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West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



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Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America

4 Principles for the Exercise of Christian Liberty

How should a Christian exercise freedom in Christ?

For now, as Martin Luther wrote, *“A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.”* As it was with the Master, so it is with the servant.

It was years ago now, but I still remember the discussion. I was making my way out of our church building some time after the morning service had ended, and was surprised to find a small group of people still engaged in vigorous conversation. One of them turned and said to me, *“Can Christians eat black pudding?”*

To the uninitiated in the mysteries of Scottish haute cuisine, it should perhaps be said that black pudding is not haggis! It is a sausage made of blood and suet, sometimes with flour or meal.

It seems a trivial question. Why the vigorous debate? Because, of course, of the Old Testament’s regulations about eating blood (Leviticus 17:10ff).

Although (as far as I am aware) no theological dictionary contains an entry under B for *“The Black Pudding Controversy,”* this unusual discussion raised some most basic hermeneutical and theological issues:

1. How is the Old Testament related to the New?
2. How is the Law of Moses related to the gospel of Jesus Christ?
3. How should a Christian exercise freedom in Christ?

The Council of Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, sought to answer such practical questions faced by the early Christians as they wrestled with how to enjoy freedom from the Mosaic administration without becoming stumbling blocks to Jewish people.

These were questions to which Paul in particular gave a great deal of thought. He was, after all, one of those appointed by the Jerusalem Council to circulate and explain the letter that summarized the decisions of the apostles and elders (Acts 15:22ff; 16:4). Faced with similar issues in the church at Rome, he provided them with a series of principles that apply equally well to twenty-first-century Christians. His teaching in Romans 14:1–15:13 contains healthy (and very necessary) guidelines for the exercise of Christian liberty. Here are four of them:

Principle 1: Christian liberty must never be flaunted. *“The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God”* (Romans 14:22, ESV).

We are free in Christ from the Mosaic dietary laws; Christ has pronounced all food clean (Mark 7:18-19). We may eat black pudding after all!



West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church



4 Principles for the Exercise of Christian Liberty - Cont'd

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But you do not need to exercise your liberty in order to enjoy it. Indeed, Paul elsewhere asks some very penetrating questions of those who insist on exercising their liberty whatever the circumstances: Does this really build up others? Is this really liberating you—or has it actually begun to enslave you (Romans 14:19; 1 Corinthians 6:12)?

The subtle truth is that the Christian who has to exercise his or her liberty is in bondage to the very thing he or she insists on doing. Says Paul, if the kingdom consists for you in food, drink, and the like, you have missed the point of the gospel and the freedom of the Spirit (Romans 14:17).

Principle 2: Christian liberty does not mean that you welcome fellow Christians only when you have sorted out their views on X or Y (or with a view to doing that).

God has welcomed them in Christ, as they are; so should we (Romans 14:1, 3). True, the Lord will not leave them as they are. But He does not make their pattern of conduct the basis of His welcome. Neither should we.

We have many responsibilities for our fellow Christians, but being their judge is not one of them. Christ alone is that (Romans 14:4, 10-13). How sad it is to hear (as we do far too often) the name of another Christian mentioned in conversation, only for someone to pounce immediately on him or her in criticism. That is not so much a mark of discernment as it is the evidence of a judgmental spirit.

What if the measure we use to judge others becomes the measure used to judge us (Romans 14:10-12; Matthew 7:2)?

Principle 3: Christian liberty ought never to be used in such a way that you become a stumbling block to another Christian (Romans 14:13).

When Paul states this principle, it is not a spur-of-the-moment reaction, but a settled principle he has thought out and to which he has very deliberately committed himself (see 1 Corinthians 8:13). When that commitment is made, it eventually becomes so much a part of our thinking that it directs our behavior instinctively. We are given liberty in Christ in order to be the servants of others, not in order to indulge our own preferences.

Principle 4: Christian liberty requires grasping the principle that will produce this true biblical balance: “We ... ought ... not to please ourselves.... For even Christ did not please himself” (Romans 15:1-3).

There is something devastatingly simple about this. It reduces the issue to the basic questions of love for the Lord Jesus Christ and a desire to imitate Him since His Spirit indwells us to make us more like Him.

True Christian liberty, unlike the various “freedom” or “liberation” movements of the secular world, is not a matter of demanding the “rights” we have. Dare one say that the American Founding Fathers, for all their wisdom, may have inadvertently triggered off a distortion of Christianity by speaking about our “rights” to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? The Christian realizes that before God he or she possesses no “rights” by nature. In our sinfulness, we have forfeited all of our “rights.”



West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church



4 Principles for the Exercise of Christian Liberty - Cont'd

How should a Christian exercise freedom in Christ?

Only when we recognize that we do not deserve our “rights” can we properly exercise them as privileges. Sensitivity to others in the church, especially weaker others, depends on this sense of our own unworthiness. If we assume that we have liberties to be exercised at all costs, we become potentially lethal weapons in a fellowship, all too capable of destroying someone for whom Christ has died (Romans 14:15, 20).

