

1 Corinthians 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 1 Corinthians chapter 8 Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. 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.

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.

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.

Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

[1 : 0 9] 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? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.

Thus sinning against your brothers, and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

1 Corinthians chapter 8 turns to a new issue, food associated with pagan deities, or idol meat. There are various ways in which food could be entangled with pagan deities.

Sometimes it would be meat in the marketplace that would have come from pagan sacrifices. Meat could also be eaten in cultic meals, or in meals otherwise associated with pagan temples and their gods.

In some such cases, there might be the sense of eating in the presence of the deity, and wealthy Corinthians would likely have been invited to meals in dining places associated with temples.

[2 : 1 0] This was an issue in the early church. We see it in Acts chapter 15, verses 19-20 and 28-29. Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements, that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.

If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. And then in Revelation chapter 2, verse 20. All of us possess knowledge, seems to be a statement of the Corinthians, and Paul here provisionally presents this viewpoint as if he agreed with it for his rhetorical purposes, before going on to subvert it.

We should likely also read knowledge here, as if in scare quotes, as Paul's following statements seem to support. The Corinthians' supposed knowledge probably had a lot to do with their supposed super-spirituality.

They likely believe that they can eat food associated with pagan deities with no problem whatsoever, believing that the pagan deities are not real, and that it is just meat. They might even be purposefully eating pagan meat to make the point, to display their knowledge.

[3 : 47] Yet such knowledge merely puffs people up. It makes them feel self-important and superior. Love, however, builds up. It has substance and genuineness to it. Love, in contrast to such knowledge, is concerned for the effects of our actions upon others, upon weaker brethren.

The Corinthians' knowledge is selfish, individualistic, and self-important. But love seeks the good of the community. And those who think that they have achieved this sort of knowledge haven't yet come to know as they ought to know.

True knowledge is achieved in the way of love. The Corinthians might regard their triumphalistic knowledge as a spiritual gift, but Paul contrasts it with a coming to know that is characterized by growth in love, which is a more humble and a humbling process.

Anthony Thistleton suggests that we should follow some manuscripts which exclude the reference to God in verse 3, and that would read, The alternative, the more common reading, again privileges love, as something directed to God, and as something that is related to the priority of God's act of knowing, rather than our own.

Similar expressions of the priority of God's knowing over ours can be found in places like 1 Corinthians chapter 13 verse 12, And then in Galatians chapter 4 verse 9, But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.

[5 : 22] Our knowledge of God then proceeds from, and responds to, his prior loving knowledge of us. Not only does Christianity have a way of wisdom, a way that's associated with Christ and the mindset of the cross, it also has a way of knowing, a way of knowing that's characterized by love.

True knowledge is arrived at through the act of love, and a so-called knowledge that is not loving will not produce any sort of true knowing. Paul goes on to affirm, at least in principle, the Corinthians' knowledge that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but one.

He shares these convictions, but he goes on to show how they play out differently in his thinking than they do in the Corinthians. For even if, for the sake of argument, there are many gods in heaven and earth, just as there are many for which the status of gods or lords are claimed, for the Christian there is only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ.

And there is an underlying question here. Are the gods of the idols real, or only imagined? And Paul's point might seem to align with the sort of statements that we find in Isaiah, where idols and their makers are ridiculed as powerless to save in vain, as if they were nothing.

However, elsewhere in scripture, one might get the impression that there really are false gods at work in the world. Paul returns to this issue in chapter 10, verses 19 to 21, where his position becomes clearer.

[6 : 51] What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons, and not to God.

I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

The false gods are vain, and they are not what they claim to be. And God has proven his actual power over their empty boats. However, this does not mean that powerful demonic forces aren't at work in the world.

The weak brothers might ascribe far too much power to these demonic forces, and these false gods, and the strong far too little. The strong rightly recognise their vanity and their emptiness, but the weak recognise their power.

Both are only seeing part of the picture though, and Paul wants to emphasise both aspects. In verse 6, Paul quotes and elaborates the fundamental claim of the Jewish faith, the Shema.

[7 : 51] Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. However, Paul has taken this statement, and has inserted Christ into this fundamental confession. The term God relates to the Father, and the term Lord to Jesus Christ, but they are held together in indivisible unity.

There's one God, but the identity of this one God includes both Christ and the Father. The Father and Jesus Christ are, however, distinguished by the prepositions applied to them.

All things are from, and for, the Father, and all things are through, Christ. This helps us to understand the Trinity in part, how the triune persons can be one, and their actions inseparable.

It is not that the triune persons divide the work out between them, like a division of labour. Rather, every single act of God is done by all of God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

Every act of God is from the Father, every act of God is through the Son, every act of God is in the Spirit. Each of the divine persons is the author of every work of God in its entirety, and the one undivided God is active in every single one of the divine works.

[9 : 02] We're seeing a very sophisticated theology emerging here. For Paul's argument, the fact that all things are from the Father and through Christ challenges the idea that there is any such thing, or could be any such thing, as an alternative deity with autonomous power to exert in the world.

Whatever the false gods might be, whatever the idols that people worship, they are of an utterly different order of reality than the one true God. The one true God is the creator and sustainer of all things, and they are merely dependent creatures.

The problem for many of the weak, who presumably had lower social standing, was that they had former associations with idols. They see idol food as offer to a real false deity.

They may want to go along with the strong, who presumably had higher social standing, that's part of what the strength means, and a sense of knowledge. They might have invited them to come along to some of these feasts, but they are compromised in their self-awareness, and as they go against their consciences, they end up being wounded in their faith, and going astray.

Paul makes clear that neither eating, nor refraining from eating, advantages someone before God. Exerting a supposed right to eat food is not going to make you better off before God, nor is abstaining.

[10 : 17] He warns against the strong's supposed right to choose, and the way in which that supposed liberty could actually cause the weak to stumble. It might be that the strong wanted to encourage the weak into exerting supposed knowledge in eating food sacrificed to idols.

However, the weak would end up eating the food, while feeling the cultic force of what was taking place. They would feel confused, and be wounded in their conscience as a result, feeling that they were actually showing some sort of homage to the false deities.

It is one thing to believe that the food of the marketplace isn't defiled by virtue of weaker supposed associations with idols. It is another to aggressively assert one's knowledge in a manner unmindful of and unloving towards brothers and sisters who could be wounded by it.

And this wounding of conscience, together with the confusion that could be caused, would actually lead to weaker brothers' faith even being shipwrecked in some way. While the strong might be seeking to build the weak into the same confidence that they enjoyed, the effect was actually destructive.

And what's worse, Christ died for the weaker brother, whose spiritual well-being the strong have treated with such carelessness. The result is that they are sinning against Christ.

[11 : 32] Paul's approach, then, is against the proud individualism that would ride roughshod over others' weak consciences for the sake of their higher knowledge. He would rather not exert freedoms that he genuinely possessed for the sake of the well-being of the weaker brother.

Love is prioritised over proud knowledge. A question to consider. What are some of the broader implications of the fact that the way of true knowledge is through love?

