**The Church at Corinth**

**A Church Facing Inner Problems – #24**

**Christian Freedom in a Pagan Society - Part One**

**1 Corinthians 8:1-13**

***Class Dinner*** *– Wednesday, May 8, will be our class pitch-in dinner to end the semester. The dinner is in the E91 Community Room at 6:30 (be there a little earlier if you’re bringing a dish). We will have food sign-up in our last two classes April 24 and May 1.*

**Meat of Sacrifices offered to Idols**

***1 Corinthians 8:1*** *Now for meat sacrificed to idols: we realize that “we all possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.* ***2*** *If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know it, as he ought to.* ***3*** *But if one loves God, one is known by him.*

***4*** *So about the eating of meat sacrificed to idols: we know that “an idol is nothing at all in this world” and that “there is no God but one.”* ***5*** *For even if there are so-called gods either in heaven or on earth – indeed, there are many “gods” and many “lords” –*

***6*** *yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom come all things and to whom we belong; and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come and through whom we are destined.*

***7*** *But all do not possess this knowledge. Some because of their habitual association up to this time with idols eat such meat as sacrificed to idols, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.* ***8*** *Yet food will not bring us before God. We are neither worse off if we do not eat, nor better off if we do.*

***9*** *Only see to it that this very right of yours does not become a stumbling block for the weak.* ***10*** *For if someone sees you, with your knowledge, reclining at table in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, weak as it is, be emboldened to eat meat sacrificed to idols?* ***11*** *So because of your knowledge this weak person, a brother for whom Christ died, is brought to destruction.* ***12*** *When you sin in this way against your brothers and strike at their conscience, weak as it is, you are sinning against Christ.* ***13*** *Therefore, if food causes my brother to fall, I shall never eat meat again, so that I may not cause my brother to fall.*

**Historical Background**

1. People invited by their pagan friends and normally easting in temple banquets of meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Paul sees the problem of eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols against the background and with implications that some of the Corinthian Christians do not realize.

2. Archeological excavation of the forum of Roman Corinth has shown numerous temples and shrines in it dedicated to various gods that the city of Corinth must have worshiped. Civic and social life in such a city would have meant an obligation to join the population in festivals, celebrations and public ceremonies on occasions when religion and politics were very much mixed and not were clearly defined. People who were doing the same trade or the same kind of arts and other works had their own guilds. They met with one another on certain days in which specific gods were honored with banquets and sacrificial meals.

3. Feasts in honor of various deities were celebrated regularly in numerous temples, when food (cereals, cheese, honey) were offered and animals (goats, cows, bulls, horses) were sacrificed to them. The Offerer and the servants of the temple servants often ate the meat of animals slaughtered, when not fully consumed in sacrifice. What was left was later sold in markets (see, R. M Ogilvie, *The Romans and Their Gods in the Age of Augustus*, 1970, pp. 41-52, on the Roman mode of sacrifice; [H. H. Scullard](http://www.amazon.com/H.-H.-Scullard/e/B001IQZFH8/ref%3Dsr_ntt_srch_lnk_1?qid=1365984226&sr=1-1), [*Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic - Aspects of Greek and Roman life*,](http://www.amazon.com/Festivals-Ceremonies-Roman-Republic-Aspects/dp/0801414024/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1365984226&sr=1-1&keywords=Scullard%2C+Festivals%2C) 1981, pp. 22-27)

4. The Jewish Christians in Corinth, the feasts and their deities and the sacrifices offered to the gods meant little or nothing, because they believe in One God and the OT Decalogue (Ten Commandments) and other warnings (Deut 32:15-18, “*They provoked Him to jealousy with strange gods; with abominable practices they stirred Him to wrath*”; Ps 106:34-39) would have given them the sense of the futility of Paganism and its worship. Jews lived in Diaspora (scattered from Israel) such as Philo in his comment on Exodus 23:2 warned fellow Jews, who were inclined to join others as matter of politeness and for the sake of maintaining good social relationship that they were “*following many to do evil*”.

5. For Converts from among the Pagans, banquets in Greek and Roman temples would have become a problem because of their former habits of partaking in such banquets and the popular pressure of former customs. Paul recognizes the force of habit (8:7) and the effect that the customary dining in temple ceremonies would create for some Corinthian Christians. Can Christians take part in such sacred meals offered to those gods and before their idols? Can they eat from the food especially the sacrifices? Paul’s attitude to this problem offers two answers. On the one hand (verses 1-6) he formulates a principle about idol meat: for Christians who believe and love God, all idols are nothing at all. Idols are not real divinity, so per se “idol-meat” would be insignificant. On the other hand, however (verse 7-13), he realizes that the eating of meat sacrificed to idols in temple banquets could scandalize fellow Christians, especially those having weak consciences.

