



Right Premise, Wrong Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Slogans. Taglines. Catchphrases. We see them, hear them, use them all the time. From popular brands to politicians, from protestors to pastors, slogans are everywhere. They are powerful, easy to remember ways to communicate an idea, a truth, a point of view. Repeated often enough they become engrained in our minds. In fact, they often become so much a part of the way that we see the world that we don't even think of them as something true or false, they are simply the way the world is.

The problem, of course, is "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it." That quote is usually attributed to Joseph Goebbels, the infamous head of the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda. Note the irony here: he probably never said it. The idea of a "big lie" was used by Hitler and by Goebbels himself in their discussions of their enemies but probably not about their own strategies. It turns out, as C.S. Lewis writes in *The Last Battle*, "By mixing a little truth with it they had made their lie far stronger."¹ That can definitely be true for the easily recognizable slogans we regularly hear.

That is the very premise of *The Last Battle*: a character lies, using truths or references to the truth, and slowly people are deceived and find themselves doing all sorts of things that they would never have imagined before. But such twisting of the truth need not have such obvious ill intent. How many of us have heard that it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert in a given field? Malcom Gladwell popularized this idea in his book *Outliers*. Many of us believe what he says because it sounds so plausible. There is a certain amount of sense to it—if you want to get good at something, you have to put in the time. Gladwell bases his thesis on the research of Anders Ericsson who studied violinists in Berlin and who himself argues that Gladwell's "rule is an oversimplification, and in many ways, an incorrect interpretation of his research." There are numerous issues with Gladwell's take, including focusing solely on the amount, not quality of practice.² Gladwell takes something true and comes to a false, or at least misleading conclusion.

And that is exactly where we find ourselves in 1 Corinthians 8—slogans with an element of truth that lead to radically wrong conclusions.

¹ C S Lewis, *The Last Battle*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1984), p. 116.

² Michael Miller, *The Great Practice Myth: Debunking the 10,000 Hour Rule*, <https://www.6seconds.org/2022/06/20/10000-hour-rule/> accessed 10/18/2024.

BREAK THE ICE

Can you think of any slogans or “big lies” that seem plausible on the surface but don’t hold up well under scrutiny? Why do you think they are so easy to fall for?

READ IT

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

EXPLORE IT

1. What is the main issue for this passage?
2. What does Paul contrast in verses 1-3?
3. What does Paul say about idols (v. 4)?
4. What has happened to some recent converts (v.7)?
5. What is Paul’s warning to those eating? (vv. 9-12)?

APPLY IT

Food offered to idols. Not exactly a live issue for most of us in the 21st century (though there are still places and cultures around the world where this is a real concern). It is easy for us to breeze past a passage like this: “doesn’t apply, let’s move to chapter 9.” But there is more going on here than a specific issue that we modern Christians don’t need to deal with. The issue of eating food sacrificed to idols in Corinth exposes serious problems in Corinth. Problems of knowledge, of cultural pressures, and of lack of awareness of how our own actions can have serious repercussions for others. It also offers the opportunity to see how our theology connects to the way that we live. Chapter 8 introduces Paul’s response to a Corinthian question (“now concerning” in verse 1 is the same way he begins to answer their question in 7:1). Paul’s response is actually a long and complex argument that extends all the way to 11:1. While chapter 9 and the first half of chapter 10 seem unrelated at first glance, they actually continue Paul’s correction of the Corinthians’ faulty reasoning. It is only when we take this entire section together that we get a complete picture of Paul’s teaching.

