Liberty in Messiah: The Steep and Narrow Path to Unity

Olive J. Hemmings
Washington Adventist University

The multi-ethnic, multi-convictional nature of the early church- steeped Greco-Roman religious-philosophical ferment - defied efforts at uniformity of practice. So strong were the consciences of particular groups that in spite of the Church's ruling at the Jerusalem Council on certain practices, there remained resistance. The Council ruled that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised, but it continued to be a factious issue. The Council ruled that Gentiles should not eat meat offered to idols as they used to before their conversion, but that, too remained a factious issue.

Similarly, the Seventh-day Adventist church in a General Conference session voted against the autonomy of any region of the world church to ordain women; but it still remains a factious issue.

Apostle Paul addresses these divisive issues not by appealing to the ruling of the Jerusalem Council, but by appealing to the Abrahamic Covenant through which God brings liberty. He strongly opposes enforcement of uniform practice on matters that have no spiritual virtue in and of themselves (*"weak and beggarly rudiments"* [Galatians 4:9]) calling such practices enslavement to the flesh (Galatians 4:21-31; 1 Corinthians 3:3) or capitulating to a "weak" conscience (1 Corinthians 8:7). Paul explains that to live in covenant is not about rituals and traditions, but about love for one's neighbor, i.e., fair

and equitable relations in community fostering the bond of faith (Gal. 3:28; Romans 13:). Like Jesus of Nazareth, Paul's purpose is to reinforce this fundamental ethic of the kingdom of God *vis a vis* rituals and traditional practices. By this careful ethical instruction of factious communities such as Galatia, Corinth and Rome, he calls the church to the liberty in Messiah that enables it to embrace - without rancor diverse practices in the faith.

In *Galatians* Paul writes:

"*For freedom Christ has set you free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."*

This statement is a climactic point in a conversation on freedom of conscience which constitutes the letter to the Galatians. I will proceed to discuss the question of liberty of conscience in the context of this statement as it addresses factious issues in the early church and reinforces the fundamental ethic of the Kingdom of God as the only path to unity.

My thesis today is this:

The New Testament teaching on unity is a call to enter the new covenant experience of liberty that frees the community from the need for conformity to rituals and regulations that have no spiritual value in and of themselves, but serve to keep it enslaved.

I will in many places use the term "Messiah" instead of "Christ". Both terms mean the same, i.e., anointed specifically to mediate God's liberating justice. However the general

consciousness tends to recognize “Christ” as a name rather than as a function - messianic function.

For Freedom Messiah Has Set You Free – Righteousness, Faith, and Works of Law

“*For freedom Christ has set you free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. ”*
This statement is the response call to Paul’s thesis: *“a person is not justified by works of law, but through faith in Jesus Messiah”* (Galatians 2:15). His teaching on “righteousness” or “justification” in *Galatians* (and *Romans*) is his radical assertion that Gentiles who do not subscribe to Jewish rituals and traditions have a right to membership in the covenant community - the community of the righteous. We so often use the term “righteousness by faith” when speaking of Paul’s soteriology, and contrast that to “works of the law”; and we do so with reference to personal sins. However Paul’s message is to a community - about how it conducts itself inter-relationally as people of the covenant. It is a message of inclusion and freedom of conscience. Five hundred years of Reformation has silenced this conversation. However, the late 1970s saw the rise of the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) with the publication of E.P. Sanders’ *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.[1] The NPP has heralded a new look at Paul’s conversation on “justification” through the lens of scripture, rather than through the lens of the Reformation. It thereby reads Paul’s argument in the context of Second Temple Judaism, the nature of the Jesus Movement, and the actual issue he addresses.

[1] E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1977)

In light of this context, let me define these key, often misunderstood terms in Paul's conversation - "righteousness", "faith", and "works of law".

