

Cornerstone Baptist Church

*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.
(1 Corinthians 10:31–33 ESV)*

Doubtful Things (In Difficult Times)

July 26th, 2020

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

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Introduction:

Well good morning church! It is so good to be with you again today! I'd love for you to open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 8:1-13. As you know, last week we completed our 10-week series on apologetics. God willing, we will begin a new series on 1 John dealing with the matter of Christian assurance on September 13th and we thought it wise to use the intervening weeks to cover a few topics of particular relevance to our situation as a church in the midst of this pandemic.

This morning's message has to do with how to make difficult decisions about doubtful things in a world in which we see through a glass darkly. What factors should we consider and in what priority? That's what we are trying to get at today.

Hopefully by now you have your Bibles open to 1 Corinthians chapter 8. I'll read and review the passage to ensure that we've properly understood it and then we'll see if we can't EXTRACT the relevant principles so as to APPLY THEM AFRESH in our context today. Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 1:

Reading And Reviewing The Text:

Now concerning food offered to idols:

You may have heard before that 1 Corinthians is what Bible scholars refer to as “an occasional letter” – meaning that Paul wrote it in response to specific issues and problems that had arisen in a church that he had planted. In chapter 7 they had asked him some questions about sex and marriage and so Paul spent a whole chapter answering those questions and HERE, OBVIOUSLY they have asked him a question about meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

In 1st century Roman Corinth almost all meat would have been associated with idol worship to some extent or another. We need to remember that in the ancient world people did not eat meat as regularly as they do today. Meat was mostly for special occasions – the fulfilling of a vow or the celebration of a special feast day or holy day – and thus the most common place to eat meat would have been in one of the large eating areas associated with one of the pagan temples. We have invitations actually from the Roman world wherein a wealthy individual invites some friends to join him in the courtyard of a local temple to share in the meat associated with one of his particular sacrifices. **F.F. Bruce** shares one of these invitations in his commentary. It says:

‘Chaeremon invites you to dine at the table of the lord Sarapis at the Sarapeion (sc. temple of Sarapis) tomorrow, the 15th, at the 9th hour.’¹

That’s the ancient equivalent of a neighbourhood bar-b-q – how exciting!!! The problem is that before the bar-b-q, prayers would be made to Sarapis and you would be expected to politely bow your head, and then of course, there is the fact that the rest of the carcass had been burned on the altar to Sarapis as part of some sort of vow or worship offering – and so the question naturally arose:

Is it appropriate for Christians to involve themselves in such affairs?

On the one hand, we do want to be salt and light, don’t we? For crying out loud church, we just spent 10 weeks preparing to have conversations at this backyard bar-b-q, did we not? That was the whole point of that apologetics series we just did. And now the invitation comes and we aren’t sure if we should go.

¹F.F. Bruce as cited in David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, ed. John R. W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today*. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove. Bible Speaks Today-NT: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 148.

How do we handle this?

That was the question that these dear people sent to the Apostle Paul and before you think that this is an easy question to answer – don't forget that there were PLENTY of stories in the Old Testament that warned against participating in just these sorts of experiences.

Do you remember the story of the Baal of Peor in Numbers 25? In that story some very nice young ladies from the neighbourhood invited the young men of Israel to a backyard bar-b-q that turned into a giant pagan orgy – that's not even close to an exaggeration, you can read the story for yourself in Numbers 25. In verse 5 of that chapter, God called the nation to account, he said:

“Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the LORD, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.” (Numbers 25:4 ESV)

In the judgment of God this decision by the chiefs to allow the young men to participate in this festival was so terrible that the whole lot of them had to be executed on the spot. That story is in the Bible - and it seems that there may have been some people – probably some justifiably nervous leaders – in the church at Corinth who were aware of this story and who, very wisely I would say, wanted to get an opinion from the Apostle Paul before making a final decision. I'll read the whole passage to you now, beginning again at the very beginning:

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.

⁴Therefore, 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”—⁶yet 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.

