

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Questionable Practices At Corinth I Corinthians 8:1-13

Should I have a glass of wine if at a wedding reception of a Jewish friend? Should I go see the Orlando Magic play basketball on Sunday if I have a Christian friend who is a strict Sabbath keeper? Should I pierce my body for jewelry or get a tattoo? These are all questionable practices or doubtful things among Christians in our American culture, and while I Corinthians 8:1-13 does not specifically deal with these issues, it does give basic principles which we can use in handling any questionable practice.

A doubtful thing or questionable practice is: An act, not sinful in itself nor specifically commanded against in Scripture, which a Christian is free to do but which may become sinful for the Christian if practiced or abused when practiced. There are only three questionable practices listed in the New Testament: 1) The observing of Jewish religious holidays; 2) The drinking of wine, and 3) The eating of meat which was sacrificed to idols. In two thousand years of church history the Christian church in America has picked up hundreds of others such as use of tobacco, drinking of alcohol of any kind, dancing, cosmetics, clothing styles, television, movies, card playing, recreating on the Lord's Day, hairstyles for men and women, and listening to jazz or rock music. Some fairly recent questionable practices are body piercing for rings in the nose or in the belly button for women and ear lobes for men, tattoos for women and the purchasing of lottery tickets. This is just a representative list and other countries and cultures have questionable practices which we do not have in America. There are some practices and some situations in which there is no clear black-and-white or yes-or-no answer.

"There are some ethical matters that are immoral, regardless of what the culture says about them -- homosexuality, stealing, lying, adultery, murder, and the like. And there are some ethical issues that are moral, regardless of which society may say— like fidelity, honesty, gentleness, forgiveness, and generosity.

But most of the ethical matters we have to decide about are in the neutral zone. That means they are neither moral nor immoral in and of themselves. Consequently, it is not the action itself, but rather the motives or the situation and circumstances that can make them either moral or immoral" (Knofel Staton, First Corinthians).

The Corinthian Church had just one questionable practice: whether to eat meat which was offered to idols. The Apostle Paul took three chapters (8-10) to deal with this subject which seems absolutely irrelevant to us today. Has anyone struggled with eating meat offered to an idol lately? Of course not, but you probably struggled with other American questionable practices, and those practices can only be solved by applying the principles of I Corinthians 8:1-13.

By way of background, Corinth was a wicked city, filled with idolatry because of pagan temple worship. Every convert to Christianity was saved out of this idolatrous heathen worship. All Christians agreed a complete break with heathen practices had to be made after one became a believer in Christ. "They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ." (I Thess. 1:9). "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (I Jn. 5:21). However, there arose the problem of meat offered to idols. The Corinthians were big meat eaters, and almost all of the meat sold in the meat markets and restaurants had first been offered to idols. There were some Christians in Corinth who thought it absolutely wrong to eat any meat offered to idols because it was part of that old system from which they had been delivered. They were weak in conscience and their doctrine of Christian liberty was not yet straight. These weak brethren became offended at the actions of the strong brethren who exercised Christian liberty and the weak began to judge. On the other hand, there were some strong Christians who saw that the meat offered to idols was good meat and an idol was nothing, so they felt free to eat the meat. They had no conscience or scruples about this matter. Their tendency was to despise and snub those who chose not to eat. Obviously, there was a division in the local church at Corinth over this issue.

DECLARATION OF THE GOVERNING PRINCIPLE IN QUESTIONABLE PRACTICES: Love Is Superior To Knowledge 8:1-3

Now about food sacrificed to idols. In the pagan temples in Corinth, they offered animal sacrifices. A third of the offering was cooked for the priests to eat; another third was given to the offered, and the last third was given to the priests which they in turn sold to the meat markets and the local restaurants for a profit. The best place to buy a roast or get a good steak was in the meat markets and restaurants that were right next door to the temple filled with idols. It was virtually impossible to eat any meat which was not sacrificed to idols. The question naturally arose among the Christians, "If a Christian eats meat offered to idols, is he not participating in some way in the worship of an idol?"

There were the strong brethren, advanced in doctrine, who knew that idols were nothing and meat sacrificed to idols was still good meat. They understood their rights to Christian liberty and insisted upon eating the meat, not giving in to any superstitious beliefs about idols. However, these stronger brethren became proud of their knowledge and boasted of their Christian liberty. Perhaps some even became libertines in their practice. A libertine is one who abuses Christian liberty, exercising all his rights and smugly looking down his nose at weaker Christians who have sensitive consciences about questionable practices. A libertine says, "I will not give up my rights for any narrow minded legalist," and he does not care that his freedom may be misinterpreted by weaker brothers as license to sin.

There were also the weak brethren who knew the awfulness of idolatry and immediately associated the eating of meat with heathen practices. These brethren would be offended if they saw someone eating this meat, having a defensive, critical and judging spirit. Perhaps some of the weak Christians became legalists, demanding everyone conform to their negative thinking. The weak brethren were not weak because they did not practice certain doubtful things. They may have had solid convictions about their actions but they were weak because they could not stand to see other Christians practicing them and they judged. They would become legalists only when they insisted that all Christians conform to their opinions about questionable practices.

