



## Responding to controversial issues

### **Question:**

*What biblical guidelines should direct us in our discussions with people who hold opposing views on a matter to which there is no explicit biblical command?*

### **Answer:**

This questions deals with the doctrine of Christian liberty, articulated so beautifully by the Reformers on the basis of Scripture. In its classic form, it has been well-articulated by the Westminster Confession of Faith, Article 20. Though it would be worth quoting in full, it would take all our space. It unpacks fifteen beautiful aspects of what Christ has purchased in His death in terms of freedom. Among other things, it emphasizes how Christian liberty has been enlarged compared to what the Jews enjoyed by abrogating the ceremonial laws. Then it makes the great statement: *"God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men."* It carefully delineates that we cannot abuse this Christian liberty to commit sin or cherish lusts, or to undermine any lawful power, either civil or ecclesiastical

Essentially, the confession is celebrating what Paul sets forth in 1 Corinthians 8-9 and Romans 13-15. The two pillars of this doctrine could be listed as, on the one hand, Romans 15:1-2, *"We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification;"* and Galatians 5:1,

*"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."*

Sadly, many make a very common error at this very point; they think of life as three columns. One a list of things the Bible says we must do; another the Bible says we must not do; and then a (often large) middle column of what we can do or not do depending on what we ourselves wish. This is to deny the sufficiency and clarity of Scripture as the God-given rule for all conduct and leave our very fallible conscience to be the standard.

Sometimes people use the term "adiaphora" that way. Literally, it refers to "things indifferent." Some think these are things on which Christians have differences and different opinions and that's fine. Strictly speaking, "adiaphora," are things that the Lord sanctions or permits, such as eating *"food offered to idols"* (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8). Doing so had the sanction of the Lord; however, if it caused a brother or sister to stumble, it would be wrong to do so in a way whereby they would stumble (Rom. 14:20-21).

Christians, then, should be careful when speaking together about things on which people do disagree. They should keep in mind:

1. To observe the ethos of the family of God, with love for the brethren, respect for the priesthood of all believers (Gal. 4:4-7), with utmost respect for Christ, the church's Head, and how He governs His church through His officers, elders and deacons, who are to rule over us and watch for our souls (Heb. 13:17).
2. To remember that *"the powers that be are ordained of God"* (Romans 13:1-2), whether civil or ecclesiastical, and ought to be obeyed unless their demands go against Scripture.

3. To do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). This governs the smallest action, thought, word, and lack of these imaginable. How we need Christ's Spirit! If we have not been born again, all our debating, discussing, and devising is vain. It is simply the exercise of a heart that is bound and in rage against God and His Christ. Let none imagine or pretend to go a step without the Spirit of God!

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