⁷However, 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.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. ¹³ Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:1–13 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Of course we are only listening in on one half of this conversation, but the situation here seems reasonably straightforward: apparently there was a group within the church at Corinth that felt perfectly free to go to these pagan festivals. After all – they had knowledge!! They knew very well that there was no such thing as a “pagan god” – these were just dumb idols. Therefore, it would be absolute lunacy to miss out on such a fabulous opportunity to reach out to our unsaved friends and neighbours. How are we ever going to share the Gospel of Jesus with these people if we refuse to enjoy their hospitality?

That was their argument.

And Paul concedes a great deal of it.

He says, yes, of course you are right:

“an idol has no real existence,” (1 Corinthians 8:4 ESV)

And:

“there is no God but one.” (1 Corinthians 8:4 ESV)

So you are correct he says. These poor people are terribly deceived and there is no pagan god cursing your T-bone steak. Food in and of itself does not commend us to God.

We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. (1 Corinthians 8:8 ESV)

So – you are right – as far as your “knowledge” goes, but there are a few factors that you failed to consider. First of all, Paul says, you have forgotten that we do live in a spiritual world. He says that later in the argument in chapter 10 verse 20. He says:

“I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.²² Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?” (1 Corinthians 10:20–22 ESV)

We don’t want a repeat of that whole Baal of Peor incident do we? We mustn’t make God angry by even appearing to dally in demonic activities. You’ve forgotten to think about that.

And you’ve forgotten to consider the weaker brother.

He says that in chapter 8 verse 7. You know all these wonderful things – you have really excellent theology – but:

“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.” (1 Corinthians 8:7 ESV)

You know that there is no reality to that idol – good for you, but they don’t know that. Baby Christians haven’t had time to put all that together.

I’ve told you this story before but years ago when I was working in India with the Guardians of Hope program an old widow who had recently become a Christian was asked to give her testimony. The Guardians of Hope program provides support to families in India affected by AIDS. Her son and her daughter in law had both died of AIDS and so this poor old widow was raising her two grandchildren on her own and she had been marvelously helped by the program. She came to microphone and she said: “When my son died and his wife, the Hindu gods did not help us. Our neighbours shunned us. But the Christian God, Jesus – he helped us. He sent people to care for us, so now I worship him.”

Now, that’s not very good theology is it? But it is exactly what you would expect from a baby Christian saved out of a pagan culture.

But of course, I'm a grown-up Christian. I've been a Christian for years! I know perfectly well that there are no Hindu gods – what utter nonsense! What primitive foolishness! And so suppose, for evangelism sake I went into the local Hindu temple and sat there and nodded my head at the prayers and ate their special meal – all so as to share the Gospel with these lost people who desperately need Jesus – suppose that dear woman SAW THAT – how would that affect her? What might that draw her back into? How would that influence her in her developing love for Jesus?

That's the issue!

And you people didn't think about that, Paul says.

You just wanted the bar-b-q:

“And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother (or the sister) for whom Christ died.” (1 Corinthians 8:11 ESV)

That's what Paul says. Now, of course, we aren't likely to face a scenario exactly like that here in North America – and yet we do regularly encounter situations that require us to BALANCE KNOWLEDGE, FREEDOM, LOVE and CONSIDERATION of our weaker brother – don't we? I believe we are facing such a situation right now and so we are very interested in the principles that may be extracted from this inspired and authoritative text.

Extracting The Principles:

The first of those I imagine would be this;

1. “Knowledge” is frequently over-rated

The ESV assumes, I think rightly, that Paul is quoting back to them some of the words and phrases they had used in their letter. Look at verses 1-2:

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. (1 Corinthians 8:1–2 ESV)

So we can easily imagine how their letter might have gone. “Dear Paul, we are facing a very difficult situation here in Corinth. We have to figure out how to handle this whole issue of pagan festivals – whether we should go or not. Of course, those of us with knowledge understand that there is no such thing as a pagan idol, but we have some weak and sensitive souls among us who are slowing the rest of us down. Would you be able to set them straight? Thanks ever so much, your loving friends in Corinth.”