First, "Righteousness"

The Greek terms English translations render "righteous" (*dikaios*), "righteousness" (*dikaiosunē*), and "justify" (*dikaioō*) actually mean "just", "justice", "give justice" respectively as in liberating justice. *Dikaiosune* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *tsedakah*. *Tsedakah* - is the Hebrew prophetic plea against oppressive structures - corruption, greed and the exploitation of the vulnerable. It is a call for right relations in community as in doing to others, so that all may live in peace and freedom. This the focus of Jesus Sermon on the Mount, summed up in the golden rule (Matthew 7:12) hence his call "seek first the kingdom of God and his justice" (Matthew 6: 33)

This is how Paul uses the term in his discussion of what many understand as "righteousness by faith".

Second, "Faith"

The term translations render "faith" (*pistis*) actually means "faithfulness". (In Greek argumentation the *pistis* is the proof of, or faithfulness to one's claim). The phrase "faith in Jesus Christ" (*pistis tou Iesou Christou*) both in the Greek and in the context of Paul's discussion literally reads "faithfulness of Jesus Messiah." God' people receive justice through the faithful mediation of Messiah; and this is the actual meaning of the Abrahamic covenant in the context of Jewish Messianic expectation.

Third, "Works of Law"

Jews believed that only practicing Jews were heirs of the Abrahamic promise, and as the covenant community, they were inherently free (John 8:31). To access that freedom one

had to become a practicing Jew – signified by the ritual purity of circumcision with its accompanying rituals and regulations. Paul calls these "works of law". The conviction about circumcision remained entrenched among Jewish Jesus followers including Peter who God confronted in a radical vision to convince him to enter the house of an uncircumcised Gentile (Acts 10). (In fact, even after the Church at Jerusalem Council ruled that Gentiles did not have to receive circumcision, Peter was still so intimidated by the seemingly influential "circumcision faction" that upon their arrival in Antioch where he used to eat with the Gentiles, he led other Jews - including Paul's ally Barnabas - to withdraw from eating with Gentiles, perhaps for fear of losing his own influence. And Paul calls him out on his hypocrisy [Galatians 3:11-14]).

One may further understand this entrenchment in light of the fact that the early church was a Judaic community; it was not a different religion. The Jesus Movement was another rabbinic school, and Paul a rabbi doing his work of instruction.

Unity in Diversity – the Path to Liberty

Paul does not dismiss the validity of his own Jewish tradition ("*Do we then overthrow the law….?"* [Romans 3:31b]); rather, he advocates the right of Gentiles to the Abrahamic promise without having to conform to Judaic tradition *("…he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith"* [Romans 3:30]). Gentiles who resist the very ritual that ratifies the Abrahamic Covenant

have a right to that Covenant, because it is not ritual and legal regulations but a spiritual experience –"circumcision of the heart" (Roman 2:29) that produce just relations within a

diverse community. If they were to coerce the consciences of these new believers, that would prevent the community from entering into the covenant experience of liberty. Both the coerced and the coercer are enslaved to the flesh - the rudimentary elements of this world - and that cannot bring true liberty.

A close examination of the context of the use of the term "liberty" will demonstrate the extent to which Paul (and as we will see, Jesus) opposed the coercion of conscience in the interest of "unity".

Liberty

The term *Eleutheria* - "freedom" or "liberty" goes as far back as the Ancient Greek city-state Athens[2] around the 8th century B.C.E. Its fundamental significance rests in whether one is living free (*eleutheros*) as opposed to being a slave (*doulos*).[3]The *doulos* is someone else's possession and lives according to the dictates of someone else's will and conscience, while the *eleutheros* is their own person.[4]

Eleutheria was a major issue in the Hellenistic Roman age and fundamental to the religious and philosophical zeitgeist of the era. First century Apocalyptic Judaism asserts freedom through the Abrahamic Covenant, and this liberty comes to full

[2] Ancient Athens distinguished itself among the Greek city-states in its quest for *eleutheria* – democratic freedom - vis a vis the total enslavement of the people to the state as was the case in its neighbor city-state Sparta. Athens became a center of free thinking, the hub of Greek philosophy, and the birthplace of modern democracy. The great philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle lived in Athens. But it is significant to note that the Athenians voted to kill Socrates in 399 B.C.E. because Socrates sided with Spartan oligarchy, placing law over the individual, and opposed freedom of thought in defense of what he regards as unchangeable truth. (See Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth* [New York: The New Press, 1999], 281-301)

[3] Mogens Herman Hansen "Democratic Freedom and the Concept of Freedom in Plato and Aristotle," https://vitruvianman.wikispaces.com/file/view/greek+freedom.pdf, 2, retrieved 6 June 2017.

