

Liberty

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The love of freedom is inherent in all of God's intelligent creatures. For centuries, millions have given their lives for what they considered the cause of freedom and liberty. As we come to appreciate the Plan of God, we see that it was the divine purpose that all enjoy liberty, but with certain limitations—respect for and submission to the divine law, and a mutual love and respect for the rights and liberties of fellow creatures being the only limitations. These are the bounds of liberty. Only within these bounds is it rightful for any to exercise personal liberty.

But as we look about us in the world today, we see many have a different idea of freedom and liberty than this. To many, the idea of liberty and freedom means the right to do as they wish. With this idea of freedom, many are anxious to cast off all restraints of God and man (i.e. law and order) and rush headlong on a selfish course, trampling under foot their obligations to God and the rights of their fellow men.

We have seen such ideas of freedom lead to riot, anarchy and destruction. To such, the wholesome restraints of law and order appear to be infringements of their rights and they consider themselves in bondage under them. And this sentiment is rapidly growing all over the world among the masses of mankind. Thus the outlook for the future is ominous as world-wide anarchy threatens the utter wreck of the present social order. It is not surprising that this cry for liberty should become so pronounced at this period of man's history; for this is the expected result from the proclamation of liberty (the blowing of the Jubilee trumpet) at the second advent of our Lord.

However dearly mankind desires liberty, the fact remains there is no man that actually possesses it now. As a result of the fall, man became a slave to sin, under the influence of Satan, in bondage to sin. Not until the promised restitution of all things is completed, will men enjoy liberty in its full sense.

At a time when the clamor for liberty is so pronounced among mankind, creating a spirit of anarchy discernable on every hand, we must be on guard lest this same spirit of anarchy become present among the Lord's people. Therefore, it is important for us to carefully examine this subject of Christian liberty. We believe there is a difference between liberty and Christian liberty. By divine arrangement the Christian has the liberty to do everything that will not injure himself, or a brother, or a neighbor. This means then that the Christian has no liberty to do wrong—anything that would injure himself, his brother, or his neighbor. This is Christian liberty. Thus we see that while our liberty to some may appear as absolute, yet it is really quite limited.

While all the “Thou shalt nots” of the Mosaic law are removed, the essence or spirit of that Law remains as a restrictive influence upon the true Christian—Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, and thy neighbor as thyself. Thus the Christian is at liberty to do anything that does not conflict with the Law of Love. So then, the boundary of Christian liberty is limited to that which is in harmony with the will of God. It does not mean that we are restrained from going contrary to the will of God. We have the liberty to do so. Liberty is one of the tests upon the Christian. As free moral agents our Lord has given each of us a stewardship and then the liberty to do with it as we will.

God wants to see if we will seek to be governed by the Divine will in the exercise of our stewardship or be governed by our own fleshly desires. The only way this can be demonstrated is by giving his people liberty. However, here again we must make a distinction between liberty and Christian liberty. The exercise of liberty to go contrary to the will of God is not the exercise of Christian liberty but is the exercise of liberty without restraint. This then would be outside the bounds of Christian liberty. Christian liberty is governed by the Law of love—love for God and His dear Son, love for His plan, His ways, love for the brethren and love for all mankind. Perhaps the bounds of Christian liberty can best be illustrated by the perfect example of our Lord and Master. Christian liberty would be defined then as the liberty exercised in the way Jesus exercised his liberty.

Let us consider how confining were the bounds of our Master’s liberty. He had liberty to do the will of God, liberty to do that which was written in the Book concerning Him. Jesus had a thoroughly consecrated heart. When he came to John at Jordan, his attitude of heart was as described prophetically in Psa. 40:7, 8, “Lo, I come; in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God; yea, thy law is within my heart.” Even before this, when he was 12 years of age, he sought to know when he should become active in doing his Father’s work. At the time of His baptism, when John forbade Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized of thee”—Jesus said, “Suffer it to be so now; for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.” He was being governed by what He knew to be the will of God and He delighted to do God’s will.

