

Idolatry, Conscience & Love

The Vision / February 2010

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1 Corinthians 8:1 (NKJV) “Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.”

What should be the proper Christian’s stance regarding pagan practices in our culture? What about Christmas, Lent, Easter, and other Christian holidays that are adapted from pagan holidays? What about holiday practices such as Christmas trees, Christmas presents, Easter eggs, and other practices that are in part adapted from secular or even pagan traditions? Unfortunately the resulting controversy within the Christian community has sometimes resulted unloving attitudes and broken fellowship. Rather than ignore this controversy, Paul tackled the issue in the eighth chapter of 1 Corinthians.

From the onset we must be clear that Paul emphatically commanded Christians to flee from idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:14). He goes on to say, “*You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons.*” (1 Corinthians 1:21). Christians are clearly instructed to avoid any involvement with idol worship.

Christians in Corinth had turned from idolatry to believe in the one True God (1 Corinthians 10:14-22). As a result, their consciences were very sensitive in regard to their past involvement with idols. They did not want to compromise their faith through any involvement with idols. Unfortunately, unlike the Jewish nation whose society was built around the law of God, the Gentile culture in which they lived was built around the worship of pagan gods. For believers living in Corinth, avoiding things tainted by idolatry was impossible. For instance, much of the meat sold in the local food market had been offered to idols at the local temple of Apollo. Knowing this, should they buy and eat it? If an unbeliever invited them over to eat and said that the meat had been offered to an idol, should the Christian eat it? These difficult questions Paul addressed in this chapter.

According to Paul, the problem behind the controversy stems from pride based on knowledge of spiritual things, particularly involving worship. The answer to the controversy was a response of love rather than knowledge. How could knowledge cause such a problem? Quoting Paul’s own words, he said, “knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.” (Verse 1) In other words, those who think they “know” something are quick to judge those who are ignorant. In the Corinthian church, some had knowledge of the demonic nature of idolatry and used that knowledge to judge those who seemed to ignore it. Others had knowledge of their liberty in Christ and used that knowledge to proudly parade their liberty before their weaker brothers and sisters. Knowledge apart from love will destroy the fragile fellowship between believers. Love, on the other hand, will use its knowledge to build up the church.

In order to clear up a major element of the confusion, Paul first addressed the superstitions regarding idols. Some overemphasized the idol as if it were a real god, Paul, on the other hand, makes it clear that an idol is nothing (i.e. not a god) because there is only one God, the Father (Verse 4-6). It is God the Father, not idols, who created all things through our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus there is nothing inherently good or evil in what God has created. It all belongs to Him and is made for Him. Those who have this knowledge are able to receive all that God has made as a gift from Him regardless of its previous association with idolatry: “*For every creature of God is good,*

and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.” (1 Timothy 4:4-5).

Paul insists that food is ethically neutral: *“But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.”* (1 Corinthians 8:8). Therefore one believer with the knowledge that all things are from God could eat meat from the marketplace and be approved before God, while another who had consciousness of the idol would not eat and also be approved before God. Both of these different responses were done out of love for God. What should the attitude of believers be toward each other in such matters? Paul said in Romans 14:3, *“Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has received him.”*

The key to a proper response in questionable things is to maintain a good conscience toward God and to consider one another in love. Our conscience is the voice of our human spirit that either approves or condemns us in what we do. Our conscience approves or condemns us based on the knowledge that it has received. In matters of eating meat sacrificed to idols, those whose conscience was weak in the knowledge of Christ associated the meat with the idol. Those whose conscience was free in the knowledge of Christ associated everything with God. The issue is worship. Those who refrained from eating did so as an act of worship to God. Those who ate also did so as an act of worship to God. Again, the key is our worship. This applies in other areas as well. Paul said, *One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself.”* (Romans 14:5-7). We must be convinced in our own minds (or consciences) of what we approve or disapprove because it involves our worship unto God. In love we must give each other the freedom in Christ to do the same, for the Lord alone is our judge.

In addition to a pure conscience before God, we are to be guided by love for the spiritual well-being of a weaker brother. If we have a clear conscience to eat meat sacrificed to an idol but our freedom emboldens a weaker brother to participate in idolatry, then out of loving concern for the weaker brother Paul says we should refrain from exercising our freedom (1 Corinthians 8:9-13). Thus our freedom must be guided by love to do what is in the best interest of our brother or sister in Christ.

When we are guided by a pure conscience toward God and a love for the brethren, the church is built up. Whether it be meat, trees, eggs, or anything else that God has created, it all belongs to Him and it is good. Nothing that He has made is evil in itself. What is approved or disapproved by God is ultimately based on how it is received and how it is offered in worship

Paul said that we all have knowledge. Let us walk in the knowledge we have been given and ask God for more. Let us use the knowledge we have received through His Word to worship Him with a pure conscience, and lovingly seek the spiritual well-being of those who are weak.