

The Loving Limitation of Liberty

Series: Lifestyle Issues in the Church

Doug Goins

In 1 Corinthians 8 we're going to come to another issue that the leadership in the church of Corinth raised with the apostle Paul in a letter to him. In 8:1 Paul writes, "Now concerning things sacrificed to idols...." This parallels the form of his previous responses to issues they raised. Remember, at the beginning of chapter 7, Paul wrote, "Now concerning the things about which you wrote...." and then he talked about the sanctity of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In 7:25 he wrote, "Now concerning virgins...." In 8:4 he says again, "Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols...."

In Corinth most of the meat that was sold in the public meat markets came from sacrificial animals that had been slaughtered in ceremonies at pagan temples. So the questions these Corinthians had were as follows: Did these rituals somehow automatically taint the meat? Could Christians buy it from those markets for their use at home? Could they eat it if it was offered to them at non-Christian friends' homes? And what about the various social events that were regularly scheduled in the banquet halls of the temples? These were the best banqueting places. So if you were invited to a party or a club meeting or a wedding, were you free to participate and eat the food that was served there? What if you were invited by your non-Christian friends to some sort of a ritual in the temple that was overtly pagan? Were you free to participate in something like that? And the immediate concern of these Christians in Corinth was this: If a Christian ate meat offered to an idol, wasn't he participating in some way in the sinful worship of that idol? Some of the Corinthian believers said that the meat was tainted by its idolatrous identification, and it was a sin to eat it. Some of the believers said it wasn't.

I was thinking last week as I studied this about how I've experienced similar conflicts in the body of Christ over the years. Soon after Candy and I were married, while I was still in seminary, I was invited by a friend to preach in his church in Las Vegas. On Saturday evening, he took Candy and me to see an entertainer at one of the resort hotels. To some Christians, that would be offensive. Ironically, the next afternoon he tried to convince Candy and me that we should not have a Christmas tree in our house because of its pagan origins.

I was also criticized some years ago when I was serving as a youth pastor in West Los Angeles. I had a good friend who was a cantor in a reformed synagogue, and his teenage son was going to be bar-mitzvahed. He invited me to go to the bar mitzvah and the reception that followed. There was a young Christian in our church who had just been converted from Judaism, and he was really critical of my decision to attend the bar mitzvah. He said I was compromising my witness and giving tacit support to a Christ-less Judaism.

I have been involved through the years in ongoing debates surrounding the participation of Protestants in the Eucharist of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

One vivid memory I have is of one of our pastoral trips to Southeast Asia about fifteen years ago. I remember the discomfort I felt upon entering a very nice restaurant in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, because there in the lobby was a golden statue of the Buddha surrounded by lit candles and smoking incense sticks. There were offerings of fresh-cut flowers, money, and costume jewelry in front of it. I felt some of the same concern that these new Christians in Corinth must have felt toward eating the meat and eating in the setting of idolatrous worship.

AN ATTITUDE OF CONDESCENSION

Let's read Paul's response to this concern, beginning in verse 1:

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

This entire chapter is addressed to the Christian group in Corinth who were convinced that there was no sinful defilement in buying and eating meat purchased from the temple butcher shops. Their knowledge of God's word and their insight into how Christians ought to live reinforced the freedom they had in Christ. They were strong in doctrine, clear in their Biblical understanding of grace and law, freedom and bondage. They had been delivered from paganism by Jesus Christ, and they could eat that meat with a completely clear conscience before the Lord. Paul addresses them because they are the ones who raised the issue of the less theologically knowledgeable Christians in the fellowship who were having a more difficult time handling this situation. These were people who still struggled with their pagan origins and the temptations and corruption they represented. They still felt guilty if they ate this idol meat, as if they had sinned. They were still trapped by the old religious associations, and they couldn't understand how other Christians could freely indulge in it without feeling guilty.

The question that the knowledgeable, guilt-free Christians raised about these theologically naive, guilt-ridden Christians can be phrased, "Should we limit our freedom in Christ because of the more restricted sensitivities of other Christians? How much should their views control our behavior?"

