

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 “Love and Knowledge: Food Offered to Idols”  
Deuteronomy 6  
Psalm 86

May 25, 2014

“Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.  
You shall love the LORD your God  
with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

This confession is at the heart of biblical monotheism.  
The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

This basic biblical confession asserts that God is one –  
and as it is expounded in Deuteronomy 6-11,  
it makes it clear that not only is God one,  
but there is only one God.

Our Psalm of response, Psalm 86, articulates beautifully  
the way in which the Scriptures recognize the “existence” of other gods,  
without accepting the deity of other gods.

“There is none like you among the gods, O LORD,  
nor are there any works like yours.”  
Sure, there are “gods” out there –  
but none like our God!

Sing Psalm 86:1-11  
Read 1 Corinthians 8

Too often, we just breeze through these parts of Paul’s letters.  
We think that chapter 8 does not really apply to our situation in life.

But while you may never be invited to a dinner at the temple of Zeus,  
you very well may be invited to eat food sacrificed to idols.

In *That Hideous Strength*, C. S. Lewis describes a fictional college,  
where the “inner circle” is every bit as idolatrous as the temple of Zeus.  
Eating and drinking with them *in their private meetings*  
is portrayed as an initiation into the “inner circle.”

There would be nothing wrong with having lunch with one of these fellows  
at the local pub –  
but to eat and drink with them when they are plotting and planning  
that would be to partake of the table of demons.

Many of you have already faced this.  
Many more will in the coming years –

that moment of decision when you are faced with the question –  
“whose side are you on?”  
Will you bow to the pressure to “be one of the in-group”?  
Or will you deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus?

Let me describe the way that idol feasts functioned in the Roman world.

First of all, these feasts were only *barely* religious (in our eyes).

Think of the opening of Plato’s *Republic*,  
where Socrates and his friends are celebrating a feast.

The “liturgy” takes place at the temple –  
and then people return to their homes to eat and drink and talk.

400 years later, not much has changed –  
except that now, there are more places around the temple  
for people to eat their sacrificial meals together in public.

Still, the only “devotion” required is that you show up.  
You don’t really need to believe anything!  
You can get in trouble for mocking or denying the deity –  
but so long as you go through the motions,  
you certainly don’t need faith!

So, in one sense, these feasts are only barely religious.  
But in another sense, these feasts remind us that in the ancient world,  
everything was religious.  
Your presence at the feast demonstrates that you are a faithful and dutiful citizen.

Cicero, in the first century B.C., warned that “new religions” were dangerous,  
because they would divide the republic.  
Therefore, all new religious rituals must be approved by the Assembly.  
There was no ‘separation of church and state’ in the Roman world.  
Priests and augurs were public officials,  
whose chief role was to advise the magistrates and appease the gods.

And what were the gods?

There were many Greek and Roman philosophers  
who privately questioned the “existence” of Jupiter and Juno and their horde.  
Many thought that the gods were personifications of the natural world –  
manifestations of the “divine”  
(it would be hard to find a true atheist in the ancient world).

But almost no one argued against the rituals and customs of Roman religion,  
since the rituals and customs served to bind the people together.  
Indeed, the festivals were the primary means of exhibiting and forming civic duty,  
as the whole city came together – setting aside their petty squabbles for the day –  
in order to manifest the glory and power of the city.

But there's another twist.

Because the problem is that food sacrificed to idols is *everywhere!*

It's clear from what we know of ancient Corinth,

that the meat market in Corinth (as elsewhere in the Roman world)

was closely associated with the temples.

Ancient Greek and Roman temples had dining rooms built into their courtyards.

The meat from the sacrifices would be prepared at the temple –

and wealthy patrons would invite their clients to feast in these dining rooms.

(We have many invitation letters from the ancient world

“Apion invites you to dine in the house of Serapis at the table of the Lord Serapis

on the 13<sup>th</sup> at 9 o'clock.” [AT, 619])

You could even say that the temples in Corinth operated restaurants.

So, if you are a Christian,

what's the problem with going downtown,

and having a meal together with your friends?

So what if the restaurant happens to have a statue of Asclepius?

In fact, that's precisely the position held by “the strong” in Corinth.

We're not worshipping false gods – we're just having a meal with friends!

Friends.

I probably need to explain that too!

Friendship in the Roman world was not primarily about warm, personal affection.

It could include that – and there are some beautiful examples of that in the ancient world!

