

XIII. Caring for a Weaker Brother

March 19/21, 2013

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Aim: To love our brothers and sisters in Christ by not demanding our own way in matters of moral neutrality if it would cause them to stumble in their Christian walk.

Just as chapters 5-7 formed a block of teaching (on sexual holiness), so too Paul has arranged his material in chapters 8-10 to address a current burning issue, namely, idolatry. The language of ‘temple culture’ is found throughout these chapters; e.g., *eidōlon*, ‘an idol’ (8:4, 7; 10:19); *eidōlthutos*, ‘idol-sacrificed meat’ (8:1, 4, 7, 10; 10:19); *eidōleion*, ‘idol house’ (8:10); and *eidōlolatrea*, ‘the worship of idols’ (10:14).

A. The Problem with Food (1 Cor. 8:1a)

1. The Problem in General

Some things are clearly right. Scripture tells us so. Other things are clearly wrong, and no amount of hedging and dodging can make them otherwise. But not all moral issues fall neatly into one of these two distinct categories. Some issues fall into that murky middle class of things which are neither black nor white but a dingy gray. The Christian is always obligated to do what Scripture commands and to refrain from doing what it forbids. But so far as we can tell, on these murky middle issues, God has not clearly revealed His will.

The basic problem that confronted the Corinthians faces all of us. The issue is: How far does Christian freedom go in regard to behavior not specifically forbidden in Scripture? ‘Questionable’ practices that many believers feel to be wrong but that are not specifically forbidden in Scripture include: drinking alcoholic beverages, smoking, card playing, wearing makeup, dancing, Sunday sports, styles of music, and going to the theater or movies. It is not that those and many other similar issues may not be important. But we cannot speak as authoritatively about them as we can such things as stealing, murder, slander, adultery, or covetousness—which Scripture plainly forbids as sinful. Likewise both testaments teach many things that are always good to do—loving and worshiping God, loving our neighbor, helping the poor, and so on. Those specific things are black or white, wrong or right. Many behaviors, however, are not commanded, commended, or forbidden in Scripture. They are neither black nor white, but gray. Such issues in one age or area may not be the same as those in other times or places; but every age and every place has had to deal with the gray areas of Christian living.

Christians tend to answer the debate about whether to practice or refrain from gray area issues in one of two ways. Some look at the absence of God’s revelation on a certain practice and say, ‘It must be right!’ Other Christians look at the absence of God’s revelation on the same practice and say, ‘It might be wrong!’

The church in Corinth was engaged in a fierce debate on an issue that fell into the murky middle area. Unable to come to agreement on it, they finally wrote to Paul and asked for his guidance. The issue they were debating was meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Two questions were involved. First, should the Christian ever eat meat when he knew part of it had been used to make a sacrifice to an idol? Secondly, should the Christian ever attend a banquet in which sacrifices were made to idols? Paul deals with the first question at great length (8:1-10:13), the

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second question in a much briefer fashion (10:14-22), and then gives a brief summary of the whole matter (10:23-11:1).

2. The Particulars in Corinth (8:1a)

¹ *Now concerning food offered to idols:*

Paul is answering another question already raised by his readers. The subject is ‘food sacrificed to idols’ (*eidōluthutos*). The Corinthian skyline was dominated by a centuries-old temple dedicated to Apollo; the city was also replete with many other shrines. Most likely Paul taught about temples, gods, and sacrifices when he established the church five years earlier. The immediate issue addressed by Paul is that association with idolaters, if taken too far, almost certainly involved eating meat known by all concerned to have been sacrificed to the gods.

In chapters 8-10 Paul touches on three aspects of idol culture that affected the Corinthians. One related to being present when the priest sacrificed the animal on the altar for the god (cp. 10:14, 20). This usually occurred in an open space outside the temple. Second, the worshippers ate the food that had been sacrificed to the god. This might occur in the main part of the temple (cp. 10:20-22) or, alternatively, in the small dining rooms attached to the temple where people assembled for a dinner at which the sacrificed food was eaten. However, thirdly, sacrificed meat was also sold in the shops, taken home, and eaten (cp. 10:25, 28). Each of these aspects of ‘temple culture’ presented acute pastoral problems for the new Christians in Corinth.

Food sacrifices were an essential part of the worship of all the Greek gods for two reasons: the gods had to be kept happy, and the food had to be cleansed or purified from demonic contamination. The common belief of that day was that demons were constantly trying to invade humans and the easiest way for them to do so was by attaching themselves to food. By being sacrificed to a god, the food was purified and could be eaten safely.

