

3. In order to rightly answer the Corinthians' dilemma regarding things sacrificed to idols, Paul had to first lay the necessary foundation. The Corinthians believed knowledge should decide the matter; what they sought from Paul was his opinion as to whose conviction was right and whose was wrong. But Paul understood that knowledge – even when correct – cannot itself resolve any issues in the Christian life; one can be right from the vantage point of factual truths and be wrong when measured against the truth as it is in Christ – the truth as God views it. Whether the present concern or any other, the resolution is found in discerning and applying the relation between knowledge and love: What matters is not what one knows, but how he appropriates and applies what he knows; what matters is faith working through love (cf. 13:1-13 with Galatians 5:6 and 6:15).

Thus answering the Corinthians' concern began with properly orienting their thinking. Paul was responding by letter, and he was well aware that they would be interpreting his words through the grid of their own perspectives and sensibilities. Paul wasn't going to be present with the Corinthians to clarify his instruction, and so it was crucial that he do what he could to secure a "meeting of the minds" with them. Only then could he rightly turn his attention to the matter at hand (8:4-13).

- a. If it seemed at the outset that Paul was disparaging or discounting knowledge, he quickly dispelled that notion. Among other things, knowledge had to answer the foundational question of whether or not food offered to idols is defiled. Since that question was fundamental to the contention between the two groups, there was no basis for further discussion until it was resolved; if such food is indeed defiled as the one group contended, then the question of eating was settled: Christians should abstain from partaking in it. Knowledge thus played a crucial role in resolving the dispute, and the verdict of knowledge is that foods sacrificed to idols are not defiled for the simple reason that they are offered to imaginary beings.
- Idols are nothing because there is only one God and one Lord. True, there are many so-called "gods" and "lords" whom men acknowledge, worship and serve, as the Corinthians well knew. They lived in a city filled with temples, shrines and altars, and they were well aware of the emerging imperial cult which venerated Caesar as a god and the "lord of lords."
 - But those who know the truth – those who are *of* the truth – recognize that there is but one God who is the Creator-Father and one Lord who is Jesus Christ. This Lord is the co-creator of all things with the Father and the One in whom all things – and most especially man as God's image-son – find their life, meaning and destiny (8:4-6).

Paul's unique language in describing this one God and one Lord has led some to speculate that it reflects a confessional formulation in the early Church. This is certainly possible, but it's more likely that Paul chose this particular way of expressing the singular deity and lordship of the Father and Son because it highlights them as the source and goal of every other being. There can therefore be no other "gods" or "lords"; there are only created things, subject to the Creator.

- b. Men devise in their minds “gods” and “lords,” and fictitious entities cannot affect things that are real. So idols, being imaginary beings, cannot defile food offered to them, with the result that there is no defilement or sin in eating food that’s come to the table from the idol temple. This is the truth of the matter, *but not every Christian has this knowledge* (8:7). Such individuals weren’t dull or foolish; they, too, had knowledge (8:1), but their knowledge was immature; they hadn’t yet attained to a mature understanding. In their sincere judgment, food sacrificed to idols *is* defiled. In the case of “weak” Gentile believers, they were coping with the baggage of years of devotion to the religious and cultural “truth” that idols represent real gods; their Jewish counterparts had the baggage of their lives under Torah’s dietary restrictions and the obligation of non-association with everything Gentile. In their own way, both were *“accustomed to the idol until now.”*

Whether grounded in Jewish or Greco-Roman sensibilities, these immature believers had a conscience problem with eating foods associated with idol rituals and idol temples. Their consciences regarded such food as defiled, and the result was that, *for them*, it was defiled. So eating it left them in a state of defilement – not in their bodies or in God’s estimation, but in their own conscience (8:7).

Paul was here making a crucial point that must not be missed: While there is no inherent defilement in the food itself, the *conviction* that it’s defiled results in a defiled conscience for those who act contrary to their conscience. Paul had settled the question of whether a sacrificial ritual or pagan site can defile food: they can’t. But the real concern in the matter isn’t the status of the food itself, but how a person regards it. The Corinthians were focusing on the defilement of “idol meats” when the issue was the defilement of human consciences. And that defilement occurs when the Christian goes against his conscience, *regardless of whether or not his conscience is rightly informed.*

This is precisely what Paul meant when he insisted to the church at Rome that anything that is not an expression of faith is sin (Romans 14:23). God’s creation is good in all of its components and features. There is no sin in partaking in the world God created; sin and defilement are a matter of the heart’s perspective, orientation and conviction. This means that no thing is unclean in itself; rather, things become tainted by uncleanness when the human heart projects its own defilement onto them by regarding, embracing and employing them with an unclean mind and in an unclean manner (ref. 1 Timothy 4:1-6; Titus 1:15).

Thus Paul’s point: Sin with respect to “idol meats” results from acting contrary to one’s faith (i.e., violating one’s conscience as it is submitted to Christ), not from the act of eating. This means that two believers can eat the same food and the act will be sinful and defiling for one and not for the other. The one who acts in faith, being fully convinced that God has given all things to be enjoyed with thanksgiving and praise, is free of sin; the one who violates his conscience and acts against his faith is guilty before God. By engaging himself with what he believes to be wrong or unclean he has defiled his conscience (Romans 14:5-14).

