

Guidelines and Directions Regarding the Exercise of Christian Liberty Within the Local Church

Introduction

It is very good for Christians to gather together and fellowship with one another. However, often as we pursue fellowship with one another practical issues arise regarding the different condition of the consciences of very sincere brothers and sisters. When we gather over a meal, go to a ball game, have a New Year's Eve gathering, play games together, pursue forms of recreation and entertainment together we discover that our brothers and sisters do things that we would not and we also discover they will not do things that we would. Why is this? God has not given us a Talmud that defines what we should do in regard to every detail of our lives. No, we are given the Word of God *and our consciences* as the means of regulating our behavior in all the various details of our lives. "I would never spend that much on a meal because...." "I would never go to a sporting event because...." "I would never play that computer game because..." "I would never drink a glass of wine because...." "I would never buy that product because...." The "because...." of our expressions shows that our consciences are endeavoring to apply what we know of the explicit commands and principles from scripture to the many details of our lives that scripture does not directly address. *This is a good endeavor* reflecting the Christian's awareness that Jesus Christ is Lord of every area of our lives. We have been bought with a price and knowing this leads to a desire to please and obey Him in all things for we are not our own. Since God has left many of these details to each individual a diversity of behavior amongst His people very naturally arises. This diversity is good and the New Testament actually anticipates and addresses this matter.

Background

This paper is intended to provide biblical direction regarding situations which occur, often occasioned by fellowship, within a local church when the members of the church are beginning to function with a diversity of conscience regarding matters that the word of God has relegated to the conscience of each individual. In these situations church leaders have often stepped in and ruled on such matters and then endeavored to enforce a uniformity of practice upon all members of the congregation. This is not the direction that the leaders of SGBC believe to be correct or the direction which promotes individual and corporate Christian maturity. However, when Christian liberty is defended *the proper exercise of such liberty must also be understood and upheld*. This paper examines a number of biblical mandates that regulate the proper exercise of Christian liberty within the life of the local church. The discussion which follows is based upon the following five statements which summarize the doctrine of Christian liberty. This paper is not intended to defend these statements but assumes them to be an accurate distillation of the teaching of scripture.¹ The discussion which follows is based upon these statements:

1. The doctrine of Christian liberty is based upon the doctrines of Sola Scriptura and Tota Scriptura, that is, that *only* God's Word can rightfully bind a Christian's conscience² and that *all* of God's word is to bind a Christian's conscience. Thus, *only* those behaviors that the Scriptures

1. Rom. 14:1-15:8, 1 Cor. 8:1-13, 9:19-23, 10:23-33. For a detailed treatment of this subject consult the series of messages given by Dan Caffese on "Conscience" available from the SGBC tape library.

declare to be sinful are sinful and *all* human behaviors that the Scriptures declare to be sinful are sinful. These principles, applied to the subject of Christian liberty lead to the following conclusion: If the scripture does not declare a behavior to be sinful, then the behavior is good and may be engaged in providing one does not violate one's own conscience, as described in statement three below.

2. All Christians are bound to obey *both* the revealed commands of God in scripture *and* their individual consciences. For the individual there are no "gray" areas.³ If the individual is uncertain whether a behavior is right or wrong, then for that individual the behavior is sinful (Rom. 14:14b, 23) and must not be practiced.
3. For a stronger brother to cause a weaker brother to stumble is for the stronger brother to behave in a way which encourages the weaker to practice a behavior that he has some doubt as to the rightness of the behavior in the sight of God. The weaker brother's doubts may be temporarily set aside because of the stronger brother's influence (by example or word). Under this influence the weaker brother engages in the doubtful (to him) behavior. However, when the weaker brother is outside of the influence of the stronger the original doubts return and the weaker brother's conscience is defiled - "maybe I should not have.....". In more serious cases the weaker brother's doubts were never even temporarily absent, but under the influence of the stronger brother, he engages in the behavior.⁴
4. It is the responsibility of the stronger brother to avoid all occasions of causing the weaker brother to stumble.
5. It is the responsibility of the weaker brother not to condemn the stronger brother for behavior that the scriptures do not clearly condemn. He is not to judge the stronger brother (see footnote 4).