Each food sacrifice consisted of three parts: the first part was consumed in the offering itself; the second part was given as a payment to the priests; and the third part was kept by the offerer. The Christians, of course, were not making sacrifices to idols, so what was the problem? Two things. First, the priests for the idols could not possibly use all the meat they received, so they sold most of it to the butchers of the day who put it on the market. That meat was highly valued because it was cleansed of evil spirits, and was thus the meat served at feasts and to guests. Secondly, when a Christian was invited to someone’s home for a meal, there was a good chance that the meat served had been used in idol-worship.

It was almost impossible for a believer who had any personal contact with Gentiles to avoid facing the question of eating idol sacrifices. Apart from the Jews *all* the people of this city would have attended the festivals, rubbed shoulders with fellow citizens, discussed local issues, found employment, and transacted business. The ‘culture’ of the temple, its worship and sacrifices, permeated the whole of life at that time. Not to participate, in effect, meant to separate oneself from the civic life of the city.

Converted Jews never had problems in this area; for them avoiding idol food was an open-and-shut matter (cp. Dan. 1:8, 16; Acts 10:14). But baptized Greeks, springing from a culture that had long been devoted to Olympus, and whose food, retailed in the local markets, was, as Paul says it, polluted by pagan rites, had no such back-up.

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3. The Positions in Debate

Christian liberty is a central truth of the New Testament (cp. Jn. 8:31-32; 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:1). But Christian liberty is not unbridled license. It is never freedom to sin, and often it should exclude things that in themselves are not sin but that may become sinful or lead others to sin. Two common extremes are often followed in regard to doubtful things. One is legalism; the other is license. Legalism believes that every act, every habit, every type of behavior is either black or white. Legalists live by rules rather than by the Spirit. License is the opposite extreme. It is like legalism in that it too has no gray areas—but neither does it have much black. Almost everything is white; everything is acceptable as long as it is not strictly forbidden in Scripture. Such advocates believe that Christian freedom is virtually absolute and unqualified. As long as your own conscience is free you can do as you please. That seems to have been the philosophy of the group Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 8.

There are two schools of thought among Christians when any issue in the gray area comes up. These two schools had both weighed in for this debate in Corinth. One school consisted of those Paul calls the ‘weak’ Christians. These were the ones who were afraid to do anything not explicitly permitted by God for fear that it might be wrong. If they attempted to do so, they found themselves conscience-stricken and miserable. These sensitive Gentile believers refused to buy such meat because it brought back memories of their previous pagan lives or because those who saw them buy it might think they had reverted to paganism. Also many believers, both Gentile and Jewish, were reluctant to eat at the homes of pagan Gentiles—and even of some Christian Gentiles—because they were afraid of being served that meat.

On the other hand were the ‘strong’ Christians, those who were able to practice anything not strictly forbidden and not feel any guilt at all. To them, meat was meat. They knew pagan deities did not really exist and that evil spirits did not contaminate food. Perhaps these Corinthians were saying that because they ‘knew’ that there was no real god behind its image this meant they were free to go to the temples, attend the sacrifices, and eat the sacrificed meat. The problem was that these ‘strong’ Christians had very little patience with their weaker brothers and sisters. When the issue of eating meat arose, they rather enjoyed flaunting their ability to eat this meat and causing the weaker Christians to squirm.

Were the ‘weak’ believers to become vegetarians, or had they to shun occasions when their families, friends, and associates invited them to dine, with nominal respect being shown to the gods? Were the saints to decline commodities on display in the shops for fear that they might be spiritually contaminated? Converse, if they – rightfully – chose to eat anything they desired, why should they be stigmatized as libertines, unprincipled people?

A few years earlier the Council of Jerusalem had decreed that Gentile converts should refuse food previously dedicated to heathen worship (Acts 15:20, 28-29). So why does Paul not mention what was determined on that occasion? Part of the answer would be that the complexities of the situation at Corinth compelled him to expound basic principles. Anyhow, because the Jerusalem Council did not touch on such matters in detail, Paul grapples with them.

4. The Principle of Paul

Paul teaches the Corinthians that even if we do not sin in a specific instance, it can still be wrong if we offend the consciences of fellow believers when they are less mature (‘weak’) and when what we are doing is not necessary in our service to the Lord. In answer to the specific question

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about eating food offered to idols, Paul gives a general and universal principle that can be applied to all doubtful behavior. The principle is: ‘Take care lest this liberty of yours somehow becomes a stumbling block to the weak’ (8:9). Before we exercise our Christian liberty in a given area not forbidden by Scripture, we should consider how it will affect others, especially our fellow believers.

