

B. The Matter of “Things Sacrificed to Idols”

The Corinthians raised a second issue in their letter, and that pertained to how they should regard foods which had been connected with pagan worship rites. This sort of situation is very remote to contemporary western readers and so tends to provoke two responses in them: puzzlement and disinterest. They’re so far removed from the Corinthian circumstance that, apart from doing historical research, they really don’t understand what was going on in Corinth or why it was such a contentious issue for the Corinthian church that they felt it necessary to write Paul about it. And while no one would argue that it’s unimportant to understand the issue and Paul’s treatment of it, it’s hard for contemporary Christians to see in the Corinthian situation any direct relevance to themselves and their lives. Who worries about whether the food they eat has been associated with pagan ritual sacrifice? For many, this is a context to be read with only passing interest, and preachers and teachers have sought to make it relevant to their audiences often by making idolatry (in the generic sense of devotion to something other than God) its central concern.

Paul was indeed addressing a situation unique to the early Church – one that doesn’t exist for the western Church in the modern era. But this doesn’t make his instruction irrelevant to the contemporary Christian; on the other hand, its relevance doesn’t reside in a supposed concern on Paul’s part with the “idols” of self, materialism, status, pleasure, etc., or with Christians involving themselves in “worldly” practices. Manipulating the context in that way may prove useful to preachers anxious to draw out a convicting and compelling application, but it insures that Paul’s point – and the true relevance of his instruction – will be missed.

Another interpretive challenge posed by this context is the fact that it actually consists of four smaller contexts. The first two are found in chapters eight and nine respectively, while the third and fourth roughly divide the epistle’s tenth chapter. These passages differ enough in their content and emphasis that some readers (and interpreters) treat them as separate and distinct contexts. This is especially the case with the second one (9:1-27) in which Paul turned his attention to his own ministry of the gospel and the way his ministry reflected his personal perception and use of his rights as Christ’s apostle. How many Christians recognize Paul’s discussion of his apostolic ministry in chapter nine as part of his answer to the Corinthians’ question regarding foods sacrificed to idols? Indeed, even some commentators fail to make this connection as they ought. And yet, if one reads this section as Paul intended – namely, as a cohesive whole, it’s not difficult to see how all four contexts function organically to answer the Corinthians’ specific concern regarding “idol meats.”

1. The question the Corinthians raised pertained to “things sacrificed to idols” (8:1a), and Paul’s subsequent treatment shows that they sought his counsel as to whether or not they should refrain from eating foods associated with those sacrifices (ref. 8:4ff). As with the previous issue of celibacy, the text leaves no doubt as to the general matter at hand; *what isn’t explicit, but must be inferred from the passage and other considerations, is the exact nature of the concern and why and how it was causing confusion and contention among the Corinthians.* The epistle makes it clear that the Corinthian church was plagued by a factious spirit, and this particular issue, too, contributed to the fragmentation of the body and its division into various factions, especially as it reflected the socio-economic distinctions among the Corinthians.

The place to begin, then, is with the historical circumstance in which the Corinthian believers found themselves. Corinth was uniquely situated so as to have two ports – one leading west into the Ionian Sea and the other leading east into the Aegean Sea. This made Corinth a priceless jewel among Rome’s holdings – a bustling and prosperous commercial center with a large population comprised of transient merchants and seamen as well as permanent residents. And as a major metropolitan city, Corinth also boasted a large and thriving religious trade. The city had numerous temples and shrines and the business of religion filled its streets and pervaded its culture. Corinth may not have equaled Athens in that regard, but its religious activity was ubiquitous and lucrative.

Religion was an industry in Corinth, and so was woven into the fabric of the city’s commercial life. It was just as dependent on other businesses and industries as they were on it. Religion was big business in the Greco-Roman world; artisans and merchants, as well as priests and prostitutes, derived their livelihoods from it (Acts 19:23-27).