**Three interpretations**

Three interpretations of these verses (8-10) are currently given.

1. Some commentators maintain that although Paul agrees with those who possess knowledge (about the nonentity of idols and its implications), he encourages them to be sensitive of their fellow Christians who have a weak conscience about idol meat.

1. Others claim that Paul intends to persuade those who have knowledge to abstain completely from idol meats precisely because it has been part of idol worship.

1. Still others think that Paul seeks to persuade those who possess knowledge to adopt his attitude not use their “right” to consume such idol meat even in temple banquets. This last approach seems to be the best.

**Paul’s two ways of looking at the problem**

1. Paul, who was born in Tarsus, was familiar with idolatry (1 Thess 1:9-10; Gal 4:8-9; 5:20) and turns now to comment on eating food possibly related to it. The Council of the apostles (Acts 15:29) forbade eating meat sacrificed to idols. The Council adopted a name “idol meats,” in Acts 15:29. The same name appears in 1 Corinthians 8:1-10 and 10:19. Paul seems to agree partly (see verses 1-6) with the thinking of those Corinthian Christians who “possess knowledge”: i.e., nothing is wrong in eating “idol meat,” per se, so they have a right to eat it. But in verses 7-13, Paul introduces a restriction about eating it, which comes not from the meat itself, but from the context in which it is eaten (the temple banquet and the worship of pagan gods) and from one’s concern for other individual fellow Christians, some of whose consciences may be weak and still think that the idols are real divinity. Hence one has to be guided not only by knowledge, but also by love and concern, and indirectly by Paul’s own example as he argues in the end.

2. Paul’s theology is more advanced than that of what we know about Jewish attitude. Paul’s basic vision is based on:

a. Idols are no reality in this world. (8:4)

b. There is no God but one. (8:4)

c. Christian confession in One God and one Lord of all (8:6) should give more confidence in living without fear of false deity.

d. Food will not bring us closer to God. (8:8)

e. Our behavior must take account of our fellow Christian, no matter how weak in conscience for he is one for whom Christ has died. (8:11).

**Text Study**

**VERSE 1 –** *Now for meat sacrificed to idols ..*

“Idol” is a noun that often occurs in the LXX, and mean “something offered by burning.” Christian writers imitate the Jewish usage (Acts 15:29; 21:25; Rev 2:14, 20; Did. *[Didache]* 6.3). Usually Greek speakers would speak “*something sacred offered/sacrificed (to a deity),*” which appears in 1 Corinthians 10:28, where a Greek is being quoted. This sacrifice was an animal sacrificed before an idol and eaten in its presence. From verse 7, one learns that the problem in verses 1-13 is not the meat in itself, but the “eating” of it by converts while “reclining at table in an idol’s temple” (see verse 10). Paul discusses idol meat and its relation to Christian faith and more generally to abstract knowledge and love among Christians.

Portions of sacrificial meat were burned on altars of a Greek or Roman god (Aristotle, *Oeconomica*, 1349b 13) as the deity’s portion, but other portions were either consumed in the temple by those offering sacrifice (thus honoring the god), or sold later on the market (1 Cor 10:25). The problem of such meat in markets will preoccupy Paul in Chapter 10.

**VERSE 1 (cont.) –** *We realize that we all possess knowledge.*

That is about such matters as eating. The idiom, “*have or possess knowledge*,” is found in the LXX (Hos 4:6; 2 Macc 6:30). Knowledge should be the guide. Paul puts himself with those who possess “knowledge” by saying “we realize,” identifying himself with the Corinthians to whom he is writing.

**VERSE 1 (cont.) –** *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up*.

Knowledge “puffs up,” for this can make any one act arrogantly, paying no attention to the feelings or opinions others. Love for knowledge is his self-love that does not go higher than the self. “Knowledge,” which can puff up is “knowledge” which was esteemed for its use for selfish reasons and the circle of the “ego”.

Although “knowledge” is also among the spiritual gifts bestowed by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:8), knowledge is part of love, and that is why love can “build up” (3:10–17; 10:23; 14:4, 17).