Paul’s responses to the ‘strong’ Christians’ positions were *directed to* that group of more mature believers. But his responses *centered on* the other group. He told the mature believers not to focus on their liberty but on the spiritual welfare of those who were less mature. He was saying, ‘Don’t look at your freedom; look at their need. Your own freedom should be limited by your love for fellow believers.’

B. The Position of the ‘Strong’ (1 Cor. 8:1b-6)

1. Warnings Regarding Knowledge (8:1b-3)

The stronger Christians were framing the issue in terms of knowledge; that is, they were saying they were able to do these things because they were more knowledgeable than their weaker brothers and sisters. From what Paul has said in this letter about other issues, it is apparent that Corinth had a good number of people who suffered from spiritual elitism.

So before ever taking up the issue of meat sacrificed to idols, Paul deals with the arrogant attitude of these stronger Christians. In fact, his whole discussion of this issue is addressed to the stronger Christians. He talks to them about the weaker Christians. Essentially, Paul says that even if these stronger Christians did possess great knowledge, they had no reason to be proud and boastful about it.

Paul realizes that even the relative maturity of the stronger element within the church generates problems, the head-knowledge of some not necessarily healing the heart-sickness of others. He teaches that those who (rightly) dismiss the gods of Olympus as nonentities must respect the reservations of the less-aware brethren.

Far from being merely a digression, these verses (1b-3) state the most basic principle on which Paul’s argument over the next few chapters will be based. It is a splendid statement that forms the foundation for his advice to the Corinthians, but which stands for all time for a believer’s relationship with God. Paul wanted his readers then and now to recognize that ‘knowing *about* God’ does not mean that they ‘know God.’

a) *Knowledge Is Not Exclusive (8:1b)*

...we know that “all of us possess knowledge.”

First he declares that *knowledge was not their private domain*. Paul is presumably echoing the Corinthians’ assertions that the way to deal with the issue was on the basis of what everybody ‘knows.’ The statement was true but egotistical. It reflected a feeling of superiority. They knew that eating the food could not contaminate them spiritually, that it had no affect on their Christian lives. They felt totally free to eat whatever they wanted, no matter what others thought. Thus, Paul seems to be throwing another Corinthian slogan back into their faces: ‘You have said that all have knowledge. Perhaps I agree – but how you and I apply our *gnōsis* is another matter.’

They were evidently reserving the phrase ‘all of us possess knowledge (*gnōsis*)’ for themselves, but Paul expands it to include all Christians. They were putting the emphasis on ‘we’ (‘us’), but

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Paul put it on ‘all.’ All Christians don’t know all things, but they all do know some things. Therefore, no Christian should look down on his brother or sister in Christ.

b) Knowledge Is Inferior to Love (8:1c)

This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up.

Secondly, Paul says those who possess knowledge still have not arrived, because *knowledge is inferior to love*. Those believers were mature in knowledge, but they were not mature in love. While knowledge puffs up, love edifies, or builds up others; and that edification they did not have. They were solid in doctrine but weak in love. They were strong in self-love but weak in brotherly love. By introducing the idea of love into the discussion, Paul dramatically shifts the focus.

None too subtly Paul tells the wisdom-besotted Corinthians that ‘knowing’ *about* God brings arrogance. It is in that spirit that they exercise what they consider to be freedom. Knowledge alone simply inflates its possessor, because it separates him out from those who do not know, and provides perceived advantages over others that he will be tempted to make use of to advance himself and to put others down. No Christian community is immune from this basic sinful stratagem.

No one believed more in the importance of knowledge than Paul. One can make absolutely no progress in the Christian life without knowledge. It is impossible to believe or obey what is not known. But just as Paul was second to none in emphasizing the need for knowledge, so he was second to none in emphasizing that knowledge alone is not enough; it is essential but not sufficient. By itself knowledge puffs up. To have love but no knowledge is unfortunate; to have knowledge and no love is equally tragic. So we find Paul firmly declaring we must always hold the truth with love (Ep. 4:15). Truth straightens us, but love sweetens us.

