

Adult Evening Gathering: Christian Liberty in Daily Life
Foundations & Definitions
22 February 2004
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*(Note: These notes are a lightly edited version of the notes that I used in teaching the class. The form is based on the style used by Winston Churchill for his speech notes.
The HTML version doesn't show indentation but the PDF does.
Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from
The New King James Version,
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[SLIDE 1: title slide]

Back in the winter of 1996-97,
Greg Matson and I
led a 13 week Sunday School class
on the topic of Christian Liberty.

Because the topic is so important,
and so frequently misunderstood,
and because several people have expressed
a strong interest in the subject recently,
it seemed like a good idea
to spend a few evenings
talking about Christian Liberty again.

Outside the conservative, Christian church,
people deny the truth that
there is only one way to God.

Sadly, too often within the conservative Christian church,
we try to turn
"There is only one way"
into a generic schema
that applies to every area of life.

Thus,
you will hear well-meaning, sincere people say,
perhaps not explicitly,
but certainly implicitly,
that

There is only one way to educate children.

Or

There is only one way to find a spouse.

Or

There is only one way to sing in worship.

Or

There is only one way to do
a host of other things,
things that God Himself
has not said
are restricted to only one way.

One of the reasons we do this
is that we don't really understand
Christian Liberty.

I hope that God will be pleased
to help us all gain a better understanding
of the subject as we discuss it
for 4 weeks.

Our concentration
will be,
as the title on the slide says,
on Christian Liberty in Daily Life.

In the Sunday School class
we spent a lot of time
carefully developing in detail the theology
of Christian Liberty.

I'm not going to do that in these sessions —
we'll do only what is necessary
to enable our concentration
on particular practical aspects
of Christian Liberty.

The slides that I'll use each week,
along with a sanitized version of my notes
will be available on the web
at the URL you see here.

Also,
if you have questions or comments during the week,
please e-mail them to me at this address:
liberty at logicteacher dot com.

If you have any questions while I'm talking,
please raise your hand.
My intent is that these sessions
will be fairly interactive —
to encourage this,
I'll have some questions for you all
from time to time.

[SLIDE 2: Questions We'll Try to Answer]

Here are the five questions
that I hope we'll be able to answer
before we finish up the series.

What is the definition and purpose of Christian Liberty?

How do I recognize whether something is a liberty issue?

How do I decide what to do for a given liberty issue?

What do I do when others disagree with me about liberty issues?

And,

Does respect for liberty negate the pursuit of wisdom?

Are there any questions
that are not on this list
that you'd like to be on the list?

[SLIDE 3: Biblical Basis for the Answers]

Let's talk briefly now about the Biblical basis
upon which answers to these questions
is developed.

What are some of the main
Scripture passages that address
Christian liberty?

[SLIDE 3a: Biblical Basis ... Verses]

Here are the main passages: Romans 14,
1 Corinthians 8 & 10,
Galatians 5, and
Colossians 2

[SLIDE 4: Biblical Basis ... with WCF]

Some of the basic teaching of these passages
is summarized in
Chapter 20
of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

We're not going to take the time tonight
to read these passages,
although I'll quote from some them shortly,
but I strongly encourage you
to read them during the week,
as all that we'll be talking about
is rooted in the truths
from these and related passages.

I encourage you to read these passages
multiple times on your own this week.

That's the foundation.

Let's move on to give an answer
to the first question I mentioned earlier:
What is the definition and purpose
of Christian Liberty.

[SLIDE 5: Definition ... Liberty]

We'll start
where all definitions of English words
should start,
with the Oxford English Dictionary.

Please note,
when I say, "should",
I'm only expressing a preference,
not a moral imperative —
it is not a sin
to use some other dictionary.

It's quite silly,
but not a sin.

The OED entry relevant to us is this one:

*The condition
of being able to act
in any desired way
without hindrance or restraint;
faculty or power to do as one likes.*

This provides an excellent
basis from which to construct
a good definition for
Christian liberty.

All we need to do is add some words,
specifically,
we can add
one
three-word phrase
in two places,
and
a single word in another place,
and we'll have a it.

Anyone want to take a shot at it.

Well, the three word phrase is "to glorify God"
and the single word is "biblical,"
giving this:

[SLIDE 6: Definitions ... Christian Liberty]

Christian Liberty is

*The condition
of being able to act
in any desired way
to glorify God
without
biblical
hindrance or restraint;
faculty or power to do as one likes
to glorify God.*

Some of you might think this definition
is a bit strange right now,
but before I take any questions,
let me explain a bit further.

