

WHOSE CONSCIENCE DO I FOLLOW?

1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 10:23-29

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INTRODUCTION

The writer Philip Yancey tells about a super-strict church he was in as a teenager. He said they often sang, "This world is not my home, I'm just-a passing through . . ."

The church frowned on such activities as skating (because it was too much like dancing as partners held on to each other); bowling (because some alleys serve liquor); going to movies, and even reading the newspaper on Sunday (Yancey 18).

I grew up in a situation similar to Philip Yancey. I remember how traumatic it was for Mother when my older sister went off with our cousins to a Sunday afternoon movie. And, after I made my public decision for the ministry, Mother shamed me for playing cards. So I quit playing cards. I quit going to movies. And, of course, there was never any thought in my mind about smoking or drinking.

Did I mention dancing? You know we moved from one community to another as Daddy frequently changed farm jobs. On this one farm, the boss's daughter and son threw a party for all the school kids. So my older sister and brother and I went to the party where the main activity was what they called "ring games." Turns out, "ring games" looked and sounded a lot like square dancing. Girls would get in a circle, and the boys would form a slightly bigger circle around the girls.

When the singing started, the girls' circle moved one way and our circle moved the other way. When the music stopped, we paired up with girls we were facing and would walk around the house and maybe even hold hands as we walked. Then we'd get back in the circles and sing and move around some more as the caller told us what to do.

The boss's house and the farm worker's house weren't far apart, and the sound of the singing and the caller carried through the night. My folks heard what they thought was square dancing, even though we knew for sure we were only playing "ring games." It didn't matter what we called it, Daddy came through the woods over to the boss's house and stood in the shadows and watched what he thought was square dancing, even though we knew for sure we were only playing "ring games."

My sister and brother and I were old enough that Daddy had stopped whipping us, but when we got home, we got a good talking-to. We were given the facts of life, including the fact that Travis and Vandelia Webb's children do not -- repeat, DO NOT -- dance. And it doesn't matter whether the dancing is round, square, or oblong, or something called "ring games," you flat out don't dance.

When I went off to college, I carried a lot of that outlook given to me, mostly by Mother. For example, I saw no movies -- except a couple of Shakespeares -- until my senior year.

I used to have a book about the evils of motion pictures. I lost it or gave it away somewhere down the line, and that's probably just as well. *Hell Over Hollywood* pointed to all the evils the movies depict. If someone were to publish a book like that nowadays, I would probably read it and agree with it. Hollywood does present an awful lot of trash these days. But *Hell Over Hollywood*, was published about sixty years ago when the worst they put in movies was pretty tame, compared with today's films.

Speaking of movies, Cecil Sherman told his experiences as a summer youth worker in two different churches while he was in seminary in Texas. Dr. Sherman was a pastor and then went on to lead the national office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

In one of those churches he served as youth minister, boys and girls could pile into the Gulf together in their swimsuits to cool off, but they couldn't go to picture shows on Sunday. In the other church where he worked, out in landlocked West Texas where I grew up, movie houses were open, but good Baptist girls weren't supposed to be in the pool with boys. We have conflicting ideas on what comprises Christian conduct.

Let me give you one more example: Lots of Baptists from around Anderson have gone to the conference center at Ridgecrest, North Carolina, for religious instruction and inspiration. They had a snack bar or canteen at Ridgecrest where you could buy ice cream and other goodies. And they had soft drink machines. In the years when I went to Ridgecrest regularly, soft drink companies were in transition from putting soft drinks in bottles to putting the sodas in cans. Just like today, those canned drinks had little tabs you popped to get to the cola inside. Well, the Ridgecrest trustees had a problem with those drinks in cans. Those pop-top cans looked too much like beer cans. So the trustees decided to ban the cans. Somebody might think good Baptists at Ridgecrest were drinking beer. Or, worse, if the kids started drinking Cokes or Pepsis out of cans, that might lead to drinking beer out of cans! So better not have machines at Ridgecrest that dispense soft drinks in cans.

The question in all these examples — card playing, movies, dating, or Mountain Dew in cans — is this: Who decides my personal conduct? To what extent should my actions be guided by what other people think is right or wrong?

TRANSITION

In the letter we call First Corinthians, one problem concerns our letting someone else set our agenda. What responsibility do you have when it comes to respecting the convictions of a friend and fellow church member whose views are very different from your own?

The particular issue in Corinth concerns food. Much of the meat available in the markets has been offered as sacrifice in a pagan temple. Should Christians eat this meat? If you have no problem eating such meat, what if some of your fellow church members feel this is wrong?

