



Making Right Choices in Questionable Issues

Sometimes Christians must choose whether or not to participate in certain “questionable” practices. A questionable issue is a “gray area” of activity or a choice not directly addressed by the Bible as right or wrong. Good Christians can disagree about many gray areas: Whether to use alcohol, tobacco, or caffeine; or what are appropriate movies, music, and magazines; or whether to participate in certain traditions surrounding Christmas, Easter, or Halloween; etc.

Some resort to extremes to settle the issues. One extreme is *license*: If the Bible does not prohibit a practice then there is freedom under grace to participate. The other extreme is *legalism*: A judgmental certainty about these issues that demands total abstinence. Both extremes neglect critical examination of the issue and the biblical principles, and both short-circuit the maturing process (See Heb. 5:13-14). The Bible gives us guidelines for making responsible decisions about questionable issues.

Under grace we *are* free, but we should use our freedom to make good decisions. A good decision is one that pleases God, and is beneficial to all. In short, a good decision is one that reflects love towards God and others (1 Cor. 10:24).

We know that God speaks clearly about some things. In those cases we are morally bound to obey. Some commands contain no ambiguity, such as “Do not be drunk with wine” (Eph. 5:18a), or “Flee sexual immorality” (1 Cor. 6:18a). But when the Bible is silent, we are free to choose responsibly according to the principles in God’s Word. These principles are summarized below in four crucial questions that we should ask when making decisions about questionable things. The principles are from 1 Corinthians 8-10 where the questionable issue is eating meat offered to idols. Some early Christians would never think of eating meat offered in idolatrous sacrifices. But others reasoned that it was just meat and had no implicit spiritual value. While Paul argued that no food was intrinsically evil (8:8), he went on to explain that it would nevertheless be reckless and inconsiderate for the meat-eating Christians to eat without regard to the effect it might have on themselves and others (8:9-13). His argument extends through chapter 10, where we find his conclusion. Here are the four guiding questions based on his conclusion in 10:23-33:

1. Does it edify or enslave me? In 1 Corinthians 10:23 Paul says, “*All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.*” The “All things” refers to those activities about which God is silent. We should choose to do only those things which help us grow in grace and holiness towards Christlikeness. Paul realized that just because God does not pronounce something wrong, it was not automatically right for the one who might do it. Participation could bring a weaker Christian into bondage: “*All things are lawful for me . . . but I will not be brought under the power of any*” (1 Cor. 6:12). If a former idol worshiper became bold enough to eat meat sacrificed to idols, he could be drawn back into the idol feasts at the idol temples, and even participate in idol worship again. Similarly, a weak Christian who views certain questionable magazines or movies may find himself drawn toward more explicit and harmful materials that could lead to sin or an addiction to pornography.

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2. Does it help or hinder other Christians? This principle is summarized in v. 24: "Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being." Then vv. 25-29 explain how we must not do anything that would hurt another Christian's conscience. Instead, what we choose to do should help other Christians grow in Christlikeness. We should never do anything that causes a brother or sister in Christ to compromise his or her conscience so as to bring condemning guilt. For example, it would not be wise or loving for a strong Christian to offer an alcoholic drink to a new Christian who has an alcoholic past. This could bring condemnation of conscience, or worse, a lapse back into alcoholism. (cf. 8:9-13; Rom. 14:19-21)

3. Does it glorify God? "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (10:31). In other words, if you can get a nose ring to the glory of God, do it. While it is conceivable that someone could do such a thing to identify culturally with those he is trying to reach with the gospel, he might just as easily draw attention toward himself and away from God. So one must examine his motives carefully to see if his choice is driven by vanity or some other self-centered interest, or by an honest attempt to magnify God. When participating in anything, we should be able to pause and give God praise and glory for it (cf. v. 30).

4. Does it weaken my witness to unbelievers? Paul wouldn't do anything that distracted from his message and ministry: "Give no offense . . . just as I also please all men in all things . . . that they may be saved" (vv. 32-33). He even gave up his right to receive financial support when in Corinth, lest some impugn his motives for preaching the gospel (ch. 9). Some unbelievers have strong convictions about certain issues. We should not do anything that makes it harder for them to hear the gospel from us. For unbelievers, the issue should be the gospel message, not the messenger.

Conclusion

Someone summarized how to choose in questionable issues this way: "Love God, and do whatever you like." Certainly, if we act in love toward God, we will also act in love toward others, and we will make wise choices in unclear issues. But be warned: You can't please everyone! Some Christians are career complainers and criticizers. These need to be gently instructed away from their legalism or judgmental spirit. In short, they need to grow up and learn how to make mature and responsible choices.