[4] Ibid

realization in a coming Messianic age. Many Greeks sought, through the pursuit of knowledge, liberation of the spirit from the corruptible material world – the flesh (Paul uses the term "flesh" to indicate slavery to rules and regulations that have no inherent spiritual virtue). The use of the term in Greek philosophy[5] heralded an era that sought an alternative to authoritative Government and compulsive and ethically bankrupt religious traditions and rituals. First century Jewish Rabbis – Jesus of Nazareth, the great scholar/professor Gamaliel, and Paul of Tarsus, for example – all drew upon both the Hebrew prophetic and the Greek philosophical traditions.

In a certain sense, *Eleutheria* (liberty) in Greek philosophy go hand in hand with justice (*tzedakah*/*dikaiounē*) in Hebrew prophecy. Both Jesus and Paul sought to reform the tyrannical legalistic/ritual-centric element of their own religious tradition by drawing upon these two traditions. In their use of the terms *eleutheria* (liberty) and *dikaiosunē* (justice) one observes the confluence of Greek philosophical and Hebrew prophetic traditions in the quest for liberty.

So in this context, liberty does not stand alone. It is inextricably connected to this very important concept in the Hebrew scripture - justice

Liberty and Justice

[5] In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Philosophy functioned as religion, "especially among the educated." It "provided a criticism or re-interpretation of traditional religion, and offered moral and spiritual direction" generally absent from ritualistic and cult-centered religion. See, Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapid, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 300. In general, Greek philosophy functioned in the same way as Hebrew prophetic tradition.

The statement: “For freedom Messiah has set you free….” is a declaration of God’s justice through Messiah. Paul uses the allegory of Sarah and Hagar (4:21-31) to indicate the extent to which obsession with rituals and legal regulations enslaves the community, and the extent to which unconditional acceptance for the other believer of different conviction liberates it.

You will of course remember that Hagar represents the Old Covenant experience that marks off boundaries, and assumes that God’s vindication comes only to a specific group identified by their traditions. Sarah on the other hand represents the new Covenant experience that frees the Non-Jew to stand before God with the assurance of God’s faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant. Here is an important understanding: Paul depicts Sarah as *hē eleuthera* (the free woman) by quoting the Septuagint version of Genesis 21:10 where Sarah says to Abraham: “Cast out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not inherit with my son Isaac.“ But the passage he quotes in *Genesis* contains neither of the two terms at play in the conversation - *doulos* (slave), and *eleutheros* (free). In fact the word the Septuagint passage uses for slave is *paidiskēs* (“slave girl” or “maid”). Paul maintains *paidiskēs* in the allegory. However, he omits the phrase “my son Isaac” (Genesis 21:10) and he replaces it with the phrase “the child of the free woman” (Gal 4:30). Here he inserts the term *hē eleuthera* (the free woman) which is not present in the text from which he quotes.

This is a pivotal point in Paul's application of the Greek philosophical concept of *eleutheria.* Hellenistic consciousness personifies *eleutheria* as "lady liberty" epitomized in the Goddess Artemis. Artemis is "lady liberty" who resists conventional boundaries - roles and rules that restrict her power, and roams the forest with her aides protecting the vulnerable from the tyranny of the powerful.

In this allegory Paul inserts the Greek idea of *eleutheria*, making Sarah "lady liberty" the representative of the Abrahamic Covenant.[6] By this skillful rhetoric, the Greek idea of *eleutheria* - liberation from tyrannical rule - becomes the most important element in his conversation about justification. So please understand that this conversation is not merely about liberty. It is actually about justice. Do not forget this as we move further into this study.

Liberating Justice

So Paul's defense of radical diversity in *Galatians* makes the case that the Abrahamic covenant is a covenant of liberating justice, specifically with regard to the conscience, not only for practicing Jews, but for everyone who accepts its Messianic fulfilment through Jesus of Nazareth. One can understand this covenantal quest for liberty through two major Jewish historical events – the Exodus, and the Maccabean revolt under Syrian rule.

