

Christian Freedom

By David Feddes

Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). The apostle Paul said, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). Jesus came to set us free from the terrible grip of Satan, to free us from our own deadly sins and habits that destroy our lives. He came to set us free and to bring us Christian freedom, real liberty.

On some things, Christians are not completely free. We are not free under God’s blessing to do whatever it is that we want or to believe just any old thing that we want to believe. There are things that we must believe in order to be Christians at all. There are things that God commands us and orders us to do, and other things that he commands us not to do. But there are also areas where Christians are quite free to decide for ourselves, where one person’s standard does not apply to everybody. That is what I would like to think about with you today, some areas where Christians differ and yet can still be Christians and seek to be unified in their faith.

Touchy issues

There are a number of difficult and touchy issues that Christians disagree about. Even in identifying some of these issues, I will provoke disagreement with some of you. Some of you may think these issues are not worth mentioning at all, while others of you may think these issues are so important that no Christian could possibly have a different opinion about them.

One area of different standards among Christians would be what kind of movies we should go to. Some would say almost no movies whatsoever. What kind of music ought we to listen to? Some Christians will listen to music and to songs that others will think are not good. In fact, they think it is bad and that you should not be listening to that. Some of it might truly be very bad, but other music may be something that one Christian could benefit from and another could not. How about dancing? Some Christians believe that all dancing is evil. Others have dancing as part of their worship services.

Another area of difference is whether you are allowed to play cards or not. Some of you say, “That is the nuttiest thing I ever heard. What could possibly be wrong with playing a game?” But if you roll dice or shuffle cards, some people associate that with believing in luck or chance rather than in God’s plan and providence. There have been entire groups of Christians that did not permit anyone to play cards.

Drinking alcohol is another issue. Some Christians believe that it is always wrong to drink anything with alcoholic content. Some Christians believe that it is always sinful to smoke. There have been other Christians whose church council room was billowing with cigar and cigarette smoke. Christians have not always agreed on whether drinking alcohol or smoking is a good thing.

How about shopping on Sunday? Some people regard Sunday as the Lord's Day and as a new Sabbath where you are to rest from those things and not make other people work. They believe that you should not be dining out on Sunday, where you are sitting down and eating and other people are being paid to work and to serve you on God's special day. Other Christians head straight for the restaurant the moment they get out of church, and then they go shopping.

Trick-or-treating is another thing that some Christians think is of the devil. Halloween is an evil holiday. It encourages the wrong kind of activities and beliefs in evil powers and spirits, and so your kids should not go trick-or-treating. Other Christians say, "Hey, it is fun for the kids to dress up a little bit and go out and get some candy. Maybe a little tough on their teeth, but other than that, trick-or-treating is fine."

Books and movies that involve fantasy and that have certain kinds of magic performed are another area of disagreement. Harry Potter is the bestselling example of books and movies that some Christians are very worried about. Other Christians say, "Oh, come on. It is harmless. It is make-believe and fantasy, and it is not corrupting my faith or ruining my doctrine."

How about what we do at communion? Some people think that the only kind of bread you ought to have at communion is unleavened bread with no yeast in it, because yeast is a sign of sin in Scripture. I remember somebody telling me that, and I said, "Oh, you mean like that parable where Jesus said, 'The kingdom of God is like yeast.'" At any rate, yeast can sometimes symbolize the kingdom of God, and sometimes it is a symbol of sin. Christians who argue about whether bread ought to have yeast or whether bread ought to be unfermented can make that an area of contention. There is also a question of whether there should be real wine or just grape juice at communion. Some Christians say it is not really communion at all unless it is fermented wine. Others say fermented wine has alcoholic content, that is wrong, and we should drink only grape juice. This is an area on which Christians disagree. Sad to say, sometimes even the meal that is supposed to bring them together and unite them and show their oneness as the body of Christ becomes something that Christians bicker and divide about.

The list does not stop there. Christians sometimes differ on how to approach education. Some think public schools are fine, and they will teach their children the things of the faith at home. They believe their children can learn to witness in the public school and can learn some things there and still maintain their Christian grounding. Others say Christian schools are the way to go. There should be schools run by Christian parents, and this is the way God wants us to educate our children. Still other Christians say the Bible tells parents to educate their children and does not mention schools at all. Homeschooling is the only godly way to bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Christians can have some pretty sharp disagreements on what kind of education ought to be provided to children.

