

APPENDIX II

Grace and Prohibitions

Any laws, regulations, guidelines or principles implemented by the church within the course of history must always be understood as existing relative to a particular time and place in history. As such they are always open to revision. At the same time, due to the reality of sin and the imperfection of believers prior to Jesus' return, laws can and do play an important role in helping God's people become transformed into the image of Christ both individually and corporately. The church, therefore, must discern by the Spirit the appropriate expectations for Christian behavior in any given context. It is helpful, based upon a Pentecostal hermeneutic which acknowledges the didactic and exemplary value of narrative accounts, to observe two specific occasions in the life of the NT church when the issue of grace and prohibitions were discussed: (1) the issue of special rules for Gentiles in the church which occasioned the Jerusalem Council; (2) the issue of eating meat that was associated with pagan worship.

The Jerusalem Council: The first General Council of the church occurred in direct response to questions concerning whether it was necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised and obey Mosaic Law in order to be saved and included in Christian fellowship (Acts 15:1, 5). Significant testimonies¹ were brought to the council by Peter, Barnabas, and Paul. Peter, who had been prompted by a revelation from God about "unclean" food, (Acts 10) told how he was sent with the gospel to the Gentiles and witnessed the Holy Spirit coming upon them the same way as on the Day of Pentecost. Barnabas and Paul reported the miraculous signs and wonders by God among the Gentiles as they received the gospel. James added to the testimonies a passage of Scripture from Amos 9 which he interpreted to be a prophecy concerning the inclusion of the Gentiles among the people of God. The decision made by the council participants was that Gentiles would not need to become Jews first, before becoming Christians. Requiring adherence to Mosaic Law, says Peter, would be like placing on the neck of the disciples, "a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10). Further, he states, "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (15:11). In this sense, then, the church chose to remove any unnecessary barriers that would, as James states, "make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (15:19). At the same time, however, the church council did decide to name four prohibitions (laws) for believing Gentiles in keeping with their turning to God from idols:

Abstain from the things contaminated by idols, and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood (Acts 15:20, cf. 15:29).

While there may be some debate over the reasons for these four prohibitions in particular, the fact that they offered rules for Gentile Christians raises several points helpful for this discussion. *First*, the church understood that their decision (both with regard to allowances and prohibitions) did not contribute to salvation – "he purified their hearts by faith" (15:9) and "it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved" (15:11). *Second*, their decision was intended to make it easier for Gentiles to participate in the

Christian community (15:19) without being burdened by too many (unnecessary) rules as requirements for communal affiliation (15:28). *Third*, the church did impose prohibitions on the Gentiles, and believed it appropriate to do so (15:29). This action demonstrates that the NT church viewed “law” (rules) as having practical importance and benefit in the present reality, and in keeping with God’s overarching purposes. *Fourth*, the four prohibitions were not arbitrary, merely pragmatic, or based solely on eliminating immoral behavior (sexual immorality is actually the only explicit moral prohibition listed), but were directly tied to activities associated with idolatry. In other words, these prohibitions were to serve as Gentile-Christian “boundary markers,” providing and preserving an identity of sorts, distinguishing these believing Gentiles from their pagan neighbors.² *Fifth*, the prohibitions also served to enable Gentile believers to fellowship with Jewish believers (implied in 15:21). Gentiles were being asked to make concessions for the sake of their new Jewish brothers and sisters, that they might be able to fellowship together, without making dietary laws a point of tension.³ It is interesting that the new, perhaps weaker believers were asked to make a sacrifice for the sake of the sensitivities of the Jewish, perhaps more mature believers. *Sixth*, the creative decision-making and consensus of the church was enabled by the ongoing presence of the Spirit who granted wisdom in this situation (15:28).

(2) The Problem of Idol Meat. The second illustration of the NT church grappling with grace and prohibitions involves an issue dealt with at the Jerusalem Council – eating meat sacrificed to idols. Should a Christian eat this meat or not? Paul writes extensively on this topic in two of his letters (1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 10:14–11:1; Romans 14), indicating the seriousness of the issue among early believers.⁴

This issue is pertinent to our discussion because it deals with issues of Christian freedoms and restrictions. Significantly, it affirms that some religious rules are not binding on all believers, but are what the NIV calls “disputable matters” on which Christians may disagree (Romans 14:1). In 1 Corinthians Paul is actually addressing two interrelated issues: (1) whether a believer should participate in meals in pagan temples, and (2) whether a believer should eat meat sacrificed to idols outside of the pagan temple venue.⁵ On the first issue, while Paul agrees that idols are nothing (affirming God as Creator), he argues extensively that believers are not to participate in venues associated with idol worship, since behind all of this is demonic activity (1 Corinthians 10:14-22). This decision is in keeping with that of Acts 15 - avoid participation in activities that are inherently anti-Christian.

