

“There Is One God”

The Fourteenth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Deuteronomy 4:15-30

I’ve heard of churches squabbling over doctrine, over new programs, and even over whether or not the church’s new carpet should be red or blue. But I’ve never heard Christians squabble over whether or not the meat someone brought to the church potluck had originally been used in a pagan sacrifice. Yet this matter had become an issue in Corinth. How do we as Christians interact with the non-Christian religions around us? Can we go to their ceremonies and participate in their rituals? Can we dress like the pagans? Identify with pagan culture? And what about using their left-overs? Is that participating in paganism, and a violation of God’s prohibition of idolatry?

The following and lengthy section of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians (chapters 8-10) requires some background information to interpret properly, since the idea of sacrificing food to idols seems so foreign to us. It is easy for us to understand why Christians should have nothing to do with idolatry. It is clearly forbidden by the first three commandments, and idolatry is condemned in a number of Old Testament passages such as Deuteronomy 4:15-30 (our Old Testament lesson). But it is far more difficult to understand how food items can be so directly connected to pagan practices.

As we work our way through this section of 1 Corinthians, there are several things we need to keep in mind. For one thing, there was no refrigeration in Paul’s day, so once an animal had been butchered it had to be eaten soon thereafter, lest the meat spoil. It was also very common for people in Greco-Roman culture to eat meals in pagan temples or in trade guild dining halls dedicated to pagan deities. The latter are the forerunners of the modern restaurant. When people gathered together for such a meal, it was common to begin with a sacrifice to the deity to which the temple was dedicated, and then the diners would consume what was left of the sacrificial animal (or other foodstuffs offered to the “gods”). Part of the butchered animal was burned as a sacrifice. The rest was placed upon the altar (the “table of the gods”) where it was eaten by the priests and the participants in the festivities. If there was anything left over, it might be given to those in attendance, but more often was sold to local butchers for resale.¹

Those in upper levels of society would have a difficult time avoiding such meals and places, since this was where virtually all of the social activities and commerce took place. Therefore, given the connection between the contents of the meal, and the particular pagan deity to whom the meal was dedicated, the question arises, “can Christians participate in such activities?” It is the connection between the meal, the sacrifice and the pagan deities associated with them, which created ethical problems for Christians. How could Christians justify eating in a pagan temple, or eating something which was offered as a pagan sacrifice?² Apparently, a number of the Corinthians saw nothing whatsoever wrong with this practice.

There is also a related problem—perhaps even more difficult to assess. The poor of Corinth could not afford to purchase meat and so the only meat they could get (cheaply, or for free) was that left over from the pagan sacrifices. In fact, this is where most of the meat sold in the cities’ shops was originally

¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 359.

² Morris, *1 Corinthians*, 120.

butchered. The merchants could buy it cheaply and then sell it for a profit. So, it would be very difficult for someone to know whether or not the meat they were eating was the leftover portion of an animal which had been sacrificed to some pagan deity.³

Finally, Jews (and Jewish converts to Christianity) would have an especially difficult time in such circumstances, because the animals offered for these sacrifices would not be slaughtered in the proper way (i.e. according to Kosher practices).⁴ This is why in most large cities with sufficient Jewish populations, Jews maintained their own kosher markets and butcher shops.

There are two important theological issues here. The first is whether a Christian can participate in pagan feasts. The second is what to do with what was left of an animal that had been sacrificed in a pagan temple, even though the meat may have been purchased from a butcher who got it from the temple.⁵

Throughout his epistles, Paul condemns idolatry. Based upon the points Paul makes in response to the letter sent to him, some of the Corinthians continued to eat food which had been used in sacrifices, and gave four reasons as to why they were able to do so. One is that as Christians, they know that there is no reality behind the idols, so what difference did it make if they attended pagan temples and ate sacrificed food, since what the idols represent does not exist? Two, such people know that God made all things “good,” and therefore that food is a matter of “indifference” (“all things are clean if sanctified by prayer”). Three, if they have been baptized, how can they fall into the temptation to worship idols? And then, finally, does Paul even have the authority to forbid Christians from doing such things in the first place?⁶ Throughout this section (chapters 8-10), Paul will respond to these objections in some detail.