Christians may differ on dress codes and what constitutes modesty, how high hemlines should be allowed to go, how low necklines ought to be allowed to plunge, and the kinds of things that boys wear. Should a man wear a ponytail? Should he wear an earring? These are things related to dress and modesty.

Some Christians have quite different standards about dating and courtship and romance. Some do not think much about that and say, "Kids dating somebody or going with somebody in fourth or fifth grade, no harm in that. It is all so cute and so nice." Others say, "We have an 80 to 90 percent fornication rate in our culture of people having sex before marriage." They believe it has something to do with the dating scene and playing games with romance, and so we should have a more structured approach to courtship, where people do not even start pairing off until they are at an age and with an intent to find out whether it will lead to marriage. This can be a very important area, and yet not all Christians agree upon it.

How about contraception, birth control? How about family size? Some Christians see no problem here and say, "This is an area where you do as you see fit for yourself." Other Christians say, "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him" (Psalm 127:3). Wherever there were large families in the Bible, it was considered a blessing from God, and so they ask, "Are you sure you ought to have your 1.2 children and then quit?"

Another area is the whole matter of patriotism and whether you support the military. Someone might say, "Every good red-blooded Christian is a patriot and will support our troops." Other Christians say, "What do you mean, support our troops? Many of the early Christians did not allow participation in the military." Jesus told us, "But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:39). Is it not obvious, they ask, that you should not be supporting troops or become a soldier? Do not be so gung-ho about your country. It is the kingdom of God that matters. Out of that come quite different views among Christians about the military and about supporting one's country.

Then there is the question of how we deal with people of other religions. Hindus and vegetarians, for instance, do not eat meat. What do you do when you are around Hindus or vegetarians? Do you order an extra-thick steak, medium rare, and show them that you eat what you like to eat, or do you handle it differently? The same thing applies in relation to Muslims and Jews. They do not eat pork. When you are around them, do you make sure you have an extra side of bacon just to make sure they know you are not a Muslim or a Jew?

These are some of the touchy issues that come up in the area of disagreement among Christians and in the area of Christian freedom. I can also mention some doctrinal areas. Should babies be baptized? Should women serve in the offices of the church, such as elder and pastor? What view of the rapture or the millennium should we believe? There are areas in the realm of biblical teaching and doctrine that Christians have not been able to be of one mind on.

How do we deal with some of those differences? It is very important, as we deal with differences among fellow believers and as we relate to non-believers, that we have a better handle on Christian freedom. We will not have everything figured out by the end of this talk, but we will at least have a framework and some guidelines to think about.

Extremely like-minded

Some of the differences arise because our consciences have a slightly different sense of what is right. Your conscience might feel one way on some matters, and mine might feel another way.

Other differences may arise from culture. Different cultures have certain practices that have come to be accepted in the whole area of conscience, and yet believers are still able to be united.

One approach is to be extremely like-minded. In the words of a rhyme:

Believe as I believe—no more, no less;
That I am right (and no one else) confess.
Feel as I feel, think only as I think;
Eat what I eat; drink only what I drink.
Look as I look, do always as I do;
And then—and only then!—
I'll fellowship with you.

There is a place for like-mindedness among Christians, but if we take the approach that we all have to agree one hundred percent of the time on everything, it is a recipe for disaster. You are never going to see eye to eye with everybody else one hundred percent of the time. We need to be of one mind on matters of absolute central importance, but then allow a lot of room for freedom on other matters and on cultural differences.

Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem titled “We and They.”

Father and Mother, and Me,
Sister and Auntie say
All the people like us are We,
And every one else is They.

And They live over the sea,
While We live over the way,
But—would you believe it?—
They look upon We
As only a sort of They!

We eat pork and beef
With cow-horn-handled knives.
They who gobble Their rice off a leaf,
Are horrified out of Their lives;

While they who live up a tree,
And feast on grubs and clay,
(Isn't it scandalous?) look upon We
As a simply disgusting They!

All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
And every one else is They:

But if you cross over the sea,
Instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it!)
looking on We
As only a sort of They!

There are a lot of we-and-they divisions in the world. There are many different cultures, and even in places where Christianity has come and had its influence, it has not always produced Christians who look exactly alike. We need to understand that there are going to be differences of conscience and differences of culture among believers. As we think about that, we want to hear what the Bible has to say about handling freedom.