When Satan tried to tempt Him in the wilderness saying, “If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread”—Jesus answered with a phrase He would often use; “It is written.” “It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” Continuing to pressure the Master into abusing his liberty—a misuse of his power, “the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple. And saith unto him, if thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down; for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee; and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy root against a stone.” Here we see the adversary quoting scripture in an effort to stumble our Master. And if Satan will quote scripture to our Master, we may be sure that under his direction,

messengers of Satan will quote scripture in an attempt to mislead the body members. This is particularly true at this late date. But Jesus answered, “It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.” “Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.” Jesus could have turned aside from his course and done so, but he would have abused his liberty; for he was at liberty only to do the will of God. “Then Jesus saith unto him, Get thee hence, Satan; for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.” Matt. 4:3-10.

To our Master, the doing of the will of the Father was a matter of utmost importance. He used an occasion (when his disciples urged him to eat) to indicate just how important was the doing of the will of his Father. “He said unto them, I have meat to eat that ye know not of.” And the disciple inquired of one another, “Hath any man brought him out to eat? Jesus saith unto them, my meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.” John 4:31-35.

A similar text is John 6:57, “As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father; so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.” Thus we believe Jesus indicated that the doing of his Father’s will was all important—that it was the doing of the Father’s will that nourished his soul—sustained and nourished the new creature, and without the doing of the Father’s will he would surely fail and pass from existence. The keeping of the Father’s will meant doing the works of His Father. Again Jesus established the bounds of his liberty which was governed by his supreme love for his Father and his Father’s plan. To some (possibly disciples of John the Baptist), who had difficulty in accepting Jesus as the Christ, Jesus said, “But I have greater witness than that of John; for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me.” John 5:36.

Again Jesus said, “I can of mine own self do nothing; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.” (John 5:30) Continuing in John 6:38, “For I am come down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.” Thus Jesus humbly acknowledges his complete dependence on the Father for guidance and strength. He says, “As I hear, I judge” and to paraphrase—he says: “my judgment is just because it is not my judgment, but the judgment of my Father in heaven who sent me. For I came to do only the will of God.” Let us take a lesson from the example given by the Master. Let us always look to our Father as the source of comfort and strength, and seek to know his ways.

Again linking this with the matter of Christian liberty, it is evident that Jesus realized his liberty was limited to doing only what his Father wished. He was at liberty to go contrary to God’s will but his love would not permit this. His thoroughly consecrated heart would

not permit it. After all, had he not indicated his complete desire to do God's will when he came to John at Jordan to symbolize his consecration by burial of his will?

Concerning his doctrine, let us read the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, we speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not of our witness." (John 3:11) Thus Jesus puts real substance behind his words to Nicodemus, "We speak that we do know—that we have seen." To the Jews gathered in the Temple, Jesus was even more explicit. He did not seek any glory or honor of his own, but sought to honor the Father, "My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself. He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory; but he that seeketh his [God's] glory that sent him, the same is true." (John 7:16-18) To his disciples he said, "The word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me." (John 14:24) And again, "For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God; for God giveth not the spirit by measure unto him." (John 3:34) Thus Jesus left no doubt that his doctrines, his teachings, his words were not his own but instead the words, the doctrine, the teaching of his Father. His love for his Father's plan, his devotion to his Father's purpose placed bounds upon his liberty and did not allow him to have any doctrine of his own, did not allow him any ideas of his own, did not allow him any will of his own. He was governed by "It is written." Diligently He searched the words of the prophets for he knew he must follow the course God had carefully laid out—he must do all that which was written "in the volume of the book." Thus Jesus by his faithfulness has demonstrated the proper exercise of liberty governed by a love for God. He has set us an example that should be indelibly impressed upon our minds. We believe this is especially important for us to consider in these troublous times when there is much misconception on the matter of liberty. To many liberty means to be free from all order and discipline and restraint. This of course is not liberty but the spirit of anarchy.