This matter surfaces elsewhere in the New Testament, such as during the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:28-29. Eating of meat sacrificed to idols was one of the few restrictions placed upon the Gentiles by the leaders of the church. In Revelation, the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira are condemned by Christ for tolerating pagan practices in their midst (Revelation 2:14, 20). The fact that this is addressed in such diverse situations shows that the pressing problem—Christians participating in things connected to idolatry—was an issue faced by Christians of the first century on a regular basis.

As Paul begins to address in chapter 8, love for our brothers and sisters in Christ lies at the heart of the Christian response to pagan idolatry.

Although Paul will go on to forbid the Corinthians from going to pagan temples, he begins his response by pointing out that even though Christians know that paganism is not true (and therefore, there is no occult reality behind the idol), this does not necessarily give Christians the right to engage in conduct which causes others to stumble. Christians are to act in love and to avoid any conduct (even if they feel justified in doing so) which causes others to stumble. This is a foundation of Paul’s ethical teaching.

³ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 120.

⁴ Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 188.

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 120-121.

⁶ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 362.

Even though the first three verses begin abruptly and seem to have little to do with the eating food sacrificed to idols, Paul is laying the ground work for his discussion of this in verses 4-13. The problem as Paul sets it out, is that the aim of our faith is not knowledge, but love, hence the contrast between love and knowledge.⁷ Knowledge puffs up, *but* love builds up. If any thinks he has come to knowledge, he does not yet know as he ought to know; *but* if anyone loves God, they are known by God.

As Paul begins to deal with idolatry, in verse 1 of chapter 8 Paul writes, “*Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up.*” In light of 1 Corinthians 7:1, Paul is answering yet another question put to him by members of this congregation.⁸ The phrase “*all of us possess knowledge*” is probably a statement used by the Corinthians in their letter to Paul. It is obvious to a Christian that there is no reality behind pagan idols. Christians know that God is the creator and sustainer of all things. Idols are nothing but a figment of the sinful human mind. And Greeks were certainly fascinated with knowledge—the secrets of life, the mysteries of the fates, esoterica, and trivia. But this kind of knowledge can make people proud (“puffs up”).

From what Paul says elsewhere in this letter, pride and boasting was a significant problem in the Corinthian church. In 1 Corinthians 4:6 Paul writes—“*I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.*” In 1 Corinthians 4:18-19 he writes—“*Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power.*” And then in 1 Corinthians 5:2—“*And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*”

Love, on the other hand, build ups. Paul uses a word which is normally used to refer the construction of various buildings.⁹ Architectural metaphors are common throughout Paul’s letters, including 1 Corinthians. Whatever conduct the Christian chooses, it must be based upon what is in the best interests of others so as to build them up. It cannot be based upon self-interest, which, in this case, is the knowledge that since idols have no reality, we are free to eat anything, even if it offends others.

In verse 2, Paul fleshes this out a bit further. “*If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.*” Since we are creatures (finite and limited to time and space), our knowledge of something may be accurate, but is always incomplete. Paul is arguing that if we think we know all things, we really don’t.¹⁰ The Corinthians, on the other hand, think they have knowledge. But Paul’s response serves as an ironic reminder that who claims he has knowledge by that very claim reveals that he doesn’t.¹¹ There is no reason for people who know that idols are false to be proud of such knowledge. Wisdom, on the other hand, always brings with it the element of humility—we don’t know all things, so we should act in light of God’s revelation, and even as we seek to learn, we should remain

⁷ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 364-365.

⁸ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 363.

⁹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 121.

¹⁰ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 121.

¹¹ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 367.

concerned for the needs of others.

Unlike the pagans—whose knowledge is really foolishness—the Christian has a firm foundation, a point made in verse 3. “*But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.*” While our knowledge is always transient and limited, love, on the other hand, comes from to God. There is a bit of surprise here. If Paul were using Greco-Roman categories (proto-gnostic), we’d expect him to say something like, “he who loves God truly has knowledge.” Instead, Paul reminds us that our love for God is based upon the fact that God already knows us. As John says in his epistle, we only love because God first loved us—“*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*” The mutual relationship between God and those who love him, is spelled out in a couple of texts. In 2 Timothy 2:19, we read, “*But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: “The Lord knows those who are his.”* In Galatians 4:9, Paul had spoken of this in similar terms. “*But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?*”

Despite the fact that there is no reality behind pagan idolatry (“*they know*”), the Corinthians are not completely free to do as they wish (Paul’s point in v. 9). Such “knowledge” fails to act based on love for others in the body of Christ. Paul reminds the Corinthians that it is not knowledge which builds the body of Christ, but love which does not seek its own interests, and which truly considers the interests of others.

