

It was well-nigh impossible for Christians in the first century to avoid contact with idolatry. In the pagan society of their day, more or less *all* social functions and festivities were conducted under the auspices of one supposed deity or other.

From what I can discover, the idol sacrifices *themselves* were normally offered on altars in the temples by an officiating priest – although the beast was usually slaughtered by the priest's assistant. But only certain parts of the sacrificial victim were in fact consumed on the altar. As in the case of the peace offering of the Old Testament, the remainder was divided between the priest and the offerer. The offerer's portion formed the basis of a feast for himself, his relatives and friends – either in the temple precincts, or in a private home – no doubt usually his own.

As we'll see later, many of the temples had dining rooms where religious meals were enjoyed by the worshippers. Indeed, one of the earliest mentions of the office of 'deacons' (250 BC) is in connection with the worship of the gods Serapis and Isis in Egypt – where a 'college of deacons' served in each temple – seemingly as waiters.

But – whether in the temple precinct or in someone's dining room – the meal was viewed as a sequel to the sacrifice to the god – and the meat itself was regarded as consecrated food and eaten in honour of the idol. Indeed, the god was thought of as having given a portion of the sacrifice back to the worshipper – who then invited his friends and relatives to eat and worship with him as *guests of the deity*. Their eating together was an expression of fellowship both with each other *and with the idol*. That is, the meal involved the pretence – the fiction – that the god was the *true* host and had provided the food. To participate in such a meal necessarily involved having fellowship with idolaters in an idolatrous setting.¹

Scholars point to many ancient papyri which take the form of invitations to dine at the table of some deity or other. Just consider two typical invitations to such meals from the beginning of the Christian era. O/H1

- The one reads, 'Chairemon invites you to a meal at the table [*literally 'couch' or 'sofa'*] of the lord Serapis **in the temple of Serapis**, tomorrow the 15th from 9 o'clock [3pm] onwards'.
- The other reads, 'Antonius, son of Ptolemais, invites you to dine with him at the table of the Lord Serapis **in the (house) of Claudius Serapion** at 9 o'clock on the 16th.

These invitations are by no means exceptional – sticking only with the same god Serapis, I have also come across the following :

'Nikephorus asks you to dine at a banquet of the Lord Serapis in the Birth-House on the 23rd, from the 9th hour', and 'Herais asks you to dine in the dining room of the Serapeum at a banquet of the Lord Serapis tomorrow, namely the 11th, from the 9th hour'.

It is important to note the key difference in the first two examples – you could feed at the 'table' of Serapis either in his temple or in somebody's house – although seemingly, from all the examples, only at 3 o'clock in the afternoon!

The complication comes in that some scholars believe that the ancient temples not only boasted dining rooms set apart for *religious* meals – but that they also offered restaurant-like facilities which involved the customers in no explicit idolatrous practices or associations – and, as we will see, this affects to some extent how we understand what Paul says in v.10.

Any portion of the idol sacrifice which wasn't needed by the priest or the offerer for their own use found its way – either to the meat market (the 'shambles', 10.25) to be sold in the butcher's shop along with ordinary meat – or, more likely in the case of the priest's portion, to the temple dining room. Christians were therefore confronted with idol food at every turn. Any public function or private meal exposed them to the danger of being served meat which had earlier been consecrated by being offered to some pagan deity.

I think we are safe in taking Paul's words 'Now as touching' – lit. 'Now concerning' – in 8.1 as referring to matters raised with him by the Corinthians in their recent letter. The phrase occurs six times in the latter part of 1 Corinthians, and on the first occasion – in 7.1 – opens up the full expression – 'Now concerning the things of which you wrote ...'. The subject of eating meats offered to idols is the third in the series of six matters which Paul introduces in this way.²

It seems likely, given the various strands to Paul's response in chapters 8 and 10, that the Corinthians had raised with Paul three distinct questions related to the Christian's proper attitude to idol food : (1) Is it alright for the Christian to partake of feasts held in an idol temple? (2) Is the Christian at liberty to buy and eat meat sold in the market – which meat might well have been previously consecrated to idols? And (3) whether, if the Christian receives an invitation to a meal in the house of a non-Christian, is the Christian free to go and to risk being given idol food to eat?