The apostle Paul writes, “All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained” (Philippians 3:15–16). Just think about that for a moment. This is an inspired apostle of God saying that if on some point you think differently, we can leave room for God to convince you. Let God make that clear to you, and make sure you live up to what you have already attained. On some matters, Paul could say, “If anybody preaches a different gospel, let him be eternally condemned” (Galatians 1:8). On other matters, Paul could say, if you think differently on something, we will leave it to God to persuade you. You do not have to think exactly like me right away.” “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1), and Paul continues to insist on that.

In considering a particular area of disagreement, one author has mentioned four possible approaches.

1. **Mature participant:** I think it’s fine for me to do this, but that does not make me superior.
2. **Mature non-participant:** It’s best that I not do this, but I won’t judge those who do.
3. **Immature participant:** I do what I like, and nobody tells me what to do!
4. **Immature non-participant:** I won’t do it, and no real Christian would do it.

You can see that there are very different kinds of attitudes here. What we want to cultivate is the ability to handle Christian freedom in a more mature manner. Whether we participate or do not participate, we follow our conscience as God directs it, and yet we are slow to jump on other people’s case when their conscience and their leading from the Lord, according to the Scriptures, is somewhat different.

I want to think about the framework, first of all, of using my own freedom, and then of relating to other people’s freedom.

My own freedom: using without abusing

In talking about my own freedom, a good way to summarize it is to use it without abusing it. I am going to raise four questions. The first question I ask about using my own freedom is, will it honor God? Second, will it trip others? Third, will it trap me, addict me, or get me hooked on

something? Fourth, will it feel clean? Will it be okay with my conscience? These are four very important questions to ask in using our freedom.

1. Will it honor God?

The first question is, will it honor God? I am not making these questions up out of my own head. They are based on scriptural revelation. Scripture says, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Will this particular movie that I am thinking about watching honor God? Will this music help me to know God more and delight in him more, or will it tend to drag me down? This is not just a matter of looking for a simple yes or no, or a do or a do not. It is asking the God question, instead of simply thinking, well, all movies are bad, or all movies are fine.

Another passage says, “If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Romans 14:8). Scripture also says, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). We have the Scriptures to guide us. We have God’s glory to honor. In every decision we make, it is not enough just to say, “Well, I am free.” The question is, free for what? Are you free to honor God in doing this particular activity?

2. Will it trip others up?

The second question is, will it trip others up? Will it cause them to stumble or be a hindrance to them? Scripture says, “If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died” (Romans 14:15). Paul is talking here about eating meat that might have been sacrificed to idols. He says that when you are out shopping for meat, it is usually best not even to ask where it comes from, because idols are really nothing, and meat is from God and is a good gift. If you are in the marketplace, just buy the meat, take it home, eat it, and enjoy it.

But Paul goes on to say that if the seller tells you, “This is extra good, special meat, because it was first offered to an idol, to one of the Roman gods or goddesses, before it came into the market,” then do not take it. You want to make sure they know that you do not believe in those gods and that you do not think meat is especially good because of that. If you have guests who ask whether the meat was sacrificed to an idol or not, or if you are dealing with a fellow Christian who has just come out of idol worship and is very careful to avoid anything that might have any association with idols, then be careful what you serve. If they ask where the meat came from and you say, “It came from that marketplace right over there by the idol temple,” you are going to cause them tremendous grief.

So in your own life and in the choices you make, you may be free to eat meat that was possibly offered to idols. But if you know it was offered to idols, and if you are serving it to someone and letting them know that it was offered to idols, then you could be destroying them, dragging them back into paganism, or offending them very deeply. Paul says, “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Corinthians 8:9).

He goes on to say, “When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ” (1 Corinthians 8:12). Christ lives in them, and their conscience is not free to participate in a certain activity.

Suppose there is a movie that you would not have any problem going to, but you have a friend who has some hang-ups about that movie. You say, “Come on, it is okay. It is not that bad. I think it is a good movie from what I have heard. You ought to go.” If this person has a tender conscience about that kind of movie, or about certain kinds of music because it had a bad impact on them in the past, or because they are being especially careful about what goes into their mind, who are you to push them into something that goes against their conscience? Ask the question, will it trip others up, when you are dealing with this matter of Christian freedom?