- c. Paul understood – as does every mature conscience – that no food is unclean regardless of its substance, its history, *or even the setting in which it's consumed*. Again, it was commonplace in Corinth (and elsewhere) for temple facilities to be used for various social gatherings and community events. Such facilities served a cultural as well as religious function, and social convention and obligations virtually insured that wealthier Christians at least would find themselves on occasion “dining in an idol’s temple” (8:10). This practice doubtless shocked some of the Corinthian saints, but Paul saw nothing wrong in it as such; like eating meat bought in the marketplace, it was a matter of indifference – of *liberty* (cf. 8:8-10 with 10:25-27). Echoing his Roman epistle, Paul insisted that neither eating nor abstaining has any value or import to God or the believer’s spiritual condition; neither “commends us to God” or makes us better or worse (8:8).
- Paul stood alongside the mature saints at Corinth in affirming their knowledge and conviction that eating food associated with idol worship and sacrifices is indifferent. Moreover, this was the case whether one did so in a private home or on the grounds of a pagan temple.
 - At the same time, he withstood them in insisting that knowledge isn’t determinative; love is. The decision to eat or not eat isn’t driven by the truth of the food itself, which is indifferent, but by the obligation of love.
 - In contradistinction to knowledge which, in itself, “puffs up” the knower and fosters his preoccupation with what is right – and therefore with the rights which correct knowledge grants him, love always “builds up” the other. Love will act in any choice, situation or circumstance in the cause of the true good of others, whether nurturing a brother’s faith and life in Christ or laboring to see them formed in one who doesn’t know Him.
- So it is that love refuses to “ruin” a fellow believer by wounding his conscience or leading it astray, *even when knowledge sanctions a different position or behavior*.
- Love will refuse its rights to dine in a temple if it encourages (wrongly “builds up”) other believers to either violate their conscience or conclude that idolatrous practice is acceptable (8:10-12; cf. Romans 14:10-21).
 - So love will push away meat served in a private home if its previous involvement in an idol sacrifice violates the conscience of another brother seated at the table (10:25-29).
- d. Love, not knowledge, determines what is finally right and proper in a given situation or concern. And such love isn’t the self-referential, ultimately self-serving sentimentality and affection that marks the natural mind; this love is of God and is the outworking of the mind of Christ: Viewed from the one side, this love for men is the expression of Christ’s love for them; viewed from the other, love for men is merely the extension of the believer’s love for his Lord (8:11-13).

The one who regards knowledge as he ought recognizes that knowledge must be subjected to love – love as it exists in God and as it is manifest in Jesus Christ, which means employing knowledge in the cause of the edification of others. But just as love must be defined in terms of Christ Himself, so it is with edification: Edification is nurture and growth *in Christ*, so that the one who serves his brother in this way is also serving his Lord. Jesus gave Himself that His people should enter into His life and be built up in Him unto their full “christiformity” (Ephesians 4:11-16). In that sense, He gave Himself for the sake of His saints’ edification. Serving that end is serving Him; undermining it is undermining Him.

Paul understood the grave implications of deferring to one’s “rights” and failing to act in love (so v. 13): First, the consciences of weaker brothers are defiled and they are stumbled in their faith. This much was evident to the Corinthians; the mature believers were well aware of the effect their freedom was having on their less mature brethren. But what they likely didn’t realize is that an assault on the consciences of other saints is an assault upon Christ Himself; by following the dictates of “rightness,” the mature at Corinth were acting so as to ruin men whom Christ died to deliver from ruination. They no doubt told themselves that their actions were good because they provoked the immature to grow up. But, in fact, they were despoiling them and sinning against the Lord and His law of love.

In this way Paul highlighted the crucial importance of properly employing one’s knowledge and the freedom it supplies. Again, the Corinthians – *regardless of which side they took* – considered the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols as a matter to be resolved by knowledge. They were concerned with upholding the truth, and this meant doing what is *right*, which is to say, conforming themselves to the conduct knowledge prescribed. In turn, by doing what is right they felt they’d be honoring their Lord. But the spiritual mind recognizes that rightness – and therefore authentic service and honor to the Lord Jesus – is determined by the dictates of love, not the insights of knowledge.

- In this context Paul’s emphasis was on the mature believers at Corinth and their responsibility to the weaker ones among them. The “strong” were right in their conviction about food sacrificed to idols, but they were to subject their “right” to love’s lordship. Their eating wasn’t sinful unless it ruined their brother, either by directly assaulting his conscience or by inciting him to disobey his convictions.
- But the same dynamic held true for the weaker, less mature individuals. They, too, were obligated to subject their knowledge and convictions to the lordship of love. Though their immaturity rendered them the “weaker vessel,” and therefore more vulnerable than their mature brethren, *they held their convictions just as strongly and so were just as prone to the sin of judging their fellows*. When Paul demanded of the Corinthians that they stop judging one another, he wasn’t singling out the mature ones among them; everyone who is convinced in his own mind is inclined to pass judgment on those who differ (cf. Romans 14:1-10). Knowledge fuels arrogance, and this applies to everyone who “knows,” whether his knowledge is accurate or false, mature or immature.