

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTERS 8-10

Chapter 8 begins a new section in which Paul addresses the issue of Christian freedom. Does freedom allow believers to participate with unbelievers in meals offered to their gods in pagan temples? Paul answers that it does not; it is wrong both ethically (8:1-13) and theologically (10:14-22).

The cultural/historical context:

In the world of the Greeks, going to the temple of god, attending private parties, or celebrating state festivals often involved the worship of pagan deities. The food served at these events often came from animals sacrificed to a deity. The meat of such sacrifices was apparently divided into three portions: one portion was burned before the god, another was given to the worshippers, and last was placed on "the table of the god," which was tended by cultic ministrants but also eaten by the worshippers. "The significance of these meals has been much debated, but they most likely involved a combination of religious and social factors. The gods were thought to be present since the meals were held in their honor and sacrifices were made; nonetheless, they were also intensely social occasions for the participants. For the most part the Gentiles who had become believers in Corinth had probably attended such meals all their lives; this was the basic 'restaurant' in antiquity, and every kind of occasion was celebrated in this fashion" (Fee, 362).

The reconstruction of the problem that Paul is addressing (taken from Fee 361 ff.) is as follows:

The Corinthians had come to Christ under Paul's ministry but then continued to practice the cultic meals that they had grown up with their whole lives. In a previous letter (which we don't have) Paul had forbidden participation in idolatrous practices but they had taken exception to Paul's comments and argued four points.

- (1) They argued that "all have knowledge" about idols (8:1, 4). That is, since they believed in only one true God, anything else called "god" didn't really exist. Therefore, they felt free to eat with their friends at the temples because in their minds their eating was not worship, for the deity being honored was non-existent. Paul agreed with their premise but not their conclusion.

- (2) They also argued that God is indifferent about food (8:8). Paul agreed with this as well. Apparently they then concluded that it not only didn't matter what they ate, but where they ate it.
- (3) They seemed to have a magical view of the ordinances of communion and baptism believing that those who partook of them would not fall spiritually (10:1-5).
- (4) Lastly, many in the church really questioned if Paul had proper apostolic authority to forbid them from going to temples. They also questioned his stance on eating food sacrificed to idols with Gentiles but refraining from eating it when around Jews (9:19-23).

In chapters 8-10 Paul addresses each of these concerns.

CHAPTER 8 NOTES

Although Paul will eventually forbid believers from going to temples, his first concern is in dealing with the basis of their argument. The argument that they had knowledge about idols (i.e. that idols had no substance) was only partially true, but more importantly, knowledge is not the basis of Christian conduct, love is. (8:1-13).

Chapter 8 can be outlined as follows:

8:1-3 - knowledge is the wrong basis for Christian behavior

8:4-6 - the Corinthians' knowledge is lacking

8:7-13 - Conclusion: The believer's primary concern should be that they do nothing that causes another brother to stumble, not in exercising their freedoms. Conduct should be based on love.

8:1 Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

The opening words "now concerning things sacrificed to idols" introduce a completely new subject presumably brought up as a concern by the church to Paul in a previous letter. Many commentators (34 referred to by Thiselton, 620) believe that Paul's mention of knowledge (*γνῶσις gnosis* - a word that appears 16 times in I and II Corinthians, but only 5

times in all of Paul's other NT letters combined) is a reference to the Corinthian's view of knowledge, not Paul's. They believed knowledge was a sign of spirituality.

Although all Christians know that there is no real god associated with an idol, such knowledge is not practical or easily applied by everyone. Furthermore, simply having knowledge of idols does not justify the Corinthians' course of action. Acting on the perception of one's freedom displays insensitivity toward the brother who struggles with how knowledge should be applied to life; Christians are not simply to act by what they know, they are to act in love as well. Knowledge does not build others up, it makes them conceited; Christian ethics is based on what serves the good of others not simply on what you know.

8:2 If anyone supposes that he knows (something), he has not yet known as he ought to know;

8:3 but if anyone loves (God), he is known (by Him).

Verses 2 and 3 have considerable textual problems.

In verses 2 and 3 the words "something," "God" and "by Him" are not in some important Greek manuscripts (p⁴⁶, Tertullian, and Origen). Their presence or absence changes the meaning considerably.

1) If "something" is part of what Paul wrote, he would be emphasizing the content of what was known.