In verse 4, Paul takes up the subject of eating meat sacrificed to idols. “*Therefore, 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.”* “So, then” indicates a return to the subject at hand. To begin with, Paul is in full agreement with the point made by the Corinthians in their letter to him, namely that an idol is nothing. While Paul will go on to speak of an occult connection to idols later in this epistle (1 Corinthians 10:20), the fact of the matter is that idols are nothing, because the “gods” of the pagans are nothing. What the Corinthians know is true, but knowledge this does not justify acting “puffed-up” and acting out of self-interest.

But while idols are nothing, Paul is clear that there is one true and living God. In words which echo the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4), Paul affirms that there is only one true God. Monotheism is as essential to Christianity, as it is to Judaism. Paul also condemns all forms of polytheism and paganism. But the problem in this congregation is that because there is only one true and living God, members of this church were using this very point to justify eating in pagan temples, or eating meat sacrificed to idols. They are right about the facts—there is only one true God. But they are wrong about the application—they mistakenly think they are free to eat in pagan temples because there is no reality behind the idols.

This is issue with which Paul must deal in verse 5-6.¹² “*For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’—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 so-called pagan gods are nothing.¹³ Yet, Paul is fully aware that virtually everything in creation (heaven and earth) can be worshiped “as a god.” This is because of human sinfulness (Romans 1:18-25). Sinful people suppress the truth in unrighteousness, and then

¹² Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 371.

¹³ These two verses are one sentence in the original language which is chiasmic in its structure; cf. Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 372.

worship and serve created things instead of the one who created them and gives them life. For Paul, a pantheon of “gods” is not a sign of a culture’s great spiritual insight or cultural achievement. Rather, this is a sign of its depravity. There is also an important polemical point here. In Greco-Roman culture, it was quite commonplace to speak of the pagan deities as “lords” (*kurios*), which explains why Paul repeatedly affirms that Jesus Christ is truly Lord, not merely a so-called lord.¹⁴

But while the “gods” and “lords” of paganism are but the figment of the sinful human imagination, Christians, on the other hand, know that there is but one God, who is not only our father, but also the father of the Lord Jesus Christ. In this, Paul affirms monotheism as clearly as he can, and at the same time ascribes the same divine attributes to Jesus as he does to God the Father, namely that Jesus is the creator of all things and that one in whom we live. God is one and the Christian lives for God. Jesus Christ is Lord and the Christian lives for him as well. Thus we have in a very basic form, the affirmation that there is one God, and that within the Godhead, there is Father and Son. Given the context—the false gods of paganism—Paul does not mention the Holy Spirit here, though he has already done so earlier in this epistle (1 Corinthians 2:4-5), when he spoke of the Holy Spirit’s power, as God’s power.

Since love builds up, Christians who are strong (those who know that idols are nothing), must act in such a way as to consider the situation of the weak (who think that eating meat sacrificed to idols is wrong). Paul makes this point in verse 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.”*

Paul has made the point that idols are nothing, but those who have recently come to faith in Christ from paganism still struggle with this matter. They may not fully understand that idols are nothing, and so for them, eating certain foods still has a religious connotation. There was such a strong association between certain foods and idols (and those places and the manner in which the food was eaten) that some were still weak, in the sense that they didn’t feel that they could eat certain things in certain places without defiling themselves. While the strong saw no problems with eating such food, the weak found it highly troubling when others did so. In the mind of the weak, to eat such things is to endorse paganism.

In verse 8, Paul comes to the heart of the issue. *“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 eating of food is “indifferent” (*adiaphora*). Food does not bring us close to God, nor does it bring us under God’s judgment. Whether we eat or don’t eat, it is a matter of individual decision. Paul knew that Jesus pronounced all foods clean in Mark 7:18-19—*“And he said to them, ‘Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?’”* (Thus he declared all foods clean.)” But even though this is the case, the strong should not insist that the weak eat what they do. Nor should the weak insist that the strong abstain from things they would not eat themselves. Underlying Paul’s comment here is a strong “mind your own business,” doctrine which is clearly a major plank in Paul’s ethic (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15). The Corinthians should eat what they eat, and should not be concerned with what others are eating.

