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 The Cross, Christ, and the Confederate Flag  
 Rom 14; 1 Cor 8-10; Philip 2; Matt 22  
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- In 2013 Knoxville, TN was #1 on Barna Group's list of most Bible-minded cities.
  - Based on surveys regarding Bible reading habits, views/attitudes towards the Bible, as well as factors like number of searches per capita on sites like Bible.org.
    - Not a perfect list by any means.
    - But Knoxville topped it two years ago.
  - In the last two weeks 6 predominantly black churches east of the Mississippi have burned. A couple are suspected to be accidental, due to lightning or something else.
    - But the first one burned was in Knoxville.
      - That was on June 21.
- Four days prior, on June 17, a 21-yr-old white male, entered a prayer service at a predominantly African-American church in Charleston, SC.
  - After sitting with the 12 men and women attending the meeting, Dylann Roof pulled a .45 caliber handgun out and began shooting people at close range.
    - He reloaded 5 times.
    - Shot 10, 9 of which died (**PIC OF VICTIMS**)
  - Upon further investigation, Roof had multiple pictures made holding Confederate flags and handguns. (**PIC OF DYLANN ROOF**)
    - He'd also written a manifesto about his hatred of minorities.
    - Interestingly enough, Roof told investigators he almost didn't go through with it b/c the people had been so nice to him.

This of course came on the heels of the Supreme Court's ruling that denying same-sex marriages was unconstitutional.

In 2015, the Tri-Cities, our region, was ranked #3 on that same Bible-minded survey.

**So in a matter of a couple of weeks, one of the country's most Bible-minded areas has had a lot to think about.**

- Both incidents have to do with rights and freedoms as understood legally and governmentally.
- But I want to suggest that both incidents are also deeply theological.
- Regardless of where you stand politically, it's not hard for the average Upper East Tennessean to see the theological implications of the marriage decision.
  - Most of us would agree that marriage was instituted by God, and the Scriptures are clear that marriage is a symbol of Christ's love for his Bride, the Church. That a husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church.
- **But I'm not confident that we all see the theological associations in the question over the Confederate Flag.**
  - So how does the #3 most Bible-minded area of the country think about such things?
- Everyone is entitled to an opinion, but that doesn't mean each opinion is equally valid or true.
  - Can turn on FOX News, CNN, or MSNBC and get all the opinions from all the experts you want.
  - Can even turn on ESPN and the Weather Channel and get opinions these days.
- But I want to point you to texts in the Word of God, words inspired by the Holy Spirit, that give us a framework for thinking about these kinds of things.

### **A couple of disclaimers before we get into the Scriptures.**

- 1. This is a message primarily directed to followers of Jesus who need to know how to wrestle with these kinds of issues.**
  - If you're not a Christ follower, I don't hold you to the same standard because the Bible doesn't do that.
  - My hope is that you'd see a better way in Christ than what the world offers you.
- 2. I don't think this is a right or wrong issue. You will not find Confederate Flag in your concordance.**
  - Instead, what I think we can do via the Scriptures is ascertain principles to apply to these situations.

So as you are pondering this whole question and thinking about whether you'll be party to the Rebel Flag parade that's happening this week or how you'll talk about the issue at the barber shop or Hardees or with the person you're trying to lead closer to Jesus....

- There is one principle threaded throughout the Scriptures that you have to see, and there are three questions I have to help you apply it in your life as these kinds of situations arise.

One principle, three questions:

Here's the Principle for us to grab hold of: **Christian responsibilities prevail over civilian rights.**

All of that said, let's turn to our first text and the first question: **Matthew 22:34-40**

- This is our first text b/c it is of first importance to our Lord and settles most every matter if we'll take it seriously:
- **Read Matt 22:34-40**

Question 1:

### **1. Am I loving God and my neighbor?**

As you try to find a place to plant your feet on this matter or any other cultural conversation that comes to bear—and they will be many—before posting on facebook or commenting at the coffee shop, ask of yourself: **Am I loving God with all my heart, soul, and mind right now?** And right on the heels of that: **Am I loving my neighbors as myself?**

- Can I love my neighbor as myself and fly this flag?
- Can I love my neighbor as myself and blast this particular type of music out of my house or car?
- Can I love my neighbor and never offer to help when I see them out working?
- ➔ What would I want that person to do or say if I were in their position? That's how I love them as myself would want to be loved.
- What kind of consideration would I want them to give me?
- Would I want someone to do that or say that or wave that around me, my family, my friends if I were in their position?