The problem that Paul recognizes in the question is an attitude of condescension toward these new brothers and sisters in Christ who didn't agree with them. So in the first three verses, what Paul does is contrast the responses of *agape* love with the responses of theological sophistication. There's an insensitivity, an arrogance, an incompleteness of knowledge in what they say (verse 1): "...We know that we all have knowledge." Paul responds, "...Knowledge makes arrogant." Then he says in verse 2:

If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know....

The Corinthians' statement in verse 1 was true, but it was egotistical and an overconfident generalization. They were saying, "Everybody ought to know, if they read their Bible and go to church, that idols are nothing. Jesus even said that it's not what goes into a man that defiles him, but what comes out of his heart [Mark 7:15]." But as Paul will point out in verse 7, there were believers who had not yet internalized that liberating reality. And these advocates of freedom in Christ were insensitive toward them.

An important point in these two phrases is that nothing ought to be judged solely from the point of view of doctrinal knowledge. Further, Paul warns, there is a certain danger in knowledge: It tends to make a person arrogant, or as some translations say, "puffed up." It puffs you up like a balloon so that you float above the other person who is not as far advanced in knowledge as you look down on them, feeling superior. It can make you unsympathetic toward the person you regard as theologically ignorant or naive.

Arrogance, as we have already seen in our study in this letter, was a besetting sin in Corinth, and theological arrogance can very easily be our besetting sin in a Bible church. We pride ourselves in the fact that we teach the Scriptures. Look back at 4:18: "Now some have become arrogant...." In 4:19 Paul again expresses concern about those who are arrogant. Then in 5:2 he says, "And you have become arrogant...." Finally, look back at 4:6b-7a: "...That no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. [Arrogance divides and sets up competition.] For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive?"

Paul makes the point in 8:2 that our Biblical knowledge here on earth is at best incomplete. No matter how much we think we know, we don't yet really know fully and completely. He will say in 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror dimly"-a smudged glass. There's no point in priding ourselves on what is inevitably incomplete. And there is a gentle sarcasm here. Paul implies that they don't really know as much as they think they do. A person who is really growing into truth is only too conscious of how much he doesn't know. A sense of intellectual superiority is a very dangerous thing, the apostle is warning.

When I was doing college ministry at PBC a number of years ago at Stanford University, I remember the

smug look on the face of a graduate student who said, "I have a very difficult time respecting a Christian who does not have a well-thought-through doctrine of God." He had allowed his theological sophistication to become a barrier between himself and those who were without his well-thought-through knowledge.

SUBMITTING KNOWLEDGE TO LOVE

So in contrast, Paul wants these Corinthian freedom-in-Christ advocates to learn to submit their knowledge to love. He wants them to understand the helpfulness, humility, and gratitude of love. In the last phrase of verse 1 he says, "...But love edifies." And then verse 3:

...But if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.

Theological insight can result, Paul has told us, in self-absorption. But if the supernatural *agape* love of God is at work in us, it's going to focus our concern on other people. "Edify" means to build somebody else up, to strengthen them, to lovingly focus outside ourselves, using whatever knowledge God may have given us sacrificially for the other person, and not for our own advantage.

In reality, we've haven't learned anything of value until we learn how to lovingly serve other people. It's true for pastors as well. In our pastoral staff study, we've been studying Paul's first letter to the young pastor Timothy. In the introduction of that letter, we were struck by the fact that Paul says, "But the goal of our [apostolic] instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1:5). Biblical knowledge is never an end in itself. It's only a means to a greater end: the building up of others in love.

Verse 3 suggests that we love other people only because God first loved us. He initiated a love relationship with us, and it's only as we accept how much he loves us unconditionally that we can give ourselves to others in unconditional love. The freedom advocates might have thought, If anyone loves God, then he will know everything. But instead, Paul says, you will come to understand how much you are loved by God.