It's evident that, in their letter, the Corinthians had also expressed their own view – that each of these questions could be answered in the same way – and very simply – it was all a matter of knowledge.

They 'knew' that the idol – or the image which represented it – wasn't *really* a god – for the gods of the heathen *had* no real existence. It followed therefore that idol food was altogether harmless – it was neither sanctified nor polluted. Armed with this 'knowledge', they felt at perfect liberty to eat such food – and to accept invitations to feasts, even those held in idol temples. After all, their own heart was free from idolatry – and their actions were altogether a matter for themselves – and for no-one else. Everything was straightforward. Everything was cut and dried. Or was it? It seems that one of their purposes in writing to Paul had been to sound out his views.

On the face of it, v.10 suggests that Paul agreed that – leaving aside the sensitive consciences of others – the Christian was indeed at liberty to enjoy a meal in an idol temple (better 'idol-place'). But – apart from the question of whether or not he forbids eating idol meats in chapter 10 – this seems rather surprising! Not least because only five years before, the Jerusalem 'council' (as it is sometimes called) had specifically prohibited gentile believers from eating foods which were known to have been offered to idols and which were associated in any way with idol worship. The decision letter of Acts 15 reads, 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these *necessary* things: that you *abstain* from *things sacrificed to idols* (being the same Greek word as 1 Cor. 8.1) and from blood ... etc ... if you keep yourselves from such things, you will do well', Acts 15.28-29. Later, referring back to that occasion, James reminded Paul, 'Concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided (judging) that they should *abstain from meat sacrificed to idols ... etc*', Acts 21.25. Yes, it's true that this ruling had been given – in part at least – to avoid causing offence to other Jews – whether Christian or non-Christian – as chapter 15 and 21 make clear.³ But for whatever reason the ruling had been given – it *had* been given. And, it is clear from James' words in chapter 21, that it applied to all gentile Christians – that it was universally binding.⁴

But had Paul and Silas the prophet – who had both been made responsible for relaying the Jerusalem decision to the gentile churches at the end of Acts 15 (vv.25-27), and who had both been at Corinth in Acts 18 (v.5) – informed the Corinthians of it? We don't know.

What we do know is that, in several other matters, the Corinthian church were more than happy to 'do their own thing' – regarding themselves very much as a law to themselves.⁵ Clearly, if they did know of the decision made at Jerusalem, they thought themselves above it – 'wiser' and 'more knowledgeable' no doubt than the elders and apostles there. In their letter they may even have directly challenged the Jerusalem ruling – setting out their own arguments and concluding that to eat idol food wasn't only permissible - it was an evidence of strong faith and a legitimate expression of their Christian liberty.

But whether or not *the Corinthians* were ignorant of the Jerusalem decision, *Paul* certainly wasn't – he had been party to it. And yet at no time in chapters 8 or 10 does he appeal to the decree. Why? Was it out of concern that some of his opponents at Corinth might turn such an appeal against him – arguing that it went to prove that he was only a second-rate – a tin-pot – apostle – dependent for everything on the authority of the 'real' – the pukka – apostles at Jerusalem – which was how many in Galatia regarded him? Quite possibly, but I suspect there was more to it. That Paul deliberately left the Jerusalem ruling to one side, chose to expound the arguments he did that – on the one hand – he might teach the Corinthians love, respect and consideration for others, and – on the other – he might *persuade* them of the folly of dabbling with idolatry in any of its forms.

I guess we face two main problems in studying 1 Cor. 8-10.

First, there is the problem of the *exposition* itself. From what I can see, we are chiefly handicapped because :

- we don't know for sure all the circumstances in which idol meats could be eaten; and
- the Greek text lacks any punctuation – for our present purpose, in particular it lacks any quotation marks – any inverted commas. This, together with the fact that we haven't any way of finding out exactly what the Corinthians had said in their letter, means that we can't be sure which, if any, of the expressions Paul uses in chapters 8 and 10 originally came from the Corinthians and are now quoted back at them. To take one simple example – it seems likely that the expression 'we all have knowledge' in v.1 was a Corinthian slogan, on the basis of which they proceeded to run the argument beginning in v.4, 'we know that an idol has no real existence ... there is no God but one'.

