

UNDERSTANDING SCRUPLES

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Paul commanded, “Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who serves Christ in these things *is* acceptable to God and approved by men. Therefore let us pursue the things *which make* for peace and the things by which one may edify another. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed *are* pure, but *it is* evil for the man who eats with offense. It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor *do anything* by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. Do you have faith? Have *it* to yourself before God. Happy *is* he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *he does not eat* from faith; for whatever *is* not from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:16-23).

The Romans had a problem with their scruples. A scruple is an opinion that is based in scripture. For example, many of the Gentiles in Rome were converted from various pagan religions. These pagan religions, as part of their religious observances, offered animal sacrifices to their heathen gods and then the meat was sold at the market for consumption. Those former pagans could not, with a clear conscience, any longer eat meat that had been offered to those false gods because they knew their former religions were false. However, the more mature Christians had no problem with buying that meat and eating because just as Paul told those at Corinth, who experienced these same troubles, “we know that an idol *is* nothing in the world, and that *there is* no other God but one” (1 Cor. 8:4).

The problem wasn’t that they held those scruples, it became a problem only when they tried to bind their scruples on those with a strong conscience, making it law. At the same time, those brethren with the strong conscience tried to convince the others that it was right to eat the meat and that they should eat it as well. It wasn’t wrong to eat or to not eat the meat, unless it violated the conscience in doing so, but it became wrong when either side tried to force the other to adhere to their personal beliefs.

One cannot, without sin, use a scruple or a liberty to force someone to abide by a personal belief that is not doctrine. God provided liberty to those who wanted to eat meat that had been offered to idols, because idols are nothing. At the same time, He provided for those of a weak conscience by commanding those with the stronger conscience not to allow their liberties to become a stumbling block to their brethren.

In essence, Paul taught that we can enjoy our liberties, such as eating meat, but we cannot encourage those that oppose a practice to participate because they could not do so with a clear conscience. On the other hand, he did not allow those of a weaker conscience to encourage the others to stop taking advantage of their given liberties, such as eating meat, because it was not a law commanded by God.