Let me give you an example. If I'm having a hard time loving another person in the body because of a disagreement (or whatever), the call here is to focus on how much God loves me and the practical ways that God has expressed His love to me patiently, mercifully, consistently. What this will do is trigger in me humble gratitude before the Lord. It will free me to see the other person through God's eyes. Think about our love relationship with the Lord. He doesn't ignore us, look down on us, or criticize our immaturity or ignorance. No, he patiently and lovingly brings us along through the process of growing in maturity. So my gratitude to him for first loving me is what frees me to love the other person who may be struggling because they're not where I am in my understanding of certain truth. What Paul wants us to see clearly is that *agape* love is far more important in the big picture than knowledge or theological sophistication.

THE FREEDOM WE HAVE

Now in verses 4-6 Paul agrees with these Christians in Corinth who see that there is nothing wrong with eating meat offered to idols. Their understanding is accurate.

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

These stronger Christians in Corinth do have a Biblical doctrine of God. The Bible is very clear that there is only one true God, and the Bible is equally clear that all others claiming deity are false—the so-called gods in verse 5. So when these people are eating the meat from the temple butcher shops, or they're attending a wedding reception in the temple banquet hall, they know that they're not worshipping any pagan deities. Those deities don't even exist. These believers were basing their actions on correct theological understanding.

That reminded me of a trip Craig Duncan and I took last October. While in Bangkok, Thailand on our way into Pakistan, we visited some Buddhist temples. One of them was the temple of the reclining Buddha. The Buddha is a statue about twenty-five feet high and a hundred feet long. We walked in single file with a great many other people all the way around this huge idol. We had to take our shoes off and walk in our stocking feet. People would throw money into little pots that were like steel drums, and it made a "dink, dong, donk, dink" sound. I was struck by the tragicomic nature of the intense religious fervor of these people as we were walking around the statue. I wanted to yell, "There is nobody home! This is just cast iron with gold leaf! There is only one God!"

These people in Corinth understood that reality. But in verse 6 Paul adds something else for their benefit: "...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 wants to counter their self-absorbed arrogance. He reminds these Christians that God is the total source of their life. He ought to be the object of their life. He is the means by which they live their life. Remember the question we read in 4:7: "And what do you have that you did not receive?" The answer was "Nothing." Even the insight to understand this liberating theological truth was a gift.

THOSE WITH A WEAK CONSCIENCE

It had already been made plain that this one true God above all was a God of love. So Paul agreed with their theology, but he couldn't agree with the attitude that their knowledge had created toward those he is going to call the "weaker" brothers. In verses 7-12, in different ways, Paul tries to make the point that our liberty in Christ must be controlled by love. Let's look at verse 7 first. Paul says love doesn't generalize, it focuses on individuals.

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.

Love doesn't assume that everyone understands the reasons for what we are doing or that everyone is acting out of the knowledge that we ourselves have acquired.

This verse says that these new Christians struggled with issues stemming from two things: their past and their conscience. Because of association with idols in the past, every new contact triggered the memory of the former connection. The phrase "being accustomed to" refers to habitual ways of thinking and believing. Old habits are hard to break. Paul calls it weakness, and he's going to make the point that the weakness of a brother or sister must be lovingly considered in all of our relationships.

Hopefully, the weak conscience will be strengthened in Christ. But just having knowledge about the idol's powerlessness doesn't solve the problem. The past associations are still too strong, and these new believers want to take no chance of being contaminated again by the evil influence that for so long governed everything they believed. Because of their "weak conscience," they will struggle with these involvements, feeling guilty and dirty and condemned if they participate. To "defile" your conscience is to ignore it. And when your conscience is ignored, it brings confusion, guilt, and resentment. Whether they have sinned or not, if they think it's wrong, then in their own mind they have sinned. That will be the case until they fully understand that the act of eating idol meat is not a sin in God's eyes.

Paul addresses the same issue in Romans 14, where they are concerned about both food and observances of holy days. "But he who doubts [who is confused in his conscience about whether something is right or wrong] is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin" (verse 23). The person who indulges in something his conscience says may be wrong is sinning before his own conscience and before the Lord.

