

Unity is one of the main themes in 1 Corinthians. We saw it right away in chapter 1, again in chapter 3, and now here in chapter 8. Unity.

Paul began verse 1 with the words “*now concerning*” in order to show that he is answering the 3rd question that the church had asked him. In chapter 7:1, Paul wrote “*now concerning*,” and answered their first question about marital intimacy, and in chapter 7:25, Paul wrote “*now concerning*” and answered their second question about marriage and singleness. Here in chapter 8:1, Paul is on question number 3 – about eating food offered to false gods.

Their first question –intimacy, and their second question marriage and singleness, we can understand. But their third question, in our times today this seems like a weird issue.

We hear of Christians disagreeing about religious beliefs, about church music and church programs, and even disagreeing about the color of the carpet, but we do not hear disagreements about whether the meat in our church crockpots was initially offered to false gods. How can we relate to this ancient passage?

We relate to it through our awareness and experience with **gray areas**, and we know about selfishness vs. love when it comes to gray areas. Some decisions are tough, and it helps to have the apostle’s help for this.

Some things are always right. To pray, to worship, to speak the truth, to praise God, to give, to work, to serve others.

Some things are always wrong – to lie, to steal, to commit adultery, to commit murder, to harm others.

But there are issues that do not fall neatly into the category of right or wrong. There are issues that are gray or foggy.

Since it is not clearly answered in the Bible, how are Christians supposed to determine whether a to practice or refrain from practicing the things in the gray areas?

Some look at the fact that it is not answered in the Bible, and say – then it must be right and okay. Others look at the fact that it is not answered in the Bible, and say, - then it might be wrong!

Gray areas cause divisions.

Unity is one of the main themes of 1 Corinthians.

Gray areas are things like what children’s activities are acceptable at Halloween, or some aspects of decorations at Christmastime, or whether to have wine at the Lord’s Supper. Lately, we have seen disagreements in churches about how a church should function during a pandemic. Gray areas can crop up over a lot of things. Let’s say a group of Christians in a church wanted to dress like a

Muslim or a Buddhist or even dress as the pope dresses, when they come to worship at a Christian church. Some would say it is just fine, because it does not matter what you wear. Others would say that sort of clothing would confuse others and be detrimental. Or, what if some Protestant Christians wanted to attend the Roman Catholic church and participate in the mass? Or attend the Buddhist temple and partake in their baptisms and their religious meals? Or what if someone brought leftover foods to a Sunday lunch from a nearby Satanic ritual?

Seven things to keep in mind as we start.

1) No refrigerators, so there was time pressure. Keep in mind that they had no refrigerators or freezers in Paul's lifetime. Once they butchered an animal to offer meat sacrifice to false gods, they would a) burn up part of it as a sacrifice, b) have the false priests eat part of it, and c) have the false worshippers eat part of it. If they had some left, they would sell it same day at the local farmer's market.

2) Center of town. All business transactions and all social activities including the false worship took place in the center of town, right where this meat was being butchered, cooked and sold. Christians had no choice to go elsewhere, for there was nowhere else. Christians could not avoid the area, and other food was hard to find. Because of the location, it became a very important question whether Christians could eat this meat, and that is why the question was being debated.

3) beliefs about demons. Food was offered to false gods for two reasons – to keep the gods happy, and to purify the food. So, you know how we pray before our meals? In the minds of the ancient city of Corinth, they believed that demons could enter you by attaching themselves to your food. So, people wanted to offer the food to false gods before eating, because they believed the food would then be purified and safe for eating. But new Christians might think the food was spiritually tainted by that same process of being offered to a false god.

4) there were differing opinions on this. Some Christians saw nothing wrong with eating whatsoever, for nothing is wrong with the meat biologically nor religiously. But other Christians could not justify eating in a pagan temple, or eating food that was first offered in pagan worship. The connection to the false gods was too much for them to buy and enjoy the meal.

5) Poverty caused another wrinkle. This meat was the only meat that the poor could afford to buy. The poor could not buy a whole animal, and then keep feeding it until the day of butchering. Instead, the poor were dependent on others selling just a few cuts of meat.

6) In the chaos of clash of religions and butchering the meat in order to first offer it for false worship, followed by moving the meat to sell, there was a lack of clear information about which meat had been sacrificed and which meat had not. The creative solution of having a few cuts of meat not offered, would not be feasible.

7) The food was not slaughtered in the proper way according to Jewish food rules. This is why down through the years, that Jews have maintained their own food markets and meat markets.

With those seven things in mind – no refrigeration, downtown was the unavoidable center of activity, beliefs about demons on foods, differing opinions, poverty, chaos about which meats had being offered where, and unacceptable meat processing, we better understand why the question put to Paul. So, here in chapter 8, Paul answered with wisdom for the gray areas of life that preserve church unity.

Within a gospel community, Christ wants us to decide our gray areas with others in mind.