**A Note from Philemon**

Knowledge as a fruit of love has three main qualities:

1. It builds up as the apostle said.

2. It seeks communion.

3. It does not look for faults.

In the third-century Coptic Gospel of Philip 110a: “*Knowledge of the truth lifts up …, but love builds up”* (see W. Schneemelcher, NT Apocrypha, 1992, Vol. 1:202).

**VERSE 2 –** *If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know it as he ought to (know)*”.

 Paul emphasis is that one should not be too confident about what one claims to know, because proper knowledge has its conditions. We can understand that the use of something here means a degree, but not full knowledge.

**VERSE 3 –** *But if anyone loves God, that one is known by him*.

Love is introduced as the wider circle where “love” does not stop but continues to seek, because without love real knowledge cannot exist. Knowledge and love can’t operate separately for each support the other. The love of God is very different from the knowledge one has of things in this world. In fact, it springs from the fact that no one other than God has already known such a lover.

**An Idol is Nothing**

**VERSE 4 –** *So about eating meat sacrificed to idols: we know that “an idol is nothing at all in this world” and that “there is no God but one.”*

It is difficult to express in English the parallelism of the two Greek sayings: “(there is) no idol in the world” (or “an idol in the world [is] nothing”) and “(there is) no God but one.” Emphasis falls on the nonexistence of the idol (i.e., no divine being really exists in the idol, (1 Thess 1:9) and on the uniqueness of the One God. An idol was supposed to be an image of a Canaanite, Greek, Roman, or Egyptian god; so if such gods really do not exist, these idols are the creation of human imagination. Hence food offered to them cannot be contaminated or affected by them (see 10:19). Christians in Roman Corinth “*possessing knowledge*” (8:10) were exercising their right and freedom, even sharing in temple banquets, because their outlook was untroubled by such nonentities as unreal idols.

The first saying reflects the OT prohibition of idols, as noted in:

-Leviticus 19:4, “*you shall not follow after* idols”

-Psalm 115, “*All the gods of the nations are idols, but our God has made the heavens*;

-Psalm 135:15-18,*The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. 16 They have mouths, but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see; 17 they have ears, but they do not hear, and there is no breath in their mouths. 18 Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them.”*

Jewish teaching equated idols with “demons” Deut 32:17; Ps 106:36–37).

The second statement echoes the famous commandment or the “shema” of ancient Israel, found in Deuteronomy 6:4:

*“Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone”.*

This becomes in the LXX: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” So the oneness of the God of Israel was emphasized, and Paul repeats it in his own formulation (see also LXX Deut 4:35, 39; Isa 44:6, 8; 45:5).

**So-called “gods” and “lords”**

**VERSE 5 –** *For even if there are so-called gods either in heaven or on earth – indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords” – …*

For the sake of arguing, Paul makes a concession admitting that he is aware what was known in his time of paganism, which included various gods and Roman emperors, (who were accorded the title divine), as well as of the sacrifices offered in honor of such gods. Paul is recalling this fact especially to the individuals who “possess knowledge” and who have been asserting their right and freedom to eat idol meat. Although idols are nonentities, many people subjectively consider them to be really existent.

As for the titles “gods” and “goddess,” (note the lower case letters), were titles given in the contemporary Greco-Roman world to deities believed to exercise control over human life and affairs and to bestow benefits on human beings (see Acts 7:40, 43; 12:22; 19:37; 28:6; 2 Thess 2:4). In the Greek world, polytheism or the belief in many gods (in a hierarchical system, with Zeus as the “father of men and gods” (Homer, Iliad 15.47), was typical in the Greco-Roman period.

***Kyrios****,* which means “lord,” is common as a Greek title for both gods and human rulers in the ancient world of the eastern Mediterranean area. The title “lord” appeared from the beginning of the first century B.C. in texts from Egypt (Joseph Fitzmyer, *Semitic Background of the New Testament,* 1971, 135 n. 26). The words here “even if there are, (lords)” means “as there are (indeed) lords in the society.” This does not mean that Paul is affirming the existence of such lord and gods, but he is only expressing his awareness of a belief in their alleged existence and of worship of them, or perhaps his awareness of the reality of idols that represent them. When Paul says elsewhere more negatively, “*You were enslaved to gods that by nature do not exist*” (Gal 4:8), he is certainly expressing the futility of paganism.

The phrase “*either in heaven or on earth*” is a statement that says it does not matter where these gods and lords exist. It is a statement that expresses Paul’s lack of interest. He is just saying, “I don’t care.”