The second problem we face is that of the *relevance* of this section – or, more accurately, the seeming lack of it – to us today. Although the eating of idol food was a *very* live concern for first century gentile churches such as that at Corinth, it hardly amounts to a burning issue for us. I guess that few elders' meetings in Florida are spent discussing it! And yet, because of the way that, by the Spirit, Paul deals with the issue, these chapters have volumes to teach us about both the rights and the responsibilities of the believer. And it is desperately important that we understand the principles Paul taught – and apply them to our lives.

Conscious then of our many limitations, let's look together at what Paul says. **O/H2**

First, the Preamble on the subject of 'knowledge', vv. 1-3

Paul opens, 'Now concerning things offered to idols' – meaning '*food* which has been offered to idols' – as is made clear by the reference to 'eating' in v.4. 'We know', he says, and then inserts a parenthesis – providing us with a kind of preamble to the subject. He returns to base in v.4, 'Concerning therefore the eating of food offered to idols ... we know' and carries on from there. In the parenthesis, Paul points out that knowledge isn't everything – indeed that in isolation it isn't even a good thing – it only breeds conceit.

Apparently, the Corinthians adopted the stand 'everyone knows ... that an idol is nothing' – an assertion which Paul contests strongly in v.7. But first he exposes knowledge as an unsafe and inadequate guide – knowledge must be coupled with love – which, in the context, expresses itself in consideration for others. For the believer, knowledge must go hand in hand with love – and rights hand in hand with responsibilities.

I don't find it all surprising that the Corinthian church should appeal to their knowledge alone as decisive. After all, knowledge was their strong point. And their attitude to the subject of idol meat served to expose one of their greatest flaws – namely, that although, according to 1.5, *in terms of knowledge* they were *very rich*, *in terms of love* they were *abjectly poor!* Which is why we will read later about the rich eating their full share of the church fellowship meal – and more – before the poor saints arrived – and how everybody was determined to parade his or her spiritual gift publicly – *not* that they might edify the body but that they might project themselves and impress others. Hence the necessity for chapter 13.

When it came to eating idol food, their attitude was totally selfish – the only thing which mattered to them was that their own consciences were clear. What they did was their own business – and others were strongly advised to keep their noses out of it. You wouldn't have found anyone at Corinth queuing up for the job of 'my brother's keeper!' Paul stresses that knowledge of this kind – the 'I-know-better-than-you-and-I-care-nothing-for-you' kind – served only to 'puff up', v.1. the Greek word translated 'puffed up' is derived from the Greek word for a bellows – and so means to inflate, to fill with wind. The word occurs no less than four times earlier in this letter – each time of the Corinthians themselves⁶. Evidently being 'blown up' with a sense of their own importance was one of their besetting sins!

There are two ways of making something big, Paul is saying – you can inflate something as you do a balloon or you can build something as you do a structure. Knowledge does the first – love does the second. Unlike knowledge, love is *never* puffed up, 13.4. The difference between love and mere knowledge is the difference between a building and a bubble – between the Christian who grows and the Christian who only swells. We do well to note that it's love which makes the building grow.

And if these Corinthian 'know-alls' imagined they already possessed 'full knowledge' – the word of v.2 – they hadn't yet grasped the very ABC of true knowledge. If we think we *know it all*, we don't really *know anything* – and the most important knowledge by far is the knowledge which God has of those who *love* Him – in biblical usage, the loving regard and favour which God has for those who love Him.

Food offered to idols - to eat or not to eat? Factor 1. There's only one God – idols have no real existence, vv.4-6.

In order to rationalise their eating of meats offered to idols, the Corinthians had taken as their starting point the foundation truth that there is only one true God. And so, because the idol images were lifeless and impotent – and the gods they supposedly represented were non-existent – it followed that neither the images nor the gods could produce any change in the meat set before them – therefore the meat was uncontaminated – and, since the food was harmless, eating it couldn't possibly do them any harm.

All those who failed to see this were obviously 'weaker' Christians, who should be pitied and whose scruples could safely be ignored. And, indeed, if any of these 'weaker' Christians could be encouraged to follow the example set by the 'stronger' then this could only be for their advantage – even if their over-sensitive consciences were unnecessarily troubled and disturbed by eating the meat.