Oh yes, Paul replies, “we all possess knowledge” don’t we? Just enough knowledge to make us dangerous to everyone around us! Now, of course, Paul doesn’t DENIGRATE KNOWLEDGE – here or anywhere else. In 1 Corinthians 1:4-5 he said:

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus,⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge (1 Corinthians 1:4–5 ESV)

So knowledge is a good thing, Paul says, and I’m very thankful that you have it – but it isn’t quite as important as you all seem to think. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul says famously:

“And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and **all knowledge**, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:2 ESV)

Knowledge without LOVE is worth NOTHING.

You see in this church the fundamental problem was that they OVER VALUED GIFTS and KNOWLEDGE – and Paul is so wise in how he handles that. He is NUANCED! How incredibly RARE it is today to meet a nuanced Christian leader! We are far too often BINARY in all our thinking. Something is GOOD or EVIL. A person is FRIEND or HERETIC – we have no middle ground anymore, it seems in far too many cases – but what Paul does consistently in this letter is REPRIORITIZE. He does that with tongues – their favourite gift. He doesn’t DELIGITIMIZE

tongues but he does DEPRIORITIZE TONGUES – and he does the exact same thing here. He says knowledge is WONDERFUL – but it is LESS IMPORTANT than LOVE – and if it attempts to operate without love, it is good for nothing.

That’s the first principle we want to extract from this story. When we are trying to make difficult decisions about doubtful matters in a confusing cultural context – YES let’s do our research, YES let’s look things up on the internet, YES let’s consult our favourite online Bible teachers – yes, yes, yes! Knowledge is wonderful – BUT let us BEWARE that knowledge tends to PUFF UP – it makes us proud, it makes us over-confident – and very often it causes us to NEGLECT the greater concern of Christian love.

Paul’s fundamental point here is that LOVE must set the limit on the exercise of our Christian liberty, not knowledge. We don’t DO AS MUCH AS WE UNDERSTAND – we DO WHATEVER will best serve and protect our weaker brother. Love has the last say, that’s what Paul is teaching here, and we must be very careful to see that.

The second principle we may extract from this story is that:

2. Not all “knowledge” is equally valuable

Paul says something very interesting in verses 2-3; he says:

If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. (1 Corinthians 8:2–3 ESV)

Over the course of this letter Paul will several times appear to be making the point that most of what we think we know in this world has to be considered “partial and imperfect”. There is so much confusion in this world – and so much deceit – and our minds are so small – and this universe is so big – so even when we “KNOW” something, we probably don’t know nearly as much as we think. So for example, in 1 Corinthians 13:12 Paul says:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Corinthians 13:12 ESV)

Mirrors in those days were polished brass so they gave you the idea, but with significant distortion – so Paul is saying here – that’s how it is with us! We see things partially – but always with a fair bit of distortion. Our sin gets in the way – but thankfully, one day, if we are in Christ, we will know fully even as we are fully known.

That’s the knowledge that really matters.

The Pillar Commentary is helpful here. Commenting on our passage in chapter 8 verses 2-3:

“the point is that they are infatuated with abstract theological or philosophical knowledge but remain woefully deficient in their knowledge (and love) of God. True theological understanding, and certainly true knowledge of God, does not lead one to act in a way which is insensitive to others and offensive to God.”²

They were accumulating treasures of lesser value – all the while neglecting to pursue the ultimate treasure of intimacy with God through Jesus Christ!

You see, maturity, in large measure, involves knowing which things are worth PURSUING and which are not.

Thirdly, and lastly, in terms of these enduring principles, we need to understand that:

3. A mature Christian is willing to do (or not do) all manner of things for the sake of the weaker brother

We see that principle stated clearly in chapter 8 verse 9:

But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. (1 Corinthians 8:9 ESV)

You are right of course, Paul says. Pagan gods do not exist so your rack of lamb is not cursed and therefore you are perfectly within your rights to eat and drink whatever you like at the festival.

²Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 377.

And yet – you must take great care to ensure that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to your weaker brother – or sister. Her spiritual safety – her continued growth and development – must matter to you INFINITELY MORE than a good meal and a good drink in the company of your friends and neighbours.