Knowledge ‘puffs up’ the *individual who knows*, but love ‘builds up’ *others in their understanding* of the faith. Now this is precisely where some of the Corinthians were failing so badly. Shortly Paul will indicate how people like them, who have a good knowledge of theology, are actually spiritually *destroying* fellow-believers who happen to be less well-grounded in the faith (vv. 7-13).

c) Knowledge Is Limited (8:2)

²*If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.*

Thirdly, Paul punctures their pride of knowledge by saying *knowledge is limited*. In doing so, he points to their lack of humility. No one knows as much as he needs to know and most of us don’t know nearly as much as we think we know. Paul is saying in this riddle that even those who think they know a lot about God, in fact know next to nothing. How could it be otherwise? The subject under discussion is *God* who is eternal, infinite, and hidden from sight and sense.

Love edifies, and the knowledgeable believer without the edification of love is not as mature as he is inclined to think. The unloving orthodox are arrogant but not edified. They have right knowledge but not right understanding. The truly edified person has some idea of what he has yet to learn. Someone has defined knowledge as ‘the process of passing from the unconscious state of ignorance to the conscious state of ignorance.’ Ignorance does not know that it does not know. True knowledge does not know and knows it.

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Paul is not being anti-intellectual. We do require knowledge because God has revealed Himself and the mysteries of His sovereign will in His Word. Ignorance is not a Christian virtue. But in any sphere of life, the really knowledgeable person knows how little he or she knows, and how much therefore he or she has yet to learn and to discover.

d) Knowledge Is Relational (8:3)

³*But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.*

Finally, Paul says *the purpose of knowledge* is not so we can brag about how much we know, but so we can love God more perfectly. The person who is truly knowledgeable in the things of God doesn't even think about how much he knows. He is simply lost in the desire to love God and to serve Him. Knowledge is important, immensely important. But, as everything else, without love it is nothing. Loving and being loved by God is everything.

We only know God in His knowing of us. Fundamental to God's knowing of us is that we love Him. Paul has moved from 'knowing facts about God,' critical as they are, to actually knowing God and being known by Him. It is not possible to know God unless we know true things about Him, as revealed in the word of God. This is not in dispute. But the reverse is not true. It is possible to know *about* God, but because of lack of love for others, or lack of humility, or lack of love for God, not to actually know Him, that is, *relationally*. This was the problem in Corinth, which lay exposed in their question and his answer.

By way of application, we need to remind ourselves that the model of New Testament church life is not the university lecture room. Teaching is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to lead us to a deeper knowledge of God and so to a deeper love relationship with Him.

The real question, as far as Paul was concerned, is not how much we know, but whether we love God. So Paul begins to answer the question about this murky issue of eating meats sacrificed to idols by taking direct aim at the Corinthian's pride. They thought their problem was whether to eat meat or to refrain from it, but Paul says their real problem was their attitude. Are you suffering from spiritual elitism? Do you look down on your brothers and sisters in Christ? Heed Paul's words! Forget about how much you know and concentrate on loving God!

2. Confirmation of Their Knowledge (8:4-6)

As far as the 'strong' Christians were concerned, the real problem in their church was not meat at all, but rather the ignorance of the 'weak' Christians. And they probably thought the whole dispute would be quickly resolved by writing to Paul. He undoubtedly would congratulate them on their knowledge and freedom, deliver a resounding rebuke to the weak Christians, and the controversy would be over.

Thus, Paul's opening words must have come as a severe shock to them. He began, not by rebuking the weak Christians for having such fragile consciences, but by reprimanding the strong Christians for being so proud of their knowledge. After reading Paul's sharp words about the danger of taking pride in knowledge, we would expect him to begin demolishing the arguments of the strong Christians. Surprisingly enough, he doesn't. Instead, he proceeds to point out the essential correctness of their thinking. In verses 4-6 Paul states his agreement with the Corinthians who were theologically well taught.

Their justification for eating this meat consisted of two arguments. First, because idols are not really gods at all, there could be no harm in eating meat sacrificed to them. Secondly, food

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doesn't make one acceptable to the only true God. Paul was very happy to set his seal of approval on both arguments. In fact, he not only heartily endorsed the first argument, but even enlarged upon it (vv. 4-6). He approves the second argument in verse 8.

a) *Idols Are Not Real (8:4-5)*

⁴Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” ⁵For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—

Building bridges, Paul agrees in theory with those who abuse their *gnōsis*: both he and they are in a position to consider the issue of eating idol meat because all are at one on basic matters. By ‘idol’ (*eidōlon*) is meant a deity as represented by its image. Paul agrees that ‘an idol has no real existence.’ The stone, precious metal, or wood is real, but there is no god behind it. The image is not of anything that really exists. It only reflects the imagination of the one who designed it, or the impersonation of the demon who deceives through it (10:20).