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Two more texts that give us two contexts to consider as we seek to apply what the Scriptures say-- **2 arenas of application for our cultural considerations**, if you will:

- Inside of the faith community
- Outside of the faith community

You have to think through these kinds of things biblically in respect to both contexts whether you're a Republican, Democrat, Tea Party, Libertarian, or Alabama Fan.

**Romans 14**—the immediate context here is that the apostle Paul is addressing the issue of those new to the Christian faith who are having a hard time reconciling their old ways of life in paganism with the way of Christ.

- Two of the issues that come up:
  - whether you should eat meat or be vegetarian?
  - is one day of the week more honorable or holy than another?
- So there's in-fighting amongst the opinions within the church.

### **Read Romans 14:10-12**

So Paul says in the midst of this disagreement within the body, **let's not lose sight of where this all ends**, which is our common meeting place before the judgment seat of God.

- As you're passing judgment on your fellow brother or sister in Christ for their practices that, in and of themselves are not sinful, **remember that you'll give an account for yourself...not for them.**
- So what will you before the Lord of your attitude and approach towards fellow believers?

Then Paul moves into what has become a sort of cliché in the Christian world, but a text nonetheless that is necessary to grasp in times such as ours: **Read vv.13-19**

- So in this text, Paul's consideration is this: Am I really going to let the weaker conscience of another believer limit my freedom?
  - B/c for Paul, it doesn't matter what food you put in front of him, he's ready to eat it. And his conscience is completely clear.
  - But he says that's not the case for everyone within the church at Rome.
- So **v.15—are you really going to elevate your rights as a citizen over your responsibilities as a Christian?**
  - *Don't choose your rights and "Destroy" the one for whom Christ died.*
  - **Don't exercise your freedom for your own personal gain or enjoyment to the detriment of your brother/sister in Christ.**

**Question 2:** there in v.19

### **2. Am I pursuing peace and mutual upbuilding?**

- Are my words and my ways consistent with the hope of unity that Jesus has for his church?
- Am I putting the spirit of my fellow believer above the satisfaction of myself?
  - B/c in doing so, I not only pursue peace, I build us both us, which strengthens the entire body.

### **Read v.20 -21**

- Could read any right you possess into v.20:
  - "Do not, for the sake of sex, destroy the work of God."
  - "Do not, for the sake of buying more or owning more, destroy the work of God."
  - "Do not, for the sake of proving a point destroy the work of God and destroy the one for whom Christ died."
  - Don't for the sake of flying a flag, destroy what God is doing in others.
  - So to summarize, the Holy Spirit tells us, don't let the exercise of a personal right trump your relational responsibility.
- **End of v.23 "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."**
- If you can't honestly say that what you're seeking to do is an overflow of your love for God and neighbor, then it's sin.
  - Whether it's to prove a point
  - Or whether it's to have a sense of self-gratification...
    - It's sin.

### **So whereas the Confederate flag in of itself, like food or drink or a day of the week, is not sinful...**

- Our exercise of rights in those things could be sinful if our brothers or sisters are offended by them, led astray by them, or destroyed by them.

And that is where I would look at this broader situation of the flag—considering the event that has ignited this debate (the murder of 9 black brothers and sisters in Christ) and the history of what this flag has meant to an entire race of Jesus followers for the last 150 years.

### **LET ME, THEN, ADDRESS THE ARGUMENTATION THAT THIS FLAG REPRESENTS MY HERITAGE.**

One can argue the historical beginnings and meanings of the Confederate Flag, of which there were multiple versions-- (the one still flown today is usually what became the battle flag of TN and a similar version that was battle flag of army of northern VA).