[6] One even wonders whether the correspondence between the Hebrew Heroine Sarah and the Greek Goddess Artemis in Paul's use of Isaiah 51: 1:4 *("…the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married…."*) is merely co-incidental. According to the myth, Artemis who chooses to remain an unmarried virgin is the goddess of childbirth.

First, when Israel under Egyptian slavery cried out, God heard their groaning and remembered the covenant with Abraham (Ex 2:23-24). And God said to Moses "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'thus says the Lord: Let my people go, *so that they may worship me* (emphasis mine) '…." This is to say God's covenant is a covenant of justice - liberation from slavery and oppression, and specifically the release of the conscience from those who assume ownership of it.

Second, in its primary context Daniel 8:14 addresses the Syrian enforcement of Greek culture upon the Jews, and the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes when he offered up a pig to the god Zeus in the temple precinct leading to the Maccabean Revolt. The future passive of the verb form of *tzedakah* (justice) appears in Daniel 8:14. (Remember, earlier I explained that *tzedakah* is the Hebrew prophetic plea against oppressive systems - corruption, greed and the exploitation of the vulnerable.) The Hebrew text of Daniel 8:14 actually says, "…unto 2,300 days then shall the sanctuary be *given justice"* as in "given its rights." Please don't pass this by. (The Septuagint uses the word "cleanse" [*katharidzō*], and that is appropriate in light of the desecration of the temple, but it obscures the message of liberating justice in the original Hebrew word from *dikaioō* [give justice]). This needs not take anything from the doctrine of the Sanctuary; rather it ought to add depth to it when one understands that in Second Temple Judaism salvation is about the liberating justice of the Abrahamic covenant mediated by Messiah. Daniel 8:14 primarily applies to God's Covenant of justice – liberty – freedom of religious conscience.

When Paul, an apocalyptic Jew[7] encountered the Gospel in the embodiment of the risen Messiah, he became convinced (through an unbiased revisit of the scriptures) that this liberation was not only for practicing Jews. The Sarah - Hagar allegory demonstrates the irony that the very people God sets free by the promise of the Abrahamic covenant are now in slavery (Galatians 4: 25), because some believe that enforcing and or conforming to a uniformity of religious tradition and regulation is what defines them as members of the community of the free.

The poignant message in *Galatians* is that certain practices rest entirely upon the personal convictions of believers, and enforcement of these upon the church nurtures a state of enslavement rather than liberty in Messiah. Paul further develops this idea in explicit terms of liberty of conscience in 1 Corinthians and Romans regarding meat offered to idols.

Freedom of Conscience

"For why should my liberty be subject to the judgement of someone else's conscience?" (1 Corinthians 10:29)

This is a powerful rhetorical question to the Corinthian enforcers of the Jerusalem Council regulation to abstain from meat offered to idols. It suggests that the church's

[7] Foundational to Jewish apocalyptic understanding especially in the period of the second temple was the coming in of a new age of God's reign through Messiah the arbiter of justice who liberates God's people from oppressive principalities and powers.

ruling on a matter that should be left entirely up to the conscience may be more divisive than unifying. What Paul calls for is not conformity to the rule. Rather he appeals to a conscience that transcends the factious convictions regarding the issue by invoking the Covenant ethic as he does in *Galatians* – that is, liberating justice - love.

It is important at this point to clarify the meaning of conscience in Paul's conversation about liberty.

Conscience

Suneidēsis: Of the thirty times that this term appears in the New Testament it appears eight times regarding the issue of meats sacrificed to idols. While the word in ancient Greek philosophical understanding denotes an internal guide or judge, this internal guide receives instruction from the external factors that form the totality of one's experience in the world.