Commands that Regulate the Use of Our Christian Liberty⁵

Putting the above five principles into practice within a local church requires caution *and* the observance of *two* categories of commands. 1) Those directly related to the right use of our liberty and 2) those requiring of us a mutual love and respect for one another within the church body. The

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2. To bind the conscience of an individual means to create in that individual a *sense of obligation to God* to either refrain from a behavior (i.e. obey a "you shall not..." command) or to perform a specified duty (i.e. a "you shall do..." command).
 3. Often matters which scripture does not directly address but which Christians have disagreed over have been called "gray areas", i.e. not black or white. Sometimes the concept of a gray area is used to represent the uncertain state of mind of the believer himself as regards the rightness or wrongness of a particular behavior. However, according to Rom. 14:14b, 23 in all cases of an individual's consideration of *his own behavior* any "gray area" has to become black to him. Thus as we consider *our own behavior* before the Word of God and our own consciences there are no gray areas. However, when I look at my brother's life I should allow "gray", i.e. *his* conscience determines whether it is black or white for him, *not mine*.
 4. A very common but incorrect understanding of the weaker brother's stumbling is the weaker brother's displeasure with the stronger brother's behavior. The displeasure of the weaker brother, often incorrectly referred to as stumbling, is actually the behavior Paul calls "judging" in Rom. 14:4,10 and the weaker brother is to be reprovved for such behavior.
 5. This paper predominantly addresses the class of individuals referred to as "strong" in Romans 14. It is not intended to be a balanced treatment of all commands (i.e. those addressed to the "weak") relating to this subject.

second category of commands are general in nature and should influence our carrying out of the specific commands which address the use of our liberty. The commands in the first category are:

- Commands to not cause our brother to stumble (Rom. 14:15, 16, 20, 21, 1 Cor. 8:12-13).
- “Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.” (Rom. 14:19)
- “Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God.” (Rom. 14:22)
- “Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.” (Rom. 14:1-2)
- “We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification.” (Rom. 15:1-2)
- “Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil;” (Rom. 14:16)

Some of the significant commands in the second category are:

- “walk worthy... with all lowliness and gentleness, with long suffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Eph. 4:1-3)
- “but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interest of others.” (Philp. 2:2-4)
- “Pursue peace with all people” (Heb. 12:14)
- “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” (Rom. 12:18)
- The broad implications of every Christian’s prayer, “and do not lead us into temptation,” (Matt. 6:13)
- “Love does no harm to a neighbor;” (Rom. 13:10)
- “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law...” (1 Cor. 9:19-23)

The bearing of these commands upon fellowship activities is discussed further below.

Distinguishing Spheres of Authority Within the Local Church

In determining how to apply the various commands that regulate the use of our liberty it is important to distinguish between two spheres of authority and responsibility within the local church. The authority of the elders over the entire church body and the authority of each individual household. Within each individual household it is the responsibility of the head of the household to ensure that his/her household, as it engages in fellowship with other households, fulfills the commands listed above. Within the church, considered as the flock, over which God has placed the elders as under shepherds, it is their responsibility to ensure that when the church (i.e. flock, not household) engages in fellowship activities that the commands listed above are honored. How can this distinction be worked out in practice? For events which are “all church”⁶ (i.e. flock) events, it is the responsibility of the elders to ensure that the activities engaged in during such events honor the commands listed above. For individual households engaging in fellowship

6. “All church” can mean everyone in the church within a certain class, i.e. all the teens, all men, all women, etc.

or social activities with other households it is the responsibility of heads of households to honor the commands. The distinction between a “church event” and a “household event” must be clearly understood. What makes an event a “church” event *is not* where the event is held (i.e. church facility, city park, or private home) but who is encouraged to attend and that the church leadership has encouraged the flock to participate.⁷

Typically any event published in the church bulletin and one for which all members (or all members in a given class) are encouraged to participate is a church event. These events are under the authority of the elders, they are usually verbally announced and promoted by an elder, and the flock is indiscriminately encouraged by the elders to participate in them. A household event is one where two or more households join together to share in some activity. Invitations to these events are usually extended personally between households. An overlapping of lines of authority may occur when an all church event is being held in a private home. In these cases it is important that the host/hostess understand how the elders are applying the commands listed above to this particular event. Once this is understood it is the prerogative of the host/hostess to host the event or not.