- So you can argue the historical development of the flag, and that's fine.
  - o I love history. Was a History major in college.
  - o But I would also want to encourage you to consider what a flag is.

### **What is a flag?**

- By nature it is a symbol.
- One of the primary facts that must be considered is that symbols, like words/language, are not static.
- Symbols don't carry an intrinsic meaning.

**Illus:** A youth pastor from AL wrote a very fine article on his experience growing up in the country in AL, where rebel flags were flown in the back of pick-up trucks, worn on hats, and put on poles in people's yards.

- He told of his own experience growing up using the "n" word to refer to blacks.
- He'd hear his dad become angry when he talked about those people who lived in "pepper town"
- And this youth pastor had a school principal take him to task when he, as a 4<sup>th</sup> grader, called another little boy the n-word.
- The principal spent two weeks meeting with the young boy in detention talking about that word and what it does to people when they hear it.
  - o He taught him the deep impact words and symbols can have on people.

**He said that principal saved him "from the depravity of racism, the ignorance of inequality and the suffocating quicksand of hatred."**

But what he really got across in the article was the real issue that symbols, such as flags, have meanings that are "**always being redefined, interpreted, and evolving.**"

I said this happens with words as well. There are words you used growing up that have entirely different connotations in today's culture.

That's why Tim McGraw wrote the song "Back When"

**Don't you remember  
The fizz in a pepper  
Peanuts in a bottle  
At ten, two and four  
A fried bologna sandwich  
With mayo and tomato  
Sittin' round the table**

Don't happen much anymore

We got too complicated

It's all way over-rated

I like the old and out-dated

Way of life

Back when a hoe was a hoe

Coke was a coke

And crack's what you were doing

When you were cracking jokes

Back when a screw was a screw

The wind was all that blew

And when you said I'm down with that

Well it meant you had the flu

I miss back when

Whatever else Tim is singing there, he's showing the reality that words, regardless of their initial meanings, can be taken and altered over time to mean something else.

- Doesn't mean the original intent isn't there, but it means other nuances have been added.

## **Illus from history**

### **The Swastika (PICTURE of NAZI FLAG)**

- What do you associate with this when you see it?
- Do you know it didn't always have that intent.
- This symbol predates Hitler by thousands of years.
- Has ancient religious roots. Hindus, Buddhists, and even early Christians, used the symbol.
  - The word itself comes from Sanskrit, which is a precursor to modern Hindi in India.
  - Still used as a liturgical language in Hinduism.
- **But the symbol (the swastika) stood for "well being"**
  - A scholar of Sanskrit suggests its deepest meaning was "permanent victory", which would make sense in use for Christian worship and decoration.

The point being it was around long before Hitler and Nazi Germany and white supremacy.

- **But after the 1930s and 40s, the heritage and historical argument lost sway b/c of what the symbol came to represent.**

Even today, would it be a sin to put a Nazi flag in your yard or wave it from your truck?

- No
- But would you do it considering what it means for the millions who were killed as it waved in the background?
- Would you consider the thoughts and consciences of those whose relatives were killed by people who held to that flag as part of their heritage?

**And that's the argument this wise youth pastor makes in his article:**

- **The meaning of symbols are fluid, not static.**
- **PIC OF KKK "When KKK members adopted it as the symbol of their hate [and ignorance], it changed"**
- **When it became a banner for segregationists who wanted to keep blacks and whites apart, it changed.**
- **When it became synonymous with burning crosses, white hoods, and ropes thrown over magnolia trees looped around lifeless brown necks. It changed!!!!**

**Think of the symbol of the cross:**

- Do you know how insane it would've looked to wear a cross around your neck or put it on the wall of your home in the 1<sup>st</sup> century?
  - o Your family members and town's people are being crucified on those trees and you're treating it like a decoration?
  - o But eventually the cross became a symbol of victory
- Who would've ever imagined that crosses would hang in the very Roman Colosseum that served as the execution chamber for Christians of the 1<sup>st</sup> century?

➔ So is the Confederate flag itself as a symbol evil? No.

➔ Did the flag ever kill anyone? No.

➔ Is it your right to wave it? Yes.