If "something" is not present, the verb "knows," by itself, would imply that the Corinthians thought that they "arrived" in the area of knowledge; they thought "they knew" (when they didn't).

2) If "God" and "by Him" are in the text, Paul would be saying that our love for God is based on His love for us. To know God is to love Him and to be known by Him is to be loved by Him. Love for the brethren is one of the ways that the love of God manifests itself (I Jn. 4:7-8, Hodge, 140).

If "God" and "by Him" are *not* present then this would not be talking about loving God, but of loving those who do not share their knowledge. In other words, true knowledge is expressed by learning how to live in love toward all. The Corinthians' belief that they have knowledge is evidence in itself that they do not

have it. That person does not know as he ought to know. That is, he lacks knowledge itself, for true knowledge involves loving his one's brother.

One cannot be dogmatic in stating which is intended. Leaving the words out does make excellent sense in the context; however, it is uncertain that there is ample manuscript evidence to justify this.

8:4 Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.

8:5 For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords,

8:6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.

Paul resumes the discussion about things sacrificed to idols that he began in verse 1. The apostle's argument is fairly easy to follow. The Christian's belief in one true God precludes that no other god can exist. Therefore, idolatry is nothing more than a figment of the imagination, a make-believe religion that has no reality backing it, for no real god exists behind a wood or stone image (8:4, however, Paul believed that demons did use idolatrous rites -cf. 10:20 ff.). The Corinthians concluded that based on this knowledge they didn't need to be concerned about eating foods sacrificed at a pagan temple or in withdrawing from the many social activities tied to idolatry. Eating food sacrificed to a non-existent god is not participating in the worship of other gods for no other god exists.

Of course, Paul isn't denying that there are many who believe in other gods and lords who lived in heaven and from time to time acted upon earth, but Christians know that they are only gods in peoples' minds (8:5), not in reality. They are only "so-called" gods.

The problem is that not all men have this knowledge, or even if they do, they cannot divorce themselves emotionally from their feelings associated with these things (8:7). Knowledge, therefore, cannot be the sole basis for Christian action.

Note: The Father and Son are distinguished not by their spheres of operation, but by the prepositions "from" and "through." The Father is the source of all that exists; the Son is the agent through whom the Father works and through whom all things come into being. Although "Lord" was the term used of YHWH in the OT, the present context favors the idea of the divine kingship of Jesus.

8:7 However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.

Even though on a theoretical level all Christians know there is no true god involved in the worship of idols, not everyone is completely convinced on an experiential and emotional level. Some in Corinth had grown up believing their whole lives that the idols they worshipped were gods and that eating food sacrificed to them was having fellowship with them. Such feelings are not easily dislodged even when the truth is plain. Even though they may know in their heads that there is only one true God, their former life is so woven together with their conscience and emotions that their old associations cannot be lightly disregarded. For them to return to the place of their former worship would feel as though they themselves were worshipping the false god (Fee, 379).

So what would happen to them if they saw a believer with a stronger conscience eating meat sacrificed to an idol? Paul assumes that the weaker brother may be tempted to do the same thing and act against his conscience. One acting "in knowledge" may cause someone else to sin by participating in what they considered to be an act of worship in their pre-Christian lifestyle. The stronger brother's actions destroy the weaker one's faith.

Knowledge then does not build others up; love does, so love should motivate our actions.

This helps us understand what Paul means by a weak conscience. A weak conscience is a conscience that regards something as wrong when in reality it isn't (cf. Ro. 14:23 - "whatever is not from faith is sin" - Hodge, 146). The conscience is defiled when it either cherishes sin, or is burdened by a sense of guilt (Hodge, 146). An uninstructed conscience may condemn what is not wrong, but even in such cases it should be obeyed if it isn't sin (Robertson, 169).

So there is the explicit connection between lack of knowledge and weakness. "Not all possess this knowledge"—that is, not all possess the knowledge that all creation is from God and through Christ and for God.

Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 10:25, "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For 'the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof.'" In other words, the fullness of faith to eat what you will to the glory of God is based on the fullness of knowledge that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." The weak believer lacks this knowledge—and perhaps other knowledge as

well—and therefore his faith is limited in its exercise. This is what it means to be weak in faith.

