

First Epistle to the Corinthians

15 – Essay Three: Freedom and Responsibility (3.1) – Food Offered to Idols

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

1. Outlines

a. *ESV Study Bible*

- i. Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter (7:1–11:1)
 1. Marriage, divorce, and unchangeable circumstances (7:1–24)
 2. The betrothed and widows (7:25–40)
 3. Food offered to idols (8:1–11:1)

b. *Reading the New Testament Series*

- i. The Limits of Christian Freedom (8:1-11:1)
 1. **A.** Two issues, (1) and (2) (8:1- 13)
 2. **B.** The example of Paul (apostolic freedom and slavery) (9:1- 23)
 3. **B'.** The examples of Paul and Israel (necessity of self- control) (9:24- 10:13)
 4. **A'.** Two issues, (2) and (1) (10:14- 11:1)

c. *Kenneth E. Bailey*¹

- i. Freedom and Responsibility (8:1-11:1)
 1. Food Offered to Idols: Freedom and Responsibility (8:1-13)
 2. Paul’s Personal Freedom and Responsibility (9:1-18)
 3. Freedom in Mission: Full Identification (9:19-27)
 4. Old Covenant Sacraments and Idolatry: Partial Identification (10:1-13)
 5. New Covenant Sacraments and Idolatry: No Identification (10:14-22)
 6. Food Offered to Idols: Freedom and Responsibility – A Final Word (10:23- 11:1)

2. Rhetoric

- a. Note Paul’s use of satire and irony...

Table 1: Bailey, location 2646

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (ESV)		Rhetoric
A. Knowledge, Love and God		
1	¹ Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up.	We know Knowledge Love
2	² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.	He knows Not yet knows Love
B. Knowledge, Idols and God		
3	⁴ 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.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—	Knowledge No idols And one God

¹ Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, loc. 2632

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (ESV)		Rhetoric
4	⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, [<i>and we are his;</i>] and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things [<i>by his hand are all things</i>] and through whom we exist. [<i>and we are by his hand</i>]	One God -- Father Creation We are his One Lord -- Jesus Christ Creation We are by his hand
C. Knowledge, the Weak and God		
5	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.	Knowledge and Idols Weak in conscience Defiled
6	⁸ Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.	God and Food The weak -- stumble Freedom & responsibility
7	¹⁰ 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?	Knowledge and Idols Weak in conscience Freedom & responsibility
D. Knowledge, Your/My Brother and Christ		
8	¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother [<i>sing.</i>] for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers [<i>pl.</i>] and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.	Your knowledge Weak -- destroyed The brother/sister Your brother/sister Weak -- wounded Your sin -- against Christ
9	¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.	My brother stumbles I do not eat

3. Initial thoughts

- What do you think the issues are? For the Corinthians? For Paul?
- What do you think Paul is exhorting?
- How do you think this passage applies to the 21st century West?
- What assumptions might we be reading into this passage?

4. A. Knowledge, Love and God – 8:1-3

- Love is more important than knowledge. Genuine knowledge is the experience of loving.*
- Food offered to idols... *What are the issues?*

In pagan cults there were two kinds of sacrifices. First, there was a private sacrifice. The animal was divided into three parts: a token to be burned on the altar, a portion for the priests, and the remainder used by the worshiper for a banquet, usually at the temple of the god to whom the sacrifice had been made...

Second, there was in pagan cults a public sacrifice. The animal was again divided into three parts: a token part to be burned, a share for the priests, and the substantial amount left to the magistrates. What they did not need, they sold to the shops and markets for resale to the public. Pagans eagerly purchased such meat... Such food was prohibited to Jews because it was tainted with idolatry, it was not slaughtered in the proper way, and tithe had not been paid on it. So, instead of calling this meat "sacrificed for sacred purposes" (hierothuton), Jews termed it "sacrificed to idols" (eidolothuton). Could a Christian buy or eat such meat?²

- i. (1) Meat eaten at a pagan temple. (2) Meat sacrificed in a ritual, then sold in the public markets.
 1. Both are issues – which one does Paul have in mind for 8:1-13?
 2. Scholars are divided: some think (1) based on verse 10; others think (2) based on Greek word use (eidolothuton), except for verse 10.
 3. Gordon Fee in *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle* makes the argument that although both issues are present, the primary one is (1) – eating at a cultic meal in a pagan temple.
 4. Even if (2) was the only consideration, it could cause a split between the Jewish and Gentile Christians.
- ii. (3) The few times the poor would have any meat to eat would be during the temple feasts when the market prices of meat would drop
 1. The poor would associate meat with idol worship – blessings of the pagan gods
 2. New Christians coming in from paganism might see the surface similarities between the Eucharist and their former feasts and come to erroneous ideas
- c. A digression(?) on knowledge and love
 - i. Paul quotes the Corinthian assertion, "All of us possess knowledge"
 1. Key is *possess* – contrast "we all know" vs. "we all possess knowledge"
 2. Proto-gnosticism: more knowledge = higher spiritual level
 - ii. Making spiritual gift (*gnosis*) the end rather than the means to the end (to build up community)
 1. Paul foreshadowing and building up argument that will climax in chapter 13