That does not mean that I must become the slave of another’s conscience. John Calvin puts the point well when he says that we restrain the exercise of our freedom for the sake of weak believers, but not when we are faced with Pharisees who demand that we conform to what is unscriptural. Where the gospel is at stake, liberty needs to be exercised; where the stability of a weak Christian is at stake, we need to restrain it.

This is all part and parcel of “living between the times.” Already, in Christ, we are free, but we do not yet live in a world that can cope with our freedom. One day we will enjoy “the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). Then may we eat black pudding whenever and wherever we want to! But not yet.

For now, as Martin Luther wrote, “A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.”

As it was with the Master, so it is with the servant. ~ *Dr. Sinclair Ferguson - Excerpt taken from ‘In Christ Alone’.*

Are Those Who Have Never Heard of Christ Going to Hell?

That’s one of the most emotionally laden questions that a Christian can ever be asked. Nothing is more terrifying or more awful to contemplate than that any human being would go to hell. On the surface, when we ask a question like that, what’s lurking there is, “How could God ever possibly send some person to hell who never even had the opportunity to hear of the Savior? It just doesn’t seem right.”

I would say the most important section of Scripture to study with respect to that question is the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. The point of the book of Romans is to declare the Good News—the marvelous story of redemption that God has provided for humanity in Christ, the riches and the glory of God’s grace, the extent to which God has gone to redeem us. But when Paul introduces the gospel, he begins in the first chapter by declaring that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven and this manifestation of God’s anger is directed against a human race that has become ungodly and unrighteous. So the reason for God’s anger is anger against evil. God’s not angry with innocent people; He’s angry with guilty people. The specific point for which they are charged with evil is in the rejection of God’s self-disclosure.

Paul labors the point that from the very first day of creation and through the creation, God has plainly manifested His eternal power and being and character to every human being on this planet. In other words, every human being knows that there is a God and that He is accountable to God. Yet every human being disobeys God. Why does Paul start his exposition of the gospel at that point? What he’s trying to do, and what he develops in the book of Romans, is this:



West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church



Are Those Who Have Never Heard of Christ Going to Hell? - Cont'd

Christ is sent into a world that is already on the way to hell. Christ is sent into the world that is lost, that is guilty of rejecting the Father whom they do know.

Now, let's go back to your original question, "Does God send people to hell who have never heard of Jesus?" God never punishes people for rejecting Jesus if they've never heard of Jesus. When I say that, people breathe a sigh of relief and say, "Then we'd better not tell anybody about Jesus because somebody might reject him. Then they're really in deep trouble." But again, there are other reasons to go to hell. To reject God the Father is a very serious thing. And no one will be able to say on the last day, "I didn't know that you existed," because God has revealed Himself plainly. Now the Bible makes it clear that people desperately need Christ. God may grant His mercy unilaterally at some point, but I don't have any reason to have much hope in that. I think we have to pay serious attention to the passionate command of Christ to go to the whole world, to every living creature, and tell them of Jesus. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

Recognizing the Earth Is the Lord's

It was Bonaventure who offered the thought: "In order that we may be able to extol and glorify God, and in order that we may advance to the knowledge of God, we must transfer to the divine that which pertains to the creature ... nearly all creatures possess certain noble characteristics which furnish a source for our understanding of God, e.g., the lion possesses fortitude; the lamb, meekness; the rock, solidity; the serpent, prudence—hence it is necessary that many names be transferred to God."

John Calvin agreed with these sentiments. "There is not an atom of the universe in which you cannot see some brilliant sparks at least of His glory."

The earth, nature that surrounds us, the world—everything is full of God. Nature is a glorious theater, a spectacular sound-and-light show of the beauty of God. But nature is not God. To worship the whole or any part of nature is idolatry. To confuse God and nature is to fall into pantheism, an intolerable monism that obscures the distinction between creatures and Creator.

But the universe is God's handiwork. It sparkles with the revelation of its Maker. It is not an independent entity existing alongside and apart from God. There is no dualism divorcing God from the world. The earth is the Lord's. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*

Almost Too Wonderful to Believe

"What a great thing it is to walk through this world knowing that though few here give you a second glance, everyone in heaven looks on with baited wonder that God, the Almighty King of Glory, has chosen to live inside your frail, poor flesh." ~ *Joel Beeke (from his commentary on I John)*



West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church



Keeping the Faith in a Faithless Age

“The greatest question of our time,” historian Will Durant offered, “is not communism versus individualism, not Europe versus America, not even East versus the West; it is whether men can live without God.” That question, it now appears, will be answered in our own day.

For centuries, the Christian church has been the center of Western civilization. Western culture, government, law, and society were based on explicitly Christian principles. Concern for the individual, a commitment to human rights, and respect for the good, the beautiful, and the true—all of these grew out of Christian convictions and the influence of revealed religion.

All of these, we now hasten to add, are under serious attack. The very notion of right and wrong is now discarded by large sectors of American society. Where it is not discarded, it is often debased. Taking a page out of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, modern secularists simply declare wrong, right, and right, wrong.