LOVE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN FREEDOM

Knowledge may tell us that something is perfectly acceptable, but love for the less mature individual will keep

us from flaunting our strength and freedom in the face of their weakness. Look at 1 Corinthians 8:8. Paul says that love views the exercise of our liberty as unimportant.

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.

Food has nothing whatsoever to do with our standing before God, and it will be helpful for the weaker brother or sister to grow into an understanding of that truth. But the reverse logic, Paul says, is also true. Exercising our freedom to eat or drink whatever we wish does nothing to enhance our relationship with the Lord. Whatever indulgence we enjoy with a clear conscience is trivial from an eternal perspective. So we can set it aside if there's a good reason to do so, such as our weaker brother's growth in Christ.

That brings us to the principle at the heart of this whole chapter in verses 9-11. Love understands that a weaker Christian's growth is more important than our liberty.

But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 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? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.

Paul is asking the more mature, knowledgeable Christian, the one who is secure in his freedom in Christ, to substitute for his own knowledge of what is right and wrong, love for the less mature Christian who is insecure about his standing in Christ. More than any other writer in the New Testament, Paul taught Christians to celebrate the freedom that they found in Christ. But in these verses, he is saying that no Christian has a right to exercise his or her freedom in a way that undermines the faith of a weaker brother or sister, somebody who is less mature in their walk with the Lord.

Now, Paul is not talking here about religious prejudices of some toughened, wizened old sage who has walked with the Lord for many years. He is not talking about annoyances or cultural disagreements. I remember reading a story about an evangelist who was conducting revival meetings in a little country church. The pastor took him to lunch at the beautiful home of one of the upstanding, wealthy widows in the church. As they were walking up onto the front porch, the young pastor said to the evangelist, "Whatever you do at lunch today, don't mention bowling."

It was a great lunch, and the lady was very gracious. But in the back of the evangelist's mind the whole time was the question, Why in the world was bowling such a big deal? So when they left, he asked the pastor.

The pastor explained, "Well, this dear lady was born and raised in a little rural mining town where the pool hall, bowling alley, and town bar were all under the same roof. The unsavory elements of the town all hung out there. So in her mind, bowling alleys are a dangerous place to go, and she told me one time, 'I hope I never live long enough to see my pastor coming out of a bowling alley.'"

That is not what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians. That woman was in no danger of having her faith undermined. Going bowling would not have been a stumbling block to her, it just would have greatly annoyed her. Here Paul is concerned about somebody who may very well be spiritually damaged by being encouraged to sin against their own conscience. By flaunting our freedom, we could cause that person to sin by leading him into a situation he can't handle. When it says, "...be *strengthened* to eat..." in verse 10, that's the word "edify," to build up. But instead of building him up in Christ, we would be building him up to destruction, Paul strongly warns.

There is a wonderful example of this by Paul Little. For years he was on the staff of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, and I heard him speak as a student. He wrote a wonderful book entitled *How To Give Away Your Faith*. Here is the story he tells to illustrate this issue:

"I got some practical firsthand experience with this problem at a student conference in New Jersey some years ago. There I met a fellow, a salesman, who literally worshipped baseball

before he became a Christian. He would slave away all winter long so that he could be completely free for his god in the summer months. For something like twelve years he hadn't missed a single game in Philadelphia. He knew every batting average since 1910. He slept, ate, drank, and breathed baseball. Then he met the Savior and gave up his idol, leaving it at Jesus' feet.

Toward the end of our rugged and somewhat exhausting conference, this fellow overheard me suggest to another staff member, 'Say, after the conference let's go to Connie Mack Stadium and see the Phillies. They're playing the St. Louis Cards.' The salesman was staggered. Incredulous, he stared at me and demanded, 'How can you as a Christian go to a baseball game?' Now, I've heard a lot of taboos in Christian circles, but this was the first time I'd heard baseball banned! I was flabbergasted and didn't know what to say. When he asked a second time, 'How can you and Fred claim to be Christians and then go out to a ball game?' Fred and I starting thinking and discussing the situation. As we talked to the salesman we uncovered his problem. Here was a man like the Christians in Rome, a former idol worshiper. Baseball had been a big thing to him; now he assumed that anybody who saw a game (ate meat), however removed from idolatrous intents, was worshipping baseball as an idol."(1)

SINNING AGAINST THE WEAK IS SINNING AGAINST CHRIST

What Paul does now in the verses 11b-12 is intensify the issue. It's not just about the brother, it's about the body of Christ and even about Jesus himself.