There are two approaches to gray areas. 1) tender people – afraid to do things not clearly permitted by God, because of fear that it MIGHT be wrong. If they attempt it, they were conscience-stricken and miserable. 2) the other approach to gray areas is bold people. Not afraid. Not guilty. Charging ahead full steam.

What about unity? The problem is the relating between the bold people and the tender people. The bold will participate anyway, and make the tender people squirm. The bold get impatient when the tender raise objections. The bold would chide the tender, saying, ‘Don’t know you know anything? There is only one God, so all the other gods don’t exist.’ It is the bold who were saying the issue was one of knowledge.

Was knowledge making the bold people arrogant in their attitude? That brings us to verse 1, where Paul wrote that we all have knowledge. But knowledge is inferior to love. Love is what helps other people. Now Paul was big on knowledge and correct doctrine. Knowledge and doctrine is not enough. We need to love. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:15, ‘*speaking the truth in love.*’ We need people who will speak the truth, but in order for us to receive those words of truth, we need to know that they love us. The bold people can be correct, but terribly rude, and therefore cause damage to a community. Besides, knowledge is limited, as Paul went on to write in verse 2. No one knows as much as he needs to know, and most of us don’t know as much as we think we know. In verse 3, Paul explained that the knowledge of God does not result in the sort of rude and bold people that Corinth had. Knowledge does not lead us to brag about how much we know.

The people who are truly knowledgeable about the things of God do not even think about how much they know, and certainly don’t brag about it, and even if they were going to comment on it, would not do so in such a way as to hurt a tender person.

The real question, Paul informs them, was not how much we know, but rather whether we love God. Those who know God, love God. Those who love

God, got that way because God knew us first and because God loved us first. 1 John 4:19, “We love because God first loved us.” All of our knowledge of God and the things of God is a gift of God’s grace, so none of us have anything to boast about.

Has Paul gotten off topic? No. The bold Corinthians thought the problem was knowing whether to eat or not, but Paul revealed that the real problem was their prideful and sinful attitude of spiritual elitism. That is, the bold in the church were thinking that you are better than other people. Do you look down on other people, because you have read books that they have not read? Do you actually believe that you are advanced beyond the gray area, so it is not a gray area to you? In fact, you believe that everyone should see the issue the way that you do.

Here is what Paul says – forget about how much you know, and concentrate on loving God. When you love God, you will also love His children, your brothers and sisters in the Lord. That will put a whole new light on the issue of the gray area. Suddenly, you will see the division caused by you.

Only the humble can learn. So, Paul pushes them toward humility and love, opening the door for them to learn to say what we read in point one.

1. My viewpoint is not enough, I need yours. An action of mine, which would not be a sin in itself, could still become a sin for me to do if it harms another. I recognize that my own knowledge/beliefs are limited, and therefore cannot be the sole factor in my decisions within a gospel community. I must add my care for others and re-calculate what I should do. (v.1-6)

In verses 1-3, Paul showed that the bold ones were correct in the point that they were making, that idols are not true gods at all. Paul endorsed the points made by the bold ones. And Paul then added to their argument in verses 4-6, saying that calling something god or lord or a religion does not make it a god or a lord or a religion. Paul shows that there is only one God. And there is only one way to get to know the one God, and that is through the only mediator – the Lord Jesus Christ. We only exist through Him. His death and resurrection grant us life and existence. Those who offer idol worship are not connecting to God at all. Only Christians know God as our Father, and we have close relationship with Him through Christ our Lord. In God the Father and God the Son, we find acceptance, protection, and care. God is the one who created all things. Our existence is for God. God does not exist for us. We exist for God. How’s that for humility? God does not exist in order to give us comfort and gifts. Instead, we exist for God. God has designs and purposes for us. One of the purposes is to care for others. We love others. We see ourselves in relationship with other people made in the image of God, and especially people who believe in Jesus. We care for others, which brings us to our second point. In gray areas,...

2. We must care for the tender ones. At those times when I, as an unaccompanied individual person, would have the right and privilege to proceed, I, as a member of the family of God, will pause to re-consider how the circumstances impact my brother or sister who is more prone to concerns and a sense of guilt. (v.7-11)

Verse 8 – food does not have anything to do with our standing with God. We have in the Bible that Jesus taught this same thing. Matthew 15:17-18, “*Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person.*” So, Jesus taught the same point as Paul, basically saying...

What you EAT, cannot bring you guilt. What you SAY, can bring you guilt.

Now we better understand about why the Bible did not address whether or not people should eat food sacrificed to idols. It is because...

a) Those who did eat the meat were not one bit closer to God than those who refrained from eating the meat.

b) Those who did not eat the meat were not one bit closer to God than those who did eat the meat.

