

# WHAT'S BEHIND YOUR INFLUENCE?

by Ray C. Stedman

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In the eighth chapter of First Corinthians we come to the second question these Corinthians had asked the Apostle Paul in the letter they wrote to him. It has to do with a problem that is very common in our Christian lives today: "How much should I let other people's views control my actions?" That is, "Must I limit my liberty by the narrower, more restricted views of other Christians?"

You recognize immediately that that is a problem every Christian faces. Some differ widely as to whether certain activities in our daily lives are right or wrong. The question is, "How much should I adjust my actions accordingly?"

The query was put to Paul in terms of a problem they faced in Corinth that we do not wrestle with much today -- whether you ought to eat meat that was offered to idols.

Did anybody struggle with that this week?

Well, there are still places in the world where you might. If you were working as a teacher or a preacher on a mission field this could still be a problem.

The answer the apostle gives is a principle that still applies to many similar situations today. He states the problem and two possible ways of handling it in this chapter, Verses 1-6:

**Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." "Knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him.**

**Hence, 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." For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth -- as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords" -- 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. {1 Cor 8:1-6 RSV}**

The best place to buy a good roast or a good steak in Corinth was right next to the idol temple. In these pagan temples, they did like the Jews did in the Old Testament days -- they offered living animals as sacrifice. And like the Jews, they reserved some of the meat for the benefit of the priests and also for public sale, so that the best meat markets in Corinth were right next door to an idol temple. Everyone in town knew that, if you ate some of that meat, you were eating meat that had been offered to an idol. Therefore, the question arose among the Christians: "If a Christian eats meat offered to an idol is he not participating in some way in the worship of that idol?"

There was a group within the church that said, "Yes, that is exactly what he is doing. When these pagans here in the city see a known Christian sitting down in the public restaurant right next to the temple, and enjoying a steak that had been offered to the idol, they will think that person is going along with the pagan ideas about that idol. As a consequence, that Christian is giving a false testimony; he is not clearly declaring that Christ has substituted for all idols everywhere. Furthermore, he is stumbling the weak Christians who might easily be led back into the worship of an idol by these actions."

But there was another party that said, "No, this is not true. There is nothing to an idol -- it is just a piece of wood or stone. How can you worship something that really does not exist? How can we deliver these people from their idolatrous ways if we act as though there is something to this? It is better that we simply proceed

according to that knowledge of reality that God has brought us to in Christ. Let us enjoy our freedom and eat this meat without any question. It is perfectly good meat, and it would be wrong to not use it." Thus, there was a division within the church.

You recognize immediately that this is a problem still common in the church today. Actually, we are not as far removed from this very issue as we might think. I heard some people arguing not long ago as to whether it was right for a Christian to repeat a mantra, a word in meditation. Some felt it was perfectly all right, while others said, "No, what you are repeating is the name of a heathen god. Repeating that word, even though you do not understand what it means, is in some way going along with the worship of that god." Unfortunately, many are going along with some of the ideas that are abroad today without realizing that they are in some way being identified with a pagan worship.

On the other hand, that can be carried to extremes. I know some Christians who will not have a Christmas tree because that custom originated with the pagans of Northern Germany who decorated a tree at the winter solstice. There are others who will not use Easter eggs because that originated with the pagan spring festivals when the egg, the symbol of fertility, was offered to a pagan goddess.

I often have pointed out to people who get troubled by those kinds of things that, if they are going to be consistent, they ought not to use the names of the days of the week either because they are named for pagan gods. There is "sun"-day and "moon"-day; there is "Thor's"-day (Thor was the god of war in the pantheon of the Norse); and there is "Woden's"-day (Wednesday), and all of these are pagan names. In fact, the names of the months are pagan names. January is named for the Roman god Janus, the two-faced god who looked backward to the old year and forward to the new. March was addressed and dedicated to Mars, the god of war in the Greek pantheon. You can go through many of these common terms and see in them a pagan origination. Now some of these are no longer a problem to us, but you can see how the principle is a very difficult one to settle. This is what they were wrestling with there in Corinth.

Notice how Paul handles this. He recognizes the two groups that were present. There was the "Freedom Party" that boasted in their knowledge. Notice the quotation marks around the words in Verse 1, "all of us possess knowledge." The apostle is simply repeating what the Freedom Party was saying: "Everybody knows that an idol is nothing." You get their amplification of this in Verse 4 where the quotes are around the words, "an idol has no real existence," and around the words, "there is no God but one." That is what they were arguing to support this idea that everybody has knowledge. "There are not any 'real' idols. They are just pieces of wood and stone. They are a symbol of the projection of men and their ideas and superstitions. Therefore there is no reason why we should not set that aside and eat the meat without any qualms."