Honoring Commands that Directly Regulate the Use of Our Liberty

For church or household events the commands listed above need to be conscientiously and prayerfully put into practice. This means time should be spent by those responsible to think through how each command relates to the fellowship event that I am considering being responsible for.

The carrying out of the commands to not cause our brothers to stumble (as defined in statement #3 above) is the responsibility of every member and particularly those in leadership roles (i.e. of households engaged in events and elders leading the flock). Since we are not to “cause our brother to stumble” we must avoid “experimentation” to determine what will or will not cause one to stumble. This means that we must, by some means prior to exposing our brother to a potential stumbling causing situation, have determined that what we are planning to do is not a problem. It is not “walking in love” to surprise a brother or sister in a situation and expect that in the midst of an event already in progress these delicate matters can be dealt with. If I am not certain whether I will or will not cause my brother to stumble, then I must proceed as if I will and I must bear the scruples of the weak, and not please myself (Rom. 15:1, 1 Cor. 8:13). However, must I say absolutely nothing to a potential weaker brother, lest he discover that I use a liberty that he doesn’t, and this discovery may cause him to stumble? We at times, especially those in positions of influence, may choose this course based upon other commands and examples. However, from Romans 14 it is obvious that when Paul wrote his letter to the Roman church he did not attempt to ensure that no weaker brothers would discover that he ate meat. This last statement needs to be balanced with 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. What can and should be done is to have gotten to know the other brother and it is not wrong to discuss the situation in a “non influence” manner well in advance to exposing the brother to a potentially stumbling causing example or influence. The more authority or stature one has the more difficult the situation can become, especially with young people - “If elder John does this it must be just fine. I’ll do it also.”

The practical outworking of the above requires that we have a fairly detailed and accurate knowledge of our brothers and sisters as regards the “meats, days, and vegetables” of our reli-

7. The definition of “church” being used here is the flock, the people. Not a building or set of facilities. However the elders are in authority over facilities use. What may or may not be done with church facilities by households for household events is under the authority of the elders.

gious culture. For “household” events this is more easily obtainable because we normally know who we have invited and who will attend. Prior to making the invitation or as part of the invitation process we can discuss the situation with them. However, for church events it is much more difficult since the elders are indiscriminately inviting everybody, including new folks and sometimes visitors. Thus it is unlikely that Paul would have scheduled an all church meal with the church of Rome and served meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

The commands to “receive one who is weak in the faith” and to “bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves,” and “let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification” are not theoretical exhortations that never need to be practiced. True, many churches may never practice them because the leaders have “solved” these problems by insisting on a set of standards that go beyond scripture and forcing an unbiblical uniformity upon the flock. We need to do better. Once the diversity arises as a result of applying statement #1 above, the practice of these commands must come into conscious exercise. The “strong” need to ask, am I practicing these commands? Have I borne with much? Have I given up things that please me? If the answer to all these questions is no, or very little, then I need to consider if these commands are regulating my use of my liberty as our Lord and love would dictate.

Paul questions the strong in verse 22, “Do you have faith?”⁸ He expects a “yes” answer. He then follows with a reproof of the “strong” who have misused their liberty, “Have it (your faith) to yourself before God.” Since this question directly follows the exhortation, “it is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles,” the, “having one’s faith to themselves” must be a means of fulfilling the intent of verse 21. This means the strong are not to display (flaunt) their liberty in front of their weaker brothers and sisters. This requires forethought. Do I know how my actions may affect my brothers? Am I in a situation where I should enjoy this “faith” simply “before God”, but not in the face of my brothers and sisters? Surely if we are not carefully thinking these situations through ahead of time we have cause to reconsider if we have fulfilled the spirit of these commands. It seems that if every person in the church of Rome knew that the “strong” enjoyed eating meat or eating meat sacrificed to idols then the strong would have failed to observe this command.