Eating food sacrificed to idols was not unusual in the ancient world. It was actually quite common. There were many “gods” and many temples in and around Corinth. Animal sacrifices were a regular part of religious observance. Part of the sacrifice would be given as a burnt offering, part would be eaten by the priests, part would be used for meals in temple “restaurants” (it seems that almost all temples included these), and some would have been sold in the markets (more on this in chapter 10). It is the temple restaurant that is mostly in view in chapter 8 (see v.10). These temple restaurants were more than merely places to eat (inns and the like did exist) or meeting places (like banquet halls). While they were used in this way to celebrate things like birthdays and weddings, there was always a religious as well as social connection to the god of the temple. Archeologists have found invitations to events at these restaurants which invoke the name of the god. The social pressures to participate in such events could be enormous and it is understandable that many want to find out if it was ok or to justify their participation. This was not just an issue in Corinth. The Jerusalem council (Acts 15), which dealt specifically with requirements for Gentiles who were being converted, listed abstaining from food sacrificed to idols first among the prohibited practices. This council happened before the church in Corinth was planted.

Throughout 1 Corinthians, we have seen that the Corinthian believers both value wisdom (“knowledge” v. 1) and that they think they have it. Most scholars agree that Paul recites several slogans or rhetorical phrases the Corinthians use to build a theological case for why they should be able to eat this food. (Though there are differences in what is counted as Paul’s quotation.) You can see these phrases in quotes in verse 1 and 4:

- “all of us possess knowledge.” (v.1)
- “an idol has no real existence,” (v. 4)
- “there is no God but one.” (v.4)

The question is whether Paul agrees with the Corinthians in regard to the first question, he certainly does in the cases of the second and third.

6. **While eating food sacrificed to idols is not a live issue for most people today, can you think of any areas which may have similar concerns or consequences to the scenario Paul lays out in this chapter?**

7. Do you think that Paul's instruction in chapter 8 contradicts the Jerusalem council? Why or why not?

8. Do you think that Paul agrees with the Corinthians assessment that they all have knowledge? Why or Why not? (remember what Paul said to them in 2:6-3:4).

Considering where Paul is headed in this chapter and in 10:14-22, as well as the prohibitions of Acts 15, it is probably wise to move where the quotes are at. Paul Gardner makes a compelling case that "we know that" in both v. 1 and v. 4 are a part of Paul's reciting of the Corinthian position.³ This makes great sense of both the flow of the book (see previous question) and the flow of this argument. It also resolves any perceived contradiction between Paul and the Jerusalem council. The Corinthians believe that they have a solution to their problem, but Paul is slowly building the case that they haven't thought all of this through.

Knowledge, as they have pursued it, has not gotten the Corinthian church as far as they had thought. From factions to immorality, lawsuits to church discipline and marriage, the Corinthian believers have shown that their knowledge has often been self-centered and has neglected love. Verses 1-3 both show the deficiencies of their "knowledge" and give a reminder of the connection between knowledge and love.

9. Do you naturally feel more drawn to knowledge or to love? Why?

³ Gardner, Paul. *1 Corinthians* Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, Michigan : Zondervan, 2018), p. 366, 371.

10. Why do you think knowledge has a tendency to “puff up”?

11. How would you rewrite the point Paul is making in verse 2 in your own words?

Verse 3 sets the stage to move from the statement Paul doesn’t agree with to the ones he does. Loving God leads to or means that God *knows* the person. It is not the Corinthians’ knowledge that shows their faith and connection to God but their love. Gardner states:

Elsewhere Paul refers to love as one of the “fruits” of the spirit (Gal 5:22), and unlike the gifts, love lasts into all eternity (1 Cor 13:8, 13). Paul’s emphasis on the centrality of love builds to its exciting climax in chapter 13, but it is important to remember in this chapter, as Paul addresses idolatry and its associated sacrifices and meals, that the authenticating function of “loving God” appears in the first of the Ten Commandments, which is actually a command against idolatry. “You shall have no other gods before me. . . . I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments (Deut. 5:7-10 ESV; cf. Exod 20:2-6; Deut 7:1-10).⁴

So the ideas of loving and knowing God have been connected to the issue of idolatry from the very giving of the Law. Idolatry was, in fact, the predominant and recurring sin of Israel in the Old Testament. Paul, as a Jew and a former Pharisee not only knows this, but he knows just how serious the problem of idolatry was (and remained). The Corinthians’ slogan seen in verse 4 combines two bedrock Jewish beliefs—there is only one God and idols are nothing, beliefs that the entire nation, however, would constantly struggle with.

The Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deut. 6:4-5) would become and remains the central prayer of the Jews, encapsulating the first command. Interestingly, at the end of his life, God tells Moses that after the people enter the Promised Land they will forsake God and follow after foreign gods (Deut. 31:16-18). God then tells Moses to write a song and teach it to the people as a witness against them in that time. Deuteronomy 32 records the song which includes the following:

⁴ IBID. 370.

“But Jeshurun [Israel] grew fat, and kicked;
 you grew fat, stout, and sleek;
 then he forsook God who made him
 and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation.
 16 They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods;
 with abominations they provoked him to anger.
 17 They sacrificed to demons that were no gods,
 to gods they had never known,
 to new gods that had come recently,
 whom your fathers had never dreaded.
 18 You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you,
 and you forgot the God who gave you birth.
 . . .
 21 They have made me jealous with what is no god;
 they have provoked me to anger with their idols.

The Corinthians are completely correct in their theology but come to precisely the wrong conclusion about their ability to eat this food. True there is only one God. True, the idols are nothing. But as Paul will deal with later in 10:14-22 and as Deuteronomy 32:17, the fact that the idols are nothing and that those “gods” are nothing does not mean that there is no spiritual reality at work. Demons masquerade as gods and participation in the sacrifices associated with them makes one a participant with those demons (1 Cor. 10:19-20).

So loving and being known by God is in direct opposition to participation with idols even though, as the Corinthians rightly understood, the idols themselves are nothing. Paul continues by acknowledging that both in heaven and on earth there are many “so-called” gods and lords. (Some think that verses 5-6 refer not only to the Greek and Roman pantheons and mystery religions but also the fact that increasingly the Roman emperors were worshiped as gods. This would have been an especially potent issue in Corinth which had been rebuilt as a Roman city). Paul contrasts these “gods” and “lords” with the one God and one Lord, identifying God as the Father and source of all and Jesus, the opposite of a Roman lord or emperor in all earthly senses, as the very means by which the Father both creates and reconciles us to himself.

12. How should the fact that the Corinthians had some aspects of their theology so correct yet came to such problematic conclusions affect us as we seek to live out our faith?

13. Paul shows that the idea of one God is both true and a marker of Christian identity “for us” v. 6 shows that we are known by God. How does this knowledge impact the things that we involve ourselves in?
14. The Israelites had such prohibitions against idolatry yet kept falling into the same trap, showing the pull of idolatry. How can we fall into similar traps today even if we don’t believe in other “gods”?

Not all of the Corinthian believers had the same “knowledge.” Indeed, Paul gives an illustration, perhaps hypothetical but definitely plausible, of a rather new Gentile convert who had formerly participated in idol worship and sacrifices. Those people, with weaker consciences, become ruined or defiled because they see some other Christians eating at the temple. A few notes are important. At the time of Paul, the term conscience was only just beginning to take on the idea of a moral guide. It was used far more often (and this makes sense given the context) of self-awareness. Second, this scenario is not the same as the “strong” and the “weak” of Romans 14 and 15. The situations are different and here the “weak” are not corrected or in any way reprimanded by Paul. These are not people with overactive consciences in the way we think of the term. They are not the person who is offended by participation in certain activities. Rather, they are people who would be likely to be pulled back into their idolatrous ways.

15. What are some ways in which our actions, or insistence on our rights, can lead fellow Christians to stumble and compromise?

16. How does Paul's instruction in verses 7-13 fly in the face of contemporary Western culture's insistence on our rights? How should we approach our responsibility of love toward our brothers and sisters in light of this?

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