You can imagine the bold and confident people cheering after verse 8 – ‘yeah! See?! I have a right to do whatever I want! If some Christians cannot eat this meat, it’s their problem, not my problem. I have a right to do whatever I want.’ But Paul was about to give the bold people another surprise. The Christian life is not a solo flight. The Christian, no matter how bold he is, can never say that he does not care how his actions impact his fellow Christians. Here it is in verse 9, in the words of Paul “*take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak (or tender person).*”

Why? Because as Paul said to the bold and confident people in verse 7, not everyone possesses this knowledge that you have. Some are recently converted, and just learning. Hey, when you just start attending a church, there is a lot to learn! Christianity touches every aspect of our lives. If recently they were worshipping idols, now how can we expect them to think of the idols so differently so quickly? The new Christians understood that there is only one right God, but perhaps they had not yet fully grasped that there is only one real God.

To the bold, it was just meat. But to the tender, it was still “food sacrificed to idols.”

Because of this fact, the bold were not totally free to eat the meat. Say what? Why not? Paul tells a little story starting in verse 10 – let’s suppose that a Christian whose conscience is still troubled about eating the meat offered to idols, sees a fellow Christian go into one of the false temples and eat that food? What kind of effect would the action of the first Christian have on the second Christian? And

here is the key question. DO YOU CARE?

Most honest people would admit that in Paul's example, the first Christian would have a bad impact on the second Christian. BUT DOES THE FIRST PERSON CARE ABOUT THE SECOND PERSON?

About Paul's story...

Do you know what a caring person would say – we cannot do that!

Do you know what an uncaring person would say – so what?

And in verse 11, Paul addressed that lack of caring directly. By your 'knowledge' this tender person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died." This is not drama for the sake of drama. Paul brings in the cross and the death of Christ in order to quickly win the argument? No.

How can a person who claims to know God and know things about God, be so unaware of the fact that Christ cares enough about the brother or sister to die for him or her, and secondly, be so unaware that the willingness of Christ to die for that brother ought to change my willingness to forgo some meat for that brother?

Paul shows that the bold brother has sinned against the tender brother or sister. That brings us to the third point.

3. We are all tied to Christ. Whenever I sin against brothers and sisters, I sin against Christ! Accordingly, in the gray areas I will be lovingly careful to weigh the impact of my actions on everyone around me. (v.12-13)

The solutions in the gray areas for Christian are not found by answering one question but two questions. To say that intellectually I can defend my action and do this without guilt, is only one question. The question of knowledge. But we must add the second question – the question of love. If I participate in that particular action, how will it affect my brothers and sisters in Christ. The solutions in gray areas for Christians are not found by answering one question (the question of knowledge), but rather by answering two questions (the question of knowledge and the question of love).

Knowledge is important, and the freedom that your knowledge brings you is also important.

But love for my fellow brothers and sisters is MORE important. More important than your freedom and more important than your knowledge of the issues. Why? Because Christ valued our brothers and sisters so highly that He died for them, as Paul has literally just written in verse 11. There are times when the gospel demands that love for others is more important than our enjoyment of our privileges and freedoms.

Love for Christians is more important than my permission to indulge in my pleasures.

Let me be clear – there come times in the gray areas of Christian life, when I am expected by Christ to abstain from things that I would remain free to do in Christ, because my brothers and sisters do not see it that way, and they would be hurt, and our unity would be damaged. We cannot treat lightly those that Christ has paid so dear a price to redeem. We cannot boldly march forward, unconcerned for the stragglers. Christ does not allow a bull in a China shop to be free to toss his head around and break all of the fine glass items, because he can.

There is a certain ignobility of the answer to motive when asked why did you do that? ‘Because I can’” That is not a Christlike motive.

The presence of something I want to do, but the presence also of my brother who now prevents me from enjoying what I want to do, forces this question – which do I love more - my rights or my brother?

Gray areas don’t get solved by asking what you think and go for it.

We don’t get to do whatever we want.

There is another principle at stake – no doing those things that will harm others.

Our motto could be “Do no harm.”

Or more accurately, “My Christian freedom does not give me freedom to do others harm.”

Conclusion:

Whose job is it to maintain unity? All of us. We all have the job of maintaining unity.

Freedom means NOT doing things that will harm others.

We don’t understand true freedom from God in the church or in the nation until we understand that there are times that freedom must be used to say no to our own desires and wants.

Unity requires a vision for the common good.

Title of this sermon is, “Less Me, More Us.” That means, in my decision making – let there be “Less of me, and more of us.” Less concern for myself, and more concern for all of us. The common good.

What is freedom? Freedom is caring about us more than I care about me.

Listen to Paul summarize in verse 13, “*Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*” Never! Notice the word Never! Paul permanently would give up his right to eat meat, if his brother or sister needed him to do so. Paul is giving us this statement as an example for us to follow.

Liberty is for people who love.

Liberty is when I give up my liberty in order to meet the higher goal of blessing you.

There is no one who understands freedom more than the one who gave His

life for others.

In a gray area in the church, we don't want to have liberty without love. We don't want knowledge without service to one another.

Christians choose to do not what is in their own best interest, but rather what is in the best interest of the church of Jesus Christ.

In Matthew 25:40, Jesus said to those who blessed others, "*as you did it to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.*"

End.