Therefore, at a time when much that is termed liberty is really license, we as Christians must keep before our minds what true Christian liberty really means, else we too, could be swept along with a spirit of anarchy. But is it possible for Christians to misuse their liberty and become influenced by the spirit of anarchy which we see present in the world?—a cry of liberty, a throwing off of the shackles of restraint, a disrespect for the established, accepted way, etc.? Yes, we believe it is possible, but this tendency will be quite subtle and almost imperceptible at first. From time to time we hear statements like—"I have a right to my own opinion." Perhaps this may seem like an innocent statement to some; and we venture to say that some may even feel it is a proper statement. But is this the lesson we have learned from our Master's experience? Did he consider that he had a right to his opinion? We suggest that such statements as, "I have a right to my own opinion," and "They have a right to their opinion," may result from a lack of understanding of what true Christian liberty is. Also it could be due somewhat to the ecumenical spirit in the world today, that has not been without effect among our brethren.

The tragedy is that so often this spirit engenders a belief that it is an evidence of growth and development in love for the brethren. For surely isn't this an indication of growth in love when we are willing to grant greater latitude to our brethren to believe what they wish? Thus Satan is quick to take advantage of every opportunity to deceive and turn us from the proper course.

The proper course is that suggested in June 3 and 2 Cor. 10:5, "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend [struggle] for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." "Casting down imaginations [reasonings] and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

Concerning our liberty or our rights, the boundary has already been set by God for all who have given their wills, their all in complete consecration to God—those whom the Apostle speaks of in Col. 3:3, saying, "For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God." We are not taking away anyone's liberty of thought. That was done when we made our consecration to be dead with him and from henceforth sought to heed the admonition—"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." After having taken this step, then we have a very peculiar relationship. We are reckoned as being dead; we are beheaded, for Christ is the "head of the Church which is his body." (See Eph. 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18) We are to have no will of our own. So then, from this point on we have no right to do our own will—it is supposed to be dead. We have no right to do anything that is out of harmony with the divine will. We have no right to believe any doctrine or hold any ideas that are out of harmony with the divine word. We are permitted to hold ideas of our own, we are permitted to exercise our own wills (even as Satan was)—but we do this outside the bounds of Christian liberty; it is not our right.

It would be entirely contrary to our position of our belief for anyone to interpret what we have said to mean that we feel all must agree with us or even that there can be no disagreement on any points. Certainly all must realize that we have imperfect minds and all do not possess the same reasoning ability. Some can reason very accurately and with great depth. Others may have shallow reasoning ability. And too, there are various stages of development among the brethren. Thus complete agreement cannot be achieved on all points of truth.

But there would appear to be a ring of willfulness in the statement, "I have a right to my own opinion" which can only prove harmful spiritually. Let us not become so infatuated with some new idea that we have "discovered" that we become blinded as to what the Lord's truth is on the matter. Instead, let us prayerfully seek to know the mind of the Lord in the matter. Let us remember the words of the Master, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall

make you free.” (John 8:31, 32) Let us not allow ourselves to become tainted with willfulness of mind. Let us rather heed the admonition of the apostle—“And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Rom. 12:2). “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” Phil. 2:5.

But this matter of Christian liberty is very complex for there must be self-restraint of our liberty. We all know that our liberty must be governed by the law of love. This law of love constitutes the restraining influence on our liberty. It has been suggested that the final test upon us will be love for the brethren. And this test could possibly be along the lines of how our love for the brethren constitutes a restraining influence on our liberty.

In Rom. 15:2 and 3 the Apostle Paul writes, “Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself; but as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.” Now what has this to do with Christian liberty and love for our brethren? In V. 1, chap. 15, we read, “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” What is the Apostle talking about? To get the full meaning of the Apostle, we must go back to the 14th chap., V. 15, where he says, “Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.” Again in V. 20 he says, “For meat destroy not the work of God.” In the early church, the matter of eating meat that had been offered to idols was a difficult one. To some brethren it did not make any difference. They realized that the idols being of stone or wood, could do the meat no injury. Paul could see it did no harm and concerning this matter he wrote in 1 Cor. 10:23, “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient; for all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.”