To a large extent, Paul agreed with the *basis* of the argument. Yes it was indeed true that – *in one sense* – an idol had no real existence – 'An idol is nothing in the world and there is no God except one', v. 4. It's possible that both Paul and the Corinthians had in mind the famous Hebrew word-play which pops up in more than one Old Testament text – 'all the gods (*elohim*) of the nations are idols (*elilim* – lit. 'things of nothing, things of emptiness, things of no worth')'.⁷ Contrary to the beliefs of the heathen worshippers, no divine realities lurked behind the idol image. Although, as Paul knew – *in another sense* – the idols were only too real in that, as we will discover in chapter 10, they provided a vehicle and channel for fellowship with demons.

Paul is prepared to admit the existence of 'many' gods only in the sense that they were *reckoned* to be such by others, v.5. But, in that sense, there *were* indeed many 'so-called' gods – even as, he says, there are gods galore

and lords galore.⁸ At one point in the history of Judah, the prophet Jeremiah repeatedly claimed that they had as many gods as they did cities.⁹ As far as first century Corinth is concerned, archaeologists have unearthed temples of Apollo, Asclepius, Aphrodite and Demeter. And an inscription found in the theatre at Corinth reveals that the cult of the Egyptian gods Isis and Serapis also flourished there at the time Paul wrote. And you only needed to go six miles down the road Isthmia to find the impressive sanctuary of Poseidon. These may be just names to us today but these were the deities who then dominated the lives of the people of Corinth.

But as Christians, Paul insists, we acknowledge no God 'but one' – here said to be God the Father *and* the Lord Jesus Christ. It's important we note that there's no evidence – from ancient inscriptions or any other source – that the heathen ever attempted to discriminate between the titles 'god' and 'lord' in terms of dignity and status.

And it would obviously be nonsense for Paul to have said that he recognised only one God and then – as proof of this – immediately to have pointed to the fact that he had two – the one of less dignity and importance than the other! But in the same way that those 'called gods' comprised the 'gods many' and 'lords many', so Paul includes both the Father and the Lord Jesus in the expression 'no God but one'. Surely it goes without saying therefore that it's just as accurate to refer to the Lord Jesus as 'God' as it is – for example, with Simeon – to refer to the Father as 'Lord', Luke 2.29. Paul speaks here of *the physical creation* ('the all things') as coming *from* God as its source, and *through* Christ as its mediator and agent – and *the new creation* as being *through* Christ as its mediator, *to* God as its goal. I hardly need to say that there's no reference to the Holy Spirit in this passage for the simple reason that Paul is confining himself to the titles of 'God' and 'Lord' which were in vogue in pagan circles.

It follows logically from this – although Paul doesn't say so as yet – holding it back until v.8 – that food offered to idols is of no significance *in itself*.

But this does *not* settle the matter! The issue isn't simply theological – realising that there's only one God, vv.3-6 – the issue is also social – concerning relationships with other Christians, whose consciences must be respected. Which brings us to :

Factor 2. The conscience of the 'weak' Christian, vv. 7-12.

- **A conscience 'defiled' by eating – with the weak person being 'stumbled', vv.7-9**
- **A conscience 'emboldened' to eat – with the weak person being 'destroyed', vv.10-11**
- **A conscience 'wounded' by eating – being a sin against Christ, v.12**

'Howbeit (but) not all men have this knowledge', v.7. *We* may have it, v.1, but not all *do* – it simply isn't universally true. We must remember that many first century gentile Christians had been steeped in idolatry until the day of their conversion – and this was certainly true at Corinth – as witness Paul's words in chapter 6, 'Neither fornicators, nor idolaters ... will inherit the kingdom of God. And *such were some of you*. But you were washed ...', vv.10-11. Many of them had been recently saved out of pagan idolatry and were still haunted by the uneasy feeling that somehow behind the idol image there lurked some kind of divine being. And such impressions were hard to shake off. The reading given in the older manuscripts of v.7 stresses this – 'Some through former association with idols (lit. *by reason of habit until now*) eat the food as offered to an idol'. That is, they had thought that way all their lives and, as a result, still regarded the food as having special significance because it had been offered to an idol. To them, it *wasn't* ordinary food – to them in some way its association with the idol had contaminated the meat. And for them to eat against their own judgment would mean violating their consciences – would result in their consciences becoming 'defiled' – that is, as suggested by the word Paul used, stained, besmeared with mud and filth – result in their consciences being soiled with a sense of guilt.

