

Resolving Non-Moral Christian Issues - 1

Should Christians play cards? Is it OK for Christians to go to the movies? Can a Christian play sports on Sunday, or even play sports at all? What about swimming, shouldn't Christians be separate when it comes to mixed bathing? What about wearing make-up, watching television, women wearing pants? What about listening to music? Is it Bach-only or more than that? Go to some parts of the States and if a man's hair touches his collar, he is considered a rank atheist. If a man wears steel-rimmed glasses, he is ungodly.

These and countless other issues make up what we might call the non-moral controversial issues of the church today. From its inception, the church has always had disputes over certain issues that could neither be said to be good or evil, but have been debated for ages. In the early church, it was the observance of certain days, eating meat offered to idols, certain carry-overs of Judaism. Today we debate whether certain clothing styles, forms of recreation, certain days and activities and styles of appearance are OK or not. Fortunately, the Bible gives us much insight on these issues.

There really are two main aspects to this: The first is biblically determining your own convictions, and secondly, graciously living with the convictions of others.

1 Corinthians helps us with the first part, Romans 14 and a bit of I Corinthians helps us with the second.

In Paul's day, you had a situation where pagan religions would offer meat to the idols. After the ceremony, the leftover meat would be sold at what was called the shambles. The prices for this meat were much lower than buying meat normally. How had this become a controversial issue for Christians? Well, some Christians went to the shambles and bought this meat at a lower price, and ate it. They said, "meat is meat – those idols are nothing! What's the big deal?" Other Christians said, "That meat was sacrificed to idols! How can Christians partake of that?" They felt offended that other Christians should eat such meat, while the Christians eating felt offended that they should be criticised and even offended that their fellow Christians did not join them in eating. Here you have a classic non-moral controversial issue. And that's the first point which the Word of God wants us to understand

1) Recognise that certain issues are non-moral.

Listen to Paul. "As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol *is* nothing in the world, and that *there is* none other God but one." I Corinthians 8:4. Paul says that an idol is a man-made thing – it means nothing. Likewise the meat. Listen to verse 8 "But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse." Paul wants his readers to understand that the issues are not about the actual physical objects or dates. It is similar to what Christ meant when he told the Pharisees in Matthew 15:11. "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man." vv19-20 "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: ²⁰These are *the things* which defile a man: but to eat with unwashen hands defileth not a man." As hard as it is for us, we have to accept that certain issues are non-moral issues. That does not make

them unimportant, it just means that we use different principles for determining the correct course of action. That often makes us uncomfortable, doesn't it? We'd prefer to have a list. Do this, and don't do that. Sign at the bottom, and no more confusion. But that is not the case in these areas. Let us say very strongly that not all issues are non-moral issues. You cannot say, "Well, my personal conviction is that it's okay to live together before marriage. I prayed about it and God gave me peace" Nonsense. God very explicitly said 'Flee fornication'. This is not a command you debate, figure out or pray about. It's there very clearly. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that the majority of life and its decisions are not open to any personal interpretation. However, issues like how to keep Sunday, wearing make-up, going to the movies, observing certain holidays, swimming with the opposite sex falls under this area of non-moral.

What we are talking about is a **neutral** issue. The issue itself is not evil like lying, laziness, greed, lust, selfishness and so on. It is a morally neutral: a day is nothing, food is nothing, clothing or make-up is nothing. Swimming is not good or evil. Playing sport isn't good or evil. And God meant it that way.

Did you realize that if God had meant us to have perfect knowledge on neutral issues He would have given it to us? The fact that He didn't means that it is part of our spiritual growth. It is part of the road to maturity to understand how to discern wisdom, how to enjoy your liberty in Christ without offending others. God means that one of the courses His children take in His spiritual curriculum is determining your own convictions on non-moral issues. And the first step is to concede that there are such things! There is one thing you will never convince a legalist of, and that is that a non-moral issue is a non-moral issue. But we need to understand that these abound. Paul says an idol is nothing. The meat is nothing. This is not an issue in itself; it is what surrounds it in terms of relationships between Christians that matters.