Some of them were arguing the Christian position: "We know there is only one God, one true God, and we worship him. When we are eating this meat we are not worshipping these pagan deities. They do not even exist." They were basing their actions upon their knowledge of facts.

Paul recognizes that knowledge is right. He says, "That is true. There is only one true God." "... 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." Many have asked why did he not give us here the full doctrine of the Trinity, including the Holy Spirit, "by whom" are all things, and "in whom" we exist? But Paul is not trying to teach the doctrine of God here. He is simply answering the claims of those who are disturbed about idol worship, and he is doing it along the same line of thought that the Roman world practiced.

In this Roman Empire the deities were gods, but Caesar was Lord. Caesar was a man, and yet they called him "Lord." Many of the struggles of the early Church were over the question of whether Caesar was Lord or Jesus was Lord. Paul is making an apparent distinction here. He is pointing out that the Father is the true God. Not that he is all of God; we know from other passages that our God exists as three Persons in one, Father, Son and Spirit. But here Paul accommodates, in a sense, to the pagan view of gods by pointing out that the Father represents the wholeness of God, and Jesus is Lord -- he who became a man and came among us as distinct from Caesar who was the Lord of the Roman world. Jesus is the One in charge of events; he is the One through whom all things come, and through him we exist.

The argument, of course, was simply that the knowledge these people had was right. But the apostle suggests that there is a problem with knowledge. You recognize that although we do not have this meat-eating problem today, there are similar problems; there are many parallel issues. Some Christians are disturbed about the matter of drinking. Should a Christian drink? Is it wrong to take alcoholic liquor in any form -- wine, beer, cocktails, whatever -- or is all that proscribed to us? Is it a sin for a Christian to be involved in these things? Some raise the question about smoking, and about public dancing. David danced before the Lord. Does that justify discotheque dancing? These are some of the issues of today. What about movies? What about television? What about keeping Sunday as the Lord's day? You can list a lot of issues that divide Christians.

Well, how do you settle them? It is interesting to me to hear these things being debated today and to realize that almost all of them are usually settled on the basis of some "new fact" of reality that has been discovered. Christian liberty and freedom is almost always defended from the point of view of knowledge.

Paul points out that their knowledge is correct; what they are arguing is correct; but knowledge has certain problems about it, he says:

First, "knowledge puffs up"; knowledge creates pride; it makes you feel superior. You only have to listen to some of the arguments waged in this regard today to see how true that is. It does not make any difference which side you are on, on the liberty side or the restricted side, knowledge tends to create a sense of pride.

Some people say, "Look at those worldly Christians. I would not do some of the things they do. How can a Christian take a drink? What a terrible thing." They are truly offended by that. They look down on those who feel liberty to do so, and point their finger at them. (Just before the service this morning a man told us about a group of Christians nearby who regard us here at PBC as extremely liberal. In fact, one of this group thought that I was probably a member of the Communist Party!)

On the other hand, have you ever heard those who feel freedom and liberty talk? They say, "Oh, those legalistic blue noses. Why don't they move out of the nineteenth century? Why don't they grow up? Why don't they realize that we are free of all these kinds of restrictions?" The result is a put down, a failure to recognize the fact that people hold these convictions sincerely. Knowledge creates pride. There is no doubt about it. It puffs us up and makes us feel superior to those who are still limited by certain restrictions.

The apostle also says there is something else wrong with knowledge: It is always incomplete. He says, "If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know." Whenever we have a view that some attitude, or action, or freedom that someone exercises is wrong, we are always seeing things only from our point of view. We are never really giving any weight to the other person's point of view. We are never suggesting that perhaps their view of things may be as right, or even more right, as ours. We only weigh the thing from our point of view, and even then we do not see all the factors involved. We think we do, but we do not. There may be elements and factors involved in our actions that we have no knowledge of but God does, and we have not even learned it yet.

For instance, think of the Scripture passages that suggest that Christians are being watched not only by the world, but by angels as well. They are watching the way we behave and learning from us. What effect does our action have upon the principalities and powers that are observing us? We do not know anything about that, do we? But God does, and he tells us that the angels are learning from us. What do they learn by these actions, either of freedom or restriction? Paul says that he who thinks he knows something does not see it very plainly even yet, therefore, he ought to be very careful about sitting in sharp judgment on someone who feels differently and who has freedom to act in a different way.

