right with God? For example, one family might engage in homeschooling with conviction, while another may choose to utilize public school or a private Christian school. If the Bible does not give examples or clear commands of prohibition that something is sin, believers can proceed in faith and obedience, to the glory of God. So, all of the families in the previous examples, are able to maintain fellowship with the Lord, while not castigating the others if they do not violate their conscience and proceed in faith, as they seek to honor and glorify God.

“Even though some believers thought that receiving the inoculation was a way to obey the 6th commandment, others were not persuaded...”

“So, if he is going to engage in something, he’d better be able to give the Lord thanks for it, ‘eating or drinking’ in faith, and engaging in such for the glory of God” (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 4:4). Recall Paul’s instructions on clean



and unclean food, that what is right for one person may not be right for another, as they have developed biblical convictions, yet landed on the other side of the fence, so to speak (c.f. Romans 14).

However, we not only have a clash of differing convictions in the Body of Christ, with the ongoing forced masking and vaccinating, we also have a clash of worldviews. How so, you might ask? Christians are part of a faith community that recognizes God as our Savior, Lord, and King. God has made man in His image. He's a rational creature that is held responsible to exercise repentant faith in Christ, as revealed in Scripture, and then live all of life under His Lordship, obeying the Holy Scriptures which reveal who He is and what He expects of us.

There are clear apostolic commands and examples that every Christian is to abide by. Yet, on issues that the Scriptures do not make a matter of sin and righteousness, we are to inform our conscience with biblical principles, research, seeking godly counsel, pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance, and make decisions of action that we believe glorify the Lord. It is at this point that believers could vary a bit from each other, as to whether they should or should not engage. Founders Ministries posted a very helpful and encouraging article that shows how Christians have, at times, differed from each other on vaccines and they use a historical case in point from three hundred years ago with the Small-pox inoculation.

Even though some believers thought that receiving the inoculation was a way to obey the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment, others were not persuaded and built their case based upon the doctrine of the liberty of conscience.

John Newton was a stellar example, who did not advocate for or against the inoculation, but warned both sides to be thoroughly convinced, receiving or not receiving it based on faith. Because, in the words of the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther, to go against conscience is neither right nor safe! Trust the Lord with whatever action you choose to take.

As Christians, we are bound to Scripture. We're responsible to study it and develop convictions that become safety rails in life to gauge what we do. While the Bible does not instruct whether one should receive the vaccine or not, it is perfectly clear in its teaching on the liberty of conscience.

This doctrine comes from God, not from man. In recent months we have 'Caesar' not staying in his own lane, and essentially requesting believers to violate their convictions and conscience, if they stand against violating their bodies with a foreign matter. Such practice is far different from the religious liberty with which our country was founded. Further, our country used to recognize that this liberty of conscience was granted by God, not the State! Choice rests on the individual, not the government. We are bound to follow our conscience, even if it goes against government mandates.

Some are seeking exemption from mandated vaccinations based on the 1<sup>st</sup> amendment, requesting religious exemption. While others have been equally appealing to the 5<sup>th</sup> amendment, seeking due process, or the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment requesting the right to equal protection.



But since these are 'pastoral reflections', where my only authority is Scripture, I return there, as I've already stated in regards to the doctrine of the liberty of conscience and the component of proceeding based on faith that this is what God would have me to do.

Further, a biblical anthropology informs us that the human body is

created by God (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:7). We are stewards of our bodies, which are a temple of the Holy Spirit (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6:19-20). So, God bought believers and they are to gratefully use their body for His glory, tending and caring for it. This body, which is fearfully and wonderfully made, was created with a natural immune system and an innate ability to heal itself when given what it needs. And even though experience does not trump the objective truth of the Bible, it was my experience

several years ago when I almost died, but overhauled my eating protocol and ate my way out of pain and the systemic issues dissipated.

“Have you counted the cost, that you are willing to walk off the job if it requires you to violate your conscience?”