Is a cigarette sin? I mean is there something inherently wicked about rolling up leaves? No. The object is neutral. If you want to put those leaves in your mouth, set them on fire, breathe in the smoke and blow it out your nose, that's your decision. I think it is one step closer to the grave every time you do it, and it's definitely not honouring to your body as the Temple of the Holy Ghost, but my point is a cigarette is like that idol: just an object. It is nothing. And we have to get a more mature understanding of Christlikeness that goes beyond our comfortable list. How many Christians condemn drinking and smoking as violations of keeping the Temple of the Holy Ghost clean and pure, but see nothing wrong with huge meals, junk food and unhealthy eating? It shows that we are not thinking our convictions through consistently. The thing itself is not sin; it is what surrounds the issue. God-honouring morality is deeper than the external. Romans 14:17 : "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."

So we start by splashing some cold water over our heads, waking us up to the fact that non-moral issues are in fact just that, non-moral. They are not mentioned by name in Scripture, but we have nevertheless much information as to how to determine for ourselves how to tackle these issues as individual Christians. These things are not part of essential Christian doctrine, they could be called 'cosmetic issues'. The Bible calls them

‘doubtful things’. We need to form our convictions on these things, but churches which spend all their time majoring on cosmetic issues are breeding strife and divisions. God does not want that and has given us a guide as to how to form these convictions.

The first aspect of determining your conviction before God is:

- 1) **Form your conviction in obedience to Christ.** I call this *liberty under authority*. This is the foundation point. Christians get some funny ideas when it comes to the neutral areas. For some reason, we think that these are not area of obedience to Christ. We think that when it comes to movies, make-up and music, that it is no longer an issue of being under the lordship of Christ. In fact, it’s just the opposite. The only way you can form a God-honouring conviction is if you bring it to His feet. Because the thing is morally neutral does not mean that there can be no sin in doing it. We’ll see that a bit later. So morally neutral does not mean we kind of unbuckle the seatbelt of prudence, and let our hair down morally. Liberty in Christ is the freedom to serve Him. Someone said that liberty in Christ is effectively slavery to God. So Paul told the Christians struggling with the issues of eating meat that each individual had to think through the issues biblically and form his or her conviction as unto the Lord. Romans 14:7-9: “For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. ⁸For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s. ⁹For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.” Paul is saying, if you say, “Well, I do this, because *I* want to”, or “I do this because *I’m* OK with it” then you’ve missed the point entirely. As Christians we don’t live or die for ourselves. We belong to another entirely. We only do the things which please Him. To form a conviction for selfish gain is sin.

Liberty has a law, the law of loving and pleasing Christ first. Paul summed it up in I Corinthians 10:31: “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” To truly honour God, I must first bring this non-moral issue to His feet and find out in His Word if this is pleasing to Him. Not if it’s permissible – which sounds like Christians trying to get away with sin and call it Christian liberty -- but is it acceptable unto the Lord (Ephesians 5:10)?

However, though the conviction is made unto the Lord, the way you live it out will be extremely sensitive to others. We’ll see that next week as we examine living graciously with your conviction and with others.

So how do I bring this issue under the Lordship of Christ? Well that leads us into our second point for evaluating a non-moral issue and that is:

- 2) **It must be profitable.** Paul says in I Cor 10:23: “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.” Paul is saying that the non-moral issues are not forbidden things, they are lawful. However, he says, not all the lawful things are useful. They will not all be profitable to me in my spiritual life. They will not all build up. We could call this *liberty with purpose*. We do not say yes to a non-moral issue because it appeals to us, that is a classic sign

of a believer who is at that point rejecting the lordship of Christ. We have liberty, but it is under the eye and permission of our Master. So the question we must ask honestly is, will this thing make me a more useful servant of Christ? Will it detract from that in any way? You may have a conviction that you will never have a television. It must be because you feel that television can not be useful to your spiritual growth. Perhaps you have decided, under obedience to Christ that you can, but there are certain programmes which will not edify you at all, and you will not watch them. Perhaps you have decided that Sunday is a day of quiet meditation between you and God. Do it because you believe such an action will grow your walk with God. Perhaps you have decided that fellowshiping, swimming and family time is appropriate for Sunday. Do so because you believe it is building you up in Christ. Don't work backwards by the way. Don't decide, and then say, "Yes, I think it can be spiritually profitable" Start with the question, "What will be spiritually profitable?" and then examine the non-moral issue.