But friendship focused on the social and moral bond between people.

Friends had mutual and reciprocal responsibilities toward one another.

And if your friend was of different social class,

then the friendship took the form of patronage

In the Roman world, everyone was either a client or a patron.

Even patrons could have patrons!

After all, if you are a powerful person in your village outside Corinth,

then you will still need help to negotiate the intricacies of the city.

And a powerful patron in Corinth will still need help in Rome.

Only the emperor and a few leading Senators could say that they were indebted to no man.

In Paul's letter to the Romans he speaks of Phoebe of Cenchreae.

Cenchreae was the port on the other side of the Isthmus of Corinth.

It was a smaller town – dependent on Corinth.

But Paul says that Phoebe had been a patron to himself and to many other Christians.

She was a powerful woman – in Cenchreae.

She probably had some influence in Corinth.

But now she is going to Rome – and so Paul asks the church in Rome  
to do whatever they can to help her.

But if your patron invites you to dinner at the temple of Serapis  
to celebrate the coming of age of his son,  
what are you supposed to say?

If you say no, you are saying that neither he nor his son is worth your time.  
But if you say yes, then you will be eating food sacrificed to idols –  
something that the Jerusalem Council forbade in Acts 15.

The Jerusalem Council had said that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised,  
and do not need to observe the ceremonies of the Mosaic law.  
Rather, as the letter of the Council stated in Acts 15:29,  
Gentiles must “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood,  
and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

I realize that’s a longer introduction than usual –  
but I don’t see how to make much sense of this passage  
if we don’t understand the context!  
So first, there are the official “idol feasts” – liturgical events  
(where Paul agrees with the Jerusalem Council – don’t do that).  
And second, there are these patronage meals – hosted at the “temple restaurant”  
(and Paul says that these are okay – but maybe not prudent).

Chapters 8-10 will work out the details of how to think about these matters.  
Here in chapter 8, he says that love for God  
means that you need to think about others as well –  
Paul is concerned for the weak –  
for those who were formerly enslaved to idols.  
And he wants us to be sensitive to the idolatries of our culture.  
Don’t insist on your own “rights”  
when by so doing you will destroy others.

And then in chapter 9, he uses himself as an example.  
He points out that he has forgone his rights for the sake of the gospel.

And finally in chapter 10, he uses Israel as an example,  
and warns the Corinthians that idolatry is still a danger.  
The “gods” of the nations are not really *gods* – they are demons.  
But that doesn’t make their festivals okay!

### **1. The Danger of Imaginary Knowledge (v1-3)**

*Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. <sup>2</sup> If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know.*

Some people want to pit knowledge against wisdom –  
as though knowledge is theoretical and wisdom is practical.

But the problem in Corinth is not “theoretical knowledge” that does not result in practice.

The problem in Corinth is that their so-called “knowledge”  
*is producing the wrong practice!*

I think that the ESV handles this brilliantly by translating it *this knowledge* puffs up,  
but love builds up.

If your “knowledge” results in lack of love for God and others,  
then you do not yet know as you ought to know.

The “strong party” in Corinth is arguing that they can eat in idol temples  
because they have knowledge.

They *know* that an idol is nothing – and so therefore it’s okay to eat food sacrificed to idols!  
Paul goes after this by starting with their premise.

Notice how Paul says in verse 2,

“If anyone imagines that he knows something.”  
(literally, ‘If anyone thinks he knows something...’)

Paul uses this same construction three other times in 1 Corinthians:

We’ve already seen it once in:

3:18 – “if anyone among you thinks that he is wise”

We’ll see it again in:

11:16 – “if anyone thinks to be contentious”

and 14:37 – “if anyone thinks to be a prophet”

The common factor in Paul’s usage of “if anyone thinks” –  
is that all of these people are “thinking” of themselves wrongly.

That’s why the ESV translates it “if anyone *imagines* that he knows something,  
he does not yet know as he ought to know.”

The Corinthians seem to think that knowledge is something one “attains” or “achieves” –  
but Paul sees knowledge as a process.

As Anthony Thiselton puts it,

“If all Christians are in process of “coming to know”  
in a dynamic rather than a static sense,  
claims to “knowledge” remain open to discussion and to possible correction  
in the light of Scripture, tradition,  
and the corporate experience of ‘all the churches.’” (p625)

If you think that you have “arrived” at knowledge,  
oh honey, you don’t know anything yet!