In vv. 8-12, Paul advances the considerations which the more 'enlightened' believers should take into account in deciding their attitude to eating idol meat :

1. That to eat the idol food brought *them* no gain, v. 8.
2. That there was the very real danger that they could stumble others by their example if they did eat, vv. 9-10, and
3. That they should tread with the utmost care because their decision involved the Lord Jesus in at least two ways, vv. 11-12.

Paul's words in v.8 suggest that the Corinthians may have been arguing along the lines, 'As Jesus said, God is concerned with clean hearts and not with clean food. So it doesn't matter *whether* or *what* we eat. Eating meat doesn't affect the spirit of a man – and therefore we are free to eat idol food'. If this was their reasoning, Paul responds that the argument cuts both ways.

'Food will not commend us to God' – literally 'food will not cause us to stand near to God' – as those approved and brought into favour with Him. God's attitude to us, Paul is saying, isn't determined by whether we eat or not. As he later pointed out to the Romans, 'the kingdom of God *doesn't consist of eating and drinking*, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit', 14.17. If, on the one hand, we do eat, we're not thereby the *better* for it – 'we do not abound' lit. If, on the other hand, we refuse to eat, we're not thereby the *worse* for it – 'we do not lack', lit. Those who eat gain themselves no credit – those who abstain suffer no debit. Contrary then to the ideas of the 'stronger brother' – of the man with knowledge – to *eat* idol meat doesn't make somebody more spiritual – and to

avoid it doesn't make him in any way less spiritual – doesn't in any way diminish his standing before God. Paul's point is simplicity itself – the believer doesn't *need* to eat idol food – he profits nothing by eating.

In vv.9-12, Paul argues that – although their eating isn't going to profit *them*, v.8, it may well have a profound and adverse effect on *others* – it may well cause them serious spiritual damage. So that – while eating food in itself *doesn't* directly affect our relationship with God, v.8 – it *can* directly affect the spiritual condition of our brother – and as such becomes a thing of great importance in the sight both of God and Christ.

It is perhaps worth noting that the word 'liberty' in v.9 (KJV) is really 'authority, right'. This particular word occurs 12 times in 1 Corinthians and appears to have been one of the Corinthians' great watchwords – and is related to the word 'lawful' in one of their favourite slogans, 'All things are lawful'. The Corinthians loved to focus on the 'right' and the 'authority' which they had to do all kinds of things – in this case to indulge in eating idol meat.

But the clear implication of what Paul is saying is that 'a right can sometimes become a wrong'! For my 'right' can prove to be a 'stumbling-block' to others – an obstacle, that is, against which they can dash their feet and stumble. The same word occurs – also in the context of idolatry – in the Septuagint of Exod.23.33 – where Moses warned Israel in respect of the Canaanites, 'if you serve their gods, these will be a stumbling-block to you'. But here in 1 Corinthians 8, the believer's association with idols may well prove a stumbling-block – not to himself – but to others. And *that* is an *extremely* serious matter. It is the Lord Himself who once warned, 'Whoever will offend (cause to stumble, that is) one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he was drowned in the depth of the sea', Matthew 18.6.

Vv.10-11 speak of the conscience of the 'weak' Christian being 'emboldened' so that, in spite of his misgivings, he goes ahead and eats – and thereby suffers spiritual ruin.