3. Will it trap me?

Another important question is, will it trap me? The Corinthians were saying, “Everything is permissible for me,” and Paul responds, “ ‘Everything is permissible for me,’ but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible for me,’ but I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12). He is saying, I am not going to get trapped, addicted, or ruled by anything.

I believe that drinking alcohol is not always wrong. The Bible speaks of wine that gladdens the heart of man as a gift from God (Psalm 104:15). Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding (John 2:9–10), and I do not think he changed it into grape juice. So I think it is permissible for Christians to drink wine and other alcoholic beverages. But I almost never drink myself, because I have seen the damage that addiction can do. If I know someone who has alcoholism anywhere in their family history, I strongly urge them not to drink alcohol. Not because drinking alcohol is always and everywhere wrong, but because for them it is a danger.

Someone who is a Native American should never touch alcohol, because the addiction rate to alcohol is so high among Native Americans. There are different people groups that have either a much higher likelihood of becoming addicted or a much lower one. People in the low-risk groups might be able to drink freely, never get drunk, and never get addicted. For myself, I will occasionally drink part of a glass of wine if I am in someone’s home and it is offered, or I might turn it down without giving offense. I am sensitive about that for myself, but even more so for brothers and sisters whose family background or other factors might predispose them to getting hooked.

Scripture warns us, “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you do not fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). Do not ever overestimate your own strength or your ability not to become trapped, hooked, or addicted.

You might think, for example, that there is nothing sinful about having cable TV. But if you find yourself constantly hitting that little clicker and going to channels that show very seamy movies and very bad images, do not overestimate yourself. Do not say, “I will do better next time. I am not going to do that in the future.” If you have that problem, get rid of the access, because you need to be careful that you do not fall. “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13).

There are things such as movies with sexual content, the drinking of alcoholic beverages, or even the use of things that involve witchcraft or sorcery. For some people, these things might be only fantasy. But if you have any occult dabbling in your background, or if you were once involved with Wicca, then things that might be a harmless distraction for some people could have a power to grab you and really harm you. So you have to ask the question, is this going to trap me, even if overall it would not always be wrong for everybody?

4. Will it feel clean?

A fourth question is, will it feel clean? Here I am not trying to be entirely subjective so that whatever you feel is right for you, but be very careful not to go against what you feel to be clean, because God gave you a conscience for a reason. Your conscience is not always right, but it is the main tool that God has given you, in connection with his word, to give you a sense of what is right and wrong. “Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Romans 14:22–23).

To go back again to Paul’s example of eating meat from the marketplace, one person may say, “I buy the meat without asking any questions. I eat it, it tastes good,” and that is what Paul recommends. But if you are a person whose conscience is very sensitive and you always want to ask where the meat came from before you eat it, then Paul says, if that is what your conscience is telling you, listen to your conscience. Do not trample on it.

At the same time, Paul also asks, “Why should my freedom be judged by another’s conscience? If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?” (1 Corinthians 10:29–30). How can both of those things go together? One answer is that you should follow your own conscience. But when you follow your conscience and you feel a little freer than somebody else might, you do not have to advertise what you are doing right in front of them.

If you think it is okay to drink alcohol, and you know somebody else does not think that is okay, then if you are going to have a social drink or a little bit of wine, do so in your home and in your privacy, not right in the face of somebody else whom you know it offends. If you think a Harry Potter book is okay, you do not have to read that book or leave it lying around right in front of people who think Harry Potter is the worst thing in the world. I am not asking you to be a hypocrite. I am saying that there are matters where Christians may feel free in their own conscience, but they should not trample on other people’s conscience by advertising their particular approach.

To summarize, in handling my own freedom, the key is using it without abusing it. Ask yourself at least these four questions.

1. Will it honor God?
2. Will it trip others?
3. Will it trap me?
4. Will it feel clean to my conscience?

Others' freedom: differing without dividing

As we think about our use of Christian freedom, we also need to think about other people's freedom. How do we relate to their freedom? How can we differ without dividing? Here again, there are four questions. First, who is the judge? Second, what matters most? We need a sense of proportion. Some things matter much more than others, so ask the question, what matters most in this situation? Third, what would Jesus do? Finally, what will advance the mission and commend the gospel to other people?