The solution to the second issue is somewhat more complex. Some believers, those with a “weak” conscience believe that eating meat sacrificed to idols is wrong in any venue (e.g., a private home) due to its association with idolatry (1 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 10, 12; cf. Romans 14:1-2, “weak in faith”). Others, with a stronger faith, do not find an issue with eating such food (Romans 15:1). Further, the weak tend to judge (condemn) the actions of the strong, while the strong tend to be arrogant toward the weak, even providing them with bad examples which might encourage them to engage in activities (i.e., eating idol meat) that could be interpreted as showing respect and homage to an idol (Romans 14:1-4; 1 Corinthians 8:9-13). In Romans, Paul reminds believers that since, ultimately God is the

judge neither condemnation nor arrogance is an acceptable position (Romans 14:6-12).

Paul's solution is not specifically dogmatic. He asks believers (particularly the strong) to use discernment and to act out of love toward other believers, even sacrificing personal rights for the sake of fellowship. Without rehearsing the details, what is of significance for our purposes, are the theological emphases Paul uses to form his exhortations.

First, Paul draws on a robust theology of creation as being that which forms his own convictions. Paul can affirm, "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4-5); and elsewhere, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Humans, then, can enjoy creation in such a way that is pleasing to God – creation, after all, is God's good kingdom. At the same time, Paul can also affirm that while "I have the right to do anything" not every human activity is "beneficial" (NIV), and in fact believers should not be "mastered by" anything in creation (1 Corinthians 6:12; cf.10:23).⁶ Paul makes the same statement in 1 Corinthians 10:23 but this time follows that statement with, "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others," indicating a shift from concern about personal freedom or well being to the "good of others" (10:24).

All things in creation, in principle, can be used for good. In the case of idol meat, Paul was able to eat it with thankfulness; nor does he think that he should be judged by others for this action in itself (1 Corinthians 10:29-30). At the same time, Paul recognizes that believers live in a yet broken reality in which people ignorantly believe that idols are real, and that demonic forces are at work to keep people living in fear and to destroy fellowship. Therefore, he needs to be careful not to offend their conscience.

Paul by no means advocates that living in ignorance, with a weak faith, is acceptable for believers. Those weak in faith need to grow up, to mature in their understanding of the theological reality of what it means to live in God's creation. But the process toward maturity is not simply a matter of attaining new head knowledge, and the conscience can be damaged if one engages in activities not backed by true conviction (1 Corinthians 8:7; Romans 14:23).

Second, Paul utilizes his Christology which features the supreme role of love and sacrifice exemplified by Jesus. His appeal to strong Christians to surrender their liberty for the welfare of others is based on the model given by Jesus who "did not please himself" (Romans 15:3). He warns believers to be careful that the exercise of "this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Corinthians 8:9, NASB). He also reminds them that the weak brother who may be injured is a person "for whom Christ died" (8:11) and the wound inflicted on the weak is actually "sin against Christ" (8:12). The ultimate goal of Christlikeness, particularly love, needs to be what guides Christian behaviour, not preservation of personal rights and to that end believers must discipline themselves (1 Corinthians 8:1-3; 9:24-27; Romans 15:1-3). Without controversy, the ultimate law for all Christians is the law of Christ which causes us to surrender everything we have for others:

Though I am free and belong to no one, 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 (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am *under Christ's law*), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people 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).

Endnotes

¹ Acts 10–15 focuses on the influx of Gentiles into the church. The early church was faced with questions as to what to do with this new form of believer, including how it was possible for Gentiles to belong to the church. The Acts 15 episode settles this question.

² Ben Witherington offers an interesting point of view by suggesting that the prohibitions are not so much about what food is forbidden, but about avoiding the venue and immoral activities associated with pagan idolatry, since these Gentiles have now turned to the true God. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 460-466.

³ James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1st U.S. ed., Narrative Commentaries (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 202, 204; William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988, 130-132.

⁴ Paul's discussion of idol meat in 1 Corinthians actually extends from 8:1–11:1, with personal and Scriptural examples to argue his case.

⁵ The participation in temple meals was a common social event, and meat that had been sacrificed to idols was frequently sold in the marketplace. See Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians, Revised ed., The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 7*, ed. Leon Morris, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985, 120-121.

⁶ It is not necessarily the case that Paul was expressing a personal belief when he says, "I have the right to do anything" (1 Cor. 6.12), since this is probably a slogan of the Corinthians, which Paul was then parroting back to them as a rhetorical device. See Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 95.