All this is building up to Paul's argument that something else is needed to settle these kinds of problems. You cannot do it merely on the basis of, "Well, we know such and such and so and so to be true, therefore, we are free to act." "No," Paul says, "knowledge alone is not enough; doctrine alone is not enough. You need love. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Love looks at somebody else's situation, not always one's own." Knowledge, in other words, is self-centered, but love reaches out to include someone else in your thinking. Love tends to build up and edify. "Furthermore," he says, "love opens up a sense of intimacy with God, '... if one loves God, one is known by him.'"

I do not know what your reaction was when you read that in the text, but my reaction was that was a non sequitur; it did not seem to make sense; it did not seem to follow the argument. Why does Paul suddenly shift from talking about our relationship to one another and start talking about loving God and being known by him? Even if he had said, "But if one loves God he shall know him," it would have made a little better sense. But what he says is, if any one loves God, "one is known by him" -- God knows you.

As I pondered that I began to see the reason for it. This great apostle understands human behavior because he has learned it from the Scriptures. He knows that when you are urging somebody to think about someone else instead of himself it is very difficult to get him to do so. You can wag your finger at him and threaten him and warn him and exhort him all you like, but it is not going to get him to do it. Well, what will? By beginning to recognize how much God has loved you. That is what will do it.

If you love God you are responding to the love of God for you. That is the appeal of the apostle everywhere. Do not try to force yourself to think of somebody else. Give yourself to reviewing what God has already done for you. Think of the thousand times a day he has manifested love and concern and faithfulness for you. It will begin to make you feel humbly grateful. When you do this you will then be able to recognize that other people need to be treated with patience as God treats you. You will begin to be more understanding of their point of view. Therefore, the key to the carrying out of this kind of exhortation is that you learn to love God because he has loved you.

I have quoted this before, but it is pertinent here:

Isn't it odd  
that a being like God  
who sees the facade,  
still loves the clod  
he made out of sod?  
Now isn't that odd?

Start thinking about that and you will begin to see yourself and the other person in a different light. You will see that God has been infinitely patient with you and brought you along when you were all mixed up and arrogant in your attitude. He did not wipe you out; he did not ignore what you believed; he patiently led you along and waited for you. You can then begin to extend that to somebody else who is struggling where you are now free.

Now, in Verses 7-13, the apostle applies all of this to the local problem in Corinth:

**However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through being hitherto accustomed to idols, eat food as really offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. [Let all the food faddists take note of that.] Only take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if any one sees you, a man of knowledge, at table in an idol's temple, might he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak man is destroyed ["injured" is the word], the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall. {1 Cor 8:7-13 RSV}**

In that passage the apostle sets forth three distinct advantages of love over mere knowledge alone.

First, knowledge, he admits in Verse 1, tends to generalize. All of us possess knowledge. "Everybody knows," we say, "that this is true." We base our action on an assumed idea that everybody understands the reason for what we are doing. But love does not do that. Love individualizes. Love says, "Not all possess this knowledge. Not everybody is acting out of the understanding that I have come to. They may not see things the way I do."

The apostle admits right off that that kind of condition is a weakness. Their conscience is weak, he says. It needs instruction; it needs training; it needs development. The Word of God acknowledges everywhere the fact that those who lack freedom to do some of the things that we have talked about are weak -- they are the "Weak Party." If you do not have freedom to participate in taking wine or beer or cocktails, Paul would say that represents a weak view because it does not acknowledge the freedom and liberty and even the example that our Lord and the apostles themselves gave.

Many Christians struggle at that point. Some I know even try to say that what the Lord and the apostles drank was grape juice, and not wine. They say it was not fermented. That, of course, ignores the fact that in a warm country like Palestine it is impossible to keep grape juice from fermenting. When they had struggles with Christians getting drunk here at Corinth (we read this a little further on in this letter), it was not grape juice they had been drinking, I can guarantee you that! No, Paul says, that is a weak position.

But what do you do with weakness? Do you kick it in the face? Do you trample on it? Do you flaunt your strength and show off your freedom in the face of weakness? No. The Christian view toward the weak is, help them. Do not put them down; do not make them feel rejected. Reach out to them; meet them where they are, and help them along. Paul admonishes here that we are to help those who are struggling in these areas.

The second advantage that love has over knowledge is that love evaluates clearly. In Verses 8-12, Paul is clearly distinguishing between two value points. The struggle is, "Shall I indulge in what I feel free to do?" Paul points out that, if you do, it is not really a very significant action. It is not all that important whether you eat meat or not, or whether you drink wine or not, or whether you feel free to smoke, or dance, or whatever. That momentary indulgence is a trivial thing; it is not important; you can set it aside if there is good reason to do so. But compared to that, a brother's growth is significant and very important. To restrain yourself, therefore, for the sake of another is a gracious, godly, Christian thing to do. That is the clear-sighted evaluation that love brings into the picture.