1. Who is the judge?

First of all, who is the judge? Romans 14 says, "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (Romans 14:1). God has accepted him. Paul is talking about a fellow believer. "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4). "You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another" (Romans 14:10, 12–13).

There are at least a couple of ways to pass judgment. One is to think that a particular matter is something by which to judge somebody, assuming that you know what is right and that they are dead wrong. There is another level as well. Even if you know you are absolutely right about something, you can still use it wrongly to judge somebody else. Sometimes we judge a person not merely as being wrong on a particular point, but as being out of touch with God or not saved at all because of something we see in their life. We do not necessarily have to change our mind about whether something is wrong, but we must be very careful. To judge someone's standing with God based on the worst thing you know about them is a very dangerous practice.

God judges us first of all on the basis of his acceptance of us in Jesus Christ, not simply on the worst thing he knows about our beliefs or behavior. We should not jump too quickly to the conclusion that something is wrong in the first place unless we have strong biblical reason to say so. Even then, we should not be too quick to judge someone as outside the kingdom of God or cut off from Christ because of one particular area where they may be mistaken. God is the judge. I am not, and I need to treat others accordingly.

2. What matters most?

The second question is, what matters most? "If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in **love**... For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of **righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit**... Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to **peace and to mutual edification**... May the God of hope fill you with all **joy and peace** as you **trust** in him, so that you may overflow with **hope** by the **power of the Holy Spirit** (Rom 14:15-19; 15:13). What matters most are things like love, righteousness, peace, joy in the Holy Spirit, mutual edification, trust, hope, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is important to keep the important things central, and not to major in minors. This is true of matters of behavior, and it is also true of matters of doctrine. We should not pretend that the doctrine of the Trinity is on the same level as your view of when the millennium will occur and exactly what shape it will take. Belief in Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for your sins is far more important than your particular position on whether women ought to be ordained as pastors and elders or not. I am not saying that the question of women's ordination is unimportant. I am saying that it is far less important than the central realities of life in Christ and life in the Spirit.

It is very important, especially if you are a pastor or a teacher, to have a sense of proportion, so that you are not teaching everything as though it were equally important. It is also very important if you are planting a church or leading a church to have a sense of proportion and to help people disagree about some things without dividing over them, as long as they are still holding on to the central truths of the faith and share a common desire to live in the joy and peace and love of the Holy Spirit. If you plant a spirit of judgmentalism, pickiness, and majoring in minors, you will reap a harvest of division, and you will not have a congregation that can hold together. It is important, for leaders and for Christians in every role, to ask the question, what matters most, and then to pursue the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23).

3. What would Jesus do?

Another question to ask is, what would Jesus do? That question became popular through the WWJD movement, with bracelets and other memorabilia, but it is also a thoroughly biblical question. Scripture says, "For even Christ did not please himself ... Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy" (Romans 15:3,7-9). In that context, the apostle is telling Jews and Gentiles to accept one another, and he grounds that command in the fact that Christ has accepted both. That leads us to ask, in a wide range of situations, what would Jesus do? If Christ would accept someone despite a disagreement on this or that, then we should accept them as well.

4. What advances mission?

Another very important question in relation to Christian freedom is, what advances mission? What choice will help a non-believer to find Christianity attractive? The apostle Paul wrote, "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:19–23).

We have Christian friends who do not want to eat pork. One group of friends comes from Egypt, where a Muslim culture influenced even Christians to regard pork as undesirable. It appealed to them about as much as eating a dog might appeal to us, even though dogs are eaten in some

cultures. Some avoid pork for cultural reasons, others for health reasons, and some even for reasons they believe are biblical. When they come over to our house, we serve them something that does not involve pork.

This is wise in relating to fellow Christians, but it also matters in advancing mission. What about when you have a Muslim friend coming over? I remember one time when we unintentionally mishandled this. My daughter, who was in nursing school, invited a fellow student who was Muslim to come home with her. That evening we happened to have a large pork roast for supper. We did not know she was coming until my daughter arrived at the door with her, or we would have chosen something very different for that meal. Not because we are Muslims, and not because we think it is wrong for us to eat pork, but because if you know a Muslim guest is coming and Muslims do not eat pork, you want to serve something else so that you have a better opportunity to build a relationship. She understood we weren't Muslims, and she ate some other food, but she was not going to eat pork because it violated her convictions.