With regard to the admonition, “Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another,” (vs. 19), there is much discussion as to whether Paul is addressing both the weak and strong, or the strong only. There can be no doubt that he is addressing the strong as they are the main addressees in verses 15-23. It is important to notice from the commands contained in verse 19, including the command to edify one another, that the “strong” have not fulfilled the intent of this passage if they have only refrained from making their brothers stumble. It is possible for me to use my liberty in a way that does not make my brother stumble, but yet be void of *pursuing* things which will make for peace with my weaker brother and actually promote his edification. The question that the text encourages us to ask of ourselves is, has the use of my liberty caused discord? And if we must answer yes to this question we must then carefully face another; have I pursued the peace and edification that I’m called to pursue? If this text addresses the weak and the strong, then they too (the weak) are responsible to pursue peace in regard to these matters. But neither can blame the absence of peace on the other, since in this case, *both* are required to pursue it - and certainly it is in the power of the strong to obtain it, not by giving over all use of liberty, but by a proper use of it. Perhaps the peace may be attained

8. Faith here means confidence that I may do the things listed in verse 21 without doubting that my behavior is pleasing to God.

by a more thorough application of the command in vs. 22 and by dropping any “evangelistic missions” to renew my weaker brother’s conscience.

The command given in verse 16 is perhaps the most difficult to fully understand. The difficulty centers around the definition of “your good” and who it is that may speak evil of “your good”.⁹ The two most plausible meanings of “your good” are your Christian liberty, which is a good thing received from God, or the gospel and all of God’s gifts. One thing that is certain is that the “strong” may use their liberty in a way which causes others (whether “weak” believers or unbelievers) to describe either their behavior, their doctrine of liberty, or the gospel as evil.¹⁰ If our use of our God given liberty has become an occasion for the doctrine of liberty to be spoken of as evil it should cause us to adjust our practices. The responsibility to prevent the “evil speaking” referred to in verse 16 is placed upon the shoulders of the “strong”, not the “weak”. True, the weaker brother is not to judge but it seems from verse 16 (if “our good” is our liberty and its supporting doctrine) that the “stronger” brother is to avoid occasions that tempt the weaker to speak evil of our doctrine of liberty. If we consider “your good” to be referring to the gospel in some larger sense¹¹ then Paul is warning us that the testimony we give as a result of using our liberty may occasion others (inside and outside the church), who most likely do not understand the gospel to speak evil of it. If this is the case, the situation envisioned is more closely parallel to 1 Cor. 9:19-23; becoming all things to all men to gain some. Again, the responsibility to prevent the “evil speaking” lies with the “strong”.

Honoring General Commands that Should Regulate the Use of Our Liberty

It is important that we understand that the general exhortations to live with our brothers and sisters in a godly way have bearing on how we exercise our Christian liberty within Christ’s church. We must never lose sight of the fact that our brothers and sisters belong to the Lord, they are His sheep. He Himself leads each one, loves each one, and is progressing each one at a rate that He sees fit. Furthermore these sheep have all come out of the world where they had gone astray on many a dangerous path and often they bear the scars of those destructive paths from which the Lord has rescued them. Each sheep’s particular “zeal” is different from our own. This is due, in part, to where each sheep has been in the past and what each sheep has learned by painful experience. What is an enjoyed liberty by one may be either a dangerous precipice for another or inseparably associated (in their minds) with behavior that the Lord condemns. Keeping these things in mind, there are a number of commands addressed to both the “strong” and the “weak”