We have a tendency to think of conscience as a personal thing, the little angel that sits on your shoulder and whispers to you what is right and what is wrong. But in fact, conscience arises from the socio-historical experience that shapes one's consciousness. Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*[8] traces its origin to the promise between autonomous individuals in the interest of their survival. Sigmund Freud calls it the "superego" which develops from the ethical restraint placed on the

[8] Fredriech Nietzche, *On The Genealogy of Morals* (*Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 1887), trans, Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Press, 1967).

individual by its social/cultural/religious upbringing. The conscience arises from what Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau discuss as the "Social Contract" that allows communities/ groups to regulate relationship and behavior for the welfare and protection of all.[9] These definitions coincide with the compound structure of the Greek word for "conscience", *suneidēsis* - *sun* (together) and *eidēsis* (knowing) literally meaning "knowing together" or "common idea". In this sense, appropriate synonyms for "conscience" are "consciousness" or "conviction".

In the case of the believing community, the conscience informs as to what constitutes right conduct before God. The conscience is not necessarily an automatic judge of what is absolutely right or wrong; rather it judges one's decision based on what one understands to be right or wrong given one's exposure in the world of knowledge and experience. This is why Paul acknowledges both the "weak" conscience (1 Corinthians 8:7) and the knowledgeable (I Corinthians 8:9) in the issue of meat offered to idols.

The Weak Conscience and the Knowledgeable

The weak conscience lacks knowledge, and remains bound to its native pagan culture, unable to liberate itself from it in spite of the Gospel teaching that "there is no God but one" (1 Corinthians 8:4) *("It is not everyone who has this knowledge. Since some have become accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food*

[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_contract, retrieved 12 June, 2017.

they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. [I Corinthians 8:4-8]). It is unreflective, lacking the will to examine whether a particular custom "brings us close to God (1 Corinthians 8:8) Paul says that such people are condemned if they eat because they do not act from faith (Romans 14:23). The knowledgeable conscience disassociates meat from the non-existent idol to which it was offered, (I Corinthian 8:8, 9). Paul says: *"I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself: but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean* (Roman 14:14).

Contrary to popular preaching on this issue, Paul does not favor the weak conscience over the knowledgeable. While he asks the knowledgeable to defer to the weak, he also asks the weak not to trample the liberty of those who eat (I Corinthians 10:29). In Romans 14: 2-4 he states it even more forcefully: *"Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables,"*[10]but whether one eats or abstain, or observes or not observes a day above another, as long as they do it *"in honor of the Lord"* no one should judge them (Romans 14:1-6). Both the knowledgeable who disregard the sensibility of the weak, and the weak who impose their conscience on the knowledgeable – both of these groups lack spiritual maturity and remain bound to the flesh *("…I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ…for you are still bound to the flesh."*

[10] Paul is not speaking of eating in terms of health, but in terms of cultic superstition.

[1 Corinthians 3:2-3]). It is this spiritual immaturity, not the diversity of conviction - that creates the disunity and keeps the church in a state of spiritual bondage.

The Free Conscience: Knowledge and Love

Regarding the conscience, one can identify two levels of liberty in the conversation about idol meat. The first level is the level of knowledge or awareness. The second level is love. According to Paul, knowledge without love is destructive to the body: *"knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."* (I Corinthians 8:2). However, Paul believes that knowledge is an important gateway to spiritual growth and liberty of conscience. Those who lack knowledge he describes as "infants in Christ" who are "not ready for solid food" because they "are still of the flesh" (1 Corinthians 3:2-3). In Galatians, those of the flesh are both the "circumcision faction", and those who comply. These are "in slavery" to rituals and regulations, so that they will not accept diversity in the faith. Paul aims to give such believers "solid food" when he considers them ready for it (I Corinthians 3:1-3). And as we can see in his epistles, Paul does deliver the "solid food".

> *"If you let yourself be circumcised, Christ is of no benefit to you."* – Galatians 5:2
>
> *"If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced, because of that for which I give thanks?"* – I Corinthians 10:30
>
> *…In the Lord, nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean."* – Romans 14:14

"In the Lord, man is not independent of woman nor woman of man…everything comes from God." God is the only head. Headship is flesh. – I Corinthians 11:11-12

Solid food.