If, after studying and listening to the many virologists and immunologists who attests to the dangers of the vaccines, you determine that injecting such a substance would cause damage to your body that God has made you a steward of, then you are conscience-

bound to obey God over man.

A biblical anthropology also affirms the sanctity of human life (c.f. Psalm 139, etc.) that begins at the moment of conception. Since fetal tissue has been used, that ought to activate the conscience of believers who affirm man’s dignity. Even though the state has cheapened human life by legalizing murder in the womb, believers treasure life as a gift from God.

Have you counted the cost, that you are willing to walk off the job if it requires you to violate your conscience? Whether you choose to receive the vaccine or reject it, are you compelled by your faith to do so? As you make an informed decision, have you followed the available science? Even in the presidential press conference (September 9, 2021) Biden repeated again (as he sought to shame those of us who are not imbibing the current narrative of the global pandemic in which “millions

are going to die”) that we need to just ‘follow the science.’

You are responsible before God to determine which science you listen to, as the evidence is all over the map. Perhaps you would be willing to carve out just one hour to watch this video presentation: <https://rumble.com/vitcgn-following-the-science.html> on the so-called ‘science.’ This includes some deceptive reporting that many of us have become privy to. There are reports that the vaccine is only, at best, 39% effective. Those results have even been reported in Forbes Magazine, which is no bastion of conservatism (July 23, 2021 edition). Further, with a survivability rate of over 99%, is the vaccine worth the risk, of the untold side-effects that even includes death for some?

I’m grateful for my fellow biblical counselor, Rick Thomas, who recently called us to consider the science, count the cost, and calls us to action (<https://www.biblicalexpositor.org/edit#/file/91bc0a10-0dc9-11ec-9ec2-1b04bfa72be0>).

You can probably tell I am a bit biased personally. I’ll admit that. Personally, I am against being bullied into receiving a vaccine that I am convinced will do damage to my body, even though our president stated how “frustrated” he is with the 80 million Americans who still have not complied. Far greater than my opinion, is the desire for Christians to recognize their responsibility to pray, study, and seek the Lord’s guidance for themselves. And after making your convictional choice, please don’t force others to comply with your view.

**Are you receiving your information through a Christian and biblical worldview?** Because there’s a spiritual component to our healthcare decision. Remember, Paul warned us of the spiritual component to this war (Ephesians 6). All that we engage in, within the Church’s Kingdom agenda, must be for the glory of God (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10:31). It must proceed from faith (Romans 14:23).

There's a clear divide between the kingdom of the Gentiles (that mandates and bullies people into compliance as they lord their authority over others) and the Kingdom of God, that is populated by Christ-centered servants, who make it their aim to serve Christ and His people (Mark 10:35-45). Let's not allow issues of conscience (vaccines or otherwise) to be so polarizing, so that we might be winsome ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. **Soli Deo Gloria!**





## Recommended Reading on Christian Liberty and Christian Conscience

In this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, we've been considering the subject of Christian liberty and Christian conscience. We understand that we haven't covered everything on this topic, but it is our prayer that, hopefully, readers of this issue of *Theology for Life* will grow in their understanding of it so they can stand fast on the Word of God.

If you've found this issue helpful and would like to study this subject further, please check out the following reading list below. These pieces are at the top of their genre in both excellence and readability.

### **Book:**

*Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ*  
by Andy Naselli and J.D. Crowley.

### **Article:**

*The Christian Conscience* an interview with Dr. Joel Beeke conducted by Tim Challies: <https://www.challies.com/reading-classics-together/the-christian-conscience/>

I hope you'll find these resources helpful as I have.

In Christ Alone,

Dave Jenkins  
Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine*

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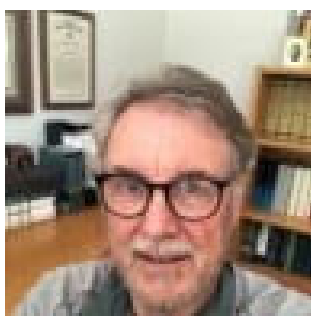


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