The strong, on the other hand, have a more full understanding of God and his relation to the world, and are freed by this truth to embrace more of God's creation in a God-glorifying way" (sermon by John Piper, Ro 9:1-5, Sept. 4, 2005 - John Piper. © desiringGod.org).

8:8 But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.

8:9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

The real point that Paul is driving at is in verses 10-12 but to get there he offers another illustration.

The logic of the Corinthians appears to be that they were arguing for their freedom to participate in pagan cultic activities because there are no true gods represented by idols. Secondly, they reasoned that since what they ate did not add or detract from their relationship with God they were also free to participate in their old practices.

Paul agrees that food is a matter of indifference with God. Whether we eat something or not doesn't enhance our relationship with God (the one who abstains is not disadvantaged, the one who eats is not advantaged -8:8), but for that very reason food shouldn't be important to Christians either. The Corinthians wanted to exercise their freedom in eating at pagan gatherings, but their eating did nothing to commend them to God. Therefore, they should not insist on exercising their "rights" and freedoms. Instead they should be more concerned about how their actions will affect others and use their freedom not to eat.

Some have concluded that Paul would allow believers to participate in cultic meals if a weaker brother is not present, but chapter 10 rules this out. *Paul is dealing with the ethics of eating foods sacrificed to idols and the implications it has in relation to others, not the theology of such actions. The theology behind forbidding people from eating pagan sacrifices is Paul's topic in chapter 10.*

8:10 For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?

The problem in exercising freedom based on knowledge alone is now clarified. Two groups of people are still in focus; those who feel free to eat at idolatrous feasts, and those who do not. Verses 10-12 drive the main point home.

Verses 10 and 11 show how someone eating a sacrifice could cause a brother to sin.

Evidently those who felt it was wrong to eat at the feasts were being invited by those who saw no problem with it. As a result of watching others participate they were strengthened (literally, built up, in 8:1 translated as edified) to join in the feast with them. What to others is only "food" is for them "food sacrificed to an idol" and their faith is ruined by their involvement in idolatry. In other words, it is not that they are offended by what the "knowledgeable brother" is doing, rather they are tempted to compromise in what they feel is wrong. Though to someone else the eating of the food may be simply eating, to the weaker brother it is participation in idolatry (Fee, 387).

This is what Paul speaks of in verse 11.

8:11 For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.

"For" (*gar -gar*) is a word that signals an explanation in Greek. In other words, verse 11 explains verse 10.

In verse 7 Paul says the weaker brother's conscience is defiled, in Ro. 14:23 the person is said to be condemned if he eats, and now in verse 11 he says the weaker brother is destroyed. All three verses amount to the same thing; guilt, condemnation, and ruin. Whatever brings guilt on the conscience exposes it to condemnation (Hodge, 148). The person who is ruined is no longer just the brother with the weaker conscience, he is one for whom Christ died. The weaker brother falls back into the grips of idolatry, possibly even denying the faith. The tragedy is that the better instructed man leads the less informed into ruin (Robertson 172).

"This means no more insistence on 'freedom' since 'freedom' moves in direction of individualized existence, while love moves in the direction of community and care for others" (Fee, 388).

8:12 And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

Such exercise of freedom turns out to be sin. Any injury to the child is an injury to the parent, so it is in our relationship to Christ. To injure His people is to injure Him (cf. Matt. 25:40 - Hodge, 150). By causing them to fall and sin, you sin against them. By sinning against one for who Christ died you also sin against Christ (Fee, 388).

8:13 Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.

Paul brings his argument to a close with the principle that he will do nothing to cause a fellow believer to stumble. Although the Corinthians had asked about a specific cultural situation that they were faced with, Paul shows that the issue was symptomatic of a much bigger problem - insisting on "rights" and "freedom" in the name of knowledge. In fact, Paul would chose never to eat any meat again if by doing so he caused a brother to stumble.

CONCLUSION: Paul begins where the Corinthians began. They insisted on exercising their freedom because of the knowledge about idols that they possessed. Paul says that Christian conduct is based upon concern for others, not exercising personal rights. The Corinthians had "an essentially self-regarding element which was incompatible with Christian love; it was . . . an approach to life and religion which was acquisitive . . . and therefore inconsistent with love" (Barrett, 190). Paul will go on to show that it is wrong to participate in any idolatrous activity, but for now he wants them to understand who they are in Christ and act accordingly.