

THE FUNDAMENTALITY OF IDENTIFICATION WITH CHRIST IN HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Christian Freedom & Brotherly Obligations

1 Corinthians 8:1-10

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The city of Corinth (located 80km west of Athens) was an effective center of business activities and was notorious, even among the pagans, for its indulgence in idolatry, sexual sins, alcoholism, pride, desire for pre-eminence, abuses, misuse, etc (*cf. Acts 17:16b; 1 Cor. 6:9-11*).

There was the temple of Venus with its one thousand “priestesses,” who offered prostitution to its “worshippers.”

Corinth was not an easy field for the gospel mission. Corinth was a world rapidly becoming more ungodly as each day pass by.

The Corinthian church was in a pagan society (*existing in an immoral environment*) struggling with the evils of the society. Each struggle brought problems that they had to deal with. They became involved in the ungodliness going on around them. Hence, you see that the church at Corinth was filled with problems – ranging from division (*following after men in the place of Christ*), leaving the focus of the gospel (*Christ and Him crucified*), self-centeredness [having members who want to be recognized as number one, as first (*most important or as lords*)], the celebration of both sexual sin and the members guilty of it, members’ engagement in conduct unbecoming Christians, to misinterpretation of marriage, divorce, sexual rights and restrictions (*1 Cor. 1 – 7*).

It seems that there was always a problem to be reported to apostle Paul - a case to be solved at every given time.

Now in *1 Corinthians 8*, another case was proposed to him by some of the Corinthians, about eating those things that

had been offered to idols, concerning which some of them sought satisfaction.

The city of Corinth was a pagan (a heathen) city. It was a custom among the heathens to make feasts on their sacrifices, and not only to eat themselves but invite their friends to partake with them. These were usually kept in the temple, where the sacrifice was offered (*cf. verse 10*). If anything was left when the feast ended, it was usual to carry away a portion to their friends; what remained, after all, belonged to the priests, who sometimes sold it in the markets (*cf. 1 Cor. 10:25 - eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience’ sake*).

Such heathens could be neighbors, colleagues, etc, who may invite us to dinner or lunch (*cf. 1 Cor. 10:27 If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience’ sake*).

Several questions can be considered from the case presented to apostle Paul, questions such as:

- What is an idol before the Almighty God?
- What effects do the foods offered to idols have on the health and faith of Christians?
- What effect does one’s knowledge of abstaining or not abstaining from foods sacrificed to idols have on one’s faithfulness to God?
- What should we do if we are invited to feast with our pagan neighbors, colleagues, relatives, etc in their temples of sacrifices?

- What should we do (during visits) if our pagan neighbors, colleagues, relatives, etc should present to us what had been offered to idols?
- What are the freedom and rights of Christians?
- What obligation or duty does a Christian owe to another Christian in terms of conviction, conscience, and personal faith?

Apostle Paul in discussing these questions with the Corinthian church started with the issue of knowledge and love.

Knowledge and love

1 Corinthians 8:1-3

¹Now concerning things offered to idols: we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. ²And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. ³But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.

Paul stated that having a proud opinion of one's knowledge of something without consideration of the effect of the use of such knowledge on others makes one arrogant, boastful, foolish, and empty before God.

What is the use of having knowledge, when the application of such knowledge to exercise one's rights, endangers the faith of others?

The Corinthian church was charged to have and put into action the love of God because the love of God makes one consider how the faith of others can be strengthened, uplifted, and made to mature, through the exercise of one's rights.

Philippians 2:1-4: *Therefore, if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*

Our knowledge must be put into use for the growth of the church; to assist others to mature in the faith, not to hurt their faith – this is the evidence that we *love God, and God knows us (verse 3)*.

Idol Is Nothing

1 Corinthians 8:4-6

⁴Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one.

Paul went further to explain to the Corinthian church, that the idols whom the pagan Corinthian city worshiped are not divine, they are not God, and therefore, they are nothing in regard to our faith.

These idols are made by man. When Paul addressed the council of Athens in *Areopagus (Acts 17:22,29)*, he said that as *creatures (children) of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.*

Idols themselves do not have the power to make foods (*which are made from God's creatures like animals, plants, etc.*) unclean, unfit, and unhealthy for Christians' consumption.

Paul told Timothy (**1 Tim. 4:3-5**) that in latter times, people will be *commanded to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. 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.*

Therefore, the Corinthian church, should not give the idols (which were made by man) the honor, worship, or respect that is meant for God alone. We have only one God and one Lord Jesus Christ. The same charge is applicable to us today.

For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live (verses 5-6).

Obligations & The Use of Rights And Knowledge To Build The Church

1 Corinthians 8:7-10

⁷ However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸ 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. ⁹ But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. ¹⁰ For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols?

Paul succeeded in correcting the various misconceptions (which the Corinthian church was struggling with) about idols and the food offered to idols.

Based on Paul's clarification, all Christians, like the Corinthian church have the right to eat any food offered to idols, at any place, at any time, if we receive such food with thanksgiving and sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

However, he noted that in the Corinthian church, as in every church today, not every member is convinced that an idol is nothing (**verse 7**) – such members have a weak understanding. Such members still retain unaccountable and divine respect for the idols they had worshipped before.

They believed that if one eats food offered to idols (whether in private houses, marketplaces, or temples of idols), one has committed idolatry and such food offered to idols is unfit for consumption.

Nevertheless, Paul stressed that he who eats is not better nor worse than he who does not eat. Eating or refusing to eat does not commend anyone to God (**verse 8**).

Matthew 15:16-20 - So Jesus said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of

the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man."

Paul cautions the Corinthian church to think about the effect of exercising one's rights on the faith of others and on the growth of the church (**verse 9-10**).

What will the use of our freedom or exercise of our rights do to weaker Christians, immature Christians, or brethren who had not the knowledge of Paul's explanation or clarification?

If the knowledgeable Corinthian Christians go ahead to eat food offered to idols, even in the temples of idols just because an idol is nothing and every food is to be received with thanksgiving, without considering the impact of their action on the faith of the less-knowledgeable members, then they endanger the faith of the weak members - it might lead to the weak members abandoning the faith and reverting to their old pagan and idolatrous lives – seeing that there is no difference between Christians and idol worshippers.

In **1 Cor. 10:23-24**, Paul stressed that our focus should always be on what will help the church to grow, what will enhance the faith of brethren, what will bring about love and maturity in the faith, etc.

²³ All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. ²⁴ Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.

As Christians, we have freedom and right by virtue of Christ's death to eat food offered with thanksgiving and sanctified by God's word and prayers.

However, the love of Christ teaches us that in exercising such right or expressing such freedom, we have an obligation, a duty to other brethren to consider the impact on their faith, knowledge, and lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

In Paul's address to the Corinthian church, the following truths are vital to the growth of any church:

- Conscience is part of faith! Thus, it must be preserved by God's word. Learning better can change the conscience.
- A weak conscience is different from a stubborn and proud conscience.
- A weak conscience should be given time to mature into a strong conscience. Weak consciences must also be developed into strong consciences! The admission of a weak conscience demands study, honesty, growth, and change.
- When a decision is made on the path a church must take, the weak conscience must be considered. The faith and welfare of brethren should mean more to us than our personal rights and knowledge.
- We should not allow trivial issues to develop into mountains in the church.
- We should be willing to give up our right (personal freedom) to certain things before such things will hurt a brother or sister.

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