

I Didn't Know This Was in My Job Description

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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We've been talking about 1 Corinthians as a letter, but I'm not sure we always really grasp that it is a part of a larger correspondence between Paul and this wayward contentious congregation. Paul is writing in part because the Corinthians have written to him, outlining all the things they are fighting about and asking his guidance on what to do. Today's passage tackles yet another one of the points of controversy in the church: whether to eat meat that has been offered to idols, slaughtered in pagan temples in pagan rituals of worship.

In the first century, pagan temples functioned a lot like a church fellowship hall. It would have been common to be invited to meals in these temples to celebrate birthdays, weddings, and other important occasions. The food served at these feasts would have been previously sacrificed to the god of that particular temple, but eating it would not have been an overtly religious act, any more than eating cake and ice cream at a fiftieth wedding anniversary in our church fellowship hall is worship. For some Corinthians, probably the more wealthy and influential members of the church who would have been asked to such celebrations, participating in these feasts was socially advantageous. These were the folks who were arguing that eating idol meat was spiritually insignificant. Others in the church, perhaps not as theologically sophisticated and likely newer Christians, were confused and upset that a follower of Christ would have anything at all to do with the pagan temples.

Paul offers an intricate and subtle answer to this question. And because his argument is tightly and carefully constructed, I want us to take it bit by bit so we can clearly understand where he is going. So let's begin with the first couple of verses in chapter 8.

1 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2 Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 3 but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Paul begins by doing what most of us do when we reply to a letter (or since so few of us write actual letters anymore, when we reply to an email). He quotes from his correspondent's letter. "All of us possess knowledge" the Corinthians had written to him. One of the several factions within the Corinthians church was a group of spiritual elitists who believed that they had special knowledge that made them superior to others who did not have their theological sophistication and position of privilege, and it is apparently this group that had written the letter. We'll call these folks the Knowledge Faction.

Paul does not immediately challenge the assertion that "all have knowledge" but he does puncture the easy assumption of superiority the Knowledge Faction have by saying that knowledge is defective and useless if it fails to build up the community in love. (We hear this theme repeated in his famous chapter on love: "If I have all knowledge....but have not love, I am nothing.") The very fact that they are boasting about their knowledge means that they are "puffed up," that they do not yet know what is really important. Knowledge is meaningless unless it is used in love to build up the community.

Paul goes on to tackle the questions about idol meat.

4 Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one." 5 Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Paul again quotes the Corinthians' own words. "No idol in the world really exists" and "there is only one God." Now Paul, both as a Jew and as a follower of Christ, would be in total agreement with these statements. He probably said something very similar when he first preached in Corinth.

His problem is not with these statements, but with the arrogance that lies behind the statements. They are saying, in effect, If Christians find it socially advantageous to eat idol meat, if not going to these feasts would damage their social and business relationships, where is the harm? After all, idols don't really exist.

Paul shows them the harm:

7 It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

The Knowledge Faction had said "we all know this," but now Paul calls that basic contention into question. No, not everyone knows this. Some members of the church have grown up believing that idols are real and have real power. They cannot eat idol meat, or see one of their brothers and sisters in Christ eat idol meat, without seeing it as an act of worship. As *The Message* translates it, *Some of you have spent your entire lives eating "idol meat," and are sure that there's something bad in the meat that then becomes something bad inside of you.*

Paul continues his line of argument, again picking up the Corinthians' own words.

8 "Food will not bring us close 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 liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

Paul agrees that food will neither save us nor damn us. Remember, it is Paul that, while continuing to be observant to Jewish dietary laws himself, has argued stringently that Gentile Christians do not come under Jewish law. Paul is under no illusions as to whether obeying certain food prohibitions will save you. But he is very concerned if one person's freedom to eat whatever they choose becomes a stumbling block to those who are newer and/or weaker in the faith.

10 For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? 11 So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. 12 But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Here Paul gets to the crux of his argument: what is the effect of all eating idol on the community? What if the weak see members of the Knowledge Faction eating in the temple of an idol and are persuaded, against their own consciences, to do the same? What if this becomes for them the first step toward falling back into idol worship? Paul is saying, "Christ gave up his life for that person. Aren't you at least willing to give up a free dinner for him? Maybe it doesn't make any difference to you. But what if it makes a huge difference to your fellow Christian? Is there any free meal on earth that is worth risking someone else's falling away from Christ?"

So now that your eyes are glazing over and you know more than you probably ever wanted to about the problem of eating idol meat in the Corinthian church, you may be thinking, churches fight about a lot of things: everything from the meaning of the Lord's Supper to what color to paint the ladies' restroom, but it's been nearly 2000 years since we fought over eating food offered to idols. This may be historically interesting, but how relevant is it to today's church?

The truth is, it probably it wouldn't be very relevant if Paul had made a simple rule. Yes, it is okay to eat idol meat. No, it is not okay to eat idol meat. That would have been the simplest, most straightforward solution. In fact, both in the book of Acts and in Revelation, we do find explicit prohibitions against eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols (which lets us know that Corinth was not the only place where this was a point of controversy). But Paul explicitly avoids laying down that kind of ban, and offers quite another kind of rule for settling the disagreement: the rule of love.

This rule is the one that we all need to adopt in the inevitable church disagreements. First Corinthians teaches us that as long as there have been churches there have been church fights. The point is not whether we always get along with each other (we won't), but whether the way we treat each other at the worst of times, as well as at the best of times, builds up or harms the community.

Disagreements escalate into ugly fights when people become entrenched in defending the rightness of their position. Now let me say that I totally understand this. The desire to be right—and to convince everyone else that I am right—is a spiritual problem for me (just ask my husband!) If I had been a member of First Christian Church,

Corinth, I would not only been a member of the Knowledge Faction, I probably would have been its president! So I understand the temptation to insist on the rightness of your position, especially when you are convinced that life would run better for everyone if they could just be brought around to doing things your way!

But Paul is not particularly concerned with who is right and who is wrong in this issue. He is concerned with the well-being of the community, and particularly with the welfare of the weakest members of that community. He is much less concerned with who is right than with who is loving. And while Paul would never compromise on the essentials of the gospel message, he sees no problem in asking the Corinthians to compromise on the non-essentials. At the dawn of time Cain asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" And Paul is answering, Yes, as a matter of fact, you are you brother's and sister's keeper.

We may not have realized that being responsible for the spiritual well-being of our brothers and sisters in Christ is in our job description as a follower of Christ. We may feel we have all we can do to take care of our own spiritual life. But Paul says that being a part of a community of faith (and he doesn't think you can be a Christian unless you are a part of a community) means looking after each other. It means thinking about how your words and actions might hurt others. It means acting and speaking with gentleness and kindness and above all, with love. It means building up the community of faith is more important than defending our positions. And that if we DO disagree with one another (and we will!) we will disagree in a spirit of love. Because you see, the number one item in a Christian's job description is love.