**But as a follower of Jesus, how do you think it makes the brothers and sisters in Charleston feel when they see it?**

- Does it make for peace and mutual upbuilding?
- Are we uniting with them in their grief and attempts to be Christian in an area of the country that still shows hatred towards their race?

These are questions to mull over as a follower of Jesus.

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One more text that I'll summarize much of and give you just a couple verses.

**1 Corinthians 9 (v.12 and 19-23)**

In chapter 8, the apostle Paul is addressing the church at Corinth, which sits in a diverse area, lots of trade happening, paganism still rampant, but the gospel is also gaining some ground.

There are those in the church still struggling with food sacrificed to idols, what's allowed in and around the temple, and Paul is trying to help them navigate these cultural and religious waters.

- Some similar language to what he says in Romans 14 about not letting your rights become a stumbling block for others.
- 1 Cor 8:13 "If food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat..."

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**But then Paul's focus moves to outside the community of faith.**

Here's where I want us to think more broadly and then narrow back in on Christ and the cross as we finish out.

The apostle Paul begins speaking about his rights and freedom to eat what he wants and then talks about how it's within his right, as an apostle, to ask for financial help as he preaches.

But for some reason, Paul truly believes that asking for financial support would hinder the advancement of the gospel

### **Read 1 Cor 9:12**

Question 3:

#### **1. Am I helping or hindering the advancement of the gospel?**

**Is my exercise of a right putting an obstacle in the way of the gospel reaching other people?**

- Do I have the right to have a beer in the company of whoever I please?
  - Yes.
- But is it possible that there are certain people I might be ministering to or trying to reach with the good news of Jesus for whom alcohol is a major issue and I'd be putting an obstacle in the way by having a drink in front of them?
- Same could be true for me taking a vegetarian non-believer out and ordering a medium rare filet...trying to share the gospel as I dab the steak in the juices flowing out of that glorious cut of meat.

So Paul says these cultural issues have to bring to mind an evangelistic and missionary focus:

**Read 1 Cor 9:19-23**

Jump over to **1 Cor 10:23 READ**

- 1 Cor is Paul's response to a letter that was written to him with these questions and situations.
- He's quoting what people are saying: "**ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL**"
  - o **I have all these rights to do whatever pleases me here...**

Paul says, right, **but not all things are helpful and not all things build up.**

**You have Christian responsibilities that take priority over your civilian rights.**

So as you consider applying this principle in the realm of evangelism, ask whether something like the flag or any other thing—alcohol, tobacco, a particular music...

- ➔ Is this going to help me advance the gospel to this person or this group of people, or is it going to hinder that cause?

**Does this personal right I have get in the way of the relational responsibility I have to be a peacemaker, to build up others, and to spread the good news of Jesus, mirroring to others his grace and compassion?**

And let me just share my human, fleshly response to all this by the time I'm done studying, preparing, and preaching.

"Good grief I have to think about other people a lot."

Yes.

And that comes to us from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It's unnatural for us b/c our hearts are sinful and our minds are so turned on ourselves.

But listen to the way of Jesus: **READ Philippians 2:3-5**

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.*

- How differently would our world look if the Christians took the Word seriously?
  - o How different would your marriage look?

- Your dating relationship?
- Your relationships with co-workers?
- Your church, this one or any other.

**The cross of Jesus Christ is a symbol forever changed b/c of who died on it.**

- Jesus put aside his divine rights as King of kings and Lord of lords and humbled himself, taking on the form of mankind, and dying for the sins of those he created.
- But he rose from the grave, victorious over sin and death, forgiving us from the penalty of sin and freeing us from the power of sin.

**That's why we worship and pray and sing as a people united by something greater than our earthly citizenship.**

- For we are citizens of heaven, a better country.
- The Scriptures speak of God's people as sojourners, aliens, exiles, citizens of another kingdom....

And as such we seek to bring that kingdom to earth.

So as our Lord Jesus taught us and modeled for us in the most extravagant of ways, we are willing to set aside rights for the sake of relationships and responsibilities.

We heed the call Jesus makes to his disciples to die to yourself, to take up your cross, to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.