

Sinful But Not Damning?

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Does a Christian's belief that conduct "X" is sinful necessarily commit him to the belief that a Christian who disagrees and engages in "X" is cut off from Christ and bound for hell? Or can one reasonably believe that God will forgive some sins a Christian persistently commits that are rooted in a sincere misunderstanding of God's will? To put the question concretely, if a Christian believes it is sinful to consume alcohol in any amount, must he also believe that any Christian who steadfastly disagrees and occasionally has a glass of wine with dinner is lost?

If it is true that doing what one sincerely but mistakenly believes is permissible necessarily results in damnation, regardless of how tangential to the gospel the conduct may be or how debatable the prohibition, then the way of salvation is perilous indeed. The only hope for peace in one's salvation would be to live in all cases according to the most restrictive understanding of God's will, despite one's disagreement with that understanding. Otherwise, one would be risking one's eternal destiny on the accuracy of one's fallible theologizing about a disputed understanding, which is a prescription for spiritual neurosis.

Since God wants us to be confident and at peace in our salvation (Mat. 11:28-30; Jn. 14:27; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 3:11-12; Phil. 4:6-7; 2 Thess. 3:16; Heb. 4:15-16, 10:19; 1 Pet. 5:7), I do not see how that can be correct. One could argue that God intends for us to realize the confidence and peace he desires for us by living in all cases according to the most restrictive understanding of his will, but there is good reason to doubt that. We know, for example, that God does not want Christians to allow their liberty to be taken by a false claim that it is sinful to be uncircumcised, to live outside the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:1; Gal. 2:3-5, 5:1). If the claim that it is sinful to consume alcohol is likewise false, then presumably the Lord does not want Christians to allow their liberty to be taken by that claim (1 Cor. 10:25-30, esp. v. 29), to have their lives ruled by false teachers rather than by him.¹

So if a Christian thoughtfully and sincerely believes that the prohibition on consuming alcohol is a manmade restriction on Christian liberty, he may feel duty bound not to surrender to demands based on that prohibition. In that case, it would violate his conscience to submit to the demand, which would be sinful (Rom. 14:14, 22b-23; 1 Cor. 8:7-13). As a limited and fallible human, he is caught between the prospect of sinning by exercising what he believes is a Christian liberty and sinning by surrendering that liberty to what he believes is a false teaching. If he can find no peace in the mercy of Christ, if he cannot trust that he will be forgiven in the event his fallible judgment has led him astray, there is no peace to be found. And since God desires for us to be confident and at peace in our salvation, I conclude that he will grant forgiveness in such cases. Though I believe it is possible to apostatize, that possibility must not be turned into a trap, something into which one who loves God can slip unintentionally.

¹ Voluntarily foregoing one's liberty out of love when in the presence of one with a narrower conscience is a different matter.

This does not mean that conduct rooted in persistent misunderstandings of whatever kind will be forgiven, so that no false teaching poses a threat to salvation as long as one sincerely accepts it. Because of its relation to the gospel and the clarity of its condemnation, those in the Galatian churches who embraced the Judaizers' false teaching and refused to heed Paul's correction were lost regardless of how effectively they had been misled (Gal. 5:2). Their persistent rejection of that particular truth was in fact their rejection of Christ.

Which teaching and associated conduct is in which category can be difficult to determine, but I think the more a teaching connects to the gospel and the clearer it is, in the light of sound interpretive methodology and the history of interpretation, the greater the potential that its rejection will be damning regardless of one's sincerity. Obviously, all Christians should strive to obey God in all things, but there must be room for believing that God will forgive some sins a Christian persistently commits that are rooted in a sincere misunderstanding of his will.

If that is not the case, it is especially bad news for those of us who teach. The existence of the error that mere mental assent to the truths of Christ is sufficient for salvation prompted James to issue a caution regarding teachers in Jas. 3:1-2. He says that not many of them should become teachers because as teachers they will receive a stricter (or greater) judgment. That should give a prospective teacher pause because sinning in speech is among the easiest ways for humans to stumble. It is sinful to misrepresent God, to speak falsely of him in any way, and yet the riches of the Scripture that Christian teachers expound cannot be exhausted by the greatest and most spiritually mature human minds. We must be deadly serious in our effort to speak faithfully on God's behalf, but it would be delusional to think we speak with perfect fidelity. Were God not gracious regarding our sincere errors, we would have no hope.