We may be able to relate the Corinthian problem to our culture, for there are some Christians today who cannot celebrate Christmas, Easter, Halloween and Valentine's Day because of their pagan origin. Their sensitive consciences are offended as the whole idea. Those who buck at Christmas, Easter, Halloween and Valentines Day must deal with so much of our culture which is still influenced by pagan thought. The names of the days of the week are dedicated to a god: Sun-day, Moon-day, Thor's-day (Thor was god of war in the Pantheon of Norse). Even the names of our months are for pagan gods. January is named for the Roman god Janus, the two-faced god who looked backward to the old year and forward to the new. March was dedicated to Mars, the god of war.

We know that we all possess knowledge. Apparently the "Liberty Party" in the church was repeating the slogan. "We all possess knowledge." The strong brethren were saying every Christian in Corinth knew in his head an idol is nothing. They were driving home knowledge alone as the only basis for handling the problem of meat sacrificed to idols. They said the weak brethren were wrong, narrow minded, ignorant and a bunch of legalistic fundamentalists. These weak brethren should be set straight before they ruined the whole church with their legalism.

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Those who had the most knowledge and understanding about questionable practices were abusing their freedom. They rightly understood the law of liberty.

Everything is permissible for me but not everything is beneficial.
Everything is permissible for me but I will not be mastered by anything (I Cor. 6:12).

"Everything is permissible" — but not everything is beneficial
"Everything is permissible" but not everything is constructive (I Cor. 10:23).

Yet they were lax in practicing the law of love.

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way (Rom. 14:23).

It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall (Rom. 14:2 1).

The Liberty Party had their facts straight about questionable practices, but their attitude was atrocious, displaying a superiority spirit. They did not understand that love takes precedent over knowledge in the solving of questionable practices. Love builds up the saints, but knowledge, not rightly applied, puffs up. Knowledge is important, but knowledge without love brings pride, selfishness and a critical spirit. Love is always superior to knowledge, and true love takes a servant's position and displays an accepting, caring and understanding attitude when dealing with the brethren who do not see eye to eye with them on questionable practices.

The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. This is a subtle slam at the Corinthians who prided themselves on their knowledge. Human knowledge on this earth is at best incomplete and partial. Any time a stronger brother looks down his nose at a weaker brother for not exercising a Christian liberty, or a weaker brother judges a strong brother for practicing some liberty, he must remember his knowledge is incomplete. We often judge motives and forget that our ability to grasp the whole situation with all the facts is incomplete. We not only do not know motives when we see a brother refraining or practicing some doubtful thing, but also our knowledge of the whole action is usually limited, insufficient and incomplete. When solving the problem of questionable practices, knowledge, doctrine and logic is not enough. There must be love.

But the man who loves God is known by God. The Apostle Paul says the test of real knowledge is loving God. The person loving God is recognized by him as having real knowledge. The acid test of whether we really know something is how this knowledge affects our love towards God and how this flows out in our love toward people. Love is the supreme quality of Christian character. The determining factor to find out one's spirituality is not how much a Christian knows but how much he loves other Christians. A Christian is to have a knowledge which operates on the principle of love.

EXPLANATION OF THE PROBLEM IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH: Is Meat Sacrificed To Idols Sinful? 8:4-6

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. Paul again agrees with the Liberty Party. There is absolutely nothing to an idol. It is only a piece of wood or stone, and the gods these idols represent are just a hoax. It is mere superstition. There is only one God and He is eternal and not made with hands. Paul would concur with the stronger brethren that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness therefore" so one does have liberty to partake of this meat offered to idols.

For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), Paul says there are no divine beings behind the idols the Corinthians worshiped. Even though the Corinthians saw the beautiful sculpture of the goddess Aphrodite in her temple, she, as a deity, did not exist. This would be true of the worship of Zeus, Jupiter, Mars and a thousand other idols worshiped in that day. However, while there are no deities behind these idols, Paul tells us there are supernatural beings (demons) who are behind them. "No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons" (I Cor. 10:20).

Yet for us there is but One God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; Christians do not worship many gods as did the Greeks and Romans in their polytheism. We worship one God, a triune person. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4). Notice our God is called "Father" in contrast with all the impersonal deities the Corinthians had worshiped as pagans. They could have no intimate relationship with them. They dreaded and feared their gods, but Christians have a God they call Father. This God is the originator of all things. Paganism had a god to create the sea, another the earth, another the sky, others who created the sun and the moon. There was a god for everything. The Christian God created all things by a word from His mouth. This God has created us for Himself. We exist for Him, not for the gods but for the one, true God.