And among the multitude of businesses and enterprises that were interwoven with the religious trade was the food industry. Human beings can be remarkably ingenious and efficient when it comes to making money, and this includes finding ways to maximize profit by more effective utilization of material resources and processes. So it was with those involved in Corinth’s food production and delivery system. It didn’t take long for them to realize that they had a perfect business partner in the religion industry.

- Meat on the table means that an animal has been killed and processed for human consumption; so commercial meat production – meat in the marketplace – requires slaughtering and processing on a relatively large scale.
- At the same time, animal sacrifice was a central feature of religious practice in the Greco-Roman world. In a large city like Corinth which boasted numerous temples and multitudes of worshippers, the religion business involved the ongoing slaughter of large numbers of various kinds of animals. Why not, then, form a “win-win” business partnership between the two industries? The food industry needed slaughter services and the religion industry needed animals for sacrifice.
- Thus the common practice at Corinth (and elsewhere) was for animals earmarked for consumption to be first employed in sacrificial rituals. After that, the carcasses would be processed and the meat made available for sale to consumers.

The result of this was that, when a person bought a piece of meat in the marketplace, it was virtually certain it had come to the market by way of a pagan temple and sacrificial rite. This was no secret and, far from being shocking to people, it was accepted as normal practice. Everyone at Corinth knew how the process worked and no one gave it a thought. No one, that is, except worshippers of the Living God.

Jews in the Greco-Roman world had long refrained from consuming such meat, not merely because of the connection with pagan rites, but also because the Law established strict dietary rules (cf. Genesis 9:3-4 with Leviticus 11:1-31 and Deuteronomy 12:15-25).

Jesus had declared all foods clean (Mark 7:18-19), and those Jewish Christians who knew and embraced this fact doubtless promoted it among their believing brethren. However, many continued to observe Jewish dietary practice, either because of cultural norms or because they didn't know or understand how it was that Jesus had fulfilled the Mosaic dietary code (as indeed the whole Mosaic Law) in His person and work.

Thus it's quite likely that Jewish sensibilities were contributing to the contention among the Corinthian believers. Nonetheless, the context indicates that the primary concern wasn't whether the particular meat in dispute conformed to the Mosaic prescription. *The issue was the fact that most, if not all, of the meat set on tables in Corinth found its way there from idol temples.* The point of contention was the conviction of some in the Corinthian church that foods involved in pagan sacrificial rites were defiled, and thereby defiled those who ate them. Beyond that, Paul's treatment suggests that some were even arguing that eating such meat indirectly involved the eater himself in idolatrous practice.

The intensity of the dispute was heightened by the fact that the contending parties were divided largely along socio-economic lines. Hays' comments are illuminating:

"Feasts held in temples were common events in the daily life of a Greco-Roman city. For example, the sanctuary of Asclepius in Corinth comprised both an area for cultic sacrifice and several dining rooms that opened onto a pleasant public courtyard. The wealthier Corinthians would have been invited to meals in such places as a regular part of their social life, to celebrate birthdays, weddings, healings attributed to a god, or other important occasions. For those few Corinthian Christians who were among the wealthier class, their public and professional duties virtually required the networking that occurred through attending and sponsoring such events. To eat the sacrificial meat served on such occasions was simple social courtesy; to refuse to share in the meal would be an affront to the host... Within the social circle of the poorer Corinthians, on the other hand, such meat-eating would not have been commonplace. Meat was not an ordinary part of their diet; it may have been accessible only at certain public religious festivals where there was a distribution of meat. Consequently, the wealthy and powerful, who also had the most advanced education, would take the eating of meat in stride and readily accept the view that it was a matter of spiritual indifference; at the same time, however, the poor might regard meat as laden with 'numinous' [supernatural] religious connotations."

