
Why are You Tripping Up Your Brother?

1 Corinthians 8¹⁵

Cultural background...

Idolatrous temples everywhere...

Temple restaurants as country clubs and social life...

Unimaginable depravity and debauchery associated with the Temples...

Practical divisions between groups of people...

Jews and Gentiles with very different backgrounds and histories...

Those with strict consciences and those with free consciences...

Those who reacted against their backgrounds and those who believed they were not affected by their backgrounds...

So the church was divided on socio-economic grounds. It was divided along ethnic and cultural lines. The flash point was going to the temple restaurants and eating the meats that had been offered to idols.

Paul devotes the next three chapters to dealing with these issues. We call the underlying issues, Christian liberty. Christian liberty is simply the choices we have to make where the Bible gives us no commands. Ever since the beginning of the church, this area of the Christian life has been misunderstood and abused. Narrow legalism has tried to use these texts to force others into their strictures. Haughty spiritual high mindedness has looked down on and dismissed the concerns of others. So Christian love has not been evident much less has governed the interaction.

Now, go back with me into the first century to the church gathered in Corinth. Here is a church whose self-perception is of marked spirituality, deep knowledge of the Word, powerful expressions of ministry, cultural openness and tolerance. The truth is that the church was carnal, divided and cliquish, self-absorbed, tolerating of sin, misusing and misrepresenting spiritual gifts and legalistic on peripheral issues. In the midst of their mess, chaos and confusion, the church wrote to Paul seeking his counsel on many issues.

The issues they spoke of echo in our culture in different ways. If we are not careful, the truth and applications of the text will be left in the mists of obscurity leaving us to repeat the mistakes they made. So, we will need to exposit the passage in its context, to develop principles from which we make application for our place in redemptive history.

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The Mutual Concern

(v.1-3)

Paul's approach to this problem makes it evident that the Corinthians were dealing with symptoms and not diseases. They were concerned with buying meat. Paul is concerned with more primary and basic issues.

¹ Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. ² If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³ But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

Introduces the Subject

(v.1a)

One of the issues they were concerned about seems almost incomprehensible to us today. You see, there were two ways to buy meat in their day. You could go the open market and purchase your meat there. Or you could go to the smaller markets run by the pagan temples. Now the price at the temple markets was much lower due to the fact that the meat being sold had once been part of an offering to a pagan deity or idol. Many Christians went to the temple meat market to purchase their meat. Many Christians felt that was sin in that it was a compromise of their standards. How would people know if they were there to buy meat or worship at the temple? And is not the meat contaminated by the use it has been put to? This was the question before them.

Further, they are concerned about going into the restaurant associated with the pagan Temple and eating there. This concern was primarily because they would be eating food that had been offered to idols. Secondary to that, they were concerned about being in such a place where they would be exposed to idolatry and would be seen by others entering a pagan Temple.

Quotes their Letter

(v.1b)

The quote is "we know that we all have knowledge."

In their letter they spoke to a number of issues by way of statements and questions, which Paul quotes back to them in his response. (Part of our problem today is that reading the book of 1 Corinthians is somewhat like hearing one side of a telephone call.)

In other words, the Corinthians are in essence saying that those who are saying we should not buy our meat at the temple market ought to know better. We all have a shared knowledge about this thing.

Evaluates their Attitude

(v.2-3)

The (ESV) captures this very well, "This 'knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up."

Now why does he say this to them? Paul, who is often deeply concerned about the ignorance of Christians, is here seemingly concerned about the dangers of knowledge. Well, those dangers are very real. Paul is not saying that we are not to seek knowledge, but rather we must be carefully evaluating ourselves to see if *knowledge gained is elevating*

self-importance. In fact, the bottom line (if I may pre-empt the study a bit) is that they were using right knowledge and doctrine in wrong ways.

Galatians 5:6 reflects the principle of this passage. Paul writes, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.” In other words, the mark of true Christians is faith – (a body of belief or seeing with our understanding the reality of spiritual truths) – going to work in the sphere of or in the factory of love.

The people writing this question fully expect that Paul will affirm them and their response. They expect Paul to say, “Yes, because of this knowledge it is perfectly ok to continue to buy and eat at the pagan temple. So what follows I am sure came as a surprise. The strongest evidence, according to verse 2, that a person does not know what he ought to know is when he thinks he knows everything he needs to. What is needed is a love for God which affirms, not that we have arrived in our knowledge, but that God knows us.

The Majestic Concepts

(v.4-6)

These verses are recognized by most scholars as a creedal summary of a larger body of teaching.

⁴ 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.” ⁵ For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”— ⁶ 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.

The Evaluation of Idolatry

(v.4)

Here again, he seems to be quoting them. There are two propositions here:

Idols have no objective reality in the world. In essence, idols are material representations of spiritual illusions. They are the smoke and mirrors of error and false worship.

There is only one God. This is asserting that God is not like Zeus, who is the chief among a pantheon of gods. No, God is the only God there is. The huge array of gods and goddesses represented by the statutes and idols were figments of men’s imaginations.

Paul does not leave this discussion here. Later on, he will point out that the enabling influence behind the ideas are demons.

The Exaltation of God

(v.5-6)

Paul expands on the brief statement with the intent of showing that they missed the point of asserting these truths. He establishes two categories and draws the implications from them.