² If anyone thinks he has arrived at knowledge,
he does not yet know as he ought to know;
³ but If anyone loves, this one truly knows (or, is known).³

- iii. Paul's argument against knowledge as the vehicle of spirituality
 1. In Christianity, knowledge is the result of spirituality
 2. Spirituality is learning to love in community

True *gnōsis* consists not in the accumulation of so much data, nor even in the correctness of one's theology, but in the fact that one has learned to live in love toward all... The tyranny of "knowledge" as the basis of Christian ethics has a long and unfortunate history in the church, from which most likely few who read—as well as the

² *Reading the New Testament Series*, entry for 1 Cor. 8:1-13 and 10:14-11:1.

³ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 8:2-3. Fee comments that this translation based on Clement and P46 is likely closest to the original.

one who writes—this commentary are exempt. Once one's theology is properly in hand, it is especially tempting to use it as a club on others. And in this case, it happens from the theological right as well as from the left. This does not mean that knowledge is either irrelevant or unimportant, but it does mean that it cannot serve as the primary basis of Christian behavior. In Christian ethics "knowledge" must always lead to love.⁴

5. **B. Knowledge, Idols and God – 8:4-6**

- a. *We know idols aren't real – only the one God exists.*
- b. Paul returns to the actual question
- c. Paul, in principle, agrees that idols have no real existence and that there is only one real God
- d. *But*, he argues that perception also forms a subjective reality

In both cases Paul does not allow reality to the "gods" of idolatry. What he does rather is to anticipate the argument of v. 7, that such "gods" have subjective reality for their worshipers; that is, they do not objectively exist, but they do "exist" for those who have given them reality by believing in them. Hence there are indeed "gods many" and "lords many..."

But Paul also recognizes the existential reality of pagan worship, and he knows that some within the Corinthian community are going to be affected by that reality. Thus he interrupts the concession with the affirmation "as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords.'" He does not intend by this that the "gods" exist objectively. Rather, as v. 7 indicates, they "exist" subjectively in the sense that they are believed in.⁵

- e. A connection of 8:6 to Psa. 95:3-5

³ For the Lord is a great God,
And a great King above all gods.

⁴ By his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.

⁵ The sea is his, for he made it;
for his hands formed the dry land.⁶

- i. Paul asserts the primacy of God and Christ over all other lords and gods
- ii. If Paul is indeed alluding to Psa. 95, he is writing that the Christian God includes both Father and Son (Jesus Christ)
 - 1. This is the earliest mention of the preexistence of Christ in scripture
- iii. Everything belongs to God, including all foods
 - 1. And also, all people
- iv. By asserting Jesus as Lord, Paul quietly denies the cult of the emperor (Lord)

It is common today to give a variety of other bases for ethical behavior. For Paul, and therefore for all who would be truly biblical Christians, there is only one ground for such behavior: The unity of God, and the fact that our existence both by creation and redemption is grounded in the one God, whom we serve and with whom we have to do. It is out of this kind of reality that Paul

⁴ NICNT, entry for 1 Cor. 8:2-3.

⁵ NICNT, entry for 1 Cor. 8:4-6.

⁶ Bailey, location 2731.

will eventually appeal to the death of Christ as being for others as well as for ourselves (v. 11), and therefore that love, not knowledge, must serve as the motive for Christian ethics.⁷

6. **C. Knowledge, the Weak and God – 8:7-10**

- a. *The weak may still perceive idols to be real, even if they know otherwise. Our actions may cause the weak to stumble.*
- b. Some have not yet shed their emotional conditioning of pagan temples and gods

If they ate meat offered to them [at a temple or bought at a market], were they not *ingesting the god into their very lives*? "Isn't that what happens at the celebration of the Holy Supper?" they could have asked. Or perhaps the "god" they no longer worshiped would make them sick if they ate "his meat" while refusing to worship him?⁸