What is the purpose of knowledge?

What is knowledge for?

We're not just talking about academic knowledge here.

Many of you have recently started new jobs.

You are learning a lot of new knowledge –

from the systems and practices of the workplace,

to the office politics and social dynamics of your colleagues.

What is knowledge for?

Knowledge is power, they say.

The one who shapes and controls language – what we know and what we say –  
rules far more effectively than the one who makes laws.

Paul says that knowledge puffs up – but love builds up.

What do you do with your knowledge?

You just found out that your boss is having an affair with his secretary.

Knowledge puffs up – and you could use this for your own advancement.

But love builds up.

Love is not concerned about myself, my own advancement.

Love is concerned for the other.

And that's why Paul includes verse 3:

<sup>3</sup> *But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.*

What is the knowledge that matters?

God knows me.

What do *I* know?

That's not nearly so important!

What does *God* know?

Or more important, *who* does God know?

If anyone loves God, he is known by God.

Knowledge will pass away –

as Paul will say in chapter 13!

But love endures.

Chapters 8-14 all work through various aspects of what it means to love and respect  
one another in the body of Christ.

Paul has already demonstrated how important it is for the body to be united in chapters 1-4 –  
now these chapters help us understand how to maintain a proper unity and diversity  
in the body of Christ.

And Paul opens this with a discussion of the unity and diversity in God himself.

One God – the Father.  
One Lord – Jesus Christ.

Unity in the body of Christ does not mean a rigidly enforced uniformity.  
At the same time, diversity in the body of Christ does not mean chaos and disorder!  
If you want to know what unity and diversity should look like in the church,  
look at the relationship between the Father and the Son.

And that's what we see in verses 4-6

## **2. The True Knowledge: There Is One God and One Lord (v4-6)**

<sup>4</sup> *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.”* <sup>5</sup> *For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—*

The fact that our knowledge is a pilgrim theology – a wayfarer's knowledge –  
does not mean that we know nothing!

We know truly – but we know *in part* (again anticipating 1 Cor 13)!

But at the heart of what we *know* is that there is one God and one Lord.

Translators wrestle with how to handle verse 4.

After all, in verse 5, Paul says that there are many 'gods' and many 'lords.'  
So how do you translate verse 4?

The ESV has chosen to put the phrase “an idol has no real existence” in quotation marks,  
suggesting that this is a quote from the Corinthians.  
That's probably true.

But what the quote says is “we know that an idol is nothing in the world,  
and that there is no God but one.”

An idol is nothing in the world – nothing in the kosmos.  
I'm not sure that Paul means by this that they have “no real existence.”  
*Maybe* that's what the Corinthians meant by it –  
but if so, then Paul wants to qualify that statement.

Because there *are* “so-called” gods and lords.

In chapter 10 Paul will go so far as to say that the things sacrificed to idols  
are sacrificed to demons.  
The gods of the nations “exist” –  
now, that doesn't mean that the stories about Zeus really happened!  
Rather, it means that there are spiritual beings – the devil and his angels –  
who seek to deceive the nations.

But Paul's concern here is with those who *think*

that the stories of Zeus and Asclepius really happened.

As Paul says in verse 6:

<sup>6</sup> *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.*

Moses had challenged the idols of the nations by saying,  
“Hear O Israel the LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

Now Paul paraphrases the Shema.

In the Shema “Lord” and “God” are identified as *one*.  
But Paul splits apart the Shema.

Yes, there is *one God* – the Father.  
And there is *one Lord* – Jesus the Messiah.

Paul clearly identifies Jesus Christ as the Yahweh of the Shema.

God the Father is the one *from whom are all things and we are for him*.  
God the Father is the one who created all things –  
and God the Father is the *goal* of all things  
But Jesus Christ is the one *through whom are all things and we are through him*.

In other words, we are *for* the Father –  
but the only way that we can get *to* the Father  
is *through* Jesus.

The *one God* of Israel’s shema has revealed himself to us in the one Lord, Jesus Christ.

This is the one true God –  
the God who has revealed himself in the name (singular)  
of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Incidentally, this is why the Christian church has always confessed her faith in a Trinitarian form

The earliest creeds of the church –  
of which the Apostles’ Creed is only one of many examples –  
always start, “I believe in one God, the Father...  
and in one Lord, Jesus Christ...  
and in the Holy Spirit”

The Christian church has retained the idea of the Shema in her creeds.