Paul returns to the ‘knowledge’ on which the Corinthians were basing their behavior, by making a foundational theological statement that ‘there is no God but one.’ This teaching is adapted from the *Shema* (Dt. 6:4), and is also found in various other statements in the New Testament (e.g., Eph. 4:5; 1 Tim. 2:5). His ‘oneness’ does relate to His indivisibility, arithmetically as it were, but also to His absolute *uniqueness*. He alone *was*, and *is*, and *will be*. Paul’s credo also echoes Yahweh’s own self-revelation of His uniqueness (cp. Is. 45:5).

All sorts of human creations, pseudo-deities, are dignified with the title of ‘god’ or ‘lord,’ but they are merely the products of rebellious, sinful human imagination. They have no objective reality. The term ‘god’ was anything to which deity was ascribed. The term ‘lord,’ on the other hand, was probably reserved for secondary mediators, that is, the channels through whom the gods could be approached. Although the Greek deities are sinful fictions, behind them lurk malignant and unceasingly active spiritual personalities (see 10:19-20). But calling something ‘god’ or ‘lord’ doesn’t make it either of these things, and Paul quickly affirms in verse 6 that there is in reality only one true God and only one mediator. The true God is the one whom Christians love and serve.

b) *The Triune God Is Real (8:6)*

⁶...yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

The Father is the only ‘god’ and Jesus is the only ‘lord,’ in contrast to all the confusion of man-made religions.

Paul calls God ‘the Father.’ He is the Father who loves us, but He is also the Sovereign who rules us and the Creator who made us. ‘All things’ are ‘from’ the Father, meaning that the one God is the sole creator of the universe. Because we exist for him, believers are under obligation to worship the Father to the exclusion of all other beings.

The only way we can know this one true God is through the one true Mediator—the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul’s words about the Mediator are extremely important. It is not enough for the Christian merely to claim there is only one true God. Paul not only makes clear that there is only one true God, but also shows there is only one way to know and worship Him, and that is through the Lord Jesus Christ.

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It is of supreme importance that the Lord Jesus is here bracketed with God, the Father, in the closes unity, making this one of the strongest assertions of His deity in the whole of Paul's writings. The Father is the originator of all creation and His Son is its agent and sustainer (cp. Col. 1:15-17). Jesus is said to have been the sole agent of creation, 'through whom are all things.' The God-man is essentially one person who has brought 'all things' into being.

At least five interlocking truths must be noted in Paul's solemn words. First, Yahweh the God of Israel has now revealed Himself through Christ as 'God the *Father*.' In no other religious system is God like the forgiving Father who welcomes home and forgives the wayward prodigal and who seeks to reconcile the elder to the younger brother. Second, Paul states that both the 'Father' and 'Lord' are 'One,' that is, *unique*. This must mean that the 'One' who is 'Lord' and 'Son' shares in the unique deity of 'God, the Father.' Third, there is a dynamic relationship between the Father and the Lord in relationship to 'all things.' By 'all things,' Paul means the creation and sustenance of the universe but also its redemption for the Kingdom of God. The prepositions 'from' and 'through' give us a glimpse of the workings of the Father and the Son in time, space, and history. The Father is the source but the Son is the agent of 'all things.' Fourth, alongside 'all things' Paul speaks of 'we' believers. 'We' are Christian believers 'through Him,' that is the Son who is Lord. He is the agent both of creation but also of the 'new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17). Fifth, the Father is both the source of all things—creation, providence, redemption—and the One 'unto' whom all things *are*.

But we must not miss the application as to how we are to live. Christians live *for* the Father, *through* the Son. It was Christ's perfect will of fulfilled obedience that was substituted for our rebellious wills in His atoning death on the cross. That is why it is only possible for us to live for God *through* Christ.

All this means that the way in which the Corinthians were to deal with the problem of idolatrous sacrifices was for their lives to be patterned on the love of Christ. For Christians to assert that their freedom, based on knowledge, must be exercised at all costs, irrespective of its effect on others, is to exalt knowledge over love. That is not the way of love and so cannot be the way of Christ.

C. The Position of the 'Weak' (1 Cor. 8:7-13)

From what Paul has just said, it follows that idol worship is to be abhorred and abandoned. Yet a question remains: are there circumstances in which the Corinthians might properly eat meat that has been offered to idols?