**VERSE 6 –** *Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom come all things and toward whom we belong.*

This verse is among the earliest forms of confession of faith and is a summary of traditional Christian faith in one God, which restates the Biblical monotheism inherited from Judaism and stands over against the polytheism expressed in verse 5. Here, the gods become gods by being believed in, while faith in the one God and the one Lord who created humans leads people to deny such man-made deity. The uniqueness of the One God is repeated in Romans 3:29-30. He is the One God not only of Jews, but of Gentiles too. Faith in the “one God,” echoes the OT tradition (LXX Deut 6:4; Deut 32:39; Isa 43:10-11; 44:6; 45:6).

**Three main features of Christian Monotheism**:

1. God is the One God and the Father of the One Lord Jesus Christ (1:3; 15:24; 2 Cor 1:2, 3; 11:31; Rom 1:7; 6:4; 8:15; 15:6)
2. Here God is also the source from which come all things (11:12), as well as the blessings that Christians enjoy; and He is likewise the goal of Christian life. To say that God is the source means that God is final causality in Pauline soteriology *[salvation doctrine]*: Paul says ***ex hour***, “from whom,” and ***eis*** ***auto***, “toward Him” (see Rom 11:36).
3. More important is that the One God the Father revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

Although many commentators speak of Paul’s cosmic perspective, expressed in both clauses by ***ta panta***, “all things,” which is supposed to echo Stoic philosophical usage, the Pauline (or better, the pre-Pauline) formulation found here differs considerably from such usage (see Comment above).

**VERSE 6 (cont.) –** *And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come and through whom we are destined.”*

1. “Through whom” means not only as the mediator through whom all things come to be, but also as the means through whom Christians have their new life and the goal of their existence, that toward which Christians are destined (verse 6).

2. “Lord Jesus” is the Greek way of saying that Jesus is Yahweh and this comes in many OT texts where the Lord God of the OT is Jesus Christ. This can be seen in the direct quotations of OT verses applied to Yahweh: Romans 5:21; 10:9; 10:13; 1 Corinthians 1:8; 1:31; 4:4 and more than 95 other verses. Paul was preaching against the Greco-Roman polytheism of the world, but makes no distinction between God and Lord

**Knowing the True God**

**VERSE 7 –** *But all do not possess this knowledge.*

Literally “but (this) knowledge is not in all (people).” Those who possess the true knowledge must know the true God and thus if some individuals who “do not possess” such knowledge, because they are still influenced by their former ways of thinking about gods and food associated with sacrifices and they regard the eating of such food as the consuming of it in honor of a pagan god is deviation from their Christian faith, they have to stop eating such meat. The old habits and the association and eating meat as sacrificed to idols, because of their weak conscience they became defiled. Paul recognizes the force of habit (what people had been doing before conversion) and realizes that some of them have not yet fully adjusted their outlook to their new life and belief in the One True God. What is sacrificed to idols will defile their conscience and lead the weak to the “sin of idolatry,” which is so forcefully condemned in chapter 10.

**VERSE 8 –** *Yet food will not bring us before God …*

The shift from the 3rd person (“all”, i.e. “them”) to the 1st person plural (us) is undoubtedly a sign that this whole verse might well be a saying that those who “possess knowledge” in the Corinthian community were actually a kind of majority. These words say that only the Mediator can bring us to God the Father.

**VERSE 8 (cont.) –** *We are neither worse off if we do not eat, nor better off if we do.*

 Food is for the temporary life.

**Knowledge and Stumbling Blocks**

**VERSE 9 –** *Only see to it that this very right of yours does not become a stumbling block for the weak*.

Paul agrees basically with the mature and with their thinking, but refuses to become ***proskomma***, “a stumbling block,” for a weak fellow Christian.

**VERSE 10 –** *For if someone sees you, with your knowledge, reclining at table in an idol’s temple …*

Here we have a specific example of persons who eat in in banquets of a temple. These banquets took place in side rooms often constructed with “triclinia,” that is, three-sided, U-shaped benches on which diners reclined while eating.

Some Corinthian Christians could and would partake of such food without staining their consciences, for they disregard the pagan gods. But such dining could have repercussions if such an individual were seen by “weak” Christians consuming the food in a “place of worship of the gods.

The verb “reclining” is the technical term for having a meal served at table,” (see Mark 14:3; Luke 5:29; 7:37). Paul’s argument here means that someone seen dining in an “idol’s temple” is consuming the meat precisely “as sacrificed to idols” (verse 7). That is why the conscience of the weak person is defiled. It is impossible to say whether, when Paul speaks of “seeing,” he refers to a real instance of such observation or is merely constructing a hypothetical case.