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9. For a discussion of the plausible interpretations the following commentaries may be consulted: New Testament Commentary, Romans, by William Hendriksen; Romans, by John Murray; Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Romans, by Thomas Schreiner.
 10. 1 Cor. 10:29-30 is a parallel context but in this text the “strong” individual is spoken evil of as opposed to the “your good” of Rom. 14:16. In Rom. 14:16 Paul definitely has something in mind being spoken evil of *beyond* the individual himself, i.e. the doctrine of liberty itself or the gospel itself.
 11. I prefer this interpretation because verse 16 is logically connected with verses 17 and 18 which provide the reasons for the command in verse 16. The reason has to do with what the kingdom of God “is” and “is not”. Disputes within the church focused on the things of which the kingdom “is not” inevitably lead to the gospel of the kingdom being spoken against. For even the unregenerate can see that something is wrong when those who profess to be believers are fighting and quarreling among themselves over things of which the kingdom “is not”. Further, if the kingdom of God is “*peace and joy*”, stronger and weaker brothers fighting over the things of which the kingdom “is not” certainly will occasion the gospel professed to be spoken evil of. The last phrase of verse 18 is referring to what the strong should be receiving, i.e. the approval of men, instead of occasioning the gospel or their doctrine of liberty being spoken against as evil.

that should affect how we use our liberty and how we view others who use a liberty that we have chosen not to.

The responsibility, indeed necessity, that we pursue the maintenance of peace, cannot be over-emphasized. It can be exegetically argued that the *loving pursuit of peace and our neighbor's good (i.e. the goal of love) within the body* is a major (if not the major) theme of the broader context of Romans 14 and that Romans 14 is supporting the larger goal; peace within the body. In Romans 12:18 we have the high calling, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men". Certainly our weaker and stronger brothers are included in the group "all men". The words, "as much as depends on you" are very challenging. Have I done everything I can to maintain peace with my weaker or stronger brother? The question is not simply, "have I done everything that is convenient," but, "*have I done everything that I can do, regardless of what I may need to deny to myself?*" Certainly this is a legitimate question based on Paul's exhortations in 15:1-3. In 13:8 our entire duty towards others is summed up into loving them and in 13:10 Paul assures us that "love does no harm to a neighbor." Disputes, which undermine peace, are not to be engaged in (vs. 14:1). If our behavior causes our brother to be grieved in his conscience¹² we have not walked in love (vs. 14:15). One of the major marks of the kingdom of God which is present by the power of the Holy Spirit is peace (vs. 14:17). The "things which make for peace" and "build up" others are to be "pursued" (vs. 14:19). Paul calls upon God to grant them a "likemindedness toward one another" (vs. 15:5) so that they would "with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (vs. 15:6). Finally Paul concludes the discussion asking that the God of hope would fill them "with all joy and peace in believing, that they would abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (vs.15:13).

For the strong and the weak, ensuring that I do not cause my brother to stumble or that I do not judge my brother, is *only one of several* duties we are called upon to perform. Neither the weak or the strong can consider that they have obeyed the Lord in these situations simply because they know that they have ceased from judging or not caused their brother to sin against his conscience. Such an attitude is pharisaical and does not enter into the heart set forth in the entire context just summarized above. Love will find a way, not simply to not cause my brother to stumble, but to pursue peace with him and build him up. Love will find a way, not simply to not judge my brother, but to pursue peace with him and build him up. Indeed, the kingdom of God established by the Holy Spirit (vs. 14:17-18) consists of "peacemakers" and "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9).¹³

The life transforming humility that the gospel exhorts us to and works in us is described beautifully by Paul in Philippians 2:2-4, "... but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. The command, "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interest of others," should regulate how we use our Christian liberty. Certainly we will be con-

12. From the entire context the "grief" of the weaker brother cannot be referring to his displeasure of the stronger brother's use of his liberty. This would be very synonymous with the judging for which he is actually being reprimanded. The "grief" must be associated with the conviction of sin, doubt, and guilt that weaker brother experiences when he "stumbles" as defined in statement 3 above.