1. Lack of Knowledge (8:7-8)

a) Food Offered to Idols (8:7)

⁷*However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.*

'However, not all possess this knowledge' is the turning point of the chapter. One might imagine the truth Paul proclaims in verses 4-6 would be basic knowledge for every Christian, but there are degrees of knowing and for the young convert, as yet untaught and insecure, the example of older and more stable, experienced Christians often proves crucial. Verse 7 puts his readers into the shoes of such a person.

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Paul now introduces a situation that most likely came to his attention from a report rather than from the Corinthians' letter. They are unlikely to have asked him about the specific situation which they must have sense put them in a bad light.

Paul was probably referring to those who had recently been converted to Christianity from a life of paganism. They were so steeped in idol-worship and all it involved that it was exceedingly difficult for them now to think of the idol differently. The old ways of thinking often re-imposed themselves on his new mind-set, and long-held prejudices took time to eradicate. Such believers were unable to separate the food from the idols to which it was offered.

Apparently some believers still believe that the temple food they eat is killed for the sake of, as they suspect, real deities represented by their images. They still imagined that idols, though evil, were real and that the gods the idols represented were real. Earlier superstitions still linger on. They knew that there is only one *right* God but perhaps they had not yet fully grasped the truth that there is only one *real* God.

The pagan gods were not real, but the wicked practices associated with them were real and fresh on their minds. They recoiled from having contact with anything associated with their past paganism. Their consciences were not yet strong enough to allow them to eat idol food without having them pull them back to their former idolatrous activity. Because they are not sure that what they do is right, they feel unclean, possibly regretting their action. Even though the act in itself is not morally or spiritually wrong, it becomes wrong when it is committed against conscience. A 'defiled' conscience is one that has been ignored and violated. Such a conscience brings confusion, resentment, and feelings of guilt. Defiled conscience is defiled faith.

Some of the members of the church have by long custom eaten idol-sacrificed food believing that the god was actually 'present.' By 'conscience' Paul means our understanding of the gospel as it impacts on behavior. Their return to the temples would mean eating the idol-sacrificed food with a 'defiled conscience.' Once more they would be joined to the unholy deity and be unclean in their understanding of themselves. Their relationship with the Lord Christ would be destroyed.

No matter how persuasively the strong Christians marshaled their arguments, the weak Christians were simply not able to eat meat sacrificed to these idols without being conscience-stricken. To the strong, it was simply meat, but to the weak, it was still meat offered to an idol.

If such persons are coerced, or encouraged, into eating meat offered in pagan sacrifices, their consciences will convict them that they have drifted back into pagan ways of worship, and so denied the uniqueness of the Lord Jesus Christ and their submission to him. Paul's point is that no Christian should dare to compromise another Christian's conscience, by imposing their 'knowledge' on one whom they consider ignorant, or their 'strength' on one who is weak. The particular issue about food is comparatively trivial (v. 8), but the state of a Christian's conscience is not.

b) Food Is Indifferent to God (8:8)

⁸*Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.*

The second argument the strong Christians were using also received approval from Paul. He adds no words of amplification on this point, but that doesn't lessen the fact that he did wholeheartedly agree with it. What was this argument? Simply this: food doesn't have anything

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to do with our standing before God (cp. 7:19 on circumcision). Gluttony is harmful and eating foods to which we are allergic is harmful. No sensible, mature person will do those things. But, in itself, eating or not eating certain foods has absolutely no spiritual significance (Mk. 7:15; 1 Tim. 4:4).

The reason this issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols had arisen was because God hadn't revealed His will about it. And the reason He hadn't revealed His will is because neither eating nor refraining from eating affects one's relationship with God. Those who ate this meat were not one bit closer to God than those who refrained from eating, and vice versa.

Nevertheless, such is the arrogance of some Corinthians that they flaunt their freedom in Christ by consuming sacrificed food, an action which they imagine will enhance their status. Conversely, those who retain scruples feel bruised, tending to walk away from their stronger brethren for fear of contamination. Both sides are in error, gaining no advantage in the sight of God.

Paul anticipates the misunderstanding of his words in verse 7, so he asserts that, indeed, the food itself is irrelevant (cp. Rom. 14:14; Mk. 7:18-19). Paul does not wish to bring Gentiles back under Jewish food laws, from which Jesus has set humanity free. Nonetheless, Paul continues with a warning not to abuse the freedom they have in Christ (vv. 9ff.)