As Paul notes, not everyone "has … knowledge," and not everyone is at the same stage in their spiritual development (Romans 14: 1). There will always be diverse practices and convictions in the faith, thus Paul calls the deeply divided Corinthian community to a "more excellent way" – Love (I Corinthians 12:31 – 13:13). Based on all that Paul has been saying, this love is not conformity to the loudest voice. Rather it is respect for all the voices of faith. In Romans he prefaces his appeal to accept the conviction of the other thus: *"Owe no one anything except to love one another… love your neighbor as yourself…love is the fulfillment of the law"* (Romans 13: 8-10). This is the context of Roman 2: 13-15, where he says that the conscience of the Gentiles who do not possess the law *"bears witness to "what the law requires."* - "love your neighbor as yourself." As I noted above, the well-being and safety of every person is the root of the conscience. That is why, as Paul succinctly states it, one does not have to have Torah to understand this timeless ethic. This reflects Jesus' teaching on the ten commands that they are really about love, i.e., liberating justice. And this defines love of God: *"...the second commandment is like the first: love your neighbor as yourself"* (Matthew 22:39; cf. 1 John 4: 20-21). Interestingly, the ancient Greco-Roman world is renowned for its great piety[11] - its love for the

[11] Ferguson, 300.

gods - demonstrated by elaborate rituals; but the culture was ethically bankrupt.[12] The great philosophers arose to address this ethical void. This same empty piety also existed in ancient Israel hence prophetic oracles such as:

> *I hate and despise your festivals, and take no delight in your solemn assemblies* (Amos 5:21). *"...who asked this from you? ... New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation ...my soul hates; they have become a burden to me* (Isaiah 1: 12-14). *But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.* (Amos 12-14)

Love for God depends not on ritual purity but upon the extent to which the faith community accepts and regards with respect each other in serving God through Messiah. This is true liberty of conscience – the only path to Unity.

Now, it is important to understand that the issues of conscience we have been discussing are not issues of moral rectitude, but issues of ritual purity. Let us examine these in light of the issue that now threatens to divide the Seventh-day Adventist church.

Rituals, Conscience and the Case of Women's Ordination

Paul believes and teaches that some stipulations in scripture may be entirely a matter of conscience - and therefore factious - and especially so because of their purely ritualistic function: *("Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own mind. … "I know and am persuaded in the Lord that nothing is unclean in itself…."* [Romans

[12] Bart D. Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: OUP, 2013), 22-24.

14:5,14]). Nothing in the Old Testament indicates that circumcision is not necessary. But the Church came to terms with the reality of a faith community that was no longer purely Jewish. (This makes the case against a literalistic application of scriptures that to Paul constitutes a fixation to the flesh – a constant diet of milk that impedes spiritual maturity.)

Paul's arguments suggest that a ruling of the church may not produce spiritual fruit because of the factious nature of the issue. When that ruling is factious, i.e., when it violates the conscience of some, the Church must appeal to a higher conscience, which allows everyone to practice the faith according to the dictates of their conscience (*"Let all be fully convinced in their own minds"* [Romans 14:5b]).
In doing this, it fulfills the law – "love your neighbor as yourself" (Romans 13:8).

It is vitally important to point out here that the question of women's ordination, like the question of circumcision is rooted in ritual purity. One is about the foreskin and the other about blood (Lev 12). The latter has bred an age-long misogynous culture that remains consciously and unconsciously entrenched - especially in religion. It is old covenant consciousness. This is why Paul states in Galatians 3:28: *"There is no longer Jew or Greek...male and female…."* This is New Covenant liberty in Messiah.

In light of this, the case of the current issue over women's ordination is clearly a question of conscience, and that on two levels. First, if one approaches the scripture

from a truly literalistic standpoint, then it seems that the early church in different regions acted according to conscience regarding the function of women. For example, women in Corinth and Rome functioned as prophets, teachers, and apostles (1 Corinthians 11; Romans 16), while “brethren” in Ephesus wanted them to shut up and go home to their rightful roles as child-bearers (1Timothy 2). This is one major reason why after years of Bible study by the SDA church, there is yet no conclusive consensus to prohibit the ordination of women. Some side with the “brethren” in Ephesus, and some with the sisters and brothers in Rome based on their cultural inclinations.

