

Protecting My Conscience or Promoting My Preference?

by Edwin L. Crozier

Most of us have read **Romans 14** and **I Corinthians 8**. We are aware Paul teaches us to protect the consciences of our brethren. We shouldn't pursue activities that will lead someone to sin against their conscience. After all, whatever is not from faith is sin (**Romans 14:23**). Love demands we protect each other.

Sadly, this teaching has caused no end of trouble among congregations. Often, a question will arise and someone will say, "I have a problem with that, so you shouldn't do it. You need to protect my conscience." We even find others who will say, "I know that is okay, but we need to protect consciences, so we won't allow that here." I think of a congregation that dealt with the question about dress when serving the Lord's Supper. Someone thought everyone should wear a tie. If a person scheduled wasn't wearing a tie, the elders kept one at the building they could put on or found a replacement to "protect the consciences" of the minority who had this "problem."

Of course, there is no Scripture that provides a dress code for worshipping God. That is a purely cultural decision. However, I have no doubt someone brought up in a culture where respect is demonstrated by dressing up might really be bothered by not wearing a tie. But is forcing everyone to wear a tie actually protecting the consciences or is it merely promoting someone's preference?

We need to grasp a couple of things about Paul's teaching. First, neither of these passages is intended to give any person the authority to bind even their conscience on other people. In fact, in **Romans 14:3**, the one who has the "conscience" problem is not told to proclaim his conscience and use it to mold everyone else's behavior. That brother is actually told not to judge the other person. Observe two things. First, we would never use this teaching against judgment to claim a church shouldn't make judgments about sin. Second, in like manner, we should not use the other half of this verse to allow every individual preference to govern the congregation.

Second, neither **Romans 14** nor **I Corinthians 8** are dealing with preferences. "You'd never see me serving the Lord's Supper without wearing a tie." Rather, they are dealing with issues that will lead others to actually go against what they are certain is right. Would seeing someone serve the Lord's Supper without a tie ever lead this person to not wear a tie? He has already said nothing will lead him to that. Further, what sin would he be committing by not wearing the tie? Folks who had grown up worshipping idols by eating meats sacrificed to them can be led back into idolatry by witnessing their brethren eat those same meats. That is, they think their stronger brethren are worshipping the idol and because of that think idolatry is actually allowed in Christianity. You see, in **I Corinthians 8**, the sin the brethren would be led to commit was not just a checklist item of eating meats offered to idols while thinking that action by itself is wrong. The sin was worshipping the idol which is what eating that meat meant for them.

Certainly, if some action would involve others in committing what they believe is sin, then out of love we need to choose to protect their consciences even though they, out of love, will not force them. On the other hand, let us never allow the preferences of particular backgrounds, upbringings, and cultures to become the mold into which we demand everyone else fit.