...the brother for whose sake Christ died. And thus, by sinning against the brethren [brothers and sisters] and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

Love understands the sinful consequences of deliberately ignoring a weaker Christian's sensitivities. Forcing my freedom onto a believer whose conscience is not yet as strong as mine not only undermines his Christian growth, but violates the body of Christ, of which we are both a part. And Paul goes on to say that such an offense against a weaker Christian is a sin against the Lord Jesus who lives inside that brother. So instead of proving myself to be strong spiritually, I've transgressed the law of love. My Christian freedom must never be used at the expense of a brother or sister who has been redeemed at the great price of the death of the Savior.

HELPING YOUNG BELIEVERS GROW IN FAITH

With that thought in mind, Paul gives his final summary of the principle and his own personal commitment to living it out. Paul is willing to live sacrificially as the Lord Jesus did, to die to his legitimate freedom in terms of lifestyle. Verse 13:

Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble.

Love will exercise self-control when it is necessary. Paul gladly gives up freedom for the sake of the younger brother's spiritual life and growth. He echoes the concern of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18:5-6: "And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea." We ought to be concerned not just about avoiding putting stumbling blocks in the way of young believers, but about helping them grow in faith lovingly and gently, gradually helping their conscience become strengthened in truth and grace. Listen to how Paul Little finishes his story:

Fred and I canceled our baseball date since our going would have needlessly disturbed our friend at a sensitive stage in his Christian life. But we also talked and counseled with him, and he gradually realized that not all Christians find baseball a problem. With his background, baseball will probably be a dangerous temptation to him for the rest of his life; this he knows. But later he also saw that he couldn't legislate for Christians who have no

problem with the sport. It heartened us to see him begin to mature in his attitudes."(2)

Our ultimate concern always ought to be the individual in front of us, and we need to have the eternal perspective of how God is at work in their life, so we can see how we can enter into the process with them. Love encourages sacrificial limitation of our liberty in Christ.

I remember reading a story from the life of Dr. Harry Ironsides. He went on a picnic with a number of Christians, and there was a Muslim convert to Christ among them. The only sandwiches they had at the picnic were ham sandwiches. This young man graciously refused the ham sandwich. Dr. Ironsides said to him, "Well, you're a follower of Christ; don't you realize that the food restrictions have been taken away? You really are free to eat a ham sandwich."

The young man said, "Yes, I know that. I know I'm free to eat ham, but I'm also free not to eat ham." Then he said, "I am the only Christian in my family, and so far I've had the freedom to go home and share my new life in Christ with my mom and dad. Every time I go to the front door, my dad says, 'Have those infidels taught you to eat that filthy pig meat yet?' I'm able to look my dad in the eye and say, 'No dad, I don't eat pork,' which gives me an entrée." He was able to forgo his freedom for the sake of the eternal destiny of his family.

Paul's whole point in chapter 8 is that as Christians we're meant to act on the basis of love and not stand on our supposed superior knowledge. It's true that idols are not gods, that food is a matter of indifference to the Lord, and by implication we are free to eat and drink what we like. But the universal spiritual principle is that knowledge has to be tempered by love for the weaker brother or sister who will be harmed if we act on this knowledge with indifference or insensitivity. To put it another way, we don't have to have our rights. We also have the right not to exercise them for the sake of love. What a tremendous freedom and wonderful privilege we have to choose to lovingly limit our liberty.

NOTES

1. Paul E. Little, *How to Give Away Your Faith*, © 1966 by Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship of the United States of America, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. Pp. 100-101.

2. Little, p. 101.

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Doug Goins
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