Paul envisages the Christian 'with knowledge' 'sitting at meat' – literally 'lying down, reclining (on a couch)' in some 'idol place' – possibly avoiding the use of either usual Greek word for 'temple' because he knows that no real 'god' actually dwells there. I was interested to learn that excavations at Corinth have uncovered rooms with couches for sacred meals in the sanctuaries both of Demeter and Asclepius there – as well as in the sanctuary of Poseidon in Isthmia.^{10 11}

As I understand it, Paul's attitude to idol-meat can be summarised as follows : if the eating of the food was in any way connected with idol-worship – was in honour of an heathen god or whatever – the Christian was to have nothing whatever to do with it – for this constituted the 'table of demons' and involved the eater in fellowship with demons – and it didn't matter one scrap whether this took place in the idol's temple or in a private home. And it's possible that v.10 has some such occasion in mind. But I don't think so. I think it more likely that Paul is thinking here of a social meal in the temple restaurant – rather than of some blatant act of idolatry. But, even if the meat was being eaten in the kind of eating-place which involved no explicitly idolatrous practice – given that this was within the temple precinct – it would still be obvious to everyone – including the brother who was tucking into it – that the meat had earlier performed duty as part of an offering to the god who supposedly dwelt there. Given then the associations of the place where it was being eaten – and on the principle – which Paul states in chapter 10 – that one should 'flee' from all association with idolatry – the brother shouldn't have been eating the meat there in any case.

When – after further illustrating the principle of waiving one's rights in chapter 9 – Paul returns to the subject of idol meat in chapter 10, he will point out that the meat remains uncontaminated in itself – even after it has played its part in the idolatrous sacrificial ritual – and that the Christian should therefore have no concerns about eating it – whether it is later bought in the market for eating in his own home or it later forms part of some social – but non-idolatrous meal – provided by a neighbour or friend. The only thing to watch out for in the latter case, Paul says, is if somebody with a weaker conscience happens for some reason to know the history of the 8 oz steak and makes the point of telling you that it is idol-food – in which case you stick to the french fries and veg – for the sake of that man's conscience.

The word translated 'emboldened' in v.10 means, as in the KJV margin, 'edified' – that is, 'built up'. This is the only time that Paul – who uses the word on five other occasions in this letter alone – ever employs it in a negative sense. I suspect that there is more than a touch of irony in the way in which he now uses the word. It is love, he had said which *really* 'edifies/builds up', v.1 – for someone by their example to bring pressure to bear on somebody else to do what they believe to be wrong is surely a case of 'inverse edification'.

I think we can assume that those with 'knowledge' felt that it would be a good thing for the weak brother to see them eating idol food and so be led to imitate their example. To their way of thinking, this would 'build him up'. You will gather that Paul didn't agree! 'Build him up', he is saying, 'to do what? You would deliberately lead the weak – out of deference to your superior knowledge – to do what he believes in his heart to be at best doubtful and at worst sinful – and so to lead him inevitably to feelings of guilt, to the pain of remorse, to the loss of his communion with God – and ultimately to the shipwreck of his entire spiritual life. Well done! Some building up that!'

But in fact Paul has kept his hardest punches to last!

V.11 – ‘The weak’, literally translated, ‘is being destroyed (present tense) by (as a result of) your knowledge – the brother because of whom Christ died’.

Every word of this sentence is designed to hammer home the seriousness of what these men with knowledge were doing :

- first, there is the weakness of the person injured – for whom, if anything, on account of that very weakness, they should have felt and shown nothing but compassion and consideration;
- second, there is the greatness of the injury done – to cause spiritual damage and even total spiritual disaster – the word translated ‘perish’ denoting ruin and the loss of well-being.¹²
- third, there is the matter of their relationship to the injured – he is a ‘brother’ – not a stranger. I suggest that it’s significant that this is the first time in the chapter that Paul describes the weak man in this way. And I gather from v.13 that it’s in the same light that he himself always regards those who need special consideration.
- and, finally, there is love of Christ for the man. Paul strikes the stark contrast between, on the one hand, *the selfish indifference* of the strong towards the weak brother – and on the other, the *ultimate self-sacrifice* of Christ for him. ‘Christ by His action – in dying for the man’ – Paul is saying – ‘sought only *his greatest – his highest – good* – and, in effect, by your action – you seek only *his greatest – his utmost – harm*. Christ – *and none less than Christ* – died – *and nothing less than died* – for that man. The Lord Jesus was prepared to go to a cross for him – and you aren’t willing even to miss out on a rump steak for him’.