That's the principle.

And then Paul illustrates that from his own life in chapter 9. Paul had many rights as an Apostle – all of which he was willing to lay aside for the sake of the Gospel. He says in chapter 9 verses 22-23:

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:22–23 ESV)

That is the very definition of maturity.

If you really understand Christianity then you understand that the only thing that matters is the salvation of souls and the glory of God in Christ - everything else is indifferent – you can take or leave it as the situation dictates – as long as nothing gets in the way of the mission. That's the principle.

Now how are we to apply these principles in a COVID19 world?

Applying These Principles Afresh In A COVID19 World:

We haven't left ourselves a great deal of time for this task, but I don't suspect that we will NEED a great deal of time. Once you EXTRACT the principles from the context the application seems rather obvious, doesn't it? The first application that comes immediately into my mind is this:

1. We must spend more time studying the things which truly matter

And less time studying the things that truly DON'T MATTER.

John Piper said famously: “One of the great uses of Twitter and Facebook will be to prove at the Last Day that prayerlessness was not from lack of time.”³

That cuts pretty deep doesn't it?

We can get lost on those platforms. We can follow posts and links thinking that we are chasing down clues that will PROVE once and for all that this entire COVID19 virus was actually engineered by the Chinese on behalf of the Biden campaign in order to bring down President Trump! You're just one more article away from PROVING that beyond a shadow of a doubt before you realize that you've spent 50 hours on this project over the last 3 months in comparison to the 2 hours – maybe – that you've spent on bible reading and personal prayer.

That's a huge problem, brothers and sisters.

What do you know anyway?

And how reliable is the internet?

After all:

“The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9 NKJV)

Brothers and sisters, one of the marks of maturity in this life is understanding that none of us is completely unbiased in his or her pursuit of knowledge. We are sinners – we don't so much pursue truth as CURATE BIAS.

We all do it.

³ Posted on Twitter. ☺

The rebellious person seeks out a hundred articles reinforcing their desire NOT to obey the government.

The fearful person seeks out a hundred articles reinforcing their desire to hide out in their basement until the Lord returns.

Enough.

What do you know?

What do any of us know?

For now we see through a glass through a glass darkly. For now we know in part.

But the great news is that we can be fully known by God through Jesus Christ – so why don't you study that? Give the best of your time to exploring the greatest TRUTHS in the universe.

And then secondly, and I think lastly, for the sake of time:

2. We must be willing to make all manner of concessions for the sake of the weak and the lost among us

Are you quite certain that you have this whole mask conspiracy figured out?

Are you? Are you really?

Well of course, you are free to think whatever you like, and you could be right, but just be aware that by your “knowledge” the weak person may be destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.

If you decide to abuse the mask policy that was released on July 13th by the Simcoe Muskoka Health Unit and to claim some sort of religious exemption for wearing your mask, and if you are able to influence several other Christians to go along with you and if you FLAUNT your so called “knowledge” on Social Media and there IS a second wave or a further outbreak, then it is

altogether likely that the government will turn on churches and their large public gatherings and rescind all the freedoms we presently enjoy.

And then who knows how many people will be denied the opportunity to sit under the Gospel and to receive in person CARE and DISCIPLESHIP because YOU REFUSED TO BE RESTRAINED in the exercise of your freedoms.

That is the essence of immaturity – how much better to be like the Apostle Paul who said:

if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:13 ESV)

Paul's last word on this entire question is worth stating in full. He says in chapter 10 verses 31-33:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God,³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. (1 Corinthians 10:31–33 ESV)

You see, for us friends, the issue isn't whether or not we should go to the bar-b-q, the issue is whether we will have a testimony left by the time we get to the bar-b-q.

That's the issue in our day!

And so, we need to right size our sense of certainty and we need to restrain our Christian liberty – and all for the sake of love. Love for Christ and love for the lost and the lowly – thanks be to God.

Let's pray together.

Amen. Worship team, will you come and lead us?