However, there were those who felt it was wrong and to eat meat that had been offered to idols violated their conscience. Paul, realizing that great harm could be done to these brethren, if they were in any way encouraged to go contrary to their conscience, wrote in 1 Cor. 8:9, “But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak.” Continuing the same thought in Rom. 14, beginning at V. 20, “For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence. It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended or made weak. And he that doubteth [discerneth and putteth a difference between meats] is damned [condemned] if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; for whatsoever is not of faith is sin. We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities [ought to bear with the infirmities] of the weak and not to please ourselves.” Rom. 14:20-23; 15:1.

Thus a very important lesson is brought to our attention by the Apostle. Love for our brethren is very closely tied in with this matter of liberty. We should restrain our liberty, i.e. we should refrain from doing those things that do not violate our conscience if we see

that they may cause some of our brethren to stumble. In the case at hand it was the eating of meat offered to idols. But we believe this simple principle can be applied in many ways. We are living in a very affluent society where the tests of stewardship are more difficult than ever before. This same principle should be applied to all matters of stewardship—whether it be our homes, our personal property, our automobiles, our pleasures and the use of our time. If we might stumble some of our brethren by the gratifying of some of our appetites, even though the doing so could not violate our conscience, we should curb our appetites in the interest of love for the brethren. Not to curb our appetites could encourage others to spend consecrated time and effort in seeking worldly treasure to their spiritual detriment. Applying the principle that the Apostle was making regarding the eating of meat, we see that love for our brethren would restrain our liberty along these lines and we would be glad to sacrifice such things in the interest of the spiritual welfare of our brethren.

Not only should we apply this same principle to our work, to our seeking of position of fame, but also to our stewardship of the “mysteries of God.” In the world today there is a feverish desire for something new—new homes, new cars, new methods, new ideas; and a disdain for the old and the established ways. In addition, we have witnessed that much of Christendom is embracing the ecumenical spirit. Old customs and ideas are being questioned and often forced to yield to the new.

These two forces have not been without effect in our ranks. The result has been in increasing desire and tolerance for—even a thirst for—new ideas; new twists of scripture, coupled with a feeling that there should be more latitude in matters of doctrine. Paul realized that this condition would exist. See Acts 20:28-30 and Gal. 1:6-8.

Thus a climate has been developed where any objection to encroaching error (sometimes referred to as new light) is frowned upon as a violation of the rights of the brethren. In fact, on occasion, those who “earnestly contend for the faith” have been accused as trouble-makers and charged with lacking in love for the brethren. Because of such false accusations it is important for us to get the proper focus on this subject of Christian liberty, restrained by love, as it relates to our stewardship of the “mysteries of God.” In times past we witnessed a reticence on the part of the brethren (particularly elders) to introduce new ideas, new thoughts, etc. We believe this restraint was motivated by love for the brethren—by a concern lest they might stumble their brethren.

But today much of this loving restraint has disappeared. New ideas, suggestions, and twists flood upon the brethren like an unyielding torrent. Gone seems to be the concern lest their ideas may stumble others—their liberty no longer being properly restrained by love for the brethren. Therefore, it is our considered opinion that those who contend earnestly for the faith are manifesting true Christian love, while those who would introduce new ideas are manifesting a lack of Christian love.

Do not forget—Satan was the first free thinker. It was Jesus who said, “He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory” and we wonder sometimes if this is not the root of the problem. Continuing, our Master said, “But he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him.” John 7:18.

Centuries ago the question was asked, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answer of course, is yes—every member of the new creation is his brother’s keeper. And we should gauge what we do, restrict our liberty, if we find the exercise of our liberty will in any way stumble our brethren. This is what it really means to have our liberty restrained by the perfect law of love.

And so dear brethren, we can see this matter of Christian liberty as it relates to love is a matter of vital importance to us. It may prove to be a crucial test among our brethren—finally demonstrating to the Lord those who are in the right heart condition to see him face to face.