If all the lengthy studies commissioned by the church conclude that the Bible does not prohibit the ordination of women, the current issue as it stands needs not divide the church. If the early church judged the ritual act of circumcision - a clear scriptural mandate - to have no sanctifying value in and of itself, then even more so the question of women’s ordination that has no clear scriptural mandate. The compulsion to conform to the conscience of one faction in the church indicates that the community as a whole has yet to achieve freedom of conscience toward spiritual maturity. In the context of *Galatians*, this inability to accept differences in this matter of conscience, leaves us in slavery, bound to flesh and unable to fully access the freedom that comes through Messiah. There can be no unity if the conscience of one group is allowed to coerce that of another.

Liberty and Unity in Christ

Let me now conclude by showing you that Jesus' prayer for oneness among believers in *John* 17:21 comes in the context of liberty similar to what I have been talking about in the writings of Paul.

According to John, Jesus states, "*If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*" (John 8:31). This proclamation emerges from the overarching theme of love in the Johannine writings (John, 1, 2, &3 John). John couches all the Jesus sayings about truth and love in the context of the Abrahamic Covenant. It is in this context that we get a true understanding of Jesus' prayer that the believing community "be one" (John 17:21). What makes them one is love for one another.

In *John*, the audience of Jesus' statement on truth and freedom comprises Jews *"who had believed in him."* Their response is to defend their inherent freedom through the Abrahamic Covenant (John 8:33) but Jesus replies that their actions do not demonstrate that they really grasp the freedom that the Covenant offers: *"If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing what Abraham did, but you are trying to kill me"* (8:40) *because there is no place in your heart for my word"*(8:37). The central passage in John's writings reflects Paul's interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant in *Galatians* and *Romans*: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that anyone who believes … may have eternal life"* (John 3:16). God's covenant of justice is one of love for all who accept the promise through Messiah, not just for a particular group who lives according to certain rules and regulations.

According to John, the truth Jesus speaks of is this truth of God's love and the believer's faith(fullness)[13] to it, namely to love one another:

> "*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another…. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:34; cf. I John 4:21). *"This is the message that we have heard from him and we proclaim to you, that God is light…. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light"* (1 John 1: 5; 2:10)

Love brings the believing community into liberating justice and thereby, it lives out the very faith(fullness) of Messiah. Love is the truth that sets us free.

Jesus prays that the believing community "be one" (John 17:21) as a testimony to the world of the love of God *("…so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me"* [John 17:23]) In the light of the Abrahamic Covenant, the oneness for which he prays is not conformity to rules that do not even reflect love. Jesus was killed precisely because rather than conforming to the letter of the law, he taught and lived its spirit – namely love ("…in everything, do to others as you would have them do to you…" [Matthew 7:12]).

Love is the truth that brings true freedom and unites all believers in Christ. Jesus invites the believing community into a deeply spiritual experience – the very Christ experience. According to John, to love is to abide in God (1 John 4:16), to be "begotten from God" (1 John 4:7), and to pass from death into life (1 John 3:14). This is to say that the believing community may also become one with God as Jesus

[13] As explained on page 4 above.

and God are one. This is the "in Christ" experience of true liberty into which Paul invites the church:

> In Christ *"there is no longer Jew or Greek…slave or free…male and female…"* (Galatians 3:28)
>
> "In Christ, *woman is not independent of man or man…of woman…all things come from God"* (1 Corinthians 11:11-12 God is the only head.
>
> In Christ *"nothing is unclean in itself"* (Romans 14:14)

The tendency to strive over these temporal things stems from our earthly limitations. In Christ, fear of uncertainty subsides and we rest in the mystery of God's being. Such an experience cannot be voted, legislated, or coerced. It requires spiritual discipline, and instruction in the true spirit of scriptures through responsible Christ-filled exemplary discipleship. It requires a focus on growing members that is at minimum equal to that of growing membership. This is hard, much harder than enforcing conformity to the "elementary rudiments" of our individual consciences. But it is the road on which Jesus Messiah invites the church:

"*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*"

"I know, and am persuaded in" Messiah, that this is the path to freedom.