

# High Peaks Bible Fellowship

## The Abuse of Christian Liberty 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

### Introduction

- In the last chapter Paul addressed the subject: "To marry or not to marry, that is the question." But Paul did not come down on the side of either extreme. He left room for personal choice in light of individual circumstances. He emphasized that there were several choices, none of which were sinful.
- Here in chapter eight Paul will address another issue that was not sinful in itself, but it was a case in which "personal choice" was being abused. We have seen in our previous studies that pride and arrogance were specific problems among the believers in Corinth, and their abuse of their Christian liberty was yet another example of this arrogant attitude.
- As we discussed in 1 Cor 1:10-17, it is possible that those who claimed to be part of the "followers of Paul" may have had *antinomian* tendencies. Paul had always emphasized Christian liberty, so this faction in Corinth may have been attempting to take Christian liberty to an extreme -- using their freedom to do whatever they pleased, and trying to justify it by saying they were following Paul.
- We saw a possible instance of this kind of behavior in the life of the Christian who was living in known sin with his father's wife (1 Cor 5:1-13). We also saw how Paul described the relationship between the physical body and the spiritual life in 1 Cor 6:12-20, where he said that the body was not for immorality but for the Lord, and he commanded Christians to flee from immorality. Even in 1 Cor 7:34 Paul connected our spirituality with our behavior when he implied that Christians should be holy in both body and spirit.

### What was the specific problem?

- From our background study we know that Corinth was filled with pagan temples, each practicing their own rituals of sacrifice to their god. We already discussed how much of the produce of the city passed through these pagan temples on its way to the market, and the practice of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols became a point of controversy between the factions in the Corinthian church.
- There were several ways that Christians in Corinth might come into contact with meat that had been sacrificed to idols:
  1. Buying meat in the marketplace: Even meat that was not specifically taken to the pagan temples was often consecrated by the merchant as a token offering to an idol. So when a Christian went grocery shopping there was always a possibility that the meat had been offered to an idol (see 1 Cor 10:25).
  2. Eating dinner at the home of friends and neighbors: When Christians were invited to eat dinner with unsaved neighbors there was no guarantee that the meat they were served had not been sacrificed to an idol (see 1 Cor 10:27).
  3. Eating in the pagan temples themselves: Some of the pagan temples would be used as public meeting halls which could accommodate a large gathering for public affairs or community social functions. The subject of these meetings had nothing to do with the religious purpose of the meeting place, but there were often community banquets held in these halls which Christians might attend. The meat at these banquets would probably have been offered to the temple god.
- Two different viewpoints arose in the church at Corinth about how a believer should handle this situation:
  1. One group considered the food to be defiled, polluted, or tainted by its association with the pagan idol. This group refused to eat such food, and they were offended by other believers who did eat this food.
  2. The other group claimed that the food itself was not defiled in any way, and that it could be eaten without any adverse affect on a believer or his testimony. They ate such food, and they may have looked down on other believers who held stricter beliefs.
- In our day we also have areas where Christians are forced into contact with the unbelieving world system. Some of the controversies Christians face today include whether a believer should drink alcoholic beverages, smoke cigarettes, play cards, wear makeup, go dancing, listen to particular styles of music, play the lottery, or go to the movies. The principles Paul shared in this passage can be applied in our day too.

### Identifying the root cause of the dispute (1 Cor 8:1-3)

- "Now concerning" = this marks Paul's answer to another question asked by the Corinthians. There was a strong difference of opinion on this issue among the Corinthian Christians. There was a group that saw themselves as more *enlightened*, and they acted on the basis of their so-called superior knowledge about the fact that the

gods represented by these idols did not really exist.

- "Things sacrificed to idols" = The priests were entitled to a part of the meat that was offered in the temple, and often they would put it up for sale in the market. In Corinth it was commonly referred to as a *hierothuton*, a temple sacrifice, or as a *theothuton*, a sacrifice to a god. But here Paul used the word *eidolothuton*, an idol sacrifice. In Corinth there was a close connection between idolatry and immorality, which Paul told the Corinthians to avoid (1 Cor 6:12-20).
- "We all have knowledge" (*gnosis*) = Paul is probably quoting the words of the Corinthians themselves, perhaps from the letter they sent to him. They were saying that they knew the truth about the emptiness of idol-worship, but Paul is probably quoting their words a bit sarcastically because in verse 7 he will plainly declare that all of the Corinthian believers do not have this knowledge. Here Paul goes right to the heart of the issue and pinpoints the root cause of the problem: the wrong use of knowledge.
- "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies" = this connects to what Paul previously said concerning knowledge and arrogance (1 Cor 1:5, 21; 2:8, 14; 4:6, 18-19; 5:2). It was one of the characteristics of the Corinthian believers to be puffed up. Being puffed up means selfishly focusing on pleasing yourself, but edifying (1 Cor 3:9) implies a focus on pleasing others.
- "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies" = The Corinthians were acting on the basis of their knowledge about issues of Christian liberty. Paul stated that they all had knowledge in general, but he insisted that knowledge alone was not a sufficient basis for Christian behavior. Knowledge is essential, but it is not enough. A believer should always use the formula:

### KNOWLEDGE + LOVE = Responsible Action

- Paul was not saying that knowledge was unimportant, but that knowledge alone tends to create pride. Knowledge joined with Love is a much better guide to right behavior.
- The first Church council at Jerusalem advised the Gentile believers to abstain from eating meat offered to idols (Acts 15:29). Here Paul does not refer to the decree of the Jerusalem Council, but instead he explains the foundational principle which that decree was based upon. The true intent of that decree was to outline a course of action for Gentile believers that would express true Christian love to Jewish Christians, to whom eating such meat would have been an abomination. In that case it was a way for Jewish and Gentile believers to continue to have table fellowship. Limiting one's liberty for the sake of other believers has always been the most loving thing to do.
- "If anyone supposes that he knows anything" = The first step to knowledge is to know the limitations of our own knowledge. We are finite, fallen creatures with limited knowledge -- only the omniscient God has unlimited or complete knowledge!
- "Has not yet known as he ought to know" = He has not known what is most important on the subject; he has not known the true purpose of knowledge, which is to promote the welfare of others. Knowledge that is not accompanied by love is not true knowledge.
- "If anyone loves God, he is known by Him" = In verse one Paul set up the contrast between knowledge and love, and in verse two he focused on the inadequacy of knowledge by itself. In verse three he says more about love, and especially a believer's love of God. Essentially he says, "If anyone loves God, it is a sign that God took the initiative to establish the relationship with him." There is no true knowledge that is not connected with the love of God. This kind of knowledge will lead a believer to love his Christian brothers.

### **The truth about false gods (1 Cor 8:4-6)**

- Paul continued to explain this knowledge which some believers boasted about: an idol was nothing, and there is only one true God (1 Cor 8:4). Then he acknowledged that there were many "so-called" gods, but they were gods in name only and not by nature (1 Cor 8:5). He then restated the basic doctrine of Christianity: there is only one God and one Lord (1 Cor 8:6).
- "No such thing as a idol" = here Paul seems to say that an idol does not have any real existence (see Hab 2:18). Some of their "gods" were outright fakes, but Paul also knew that some were manifestations of real demonic beings. These demonic beings do have real existence, but none of them are truly gods. They have a certain type of reality, but they certainly do not have deity.
- "There is no God but one" = What Paul means here is that neither the statue nor the demonic being it represents is what a Christian means when he talks about the one true God. There is only one true God, so an idol is a false or imaginary god which is of no significance when compared with the infinite Creator.
- "For" = Paul provides further explanation for what he meant by these "so-called" gods in comparison with the one true God. Literally he says, "called gods," reputed gods. Paul is really denying the deity of these so-called gods. Later in this letter he explained that those who worship idols are really worshipping demons, evil spirits, agents of Satan (1 Cor 10:19-21).
- "Whether in heaven" = Residing in heaven, as a group of the gods were supposed to do. Paul may be referring to the common practice of worshipping the sun, moon, and stars, or to "gods" who were supposed to reside in heaven and occasionally visit the earth (Jupiter, Juno, Mercury).  
"Or in earth" = Reigning specifically over the earth or sea (Ceres, Neptune). The pagans worshiped some gods

that were supposed to dwell in heaven, and others that were supposed to reside on earth.