When Paul says of the weak brother that Christ died ‘for’ him, he uses one of four different Greek words which are translated ‘for’ in the context of the Lord’s death – each of which has its own nuance and shade of meaning. One word signifies that the death of Jesus in some way *concerned me* – that is, *it had something to do with me*. That’s not the word here. Another word signifies that His death was *in my interests* – that is, *that He died on my behalf*. But that’s not the word here either. Another word signifies that He died *instead of me* – that is, *that He died in my place*. No, you guessed – that’s not the word here either. The word Paul uses here signifies that He died *‘because of’ me* – that is, *it tells me that I am the reason He died*. [I have a handout for you at the end of this session which puts some flesh on this.] But let me just tell you of a Christmas card my wife and I received from some friends of ours – the printed message inside simply said, ‘His destiny was the cross. His mission was to die. His reason was you’. And that is precisely what Paul is saying here – except that, I note, he is saying it – not about me – but about my brother! He is hitting me very hard with the fact that the man whose spiritual ruin I’m willing to risk is the very reason that my Lord died.

But Paul isn’t finished yet. He has one more punch to land. Which brings us to **v12** : ‘The conscience of the weak Christian *wounded*.’

And so, Paul says, you ‘wound their weak conscience’ – the word ‘wound’ signifying ‘strike, smite, beat’. This word is used of the treatment which Sosthenes received when he was beaten in front of Gallio’s judgement seat at Corinth, Acts 18.17. And, in effect, Paul says, you will be meting out to your own brethren the very treatment which Sosthenes received – and that to your ‘weak’ brethren! How contemptible can you get – how low can you stoop – to strike one who is weak! Yes, but not only so, he is saying, but I want you to know that – in sinning against your brother by doing something to harm, injure or damage him and his conscience – you are sinning against Christ!

Because anything which undermines my brother’s faith or spiritual life – anything which threatens to cause spiritual harm to my brother – is a sin against the Lord Jesus. ‘Against Christ’ – not only because my brother belongs to Him – but because my brother is ‘in Christ’ and Christ in him. Yes, the same One who once died *for* my brother, v. 11 – now lives *in* him, v.12! And so for me to injure my brother is for me to injure my Lord – as this one-time Saul of Tarsus discovered dramatically way back on the Damascus Road.¹³ I note that Matthew uses this very word ‘wound’ when describing the treatment which Jesus received from the soldiers immediately before His crucifixion – when ‘they spit on Him, took the reed, and *smote* Him on the head’, 27.30. ‘You wouldn’t have done that to Jesus Himself, would you? Then don’t do it to Him through one of His members!’ And I sin against Christ also in that, in practice, I set out to frustrate the very object for which He died – which was to bless and do that man the utmost good. In doing something which will damage him, I therefore find myself at cross-purposes with Christ – find myself on a collision course with His gracious purpose for my brother. I am sinning therefore, Paul says, not only against my weak brother but against my wonderful Saviour.

And finally, we come to **Paul’s own resolve and example, v.13**

Just note how abruptly Paul switches from the plural to the singular – to the ‘I’ and the ‘my’ of v.13 – as he concludes by making a direct and personal application of these principles to himself.

I wonder if Paul could imagine someone at Corinth saying, ‘Hmm. This all sounds very fine – but does this man actually practise what he preaches? I mean, the whole thing about idol meat is entirely hypothetical in Paul’s case. He’s probably never eaten idol-meat in his life and probably has no taste for it. It’s not going to cost him anything to give up what he’s never had’.

'Then let me tell you', Paul insists, 'that – in the light of the sobering twin-truth that Christ both died for my brother and now lives in him – I am resolved – I am determined – that if meat – not only meat offered to idols – but any kind of meat – even 'kosher' meat – causes my brother to stumble or 'be snared' – I will by no means (emphatic – a double negative) eat flesh for ever more ('to the age') – lest I caused my brother to stumble. In other words, 'If it should come to it, I am willing to become a vegetarian for the rest of my days. And, if you think about it, what I ask of you Corinthians is far, far less costly.'

The Corinthians had approached the issue of eating idol meat from the standpoint of their 'knowledge' and their 'rights'. Paul approaches the issue from an entirely different direction – from the standpoint of his brother and his brother's spiritual good. To Paul it isn't a question of knowledge and of the rights which that knowledge brings – it's a question of love and of the responsibilities which that love brings.