13. The following additional passages which exhort us to the pursuit of peace should be consulted: Eph. 4:1-3, Heb. 12:14, Psalm 34:11-14, Col. 3:15, the "peace" referred to in this text is explained as that "to which also you were called in one body", 1 Pet. 3:11. The verbs that are repeatedly used to exhort us to the promotion of peace within the body make it clear that peace is to be the *active pursuit* of every member of the church; "pursue" (Rom. 14:19), "endeavoring" (Eph. 4:3), "as much as it depends on you" (Rom. 12:18), "pursue" (Heb. 12:14), "seek peace and pursue it" (1 Pet. 3:11).

cerned not to cause our brother any harm or to stumble. But as we look out not only for our own interests but his also, surely we would desire to promote his joy and benefit to be received by fellowshiping with God's people. Should this not cause us to think, that even though our brother would not be caused to stumble by certain things, he certainly would not enjoy being around them or being with people who are engaged in them. If so, we are faced with a choice. Do I curtail my liberty so my brother can undistractedly participate with me in an activity, do I simply exclude him, or do I expect him to bear with me? Perhaps there are significant ways that we both would benefit from each other's company except for the "disputed" thing. Should I insist on the disputed thing at the expense of the mutual joy and benefit? It seems that looking out for the interests of others would lead us to set aside the disputed thing, at least when I'm seeking this brother's participation in an event. Certainly there are ways and opportunities to discuss the disputed thing with my brother *outside of the context of facing him with making an immediate decision to participate or not*. I believe love would pursue this latter course.

Another general area which has bearing upon our use of our liberty is the matter of temptation to sin. Though the scriptures (when properly understood) give us an unambiguous definition of what is sin that applies to all people, they do not, indeed cannot, give us an unambiguous definition of temptation that can be applied to all people. What is a temptation to sin for each of us may widely vary. Having multiple credit cards would not be a temptation for one person but may be a serious problem for another. Having an internet connection could be a severe temptation for one and simply not an issue for another. Being around people, enjoying a glass of wine, participating or not, may be no temptation at all for one. Yet for another, who's been delivered from the sin of drunkenness by abstinence, or even worse, has decided to become freed from the sin by practicing abstinence, such a situation could pose a serious temptation. Swimming activities may be just fine for some but a serious problem for others. It should be every believer's daily prayer to not be "led into temptation". I would infer from this that every believer, out of love for his brothers and sisters, would certainly desire to avoid all occasions of being the one who occasions the temptation of his brother or sister. Love which does no harm to a neighbor (Rom. 13:10) will exercise care not to put temptations in front of his neighbor. Such love, as it matures, will become other oriented and avoid the self-centeredness and the unconscious assumption that everyone is like me. The attitude too often displayed is, "certain things are not a temptation for me, how ridiculous to think that this is a problem for so and so". How would we feel if "so and so" viewed *our* temptations with this attitude? Ours are real, theirs aren't, right? Wrong.

What happens in practice is that often we do not know our brother's temptations. Perhaps we do with a few. Those whom we have developed a close relationship with and have been vulnerable enough with to discuss our weaknesses with each other. If I am in doubt whether I will be the occasion of temptation to someone then it surely would be selfishness to proceed. If I am not in doubt then I should have some fairly strong evidence assuring me that I will not occasion temptation. If I am thoughtless, I am *thoughtless of others*. If we do not know we should either find out ahead of time by loving conversation or simply avoid occasioning the potential temptation. This is easier to do in situations involving individual households participating in activities together. It is more difficult for church activities when everyone is indiscriminately encouraged to participate.

From 1 Cor. 9:19-23 we learn that the use of our liberties are to be regulated not only by how we may affect our brothers and sisters in Christ but the effect we may have upon those whom we are called to evangelize. Here we can see Paul's great humility and love for the lost. It is one thing to deny myself for my brothers and sisters and to become their "servants", but he, knowing full well that he was "free from all men" had made himself a servant to all, that he might win the

more” (1 Cor. 9:19). Interestingly, the “proud” Corinthians, most likely the same ones who had the superior “knowledge” referred to in vs. 8:1, 4-7 and misused their liberty (vs. 8:8-13), were actually despising Paul for his regulated use of his liberty before the lost.¹⁴ In Chapter 9:19-23 we may see the degree to which Paul would vary his own personal behavior; the range is broad! He tells us why he did so in verse 22, “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.” It seems safe to assume that he sets forth his example not only to defend his apostolic authority and practice but also intended it to be followed by the Corinthians who were actually despising him for living as he did. They had no right to despise Paul’s “servant hood” and every reason to emulate it.