- "There are many gods" = the pagans do regard them as gods, but when the pagans use the word *god* they are not talking about the God of the Bible.  
"There are many lords" = this term indicates things that ruled over them, things they submitted to, and things whose laws they obeyed. The title *lord* was often given to their idols or false gods.
- "Yet for us" = This sets up a contrast with the preceding discussion about what the pagans believed. By contrast, *Christians* know the truth about these so-called gods as well as about the one true God.
- "One God, the Father, from whom are all things" = Paul described God as the Father who is the Creator of all things. This is the best starting point for talking about the one true God of the universe. It is essential to emphasize the *Creator-creature distinction*. There is an infinite gap between the Creator and what He has created. Idols of wood or stone are made of material things, and even demonic spirit beings are mere creatures -- they are not on the same plane of existence as their Creator.
- Paul then described our relationship to this one true God. We exist for Him, and not the other way around. In contrast to the *many* lords in the previous verse, Paul here explained that there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, and He is the One through whom all things were created. Christ was the agent of our creation, just as He was the agent of our redemption.

### The difference between believers' consciences (1 Cor 8:7-8)

- "Not all men have this knowledge" = this directly contradicts the claim of the enlightened Corinthians which Paul was probably quoting in 1 Cor 8:1. If all of the believers recognized the essential unreality of idols, then there would be no problem. But not all of the believers had this knowledge.
- "Being accustomed to the idol until now" (*sunetheia*) = being intimate with, having had habitual contact with. "It is the force of habit that still grips them when they eat such meat. They eat it *as an idol sacrifice*, though they no longer believe in idols. The idol-taint clings in their minds to this meat." (*Robertson's Word Pictures*)
- "Their conscience being weak is defiled" = The conscience is that part of every person that tells him he should do what he believes to be right, and that he should not do what he believes to be wrong. It does not actually *teach* us what is right and wrong, but it urges us to do what we have been taught is right. We must realize that the conscience is part of our human nature, and as such it was damaged by the Fall. It is possible for our conscience to urge us to do something which is really a sin, based on the fact that we believe something that is not true. Paul described these believers as being weak in conscience because they were conscientious about avoiding something which truly was not a sin. This passage shows that it is possible for the conscience of a believer to operate on the basis of error -- it is not an infallible guide even for the believer.
- These Corinthians believed that something was a sin even though it was not really a sin. But at their point of understanding, experience, and maturity, it was their belief that this activity was sinful and they should not do it. Notice that Paul never said they should go against their conscience (even though it was operating on a false assumption). The conscience is something that should not be crossed -- Paul says this defiles the conscience and causes it to operate incorrectly. Instead, believers should be taught what is true and right; then the conscience will operate on the basis of what is true.
- Paul now teaches these believers what is actually true about eating food sacrificed to idols. Here is where he takes what he had just finished teaching regarding the truth about false gods and he applies this to the meat that had been offered to them. We see here that idols have absolutely no effect on the meat itself. If idols are nothing, then they can do nothing to the meat. Holding some meat in front of a piece of wood or stone does not change the nutritional value of the meat or defile it in any way. Therefore, the meat could certainly be eaten by a Christian without having any adverse affect.
- "Food will not commend us to God" = if you do something that God has not forbidden you to do, then you have not damaged your relationship with God in any way. Our dietary habits do not earn us favor with God -- we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.
- There is a common misconception about freedom. People think: "If I am free to do a something, then I must do that thing. I must assert my freedom and do the thing in order to be truly free." But this makes a Christian into a slave to his own freedom! In this verse Paul had just said that exercising our freedom does not commend us to God in any way, and that refraining from exercising our freedom does not hurt us in any way. So it is just as much an exercise of Christian liberty to not eat the meat as it is to eat the meat!
- If Paul had stopped his line of reasoning here, then the "Christian liberty" faction in Corinth could have claimed the victory in their dispute with those who were more strict in their beliefs. But Paul continued in the next few verses by putting limits on the principle of Christian liberty

### The mature Christian response to the issue (1 Cor 8:9-13)

- Those who have the greater knowledge and spiritual maturity are the ones who should accommodate to the less mature by abstaining from activities that might harm the faith and life of those who are weaker. Paul already stated that eating food sacrificed to idols does not make believers better or worse in God's estimation (1 Cor 8:8). But here Paul explains that this behavior can cause harm to others. It can be a stumbling block to the weak (1 Cor 8:9) and it can lead them to injure their weak consciences by doing something they believe to be

sinful (1 Cor 8:10). The harm this can cause is very serious (1 Cor 8:11), and being the cause of such sin means sinning against Christ Himself (1 Cor 8:12). Paul tells them that, rather than cause an immature brother to sin, it was better for them to forgo their Christian liberty in these cases (1 Cor 8:13).