But what do you do with this knowledge?

### **3. What to Do with This Knowledge (v7-13)**

#### **a. The Power of Custom: the Conscience of the Weak (v7-8)**



After all, some people don't understand what it means that there is *one God*, the Father, and *one Lord*, Jesus Christ.

We've already seen in chapter 7 how the holiness of the gospel cleanses the unclean.

*Unlike* the OT, where the unbelieving spouse contaminated the children,

Paul says that in Christ, the holiness of the believing spouse sanctifies the unbelieving spouse, so that your children are holy!

Even so, the holiness of the Christian cannot be contaminated by food!

But some people do not have this knowledge:

<sup>7</sup> *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.* <sup>8</sup> *Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.*

The Jerusalem Council had said that Gentiles should not partake of food sacrificed to idols.

Paul, in chapters 8-10, will affirm that decree – but he will also clarify that decree.

To put it simply,

You may not participate in the sacrificial rituals of Asclepius.

But if a friend invites you to dinner,

you don't need to worry about where the meat came from.

#### **b. The Problem of “Rights”: Do Not Make Your Brother Stumble (v9-13)**

<sup>9</sup> *But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.*

But in a world where people believe that once the food is consecrated to Asclepius, it is “his” food –

then you may need to curtail your rights for the sake of others.

<sup>10</sup> *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?*

We have a rather lofty view of conscience these days.

Paul does not.

The conscience, for Paul, is frequently mistaken –

and can be damaged by others as well.

The word “conscience” is rooted in the Greek for “knowing with” or “knowing together.” (The Latin has the same root).

There is a strong corporate aspect of conscience.

The fact that the Corinthian church is *not* “knowing together” –

but is rather fragmenting and dividing –

indicates the extent of the problem.

Rather than truly “knowing with” one another,  
we are wounding and destroying our consciences through our selfishness.

And Paul realizes that the primary need in Corinth  
is *not* “educating” weak consciences –  
but *protecting* them!

If your brother is weak in his “knowing together” (in his conscience) –  
the solution is not to rub his face in it!  
And the solution is *not* to “instruct him.”  
The solution is to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.

<sup>11</sup> *And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.*

<sup>12</sup> *Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.*

Paul set us up for this in the first part of his epistle:

*Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,  
but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,  
but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks,  
Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1:22-24)*

*I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (2:2)*

*If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him.  
For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple. (3:17)*

I mention 3:17, because Paul uses the same word again.

The weak person is destroyed by your knowledge –  
in other words, your participation in an idol temple ceremony,  
resulted in his apostasy and return to idolatry.

We’re not talking about a minor squabble here.

We’re talking about how *my* lack of love –  
*my* insistence on the primacy of *my* knowledge –  
results in the apostasy of a weak brother.

Paul defends the weak from the social and theological assertiveness of the strong.

In Colossians 2, Paul will object to the tyranny of the “weak.”

No Christian should ever “lord it over” others –  
and demand that everyone else follow “my conscience.”

Here in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul plainly sympathizes with the arguments of the “strong” –  
but says that they are horribly misusing their knowledge.

Indeed, Paul goes so far as to say in verse 13:

<sup>13</sup> *Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*

Better to be a vegetarian than to destroy one for whom Christ died!

Again, “Stumble” here does not mean that my brother is personally offended by what I do.

Stumble means that that they depart from the faith.

What does it matter whether you eat meat?

What matters is the gospel.

Some of you may one day find yourself in a situation where your professional advancement depends on “eating food sacrificed to idols.”

There may or may not be any fancy rituals at the beginning of the meal –

but if your participation in the meal requires you to set aside your allegiance to Christ for the furtherance of some other agenda, then that is an idolatrous feast.

[Incidentally, this is why the PCA and the OPC

insist that Christians should not be members of the Masonic order – or other secret societies.

These societies require an allegiance that contradicts our calling as Christians.]

But, as Paul points out here in chapter 8, that’s the easy example.

Because it’s not just a matter of abstract ethics.

There will be times when your love for others

will restrain you from doing what you might otherwise do.

Christian liberty is not just the freedom to do whatever suits your conscience!

Christian liberty includes the freedom *not* to do what suits your conscience,

but to put the interests of others ahead of your own –

because you love Jesus!

Close with Psalm 96