

What Does Scripture Teach About Christian Liberty?

The following statement was originally part of a report on the appropriateness of accepting third source funds. The report was endorsed by the 1979 Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. It is reprinted here as a cautionary reminder against the forces of legalism and Pharisaism that seek to restrict Christian liberty, especially as believers in God's Church strive to find effective ways to reach out and touch people's hearts with the gospel.

“In its broadest sense, Christian liberty applies in matters where God has not spoken, where God has not told man what to believe and do. Such liberty allows a Christian to be a completely free lord of all, and a servant to no man. On the other hand, such liberty also persuades a Christian to be a perfectly dutiful servant of everyone. In the exercise of this liberty, a Christian will say: ‘Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival’ (Colossians 2:16). In the exercise of this liberty, a Christian, however, will also say: ‘Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial’ (1 Corinthians 6:12). In either case, the aim of Christian liberty, as of all Christian life, is that ‘nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others’; that ‘whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God’ (1 Corinthians 10:23,31).

When applying these general guidelines for Christian liberty to the individual circumstance, Scripture again shows that the God-pleasing way is the way of mutual respect, patience, and love.

In matters where they are truly free, Christians must guard against imposing judgments upon one another.

In matters where they are truly free, Christians must guard against forcing their own exercise of piety on the community of fellow Christians.

In matters where they are truly free, Christians must guard against requiring of others what they require of themselves.

In matters where they are truly free, Christians must guard against the idea that they may

follow a certain course of action only if a Bible passage permits it, or must avoid a certain practice because there is no Bible passage which allows it. Such thinking does violence to the whole cause and nature of Christian liberty.

Of the practical exercise of Christian liberty Scripture says: ‘One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man . . . eats only vegetables . . . The man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does . . . One man considers one day more sacred than another, another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind . . . Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another’ (Romans 14:2,3,5,13). On the other hand, because patience and love stand at the very heart of Christian liberty, Scripture also cautions: ‘Be careful that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak . . . If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall’ (1 Corinthians 8:9,13).

It must be quickly added, however, that a vast gulf separates ‘offending’ or ‘causing someone else to fall into sin’ from ‘not liking what someone else does’ and therefore passing judgment where judgment should not be passed (Romans 14:13). In the second case, the person has suffered no danger to his own faith or behavior. Rather, he is annoyed. Yet people will seize on their annoyance as a weapon for tyrannizing fellow Christians. They claim offense where offense in the true scriptural sense of endangering faith does not exist. Thus they do violence to Christian liberty, if not to Christian love” (pp.188-189, Report to the Ten Districts, 1978).