- "Take care" (*blepo*) = literally, "look out, watch." Notice that this is addressed to the mature believers, and not to the immature. There is no command from God here for the immature believers to "grow up!" The command is for the mature believers to exercise self-control in order not to cause the less mature to fall into sin. In effect, Paul is saying, "Do not look at your own freedom -- instead, look at the needs of the less mature Christians around you. If you love them as God commands you to, then you will not exercise your Christian liberty in any way that will weaken their faith."
- "Liberty" (*exousia*) = authority, power, privilege, right, or liberty. In this context it means the authority or right to eat any kind of food. But often this kind of liberty becomes a pretext for indulging the whims and desires of the flesh.
- "A stumbling block to the weak" (*proskomma*) = an obstacle put in the path which would cause people to stumble if they bump their foot against it. Believers do not live only with those at their same level of maturity, and the things they leave in their wake have an effect on others around them. Knowledge alone says, "Go ahead and eat" -- but Knowledge + Love says, "How will this affect other believers?"

### The danger to the weaker believer

- "For if" = a third class conditional clause, indicating something that is a possible case -- something that could potentially happen. Here Paul gave a concrete example for what he has just said. A more mature believer might decide to exercise his Christian liberty by eating at one of the local banquets (which may be held in a public meeting hall in one of the temple buildings). A less mature believer may see this and decide to go against what his own conscience is telling him to do. But what actual impact does this have on the immature believer? Paul answers that question in verse eleven.
- "Through your knowledge" = Because of the example set by the more knowledgeable believer.  
"He is ruined" (*apollumi*) = to be ruined or corrupted. This is a very strong term, and indicates the severity of the impact of the mature believer's behavior on the immature believer.
- "For whose sake Christ died" = Christ went to the full extent of love and actually died for this believer, but the supposedly mature Christian who acts on the basis of knowledge alone will not even give up part of his supper for the sake of this fellow-believer!

### The danger to the stronger believer

- "Sinny against the brethren" = the exercise of Christian liberty to engage in non-sinful behavior can actually become a sin against another believer if it wounds his conscience. The unloving exercise of Christian liberty can actually be sinful. This is a serious danger to the spiritual life of the mature believer.
- "Wounding their conscience" (*tupto*) = to beat or strike a blow. This is what the mature believer is doing to the immature believer -- he is striking a blow at the other's conscience.
- "You sin against Christ" = Not only is the mature believer sinning against his brother in Christ, he is said to sin against Christ Himself. A sin against one member of the body is a sin against the entire body.

### The example of Paul

- Notice that Paul does not command the more mature believer not to eat meat if it will cause others to fall into sin. Paul simply presents his own personal example or conviction, and he expects them to learn from it. He says, "I will never eat meat again if it causes my brother to stumble." Paul is willing to limit his own personal liberty in order not to injure the spiritual life of other believers.

### How should a Christian decide whether or not to engage in a certain activity?

You can ask yourself several questions:

- Is this activity really necessary, or is it something non-essential that is not really important to my life?
- Is this activity really helpful and profitable, or is it something that I would do just for fun?
- Is this activity something that Jesus would do if He were in my place right now?
- Does this activity promote or support what is good, right, and true according to God's standards?
- Is this activity something that would be a good example of behavior for other Christians to imitate?
- If my unsaved friends saw me doing this activity, would it lead them closer to trusting Christ or would it show that Christ does not really make a difference in my life?
- Will this activity help me and others around me to become more mature spiritually?
- Will my participation in this activity bring glory and praise to God?
- If I engage in this activity, can I be sure that some other believer will not be harmed by following my example?

## Points of Application

- Our choices and our behavior should be motivated and characterized by self-sacrificing love for those around us, rather than by knowledge alone. A Christian is much more likely to behave correctly if he is acting from knowledge + unselfish love, rather than from self-assured knowledge alone.
- We should not be arrogant in our wisdom, but should clearly understand the limits of our own finite knowledge. This does not mean that knowledge is unimportant, because loving behavior can only come from a correct understanding of God's truth. But knowledge must be tied together with love.
- This passage points out that even godly Christians can believe things that are not true. This fact leads us to see the importance of continually teaching the truths of God's Word to others, so that we may all grow to maturity in our faith.
- One of the main messages of this chapter is that Christians should be careful how they behave. Otherwise their conduct (even in things that are not forbidden by God) might lead other believers to violate their own consciences and fall into sin. We are accountable to God to set a good example, and this should include self-denial and abstinence from certain things for the sake of others.

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[High Peaks Bible Fellowship](#)

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Our primary responsibility is to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12).