2. Lack of Love (8:9-12)

a) *The Scenario Envisioned (8:9-10)*

(1) The Conscience of the 'Strong' Brother (8:9)

⁹*But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.*

The fact that Paul agreed the strong Christians were essentially correct in their thinking should not be construed to mean they were totally correct. So Paul, after having endorsed their two major arguments, turns their attention to the crucial omission in their thinking. The strong Christians thought it was enough simply to be convinced of the rightness of their position and then to go ahead and do what they felt inclined to do. Their attitude tended to be, 'If these weaker Christians can't eat this meat, it's their problem, not mine. I've got the right to do whatever I want.' Nothing could have been farther from the truth. The Christian life is not a solo flight and, therefore, the Christian can never say he doesn't care how his actions affect his fellow Christians.

The weaker brothers will not be made strong by insisting on the irrelevance of food (v. 8) or the non-existence of idols (v. 4). Paul agrees with both views, of course, 'knowing' that they are true, but he is determined to operate on the even more important basis of love. His primary concern is with his brother's spiritual well-being, not his own freedom. Paul is not denying, nor attacking, the two realities of knowledge and freedom that flow from the gospel. The problem is the self-centered use made of them by the Corinthians, the abuse of their 'right' (*exousia*, 'delegated authority') under the gospel.

Earlier Paul had echoed their slogans, 'Everything is lawful,' and 'Food for the stomach and the stomach for food (6:12-13). In the abstract those slogans are true enough. But in the real world of temple culture in Corinth those words could be twisted to suggest that eating idol-sacrificed meat was open to fellow-Christians who still believed that the god was present in the food. Paul

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is calling on the Corinthians to put to one side their ‘authority’ to eat whatever they choose for the sake of the spiritual welfare of other Christians.

(2) The Conscience of the ‘Weak’ Brother (8:10)

¹⁰*For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?*

Excavations at Corinth have unearthed a temple to the goddess Demeter-Kore with forty dining rooms, each about 5 meters x 5 meters, each accommodating nine to ten people, but without cooking facilities. The food sacrificed and cooked elsewhere in the precincts of this temple was brought to these small rooms which probably also had a statue of the god. The meal was eaten in fellowship with the god who was thought to be present with his worshippers.

Paul envisages a situation where the believer of ‘weak conscience’ caught a glimpse of well-instructed Christians attending such a meal in the presence of the god. In an arresting wordplay, Paul says that the ‘weak’ brother will be, literally, ‘built up’ (*oikodomēthēsetai*, from *oikodomeō*, ‘I build up’) to go and eat too! The irony is that ‘you’ imagine this de facto demolition of another Christian is a building-up process for him. Love ‘builds up’ sound understanding in others (v. 1), but lovelessness ‘builds up’ an understanding in them that ‘destroys,’ as he explains in verse 11.

Paul responds with a hypothetical situation. Although Paul addresses a hypothetical individual (‘you,’ singular), he targets the whole church. Just suppose, he argues, that a Christian whose conscience is opposed to eating this meat sees a fellow Christian go into one of these idol temples (*eidōleion*) and eat. What kind of effect would this have on this weak Christian? In all likelihood, it would encourage him to do the same thing. What would be so bad about that? He would be violating his conscience about this matter. He would be doing something he really believed to be wrong, and that would be a sin for him. Are we clear at this point? If we do anything our conscience condemns on an issue on which God has not revealed His will, we have sinned.

The subsequent process of being encouraged to eat by following the stronger believer’s example is one in which he learns to act against conscience, to follow flawed human models, and effectively to harden his heart. It is a road to potential spiritual ruin.

b) *The Sins Involved (8:11-12)*

(1) The Sin of the ‘Weak’ Brother (8:11)

¹¹*And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.*

‘Being destroyed’ (*apollytai*, present tense) means ‘cause to perish,’ ‘to be lost.’ What does it mean to destroy the weak person? It is clear that Christ died for this ‘brother,’ a man who had been ‘bought with a price’ (6:20; 7:23), who had been ‘sanctified’ (6:11), and who would be preserved ‘to the end’ (1:8). Therefore, the functioning idolater is a child of God, one who by definition cannot lose his salvation. In this situation, ‘ruined’ has the idea of ‘come to sin.’ We cause that person to sin by leading him into a situation he cannot handle. What seems to be the case is that the weak believer has become confused about reality, is in peril of surrendering his profession of faith, and is liable to slide back to the world from which he had come and to which in principle he does not belong. If so, his usefulness is at an end. Unhappy and alienated from his church, his discipleship is to all intents and purposes ruined (cp. Rom 14:15).