Footnotes

¹ Compare the fiction of sacred manumission, 6.20; 7.23. See 'Light from the Ancient East', Adolf Diessmann; pages 319-326.

² The full list is : 1 Cor. 7.1, 25; 8.1; 12.1; 16.1, 12. It is, however, by no means certain that each of the subjects introduced by the expression 'Now concerning' were mentioned in the Corinthian's letter. It should be noted, for example, that Paul used the same Greek expression twice in 1 Thessalonians to introduce fresh subjects which had no background of previous correspondence; 1 Thess. 4.9; 5.1.

³ See Acts 15.21; 21.21-25.

⁴ Later – in the mid-90s – the Lord Himself condemned the churches of Pergamos and Thyatira for tolerating those who – as Balaam and Jezebel – taught God's people to eat food offered to idols – presumably as part of idolatrous practices.

Later again, Irenaeus wrote of the heretics of his time who 'addict themselves without fear to all those kinds of forbidden deeds of which the Scriptures assure us that "they who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God". For instance, they make no scruple about eating meats offered in sacrifice to idols, imagining that they can in this way contract no defilement'. Of Basilides, Irenaeus wrote, 'He attaches no importance to [the question regarding] meats offered in sacrifice to idols, thinks them of no consequence, and makes use of them without any hesitation'. And of Vanentinus and his followers, 'Their opinion as to the indifference of [eating of] meats and other actions, and as to their thinking that, from the nobility of their nature, they can in no degree at all contract pollution, whatever they eat or perform, they have derived it from the Cynics, since they do in fact belong to the same society as do these [philosophers]'. *'Against Heresies', Book 1 – VI.3; XXIV.5; and Book 2 – XIV.5.*

⁵ See especially 4.17; 7.17; 11.16; 14.36-37.

⁶ See 4.6, 18, 19; 5.2

⁷ 1 Chron.16.26; Psa. 96.5.

⁸ Compare Acts 17.16.

⁹ Jer. 2.28; 11.13.

¹⁰ 'Archeology and the Bible', Edwin Yamauchi, Zonervan, 1979 – page 82. Apparently, the Asclepeum in Corinth had three such banqueting rooms which could accommodate 11 people each. Small tables were provided and cooking appears to have been done in each of them. It is likely that they could be hired out for private functions – much as it is sometimes possible today to hire a room at a reception house or golf club. The Demeter precinct at the foot of Acrocorinth, dating back to at least 146 B.C., boasts 40 banqueting rooms.

¹¹ 'Sacrifices being of the nature of feasts, the Greeks and Romans on occasion of extraordinary solemnities placed images of the gods reclining on couches, with tables and food before them, as if they were really partaking of the things offered in sacrifice. This ceremony was called a lectisternium. Three specimens of the couches employed for the purpose are in the Glyptotek at Munich. One of them – of white marble somewhat more than two feet in height - has a cushion covered by a cloth hanging in ample folds down each side. At the most noted lectisternium at Rome, the statue of Jupiter was laid in a reclining posture on a couch. Jupiter Serapis and Juno or Isis, together with Apollo and Diana, are so exhibited with a table before them on the handle of a Roman lamp engraved by Bartoli (Luc. Ant. ii.34).' *Smith's 'Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities'; article 'Lectisterium'.*

¹² 'The idea is not extinction but ruin, loss, not of being but of well-being', W.E.Vine. An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words. Article 'Destroy' A.1. And see especially the use of the word in 2 Cor. 4.9; also in Luke 5.37.

¹³ 'Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against *the disciples of the Lord* ... "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *Me*? ... I am Jesus whom you persecute"', Acts 9.1, 4-5.

1 Corinthians 8

Food offered to idols - to eat or not to eat?

- (i) Preamble on the subject of 'knowledge', vv. 1-3
- (ii) Factor 1. There is only one God – idols have no real existence, vv.4-6
- (iii) Factor 2. The conscience of the 'weak' Christian :
 - *'Defiled'* by eating –
the weak 'stumbled', vv.7-9
 - *'Emboldened'* to eat –
the weak 'destroyed', vv.10-11
 - *'Wounded'* by eating –
a sin against Christ, v.12
- (iv) Paul's resolve and example, v.13

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