Without engaging in a detailed proof I think the main issue in verses 19-23 centered around *gaining the hearing* of individuals who were classed in the various categories that Paul mentioned.¹⁵ Often these individuals were “religious unbelievers” and there were truly non-essential issues which *were essential to their confused thinking and traditions*. These non-essential things would give way if they truly understood the gospel, however, no hearing for the gospel would be granted if the non-essentials were directly assaulted by either word or example. Thus Paul would gladly put his “freedom” aside with hopes of gaining a hearing. This situation does occur in the religious culture we find ourselves in. Some of the less desirable aspects of fundamentalism have produced generations of folks who, though having lost much of the gospel, remain zealously attached to some non-essentials, especially total abstinence from alcohol and tobacco.¹⁶ Other items could be added to the list. We who understand the difference between the sinful use of a thing and the false notion that the thing itself is sinful are still obligated to exercise great care to obtain opportunities for the gospel amongst this class of people. This care should extend not only to our individual opportunities of witness but to our corporate witness as a church. Once again, caution needs to be exercised, especially with people we do not know. We very well may not know whose hearings we have lost, of those unbelievers within the body or even the children of believers who have been raised not under the best understanding of these matters.

The Practical Application of these Principles Within SGBC

In our culture the areas over which believers consciences are exercised are very different from eating meat or eating meat sacrificed to idols or observing special days¹⁷ of the Jewish calendar. However, we are confronted with a whole myriad of other matters; modest dressing, use of swimwear, movies, use of the internet, computer games, alcohol, tobacco, lotteries, music, use of games, card games, use of the television, use of government assistance in various forms.

With regard to household events which are under the authority of the household(s) initiating the activity between households, the application of the commands discussed above should be *con-*

14. A careful reading of the entire letter reveals that some (many?) of the members of the Corinthian church were questioning, if not actually despising, Paul’s message and ministry. Chapter 9:1-15 is one of the examples. It also appears that this thinking less of Paul was promoted by other teachers, motivated by pride, who behaved very differently from Paul and led many to be blinded to see the greatness of Paul’s wisdom, love and humility. Paul was the spiritual giant - they were infants at best!

15. Paul’s having Timothy circumcised and taking on a Jewish vow are concrete examples. It would also seem safe to assume that he changed his dietary habits as he was amongst certain groups. All this was done of course when the gospel itself was not at stake.

16. Of course all drunkenness and dependence upon these substances is sinful. And if the non-sinful use of them may be a temptation to the sinful use of them then they should not be used.

17. However, what to do with Christmas, Easter and Halloween do become areas of tension between believers.

sciously thought through *ahead of time*. When in doubt on how to proceed advice from the elders should be sought and considered. They often have more detailed knowledge of the flock that may be helpful in certain situations.

With regard to “all church events” which are under the authority of the elders, matters which are known, in our culture, to be in the category of those things discussed above are to be avoided. It is not possible to ensure that we will honor the commands discussed above in these “all church” settings unless these things are avoided. The elders are required to shepherd the flock - all of the flock - and this shepherding includes the protection of any, even one, sheep.¹⁸ The elders should ensure that they are a means of the fulfillment of every sheep’s prayer to the Lord, “do not lead us into temptation” as opposed to being the ones who actually encourage the sheep to go into a situation of temptation. The elders must also endeavor to promote unity and peace and ensure the widest possible hearing for the gospel that the church proclaims. For all “all church events” the following three personal liberties are not to be exercised or encouraged: Swimming, the use of alcohol or the use of tobacco. If there are other areas of doubt beyond these three the advice of the elders is to be sought during the planning stages of the event.

18. This does not imply that any “one” sheep has been in mind by this reference or this entire paper. This is not the case. It reflects the responsibility that elders have before the Great Shepherd.