Let's look at the
biblical hindrances and restraints
on Christian liberty.

[SLIDE 7: Biblical Restraints on Liberty]

First,
we do not have Christian liberty —
that is,
we do not have the faculty or power
to do as we like
to glorify God —
to ignore the positive commands in Scripture,
commands such as
Love your neighbor as yourself,
worship the Lord,
or (for children) obey your parents,
or any of the other things
that God commands us to do.

When we ignore these commands,
we do not glorify God.

We also do not have Christian liberty to
disobey the negative commands in Scripture.
We cannot glorify God,
even if we want to try,
by stealing,
coveting,
committing adultery,
or doing any of the other
things that God forbids
us to do.

In all these things,
our acceptable —
that is, God glorifying —
choices are restrained.

This is not true about everything, however.

[SLIDE 8: Christian Liberty Issues]

When God has
neither forbidden
nor required
particular behavior,
then Christian liberty applies.

That is,
so long as we operate
within the bounds established by Scripture,
we are able to glorify God
by doing what we want to do.

We'll call any issue
to which Christian liberty applies
a Christian liberty issue.

That is,
something is a liberty issue
whenever God,
through the Scripture,
does not reduce to one
the number of God-glorifying choices
available to His people.

Before I take any questions,
let's consider an illustration,
which I hope will make this clear,
if it isn't already.

The illustration is
choosing an occupation.

[SLIDE 9: Occupations]

To keep this relatively simple,
I've reduced the universe of occupations
to these 17.

Given these 17 possible occupations,
are there any that the Scripture
forbids someone from considering?

[SLIDE 10 Occupations – X on hit man, prostitute:]

Yes, there are two:
hit man & prostitute.

It is not possible to obey the Scripture
and be in either of these two occupations.

However, for the other 15 occupations,
it is possible to be in them
and obey the Scripture.

So then,
choosing an occupation
is a Christian Liberty issue,
and the boundaries of liberty
are as shown here:

[SLIDE 11: Occupations with blue bounds]

Does this make sense to everyone?
Are there any questions about this example?

(continued example with specific person with certain characteristics)

[SLIDE 12: Specific Example, bad at math...]

[SLIDE 13: Specific Example, ... faints at sight of blood ...]

[SLIDE 14: Specific Example, ... poor speaker.]

OK,
so let's return to our definition.

[SLIDE 15: Christian Liberty Definition]

Does everyone understand the definition now?

If you recall the question I listed at the beginning,
we were interested in not only a definition
for Christian Liberty,
but also in its purpose.

What is the purpose of Christian Liberty?

Yes, the purpose of Christian liberty
is to glorify God,
as 1 Corinthians 10:31 says,
near the end of a fairly lengthy
discussion of liberty issues,
"therefore, whether you eat or drink,
or whatever you do,
do all to the glory of God."

[SLIDE 16: Convenient Labels]

To make some of our future discussion simpler,
I find it convenient to use these 3 labels.

We'll use the label
Libertarian
to refer to someone who has

a correct understanding of the Biblical teaching
on Christian liberty.

Please don't confuse my use of the term here
with the political party of the same name.

I'll use

Libertine

to refer to someone who
seeks to remove Biblical restrictions
on Christian liberty.

Finally,

Legalist

will refer to someone who
seeks to place non-Biblical restrictions
on Christian liberty.

In the spirit of Goldilocks,
we might say that
for the libertine, the Bible is too long
(We must get rid of some of these restrictions).

For the legalist, the Bible is too short
(We need to add some restrictions of our own).

Whereas for the libertarian,
the Bible is just right.
God knows better than we do what
restrictions ought to be there.

[SLIDE 17: Labels with Bubble]

It is important to keep in mind
that these labels are issue specific.

One might be a legalist about dress
(God really meant to specify a minimum hem length,
but the just forgot);

a libertine about worship
(What's wrong with women preachers?);

and
a libertarian about alcohol
(Drinking it is OK, but getting drunk is not).

If we're honest with ourselves,
we'll probably all realize
that there's some of all three of these
in all of us,
although
we're blind to our own
legalistic and libertine tendencies.

[SLIDE 18: Questions Revisited]

I'll close by returning to the list of questions
I gave at the beginning.

Tonight we've answered the first question.

Next week,
we'll concentrate on answering
the second and third
questions.