2. This was the circumstance and point of contention which provoked the Corinthians' question to Paul, and he constructed his response in characteristic fashion: Rather than simply answering their narrow concern, Paul began by framing the issue and showing how it needed to be considered more broadly. In this matter as in all matters, Paul understood that a simple answer is always the wrong answer; applying the mind of Christ to any given concern means viewing and addressing it according to the larger principles which ultimately determine right thinking and right action with respect to that concern. Thus Paul began his response, not by addressing the specific matter of food sacrificed to idols, but by speaking to the broader issue of *knowledge*: its relation to the Christian life in the Church and in the world, the limitations and perils which attend it, and its relation to the overarching virtue of love (8:1-3).

- a. As with the subject of celibacy, Paul discerned a deeper issue behind the Corinthians' query regarding food sacrificed to idols. Read through the lens of his close relationship with them, their letter showed Paul that they were reducing the whole matter to a question of knowledge – of who had the right understanding.
- Evidently there were, on the one hand, those at Corinth who were convinced that, because there is one God, idols are merely products of the human imagination. Imaginary deities cannot defile things offered to them, and undefiled offerings cannot defile those who eat them (vv. 4-7).
 - On the opposite side were others who argued on the basis of their own knowledge that pagan religious practices are idolatrous and therefore abominable to God irrespective of the fact that idols themselves are human inventions. So the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-29) had forbidden involvement with idol sacrifices and the “eating of blood” (directly or by eating the undrained flesh of a sacrificial animal). Didn't this prohibition extend to eating meat that had been involved in a sacrificial ritual?

Each party in the contention was apparently trying to vindicate its position by claiming knowledge of the truth, and Paul responded by insisting that *both* were right in that regard: “*We know that we **all** have knowledge*” (8:1a). Every Christian is taught by the Spirit of truth, so that none has a monopoly on knowledge. Paul recognized – as the Corinthians needed to – that all believers have knowledge of the truth, *and a crucial implication of this fact is that knowledge alone is not a legitimate basis for deciding the question at hand.*

- b. Knowledge can't answer the dilemma of eating meat sacrificed to idols because all of Christ's saints possess it. But more importantly, it can't do so because, in itself, it's *inadequate*. Though the answer to any question in the Christian life obviously begins with knowledge – one can hardly resolve an issue he doesn't rightly understand, it doesn't end there. Indeed, it cannot end there, for the accurate knowledge of facts alone is insufficient, and that for two reasons:

- The first ought to be the most obvious, which is that all human knowledge, however correct, is always incomplete and therefore inherently imprecise: Human knowledge is limited and conditioned by human finiteness. Even where a person's knowledge coincides with actual truth, it does so only in a qualified way. Thus Paul: “*If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know*” (8:2).

By this statement Paul wasn't denying human knowledge (ref. 8:1), but he was attaching a crucial qualification to it. Again, no person – including the most mature Christian – knows anything exhaustively or flawlessly. Thus the one who asserts, “I have come to know,” has already disproved his assertion. For the one who really “knows” recognizes that his knowledge is always imperfect; he will always be in the process of learning.

- At the same time, the context indicates that Paul was making a slightly different point. It's true that human finiteness precludes anyone from saying, "I have come to know," but Paul's emphasis was on the *mindset* behind this assertion rather than its falseness. The one who makes this claim betrays an **arrogance** by which he deceives himself and also sets himself over others. His arrogance, more than his human limitation, proves that he doesn't know as he ought. But the one who has a *right* knowledge – knowledge which conforms to the mind of Christ – recognizes that human knowledge feeds upon and feeds arrogance; left to itself, knowledge undermines, tears down and destroys.
- c. Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that knowledge is an insufficient criterion for resolving the issue of "idol meats." But what, then, is the appropriate criterion? Paul expressed it with a word: *love*. Again, it's not that knowledge is irrelevant, but knowledge must function under the governance of love: Whereas knowledge nurtures arrogance, love always effects edification (8:1b):

In and of itself, knowledge inflates the self into a deformed caricature of a true human being; love builds up the other unto his conformity to the true Man.