However, in verse 9, Paul adds a caution: *“But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”* There is another important principle operative here as well. The strong (who have knowledge that idols are nothing, so that they eat without a twinge of conscience), must also act in accordance with love toward the weak (who are their brothers and sisters in Christ). The

¹⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 122.

strong may have the right to eat all foods, but exercising that right in the wrong way may end up causing the weak to stumble. And this, Paul says, is unacceptable. When enjoying their liberty to eat or not to eat, the strong must not place obstacles in the way of the weak. The strong should know enough (if they have knowledge they claim to have) that they assume all responsibility as to know when to set aside their liberty for the sake of those who, as of yet, don't fully understand, or have the theological categories to think through these things biblically. While the strong are free in matters indifferent, that freedom carries with it the responsibility to act in love as far as the weak are concerned. Martin Luther's comment that "a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all," captures the thrust of Paul's argument quite effectively.¹⁵

In practical terms, Paul now describes in verse 10 what might happen if the strong are not careful in how these use their freedom. "*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?*" Someone who is weak might actually be enticed or encouraged to eat in such a way as to violate their own consciences. While they may not fully understand that idols are nothing, they may go ahead and do something which they think to be wrong—namely eat meat in temple dedicated to a pagan god. Sadly, they become open to such false notions as religious syncretism—they can be Christians and still engage in certain pagan practices—or their consciences become horribly and needlessly burdened over things indifferent, like food.

The solution, Paul says, is not for the strong to flaunt their liberty (misuse their authority/freedom), but to turn the weak into the strong (build them up through love). According to verse 11, the strong must consider the situation of the weak, and treat them accordingly. "*And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.*" The consequences of the strong not considering the weak are quite serious. The strong might actually create and bring about spiritual disaster for those who are weak.¹⁶ In effect, through their actions, the strong person is persuading the weak person to violate their own conscience so as to encourage them to sin. The language ("destroyed" by your knowledge) does not refer to someone losing their salvation, but to someone whose spiritual development is severely stunted, or severely damaged, because they do something they think to be wrong and struggle needlessly as a result. The key to seeing this correctly is to consider Paul's point, that Christ has died for such a person, therefore we too need to act toward them in a sacrificial way.

In verse 12, Paul states, "*thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.*" Paul's organic view of the church comes into view here. To cause (entice) someone to violate their own conscience is not only to sin against them, it is to sin against Christ, who has died for them. These people (weak as they may be) are as much a part of Christ's body as are the strong. To wound the conscience of the weak, is to sin against the savior who died for them and incorporated them into his body.

This leads Paul to conclude, "*therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*" Paul sees the non-hindrance of the weak to be of such importance that he is perfectly willing to give up what he is free to do, simply to avoid the problem in the first place. The point is that the freedom enjoyed by the strong is misused if it causes the weak to fall (to be scandalized). While the strong must ensure that the weak do not undermine Christian liberty in the church, they must

¹⁵ Martin Luther, "A Treatise on Christian Liberty" (Fortress Press, 1957), 7.

¹⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 125.

be very careful to treat the weak with love and due concern for their weakness. Although the strong must never give up Christian liberty in the face of Judaizers or Pharisees, the strong always should be willing to give up Christian liberty for the sake of the weaker brother. Furthermore, the strong must be engaged in catechesis so that the weak become strong. This, it seems to me, is the ultimate solution to this pressing pastoral problem.

What, then, do we say by way of application?

Because we know that there is one God and that Jesus Christ is Lord, we also know that paganism is false, and that idols are nothing. Because God made all things and pronounced them “good,” what we eat neither commends us before God, nor renders us guilty. Food is nothing. Therefore Christians are free to eat anything. And yet being free to eat anything doesn’t mean that we should eat everything.

In Corinth, those who had just left paganism behind needed to make a complete break with their past. Eating meat sacrificed to idols was a practice so tied to paganism, that some Corinthians did not feel to eat that meat without violating their consciences. And because Christ died for these people demonstrating his sacrificial love for all members of his body, then stronger Christians who saw nothing wrong with eating this meat, should be willing to stop doing it, whenever doing so stumbled someone who is weaker in the faith. And so, until such time as the weak become strong, the strong should be willing to give up their freedom until the weak learns the better way. The weak should never be stumbled and their consciences wounded, even though we know that God is one, Jesus Christ is Lord, and that idols are nothing.