One God - The Father. Note the importance of the prepositions: *from Him* are all things and *for Him* we exist. God is our ultimate frame of reference.

One Lord - Jesus Christ. Again note the different prepositions: *by whom* are all things and *through whom* we exist. There is only one supreme authority and that authority is upheld by the fact that He created and sustains us in our very existence.

Now, why deal with this now? Why are these facts so important? Because they were the true statements of doctrine being wrongly used.

The Needed Correction

(v.7-8)

Paul shifts the focus from the mind to the conscience. The Corinthians had knowledge, but not understanding. So he goes on to expand their knowledge so as to cultivate understanding.

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

Understand the Role of the Conscience

(v.7)

Not everyone understands these facts the same way as you do. The role of the conscience is to pass judgment on the rightness or wrongness of choices. It is never to be used to determine if something is morally right or wrong. The conscience is like logic. Logic only tells us if our argument is valid. It cannot tell us if it is true. The conscience is that voice in your soul which evaluates right and wrong and then accuses us establishing guilt. "Let your conscience be your guide" usually is too late. Now, does this contradict what we teach about not violating our conscience? No, it means that our conscience responds to what we believe to be true. Further, Paul's point here is that the conscience *can be weakened by being defiled*. In other texts, the conscience *can be callused by constant exposure to sin*.

Because of their past experience with the pagan temples and the idolatry, their conscience is defiled by the weakness of thinking of the food as having been offered to idols. Their conscience is like the old computer screens which bore the lasting imprint of images left on them.

Understand the Unimportance of Food

(v.8)

Second, they must come to grips with the fact our relationship with God is not enhanced or destroyed by what we eat. There is an interesting play in words here. The food they were arguing over had been presented to an idol in order for the worshipper to be accepted by the idol. They were concerned that the food they were arguing over was preventing them from being accepted by God. It does not matter whether you eat or do not eat the foods under discussion.

In other words, because of their past, their conscience is saying something is wrong which is not sinful in and of itself. So what should they do when they were invited by a family friend or a colleague at work to go to Astarte's Temple for lunch? What should they do when they sit down with a Christian and the food is Temple food?

The Loving Caution

(v.9-12)

Paul says that they had better be careful. No one (on both sides of the issue) was to assume that they could proceed ahead without some careful consideration of the consequences.

⁹ But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹² Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

The Exhortation

(v.9)

Be careful that the exercise of your rights does not cause another to stumble. The word freedom or liberty here might better be rendered *right*.

Now, let us be very careful here. First, the weak person in this text is the one who cannot eat. His conscience is weak because he has very strong convictions about something that is not sin. This is the opposite of what I was brought up with and some of you believe. Very strong scruples about wisdom issues and choices *render the conscience weak*. If you believe, for example, that something that is not forbidden, like tattoos, are sinful, your conscience is weak.

Second, we need to be careful of the word *stumble*. This word **does not mean** to be offended by your tattoo, or raising hands in worship, or going to a bar. Taking offense at these things is not what Paul is telling us to be careful about. I am not responsible for you being wrongly offended over the things I am free to do. Otherwise, the church would be bound to the weakest conscience taking offense. Rather, stumbling in this text means, *to do the thing the conscience says "no" to*. So, listen to how Paul explains what "stumbling" means...

The Explanation of the Consequences

(v.10-12)

Paul points to what can happen when we insist on the full exercise of our rights and liberties.

Weaker Christians may be encouraged to violate their conscience by the example we set. Certainly, we should not put people in a position that they would violate their conscience. Don't invite that person to go to a bar; go somewhere else.

Your knowledge will then be used to destroy the weaker Christian. Here is right doctrine used in the wrong way. Yes, you are free to go, to do, to buy. That is true. But that could be a truth club used to wound or harm your Christian brother or sister.

You sin against Christ when you callously ignore the spiritual condition of weaker Christians. In other words, horizontal violations of love for Christians become vertical transgression of righteousness of Christ.

So, if all this is true, then what?

The Proper Conclusion

(v.13)

¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Paul here commits himself to not eating. It is an inevitable conclusion, is it not? If the issue causes by brother to stumble – that is to do something which violates his conscience, then I resolve not to do it ever again. See the flow? Problem → Promise → Purpose

There is a sense in which Paul is indulging in over-statement here. He is, in a way, playing to the tendency of the Corinthians to overstate and over respond to everything. But we still get the point.

Reflect and Respond

When we cause weaker Christians to violate their conscience on the grounds of superior knowledge:

We ruin someone Christ has redeemed

We sin against Christ our ruler.

Here are a series of **errors** and **self-justifications** we must guard against.

My knowledge of the truth gives me the right to do anything that is not sin.

I am not responsible for others response to my liberty.

Christian individualism and independence are positive and desirable traits.

Do some self-examination:

How do I feel about my rights (liberties) as a Christian?

Which concerns me more: protecting my rights or preserving another's purity?

In what areas may my conscience be defiled and therefore needs to be purified and re-trained?

In what areas am I using truth or doctrine in a wrong way?

Do I truly love the person who appears to be a legalist to me? Do I truly love the person who seems overly careful about non-issues?

May God grant us the kind of grace and love that will be willing to give up our right to do something that I am free to do.