- c. A misuse of this passage

With the passage of time, this text has produced a special kind of fallout. For example, someone whose conscience is as strong as a brick barn tries to bully the congregation of which he is a part into enforcing a particular dress code on the women of the church. Remembering this text, members of the congregation say, "Well, we must go along with him because he has a conscience on this matter and we must not offend his conscience." Paul's advice does not apply. This contemporary illustration is not a case of a weak conscience embedded in the heart of a new Christian who is easily lead astray. It is a case of a person with a strong conscience who wants to force his ethical choices on others.⁹

- d. Digression on the term "conscience"
 - i. Moderns think of "conscience" as something that is internal, an introspective look within, something that guides an individual to know right and wrong
 - ii. Ancients viewed "conscience" as the ability to objectively assess one's own capabilities for purposeful action.¹⁰
- e. Food – whether one eats or abstains and for whatever reason – is, objectively, irrelevant to our relationship with God
 - i. Actions must be determined by love
 - ii. The subjective application, through love, of knowledge as it affects our brothers and sisters, that is what matters to God
- f. The "strong" may have been encouraging the "weak" to partake in temple feasts and also to consume meat from the markets, because idols have no objective reality (and asserting that this is the *only* true Christian position)

Paul teaches that freedom is not abstract, but concrete. Real freedom is being freed from the necessity to assert only, or primarily, one's own rights. Knowledge alone is dangerous. What ultimately matters is that believers desire the well-being of others rather than insist on their own rights and privileges.¹¹

Paul writes to the group in the community that was flaunting its freedom. By insisting on their liberty, they made the exercise of rights their ultimate concern. Paul perceives this insistence to

⁷ NICNT, entry for 1 Cor. 8:6.

⁸ Bailey, location 2773.

⁹ Bailey, location 2778.

¹⁰ *Understanding the Bible Commentary*, verse notes for 1 Cor. 8:10.

¹¹ UBC, introductory text for 1 Cor. 8:7-13.

be a threat, for it was self-serving and short-sighted. Nowhere in such exercise of personal freedoms is priority given to others over self.¹²

For the Corinthians "knowledge" (=insight) means "rights" to act in "freedom." Thus for them freedom became the highest good, since it led to the exaltation of the individual. For Paul the opposite prevails: "Love" means the "free giving up" of one's "rights" for the sake of others (cf. 9:19–23), and "life together" in community is the aim of salvation.¹³

7. D. Knowledge, Your/My Brother and Christ – 8:11-13

- a. *The weak is our brother or sister, and causing them to stumble is to sin against Christ.*
- b. Knowledge, applied in love, can build up; knowledge without love destroys
- c. For the Christian, the priority is not "my rights" but "your well-being"
- d. Wounding one brother or sister is, in fact, destroying the community and sinning against Christ
 - i. Not mere doctrinal, dietary, or lifestyle issue ("accommodation") – the "weak" are in real danger of spiritual/soul destruction
- e. As in the first essay, Paul brings focus back to the cross of Christ – this is true knowledge

Thus Paul appeals to love in two ways—even though he does not here use the word. First, the person being destroyed is a "brother." Here the interplay on love, knowledge, and building up comes into clear focus. They would "build up" the weak by their "knowledge"; what they do instead is "tear down." Because the people involved are brothers and sisters, they must be built up in the proper way. This means no more insistence on "freedom" since "freedom" moves in the direction of individualized existence, while love moves in the direction of community and care for others. Second, the common basis of their life in Christ is not "knowledge" and "freedom," but the death of Christ. Their arrogance and insensitivity, which would destroy a brother in the name of knowledge and freedom, are thus contrasted with Christ's love "unto death."¹⁴

- f. Food is not the main issue as Paul sees it – it is merely an example of a problems –
 - i. Idolization of *gnosis* – acquisition and exercise of knowledge as the most important element of Christianity
 - ii. Attempt to force everyone to conform to a single expression of knowledge
 - iii. Insistence one's rights and freedoms at the expense of another
 - iv. Failure to exercise love

8. Final thoughts

- a. How do you read and interpret this passage now?
- b. What assumptions coming into it have been laid aside?
- c. How might this passage apply to the 21st century Western church?

The real concern of the passage needs a regular hearing in the church. Personal behavior is dictated not by knowledge, freedom, or law, but by love for those within the community of faith. Everything one does that affects relationships within the body of Christ should have care for brothers and sisters as its primary motivation.¹⁵

¹² *UBC*, entry for 1 Cor. 8:9.

¹³ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 8:9.

¹⁴ *NICNT*, entry for 1 Cor. 8:11.

¹⁵ *NICNT*, concluding paragraph for section 1 Cor. 8:1-13.