The same principle applies if you have a Hindu friend. You might need to plan a vegetarian meal, not because you believe it is always wrong to eat meat, but out of respect and in order to build a bridge. Scripture says, "Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God, even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved" (1 Corinthians 10:32–33). That is a powerful statement to guide our Christian freedom. God has given us freedom in many areas, but we are not to seek only what feels good to us or what gives us the most pleasure. We are to seek the good of many, so that they may be saved.

What advances mission? What will help this person be more open to Christ? And if they have accepted Christ and are new believers, what can I do that will make it easier for them to remain in Christ, to grow, and to be built up in him?

Overview

Here's a brief overview of rightly using Christian freedom. In using your own freedom, the watchword is to use it without abusing it. Ask these questions: will it honor God, will it trip others, will it trap me, and will it feel clean to my conscience?

In dealing with others and respecting their freedom in disputable matters, the goal is to differ without dividing. Ask: who is the judge, and remember that God is, not me. Ask what matters most, and keep majoring on majors rather than minors. Ask what the Lord Jesus would do, the one who sacrificed himself for others rather than seeking his own benefit. Ask what advances mission, what helps draw someone to Christianity, and what helps a new believer grow with the least offense.

May God guide us. We cannot simply snap our fingers or render instant judgments about everything. We need the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God to use our freedom well. A checklist of questions can help, but we still need the Holy Spirit of the living God to lay on our hearts what God would have us do, so that we use our freedom wisely in the particular situations where God has placed us.

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Like-minded to an extreme

Believe as I believe—no more, no less;
That I am right (and no one else) confess.
Feel as I feel, think only as I think;
Eat what I eat; drink only what I drink.
Look as I look, do always as I do;
And then—and only then!—
I’ll fellowship with you.

We and They
(Rudyard Kipling)

Father and Mother, and Me,
Sister and Auntie say
All the people like us are We,
And every one else is They.

And They live over the sea,
While We live over the way,
But—would you believe it?—
They look upon We
As only a sort of They!

We eat pork and beef
With cow-horn-handled knives.
They who gobble Their rice off a leaf,
Are horrified out of Their lives;

While they who live up a tree,
And feast on grubs and clay,
(Isn't it scandalous?) look upon We
As a simply disgusting They!

All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
And every one else is They:

But if you cross over the sea,
Instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it!)
looking on We
As only a sort of They!

Mature Freedom

All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained (Philippians 3:15-16).

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free (Gal 5:1).

To do or not to do?

1. **Mature participant:** I think it's fine for me to do this, but that does not make me superior.
2. **Mature non-participant:** It's best that I not do this, but I won't judge those who do.
3. **Immature participant:** I do what I like, and nobody tells me what to do!
4. **Immature non-participant:** I won't do it, and no real Christian would do it.

My own freedom: using without abusing

1. Will it honor God?
2. Will it trip others?
3. Will it trap me?
4. Will it feel clean?

1. Will it honor God?

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).

If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord (Rom 14:7-8).

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Rom 15:4).

2. Will it trip others?

If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died (Rom 14:15).

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak... When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ (1 Cor 8:9-13).

3. Will it trap me?

"Everything is permissible for me"--but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me"--but I will not be mastered by anything (1 Cor 6:12).

So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! (1 Cor 10:12)

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love (Gal 5:13).

4. Will it feel clean?

Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin (Rom 14:22-23).

Why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience? If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for? (1 Cor 10:29-30).

My own freedom: using without abusing

1. Will it honor God?
2. Will it trip others?
3. Will it trap me?
4. Will it feel clean?

Others' freedom: differing without dividing

1. Who is the judge?
2. What matters most?
3. What would Jesus do?
4. What advances mission?

1. Who is the judge?

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters... God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand... You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another (Rom 14:1-4, 10-13).

2. What matters most?

If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in **love**... For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of **righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit**... Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to **peace and to mutual edification**... May the God of hope fill you with all **joy and peace** as you **trust** in him, so that you may overflow with **hope** by the **power of the Holy Spirit** (Rom 14:15-19; 15:13).

3. What would Jesus do?

For even Christ did not please himself ... Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy (Romans 15:3,7-9).

4. What advances mission?

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor 9:19,22).

Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God-- even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved (1 Cor 10:32-33).