**VERSE 10 (cont.) –** *… will not his conscience, weak as it is, be emboldened to eat meat sacrificed to idols?*

In other words, Paul is saying that a person with a weak conscience would be encouraged to the extent that he/she too might eat such meat precisely as offered to a pagan god (verse 7). Such encouragement is said in irony because the example given by those who have knowledge is no edification at all. For those so “edified,” to take part in such meals would be an act of participation in idolatry. So Paul answers in these verses (7-13) those who possess knowledge about idols and food offered to them, but he is indirectly urging such people to the nonuse of the right they have to do so.

**So My Brother Will Not Fall**

**VERSE 11 –** *So because of your knowledge this weak person, a brother for whom Christ died, is brought to destruction.*

Paul says, don’t destroy the weak one by your knowledge. Paul invokes the common “faith” when he says “*for whom Christ died,*” as he will again in Romans 14:15, “*Let not the food you eat bring ruin to such a one for whom Christ died*”; cf. 14:20, “*Do not demolish the work of God for the sake of food.”* Paul’s concern is not just for the weak conscience (verse 7), which can’t be seen, but also for “the weak person,” who happens to be “a fellow Christian.” He or she really is not being “built up” by the other Christian’s knowledge, which no longer merely “puffs up” (verse 1), but has become damaging of the life of the weak person.

**VERSE 12 –** *When you sin in this way against your brothers and strike at their conscience, weak as it is, you are sinning against Christ.”*

Paul puts emphasis on the behavior, “in this way,” and on “Christ,” as the term of reference to all behavior. This means “sin against a fellow Christian,” and even against Christ himself, because Christ died for such a fellow and a colleague. This recalls Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:4-5): “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting … .* Understand here, “Christ” is the total sum of “the community”.

**VERSE 13 –** *Therefore, if food causes my brother to fall into sin, I shall never eat meat again, so that I may not cause my brother to fall*.

The final conclusion about the eating of idol meat in terms of what Paul personally would do is to abstain totally. Paul recognizes here it is not just the use of his own “right” (verse 9), but the welfare of the others.

**Our True Freedom**

**A Dialogue with Philemon**

**George:** How do you understand the different ways of approaching problems related to daily life, I mean what is the true limits of our freedom?

**Philemon:** If you use the term freedom, you must not speak of limits. The true boundaries of our freedom are our love for the Lord and for the others. Where there is love there are no boundaries, because the Law sets boundaries and there is no Law in love.

**George:** So, do you agree with what St. Augustine said: “Love God and do whatever you desire”

**Philemon:** There is some wisdom in this but there is also some danger, because the true test of love is the Crucified love. It is this kind of love that chose freely to die for the others rather than to scandalize anyone.

**George:** Does this mean that freedom is a goal in our life?

**Philemon:** No, not at all. There is one goal who is Jesus our beloved. Any goal in our life other than Christ brings not freedom but enslavement even to freedom itself.

**George:** How can anyone be enslaved to freedom?

**Philemon:** This can happen if freedom becomes the goal of life. When we aim at it we submit our life to this goal and become tangled with what freedom brings as rules and values that are other than Christ.

**George:** I don’t understand.

**Philemon:** It is very clear to me that when we choose something, we submit our will to it and work for it. And when it becomes the goal, all other aims are no longer important, so we struggle to keep our goal and sacrifice all others.

**George:** Good, but how can this bring or create enslavement?

**Philemon:** Those who love their freedom can kill to keep their freedom but those who love Christ can in Christ sacrifice their freedom for the sake of their love for Christ and their fellow humans. I know a monk who made prayer life his goal, and that made him an angry monk, for anything that he imagined to interfere with his prayer was rejected including looking after a sick old monk who lived next door. He became a slave to prayer life and lost the love of Christ.

**George:** Why do you think that true freedom is only with Christ?

**Philemon:** Christ is not only Lord but is also Savior, these two titles have created the old harmony that we have and will never see it any where, where lordship and service are united together. He created us but he also redeemed us. Redemption is his great service that is why Jesus washed the feet before his death to reveal to us that giving his life for us can’t be seen apart from washing our dirty feet. Here, the lordship and service are in harmony. So, Christ does not enslave us when he becomes our Lord but serve us as our Savior. Now this is enough.

(1st Jan 1960)

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