Therefore, we are to consider our influence upon others, and weigh the fact that what we want to do may not be very important at all, compared with the possible danger to another's spiritual life. This certainly has a bearing on how we act in public, on whether we are willing to flaunt our freedom in somebody else's face.

The third thing the apostle goes on to point out is that, if we do this when we know it will hurt somebody, we are really sinning against Christ because we are insisting upon fulfilling some momentary satisfaction at the expense of a brother's spiritual welfare. Now, I want to point out that this kind of a situation really applies only when there is a clear case, or at least a possibility, of injuring somebody spiritually. The key word here is (in Verse 10), "For if any one sees you, a man of knowledge, at table in an idol's temple, might he not be encouraged, [and here is the key] if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?"

In many situations today, where arguments arise over these kinds of things, it is not a question of somebody's conscience being weak; it is a question of somebody's prejudices being irritated. That is different. There are many situations where people in no danger of losing their faith, or not growing in the Lord, because they see someone exercise the liberty that they have, yet raise a complaint about it. They are irritated and annoyed by it, and try to stop that kind of exercise. This is not what Paul is talking about at all. Christian courtesy would demand that we never flaunt our liberty before anybody who feels strongly about it. If we feel free to take a glass of wine, we would only do so if we felt there was nobody at the table who would feel very strongly against it. It is only a momentary fleshly indulgence and can easily be passed by if somebody does not like that kind of thing. But, on the other hand, if there is no question of that, we are free to exercise it. Just because people may hear about this someplace else, and be offended by it, is no reason not to exercise liberty because they may actually be helped by that; they may be challenged to rethink the reasons for their limitations, and their conscience may be freed to grow in the Lord.

Great danger has been done in the church by trying to accommodate the behavior of Christians to the conscience of the lowest common denominator, to the weakest brother in the church. This does not help the church to grow at all.

No, Paul is not talking about that. He is talking about someone who is going to be damaged by it, and so the third thing he says is, "Therefore, if food is a cause of my brother's falling, I will never eat meat, lest I cause my brother to fall." That is, love requires self-control in these areas. And Paul gladly gives in. He says, "When it is a case of actually offending somebody" ("One of these little ones who believe in me," as Jesus said {cf, Matt 18:6, Mark 9:42, }), rather than do that I would give up my right gladly." Paul is perhaps thinking of those very words from Luke 17 where Jesus said, "Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him if he took a millstone and hung it around his neck and cast himself into the depths of the sea. It would be better for him to commit suicide rather than to offend one of these little ones who believe in me," {cf, Luke 17:1-2}. But Paul is talking about what he does in the presence of someone, not what might be reported 200 miles away that is going to offend some older brother who does not like what he does. That is a different situation.

I remember my dear patron saint, Dr. H. A. Ironside, telling of an incident that is illustrative of this. On one occasion he was at a picnic of Christians, and there was present a man who had been converted from Mohammedanism. (His name by the way was Mohammed Ali.) A girl brought a basket of sandwiches up to this man and asked if he would like some. He said, "What kind do you have?" "Oh," she said, "I'm afraid all we have left are ham or pork." He said, "Don't you have any beef?" She replied, "No, they are all gone." "Well," he said, "then I won't have any." She, knowing that he was a Christian, said to him, "Well, sir, I am really surprised. Don't you know that, as a Christian, you are freed from all these food restrictions, and that you can eat pork or ham or whatever, if you like?" He said, "Yes, I know that. I know I am free to eat pork, but I am also free not to eat it. I'm still involved with my family back in the Near East, and I know that when I go home once a year, and I come up to my father's door, the first question he will ask me is, 'Have those infidels taught you to eat the filthy hog meat yet?' If I have to say to him, 'Yes, father,' I will be banished from that home and have no further witness in it. But if I can say, as I have always been able to say, 'No, father, no pork has ever passed my lips,' then I have admittance to the family circle and I am free to tell them of the joy I have found in Jesus Christ. Therefore I am free to eat, or I am free not to eat, as the case may be."

That little story sets this whole problem in proper perspective. We do not have to have our rights. We are free to give them up anytime the situation warrants it. Though we have the rights, we also have the right not to exercise them for the sake of love.

## **Prayer**

Thank you, dear Father, for words of wisdom and love that will guide us. Help us to act in love in what we do and not act merely in knowledge alone. We thank you for the knowledge and the truth that sets us free, but also for the love that still restrains us and makes us give consideration to someone else's welfare, not just our own. May we reflect that love as our Lord Jesus himself did. We ask in his name, Amen.

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