Paul deals with this question in chapter eight and again in chapter ten. Back in chapters five and six, Paul says some of these Corinthians are too accepting of the conduct of fellow church members. Some of them were saying, "*All things are lawful for me*" (6:12). Paul says, "Maybe so, *but not all things are beneficial.*"

Here in chapter eight, talking about food offered to idols, he seems to have that slogan in mind. He says, *Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge."*

He means supposed superior knowledge that leads them to say, "*All things are lawful for me.*" To refute that, he says, "*Knowledge*" puffs up, *but love builds up*. The kind of knowledge you're bragging about — so-called knowledge that leads you to say, "*All things are lawful for me,*" -- puffs you up with pride. Instead of knowledge that fills you with pride, you ought to be filled with love.

If any one imagines that he knows something -- that superficial knowledge that puffs you up with pride -- he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him.

As we ask whether to eat meat sacrificed in pagan temples, God's love ought to guide us. Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth -- as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords" -- yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

In Ancient Corinth, if Christians had any religion at all before they believed in Jesus, it would have been one of what Paul says as *so-called gods*. Paul acknowledges worship of those *so-called gods*, but, in effect, he says, you and I know the one true God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But not everyone knows what we know. And some of the church members there in Corinth previously had worshipped in those temples, offered meat to their lesser gods and then eaten the meat. So Paul says in verse 7, *However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through being hitherto accustomed to idols, eat food as really offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.*

These Christians don't realize there's nothing to those *so-called gods*

Paul had been in another kind of war over food earlier in his ministry. Among Jewish Christians in the early church, some felt they had to continue their kosher food restrictions in order to be true Christians. Paul is familiar with those earlier problems over food, so he wants to avoid similar "food fights," so to speak. So he says in verse 8:

Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. Even so, Paul is concerned for those Christians who haven't come to that same awareness that *We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.*

So, he cautions those who know this and are proud of their special knowledge, those who say, "*All things are lawful for me*":

Only take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

I recall an incident from my childhood. It has nothing to do with food, but it's about setting examples. I went with Daddy to the barn one day. He was trying to get one of the cows to leave the barn and go out to the pasture. The cow wasn't cooperative. So Daddy got mad at the cow and used some language I didn't know. But I repeated them, thinking they must be OK if Daddy used them. These may have been "just words," but he realized he didn't want me saying them.

Only take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

Then Paul sets up an example, using that word again that the Corinthians are so proud of: *knowledge.*

For if any one sees you, a man of knowledge, at table in an idol's temple, might he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak man is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.

We don't know much about meat that has been offered in a pagan temple, but let's set up a modern-day **What-If**:

What If you like to have an occasional beer or glass of wine? You really can limit and do limit your drinking to one beer or one glass of wine. You go to a restaurant with friends, and you have your one drink. But someone who doesn't have your will power sees you having your one beer or one glass of wine. That person knows you are a good Christian. So, if it's OK for you to drink, that person says, "It's OK for me." He doesn't know when to stop, so one drink leads to another and he gets dog-drunk.

Paul's application is in verse 12: *Thus, sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.*

Or, **What If** you play the lottery, and you limit your spending to one ticket each time. You're in your favorite convenience store one day as usual, you buy your one ticket and go on your way, knowing it's wishful thinking. But, a fellow church member who's having a pretty rough time financially sees you buy your one ticket. He wishes to goodness he could find a way to pay his debts, so he buys his ticket. But he doesn't buy just one ticket.

He spends several dollars; then another day, he buys several more tickets with money he should use to buy groceries or make a car payment---all this with the vain hope of winning the lottery and win big. He started playing the numbers because he saw you and thought that made it right.

. . . *Sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.*

As Paul contemplates how a weaker Christian might take a first step down a wrong road because of something Paul did, Paul makes an all-or-nothing assertion in verse 13: *Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall.*

Paul feels a deep concern for the person or persons he calls the weaker brother: Such a concern that he says here, he will become a vegetarian for life, rather than set a wrong example by eating meat.

At that point, Paul does something he often does in his letters. He takes a detour from his main topic and comes back to it later. But one thing in that detour has a direct bearing on what he is saying about concern for other people.

He says he tries to identify with people of all backgrounds in order to win some of them for Christ. He says he becomes a Jew to the Jews and a non-Jew to non-Jews. He doesn't spell this out, but as an actual Jew among his fellow Jews, in a Jewish setting, he probably refrains from non-kosher foods out of respect for their dietary beliefs.

MID-COURSE CORRECTION

But over in chapter ten, the latter verses, Paul makes a mid-course correction. He softens his absolute stance about never again eating meat if meat-eating offends someone.

In verse 23, he once again quotes the slogan of the Corinthians who consider themselves especially knowledgeable. Twice, he quotes their mantra: *"All things are lawful."*

After each quote, he gives a kind of rebuttal:

You say, *"All things are lawful."* OK, *but not all things are helpful.*

"All things are lawful." OK, *but not all things build up.*

Verse 24 sums up Paul's chief concern in food matters:

Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

That sums up the teachings of the Lord: Love God supremely, Love your neighbor as yourself.

Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

But that doesn't rule out eating meat from the pagan temple, as we see in verses 25-26: *Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."*

He's left that all-or-nothing stance. He no longer says, "Be a vegetarian." But he gives this cautious compromise from his earlier hard-line statement:

If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

Quite a switch from saying earlier in this same letter that he will be a vegetarian for life if that will keep him from standing in the way of someone coming to know Christ.

To understand this backing away from his earlier out-and-out stance, keep in mind, Paul dictated his letters. This means he has a free-flowing line of thought going and may sometimes overstate his case. That's what we obviously have here.

In verses 28-29, he takes a more reasoned stance: *(But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then out of consideration for the man who informed you, and for conscience' sake — I mean his conscience, not yours — do not eat it.)*

So Paul says, Be considerate of someone sitting nearby who is troubled by the idea of eating such food. But he says clearly in the last part of verse 29, he does not intend to let another person permanently set his agenda for him

For why should my liberty be determined by another man's scruples?

Suppose you have some friends over for a social evening and most of you like to play cards. Then, *play* cards. But Paul would say, if you know somebody is coming who believes card playing to be sinful, then, for that evening, play Monopoly or Uno or Scrabble.

Then, in verse 30, he says, in effect, if he can take part in an activity with a clear conscience and give thanks to God for it, he's not going to worry a whole lot about how other people feel.

We have a kind of summary principle stated in verse 31:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

The mention of what you eat is his last word about food offered to idols. If you can eat with a joyous heart and eat to the glory of God, then don't worry.

But that thirty-first verse raises the bar pretty high. What would you have to change in your life if your eating and drinking and everything else you do were all done for the glory of God?

Paul comes back to concern for others in verse 32:

Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.

That's really an all-inclusive statement because — remember — in Paul's mind, as a lifelong Jew, there are only two groups of people in the world: Jews and everyone else. So his concern is for everyone on the face of the earth and for God's church.

Paul's final word on this subject is in the last verse of chapter 10:

just as I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

Ever since Christ brought him back from the brink of disaster, Paul's all-consuming concern is to bring still others to Christ as well.

This is a far cry from the "*All things are lawful for me.*" Remember, his constant response to that slogan: "*Maybe so, but not all things are beneficial.*" And, Paul would add, "My life concern is that I may do all things for the benefit of others and, thus, bring others to faith in Jesus Christ."

FINAL STORY

In the Broadway musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*, almost from the start of the show, Tevye the dairyman has to deal with traditions that are beginning to fall apart. In keeping with marriage traditions, he consults Yente the Matchmaker concerning his older daughters.

Yente arranges for the firstborn to marry an older man. But the daughter is in love with a poor tailor her own age. The lovers plead with Tevye, so he forsakes tradition and permits the marriage, breaking the agreement and angering the prospective bridegroom who loses his prospective bride and the Matchmaker who loses her money.

The second daughter decides to marry without the Matchmaker, and Tevye can't stop them.

Without consulting her father, the third daughter marries a Christian, and they soon will leave the area. This marriage goes against a basic Jewish conviction. When he learns they have been married by a Christian priest, Tevye says, "She is dead to us. We will forget her."

It's not that simple, though. Looking to heaven, Tevye debates with himself and with God. Can he deny his fundamental beliefs? On the other hand . . . can he deny his child? On the other hand . . .

Finally, because this is so basic, he says, "On the other hand . . . There is no other hand."

Even so, Tevye proves to have a soft spot in his heart for his daughters when it comes to enforcing tradition. Tevye says the right words, indicating that he considers her dead. She tries to say goodbye before she and her husband leave the village, but Tevye turns his back on her. Still, as she starts to leave, he whispers to his oldest daughter, "God be with you," so she can repeat the words to her sister and the new husband.

Moving from Tevye the dairyman to you and me, each of us faces some "on the other hands" and, in turn, we reach a point of personal integrity that makes us say, "On the other hand, there IS no other hand." We do what we must, without bending to the pressure of what other people think we should do. In my own case, when I was a few years older, I decided for myself whether I would go to the picture show and play cards. On a larger scale, at work or at play or in personal relationships, we have to look at who we are and what we stand for and may have to say, "On the other hand, there IS no other hand."

BENEDICTION

Now, as we close this week's Baraca Radio Bible Class, I challenge you to say, "There IS no other hand" as you consider these promises:

God's love that will never let you go.

God's grace that is greater than all your sin.

God's peace that passes all understanding.

These are yours through the One Who lived for others, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

WHOSE CONSCIENCE DO I FOLLOW?---SOURCES

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Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?* Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998,