

Acts 16:1-5

Spiritual Liberty: Love It! But at Times in Love Limit It!

Paul (and Truly Mature Christians) are Firm in Their Doctrine/Morals But Flexible With Other People v1-5

During the early phases of the 2nd Missionary Journey, Paul and Silas added Timothy of Lystra to the team. Because his mother was Jewish and to avoid a needless obstacle to their work (with believers and unbelievers) Paul had Timothy ritually circumcised...even though that ritual had nothing to do with his salvation (as Paul and the Jerusalem Council had clearly affirmed).

WHY would Paul who was ALWAYS so firm/clear about the fact that works, including religious rituals (circumcision/baptism) had nothing to do with salvation insist that Timothy submit to the ritual/work of circumcision?

BECAUSE: While this specific issue had nothing to do with Timothy's salvation theologically, pragmatically it would have been a distraction to their evangelistic/discipleship work at best and a major obstacle at worst.

BOTTOM LINE

Paul's actions here are consistent with the principles of spiritual liberty in the Christian life as described in Romans 14-15 and 1 Corinthians 8-10.

Which in large part are summed in the statement/truth:

"All kinds of things are permissible, but not all things are profitable..."

1 Corinthians 10:23-24

Despite his Jewish maternity, Timothy as a NT Christian was not under a spiritual obligation to be circumcised. But for him to remain uncircumcised would have been highly offensive to many Jewish folks, not just unbelievers to whom the missionary team would share the Gospel but also to many Jewish believers. Thus, at Paul's suggestion, Timothy waived his spiritual liberty in this area/under these circumstances and received the ritual to avoid needless offense to those he would be ministering to and with.

Do You Know the Three Principles of Spiritual Liberty?

1: Recognize the difference between areas of direct biblical command and areas of personal spiritual freedom. (Romans 14:1-4; 14).

2a: In areas of freedom, each believer is responsible to hammer out his/her personal convictions... (Romans 14:5)

2b: ...and is to allow other believers to do the same even though many of their convictions in these areas will be different than ours. (Romans 14:4;10)

3: We should limit our liberty, when necessary in love. (Romans 14:13-15)

In What Kind of Areas Do These Principles Apply Today?

American Christians have insisted and some still do insist that issues like the ones listed below are absolute black/white moral issues...when in fact most of us would agree they are areas of legitimate spiritual freedom, about which each believer should "be fully convinced in his/her own mind."

Doing (yard) work on Sundays

Riding in an Automobile

Parachute Jumping

Watching Movies at Home

Bowling (at a Bowling Alley)

Buying Insurance

Eating Food in a Church Building

Attending live theatre

Celebrating Christmas at All

Wearing a Toupee

Playing card games w/"real" cards

Riding in an Airplane

Going to Movie Theatres

Skating (at a Skating Rink)

Playing Pool (in/out of a Pool Hall)

Going to the Doctor (MDs)

Listening to music with a beat

Taking certain medications

Christmas Trees (Real or Artificial)

Wearing a Really Bad Toupee

Which One of These Three Types of Christians are You?

IOWs: Do You Know/Apply the Biblical Principles of Spiritual Liberty?

1: Strong Believers: do understand/enjoy their spiritual liberty and are not surprised or offended with other believers who have different convictions than they do. This believer is not arrogant about his/her knowledge of spiritual liberty but isn't surprised when other believers who don't totally misunderstand him/her. Moreover, they do not try to talk all other believers into embracing their personal convictions in areas of spiritual freedom.

2: Weak Believers: don't understand their (or others) spiritual liberty. They are surprised and/or offended by other believers whose specific convictions are different than theirs. AND: rather than simply being offended, weak believers can be influenced to violate their convictions by (otherwise totally legitimate) actions of strong believers. This is why strong believers will limit the when/where/how of certain expressions of their spiritual liberty in contexts that could cause weaker believers "to stumble" that is to violate their own convictions because they saw "James or Dale or Jean do X."

3: Legalistic Believers: don't understand the principles of spiritual liberty. They believe almost EVERY issue is black/white. They are offended by other believers whose convictions in areas of biblical freedom are different than theirs. But in contrast to weak believers, they will NOT be tempted to violate their convictions when this happens. What they will tend to do is to slander and question the sanctification and/or the salvation of strong believers. Legalistic believers are proud of their self-proclaimed spiritual superiority over other believers who dare to have different convictions than they do.

Take This To Heart

Spiritual Liberty: Let's Love It But at Times in Love Let's Limit It!

We are to love other believers including weaker ones and legalistic ones, but strong believers should not allow themselves or their churches to be controlled by legalistic believers.