This we must do, by examining our whole Christian life. Our spiritual walk with God: will this grow it, or crowd it out? Will it steal time from being with God? Your mind: what will this thing do you to your thinking? How about your relationships? How will this affect your testimony, amongst the unsaved? At the end of the day, will it build, or break down? Will it usurp or bow in obedience to Christ? It will differ from person to person, and that is why God calls each of us to be fully persuaded in our own minds. Remember, this is not seeing how far you can bend God to indulge you; it is the loving obedient relationship of a slave to his master. Your Master is Wonderful and loving, and enjoys our enjoyment! Nevertheless, we must not give our selfish flesh an inch, or Satan will exploit these things for the dividing of the church, and the ruining of the testimony of the church before the world.

The next principle of forming a conviction is

- 3) **It must not enslave.** Paul says in I Corinthians 6:12: "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any." Paul is saying, again, there are non-moral issues. They are lawful in themselves. They are not forbidden. But, says Paul, I will not allow any thing to bring me under its power. I will not become a slave to this activity or issue. You could call this *liberty with responsibility*. I know a good pastor who was an excellent marathon athlete. He has said though how eventually he stopped running competitively because it was becoming an idol in his life. Was there anything sinful in running? No, it's a non-moral issue. But when it began to keep him out of church and when training time took him away from prayer and the Bible, he realized that he was being brought under the power of this thing. Ask yourself, will this thing enslave me in any way, or is it completely under the Lordship of Christ? For one lady, wearing make-up is nothing; it's simply part of her appearance. For another, wearing make-up traps her in a world of vanity and comparing herself with others, with the superficial. For her, the thing would be wrong to use. The make-up is not evil. But her individual response to it would be. So she should form her conviction before Jesus taking this into account. For one, going to the gym is simply a workout. For another, the music reminds him of his former life, or the drive to tone the body becomes an

obsession. For one, computer games are simply an amusement. For another, they become something that replaces study time, family time, even normal hygiene and sleep. It takes a lot to admit that something will enslave you. Humility memorises the following verse “Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.” Never say, “It won’t harm me” because you’re already in a place of misguided confidence. Admit that you could be enslaved by anything – and evaluate this thing for whether it will edify and be under Christ’s rule in your life, or whether it will become another master.

- 4) Finally, the fourth principle for determining convictions is that **you must hold it without doubting**. That might seem strange, but Paul addresses it in Romans 14:20, 22-23: “For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed *are* pure; but *it is* evil for that man who eateth with offence. Hast thou faith? have *it* to thyself before God. Happy *is* he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. ²³And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because *he eateth* not of faith: for whatsoever *is* not of faith is sin.”

“I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that *there is* nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him *it is* unclean” (14) Paul is saying that if you decide on a conviction before God by applying the above principles, but go ahead and violate that conviction, you have sinned. Seems impossible? Consider that the issue is not the non-moral object, day or activity. It is your response to it. And if you have decided that something will not be profitable for you, that it may enslave you, then to go ahead and do it is to say you care nothing for your spiritual growth, and that you are not under the lordship of Christ.

Now, this does not mean that your conviction will never change. In fact, as we will see next week, the weaker Christian will hopefully change his or her conviction on certain issues as they mature. So we are not saying you will never re-think these issues. You should and will have to if you are growing. What Paul means here is whatever you have decided upon between you and God right now, do not go back upon your decision. Don’t change your conviction because others are doing it. Take these issues seriously, they may be non-essential doctrine, but God is to be worshipped in the details of our lives. Our lives are made up of very few huge decisions, it is pretty much an everyday mundane thing. And if you cannot see and understand obedience to God in those seemingly unimportant details of lie, then you have not grasped Christlikeness at all.

That wraps up the first part of the issue of non-moral convictions: determining your own. However, Scripture places far more emphasis on the second aspect, and that is graciously living with the convictions of others. In fact, if you merely learn how to determine your own convictions, you are only half the way there, because you will find another believer who followed exactly the same steps and came to the opposite conclusion! How do we live with each other? I encourage you to join me next week as we round off this look at resolving non-moral issues.