Though all of Christ's saints possess His mind by virtue of His indwelling Spirit, their conformity to it is always a work in progress. No one knows as he ought or as he one day will (cf. 13:9-12 with 1 John 3:2), but many Christians go further by obscuring Christ's mind within them. They do so by employing knowledge in the service of natural judgment, sensibilities and interests, thereby grieving and even quenching the Spirit within them (Ephesians 4:17-32; 1 Thessalonians 5:8-22). So it was with some at Corinth; so it is with many believers to this day.

- Because men don't know what they don't know, they naturally assume that they know *in truth*; they assume that their knowledge is true simply because it is *theirs*. All men instinctively operate with the conviction that everything they believe is true, for who embraces that which he knows to be false? This dynamic alone shows that human knowledge stands on the foundation of arrogance while also nourishing it.
- Knowledge and arrogance are intimate companions for the simple reason that men are self-referential and self-oriented. They are at the epicenter of every concern and endeavor, including their pursuit, acquisition and employment of knowledge. Thus their knowledge tends toward their self-exaltation and self-promotion at the expense of others, *and this is just as much the case with what they know rightly as what they believe in error.*

Paul knew all too well the ugly and destructive face of knowledge: He'd lived his life in the erudite, self-assured world of Jewish Pharisaism; he'd known the prestigious and enviable title *rabbi* and enjoyed the respectful deference of others as tacit acknowledgement that they lacked his insight and scholarship.

If men are naturally convinced of their knowledge and the standing it affords them, Paul was all the more convinced. He *knew* what he knew and so had the obligation – not merely the right – before God to bring others into conformity with the “truth,” even if through death (Acts 6:9-8:3). But this laudable scholar who could boast a thoroughgoing knowledge of scriptural facts didn’t know the *truth* of those facts (cf. Acts 26:1-23; Philippians 3:4-6; 1 Timothy 1:12-13) and it took a confrontation with the living Christ for him to realize his ignorance and error. *Paul discovered – to his great shame, but also to his great joy – that knowledge isn’t synonymous with truth; knowledge becomes “of the truth” only when it’s discerned and employed according to the mind of the Spirit of truth.*

The Corinthians were concerned to know what they should do about eating food that had been sacrificed to idols and they sought Paul’s input on that specific question. Both factions were convinced that the answer lay in knowing the truth about idols and their relation to the Christian life and they expected Paul to decide their dispute by siding with one set of convictions over against the other. But Paul understood that applying the mind of Christ to a given issue involves discerning and applying overarching, governing principles; otherwise, one is sure to “strain the gnat while swallowing the camel.”

- d. He recognized that this particular issue – as every issue – can’t be resolved by the criterion of knowledge: what is true versus what is false; what is right versus what is wrong. Rather, a true resolution comes from applying knowledge as it is conditioned and governed by love: *Knowledge not governed by love fosters arrogance; knowledge brought into subjection to love serves love’s goal of edification.* Thus the one who truly “knows” is the one who loves, and the one who loves will find his knowledge working toward the true good of others.

This relation between knowledge and love is something the Corinthians should have understood, for they had personally experienced it as children of their heavenly Father. *Knowledge and love function together in this way in God Himself, and He has displayed and exalted them in His restoring work in His Son in order that men should walk in them.* This is the framework for understanding Paul’s assertion that the one who loves God has first been known by Him (8:3).

Paul redirected the Corinthians’ focus from their knowledge to God’s: What mattered isn’t what they knew, but who they loved, together with their recognition that their love for God had its source in His knowledge of them. In turn, God’s knowledge of them (i.e., His *relational* knowledge) was itself grounded in His love. The saints at Corinth loved God because He first loved them, and in His love for them He had communicated Himself to them in His Son by His Spirit such that they had come to know Him even as He knew them. Thus Paul’s point: *God orders and applies His knowledge in love, and so it is to be with those who share in His life. He embodies in Himself and in His self-communication the knowledge-love relation, and it’s in conformity to that relation that His children become true “knowers” who live out the truth in the Church and in the world.*