A New Landscape

Quaker theologian D. Elton Trueblood once described America as a “cut flower civilization.” Our culture, he argued, is cut off from its Christian roots like a flower cut at the stem. Though the flower will hold its beauty for a time, it is destined to wither and die.

When Trueblood spoke those words more than two decades ago, the flower still had some color and signs of life. But the blossom has long since lost its vitality, and it is time for the fallen petals to be acknowledged.

“If God does not exist,” Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov argued, “everything is permitted.” The permissiveness of modern American society can scarcely be exaggerated, but it can be traced directly to the fact that modern men and women act as if God does not exist or is powerless to accomplish His will.

The Christian church now finds itself facing a new reality. The church no longer represents the central core of Western culture. Though outposts of Christian influence remain, these are exceptions rather than the rule. For the most part, the church has been displaced by the reign of secularism.

The daily newspaper brings a constant barrage that confirms the current state of American society. This age is not the first to see unspeakable horror and evil, but it is the first to deny any consistent basis for identifying evil as evil or good as good.

The faithful church is, for the most part, tolerated as one voice in the public arena, but only so long as it does not attempt to exercise any credible influence on the state of affairs. Should the church speak forcefully to an issue of public debate, it is castigated as coercive and out of date.

A New Role

How does the church think of itself as it faces this new reality? During the 1980s, it was possible to think in ambitious terms about the church as the vanguard of a moral majority. That confidence has been seriously shaken by the events of the past decade.



West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church



Keeping the Faith in a Faithless Age - Cont'd

Little progress toward the re-establishment of a moral center of gravity can be detected. Instead, the culture has moved swiftly toward a more complete abandonment of all moral conviction.

The confessing church must now be willing to be a moral minority, if that is what the times demand. The church has no right to follow the secular siren call toward moral revisionism and politically correct positions on the issues of the day.

Whatever the issue, the church must speak as the church—that is, as the community of fallen but redeemed, who stand under divine authority. The concern of the church is not to know its own mind, but to know and follow the mind of God. The church's convictions must not emerge from the ashes of our own fallen wisdom but from the authoritative Word of God, which reveals the wisdom of God and His commands.

The church is to be a community of character. The character produced by a people who stand under the authority of the sovereign God of the universe will inevitably be at odds with a culture of unbelief.

An Old Call

The American church faces a new situation. This new context is as current as the morning newspaper and as old as those first Christian churches in Corinth, Ephesus, Laodicea, and Rome. Eternity will record whether the American church is willing to submit only to the authority of God or whether the church will forfeit its calling in order to serve lesser gods.

The church must awaken to its status as a moral minority and hold fast to the gospel we have been entrusted to preach. In so doing, the deep springs of permanent truth will reveal the church to be a life-giving oasis amid America's moral desert. ~ *Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.*

Searching for Truth

Whenever people ask me what I do for a living, I respond by telling them I am a pastor. When I tell them I am a pastor, people appear to be instantly filled with a range of emotions as they try to figure out how to respond. Depending on their spiritual state and their relationship to Christ and the church, their responses range from fear to comfort, from anxiety to delight. Some people attempt to change the subject as quickly as possible, some want to tell me all about their spiritual journey, some want to unload all their burdens, some talk about why they left the church, and others rejoice in our common faith in Christ. But more often than not, when I tell people I'm a pastor, they have questions—questions about our church, about what I believe, about the Bible, God, and the after life. All people have questions. We are inquisitive by nature. And in this age of pluralism, atheism, and skepticism, many people are searching for truth and the answers to life's ultimate questions.

In some ways, pastors have more opportunities than other Christians to proclaim and explain the gospel and do the work of an evangelist and apologist. It is one of the joys of being a pastor. By the very nature of what we do, pastors are theologians and apologists. But in truth, every Christian is a theologian and an apologist. The question for all of us is whether we are good theologians and apologists and whether we are serious students of Scripture and the theology and answers that come from Scripture.



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Searching for Truth - Cont'd

Every Christian is called to be ready to give an answer for the hope that’s within us, as Peter commands us, and never to forget that we are to give our answers with “gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).

As we do our good works before the watching world—not to be seen by men in order to get glory for ourselves, but so that the world might see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven—people will naturally ask us why we do all that we do, why we believe what we believe, and why we hold to the hope that is within us. And when they do, we must not be afraid, for Christ has promised that the Holy Spirit is with us to give us the courage and compassion to speak the truth in love. For this is one of the chief ways we shine as lights in the darkness of the world, knowing that people can only see the light if the Holy Spirit opens their eyes, expels the darkness, regenerates their hearts, and makes them alive to the light of the glory of Jesus Christ. ~ *Dr. Burk Parsons - Co-pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla.*

Birthday and Anniversary Corner - August 2017

Birthdays

Ben S. (8)
Carrie P. (24)
Ezra P. (26)
Phyllis C. (27)
Marlin H. (27)

Anniversaries

Mike and Cheryl P. (9)

Disclaimer

The views and opinions from the contributors to this newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of West Suffolk Baptist Church or it’s leadership.



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Please submit information to Walt Lawrence by the second Sunday of the month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.