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The question for the Christian is not simply whether he can defend a particular course of action intellectually, or whether he can engage in it without guilt. The question is rather how this particular action will affect his brothers and sisters in Christ. Yes, knowledge is important! Yes, liberty is important! But love for my fellow Christians is more important! Why? Because Christ valued my brothers and sisters so highly that He died for them. And I, as His follower, cannot treat lightly what He has paid so dear a price for.

The reference to the death of the cross immediately heightens the issue, and in two ways. Firstly, it reminds us that the church only exists because the Lord Jesus denied Himself the freedom rights to which He was fully entitled, and chose instead to lay down His life, in loving self-sacrifice, in order to purchase the freedom of His people. To adopt the opposite pattern in our behavior is to deny Christ and devalue His cross. But it also reminds us that a weaker brother is as equally precious to God as the strongest saint, since he too is saved at the same infinite cost – the death of God’s one and only Son.

(2) The Sins of the ‘Strong’ Brother (8:12)

¹²*Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.*

To despise someone who is that valuable to God is to opposed Christ’s values and purposes, and constitutes, therefore, not only ‘sinning against your brothers,’ but even more alarmingly, Paul says, ‘you sin against Christ.’ Whenever we sin against another member of Christ’s body, the church, we sin against the head Himself.

There is more to it than the sin of the weaker brother. I may feel free in my conscience to do a particular thing. But if my doing this thing causes a Christian who is conscientiously opposed to do the same thing, I too have sinned! I have sinned against my brother or sister in Christ and, therefore, I have sinned against Christ Himself.

Hasty Corinthians are told that ‘you’ (plural) sin ‘against Christ.’ Although their action may not be wrong in itself, it has led others to offend the Lord. Paul had learned long before that to harm the church is to distress the Savior (cp. Acts 9:4). It is not difficult to see that the apostle felt for the weak Corinthians.

3. Knowledge with Love (8:13)

¹³*Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*

In the final verse, Paul applies these over-riding principles to the matter in hand, personalizing it to himself, in the first person singular, and thereby bringing himself under the same authority, and also setting his readers an example, which the following chapter will expound. Since love, not knowledge, is Paul’s governing principle, he is prepared to surrender his freedom, rather than to exercise it in such a way as to harm his brother. Perhaps we have not learned as deeply as Paul that sacrifice is always the characteristic by which love is recognized. That may explain why we choose ‘knowledge’ as the easier option.

Paul ties ends together, revealing what he would do were he to suspect that what he ate caused a believer to stumble in the faith. ‘Never again’ translates *eis ton aiōa*, ‘into eternity;’ Paul cannot be more emphatic. In that the apostle declares his mind about what he would not do, he introduces the principle that it may be necessary to forego personal rights. In this way he

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prepares for the next chapter, in which he asserts his freedoms as an apostle (9:12-15). That this is so is suggested by the unqualified reference to ‘meat’ (*krea*; cp. Rom. 14:21) rather than to ‘meat sacrificed to an idol’ (8:1, 4, 7, 10; *eidōlthyton*).

Thus far, the argument against eating such meat is not a final statement of the case. For the moment, Paul confines himself to the situation of the weaker brethren. Following the near parenthesis of chapter 9, in chapter 10 he will present a final imperative against the consumption of food offered to the gods.

For the Christian, freedom doesn’t just mean doing whatever he wants. It also means not doing those things that will harm others. We are not truly free until we are free to say ‘No’ to our desires and wants. In deciding about whether or not to participate in any behavior that is doubtful, the following principles make a good checklist to follow:

- *Excess*. Is the activity or habit necessary, or is it merely an extra that is not really important (cp. Heb. 12:1).
- *Expediency*. ‘All things are lawful for me,’ Paul says, ‘but not all things are profitable,’ or expedient (1 Cor. 6:12). Is what I want to do helpful and useful, or only desirable?
- *Emulation*. If we are doing what Christ would do, our action not only is permissible but good and right (cp. 1 Jn. 2:6).
- *Example*. Are we setting the right example for others, especially for weaker brothers and sisters? (cp. 1 Tim. 4:12).
- *Evangelism*. Is my testimony going to be helped or hindered? Will unbelievers be drawn to Christ or turned away from Him by what I am doing (cp. Col 4:5).
- *Edification*. Will I be built up and matured in Christ; will I become spiritually stronger? (cp. 1 Cor. 10:23).
- *Exaltation*. Will the Lord be lifted up and glorified in what I do? God’s glory and exaltation should be the supreme purpose behind everything we do (cp. 1 Cor. 10:31).

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-14.