And there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. This is a fantastic claim by the Apostle Paul for the deity of Jesus Christ. In the Roman Empire, the deities were gods, but Caesar was Lord. The gods served the purpose of Caesar who was a mere man but claimed to be the supreme god, the Lord over all. Paul says Jesus is Lord of all, equal with God, the second person of the Trinity. Many of the struggles of the early church were over the question of whether Caesar or Christ was Lord. Christians refused to bow to Caesar. To be a true Christian, one would have to believe that Jesus is Lord, God come in the flesh, true deity.

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved (Rom. 10:9-10).

Paul agreed with the Liberty Party that an idol is nothing and the one, true God is everything. Therefore, meat offered to idols can be eaten because the Christian has the liberty to do so.

APPLICATION OF THE GOVERNING PRINCIPLE TO THE PROBLEM OF THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH: Love Is More Important Than The Use Of Christian Liberty 8:7-12.

Exhortation To The Weaker Brother 8:7-8

But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to Idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol. Not every Christian in Corinth had a knowledge that meat offered to idols is nothing. They could not make the theological and practical distinction between the meat and the idolatry. They still made a religious connection between the meat and the idol. Therefore, it was not just meat for the weaker brother. It was meat offered to an idol and this was sinful in the mind of the weaker brother.

And since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. For these weak brethren to eat this meat would defile the conscience which says it is wrong for them to eat meat sacrificed to idols. What is a weak conscience? It is a conscience which has been trained by upbringing, background and teaching so as to make one feel sinful or guilty when doing or seeing others participating in a questionable practice. It is a conscience which needs instruction, training and development so as to enlighten the person to Christian liberty. The weak brother is not sure whether he himself should eat of the meat. To eat or not to eat for this weaker brother becomes the question. How then is his conscience defiled? He senses he is doing wrong; he feels condemned and guilty when he involves himself in a questionable practice, but at the same time he likes it. His conviction is sincere but he is placed into frustration. The rule for the weak brother is: "When in doubt, don't" "But the man who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin: (Rom. 14:23). Any questionable practice which cannot be done by a Christian with a clear conscience should not be practiced because it will cause the brother to sin, defiling his conscience. A Christian must never violate his conscience, and to do so is sin for him. He may open his conscience to understanding and training, but he must never practice any doubtful thing until he has a clear conscience to do so, or he will end up sinning in a big way.

But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. A person is not one bit more spiritual if he partakes of some questionable practice or chooses not to partake. Eating meat or any other doubtful thing is a matter of indifference.

Christians with weak consciences need to grow up spiritually so as to accept the brother who can participate in some questionable practice even though he himself may not be able to do so.

Exhortation To The Stronger Brother 8:9-12

Abuse of Liberty Will Become a Stumbling Block 8:9

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. Paul's appeal is not to the weaker brother but to the stronger brother who should have more Christian maturity because he has right doctrine and understanding. He pleads with the strong that they might have an understanding and care for the weaker brother. While a Christian has the right to Christian liberty, he may not always exercise that right to keep a brother from stumbling. A "stumbling block" is the putting of an obstacle in the way of a Christian brother so as to hinder his spiritual growth. It appears in this context that the stronger brothers were abusing their liberty so as to cause the weaker brethren to stumble. Paul appeals to these mature believers to apply the principle of love to their weaker brethren. Their conduct was not to be governed by their knowledge (which was right) but by their love. Paul reminds the strong brethren that no Christians at liberty to assert his rights if that means doing harm to other people.

The Christian who says he is going to do some doubtful thing no matter what anybody thinks, and he is never going to yield to any narrow-minded legalist who needs to get into the twentieth century, really does not understand grace. This person is not as mature as he thinks he is. The actions of the strong must never hinder the spiritual progress of the weaker brother; therefore, the mature believer willingly gives up that which is alright to do to help the weaker brother come to understand grace.

“The apostle Paul takes the position of Christian liberty; however, he develops the teaching that real freedom involves the responsibility of love. Exercising liberty with love is the overriding principle for making such decisions. The Christian must not ask about his rights without also asking about his responsibilities” (Staton, I Corinthians).

Abuse of Liberty Will Spiritually Destroy A Weaker Brother 8:10-11

For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When a weak brother sees a strong brother eating a delicious T-bone steak in the temple restaurant, it will strengthen, encourage or influence his to try it for himself, even though his conscience says it is wrong for him. In trying this questionable practice, the weaker brother may go back into his old idolatrous habits, bringing disgrace on his Christian testimony. Opening his weak conscience to eat meat sacrificed to idols, which he saw a strong brother do, gets the weak brother out of fellowship with Christ because of past associations with idolatry, so the result is the weak brother gets wiped out spiritually. The stronger brother has influenced the weaker brother to do something his conscience could not handle. The obvious result is a spiritual disaster because his weak conscience gets hardened and insensitive to the danger of the questionable practice which he cannot handle. Misuse of freedom by the strong may well inflict ruinous damage on the weak by inducing him to do what he otherwise might not do. Christ died for the weak brother and Christ loves him as much as he loves the strong brother. If Christ loved the weaker brother enough to die for him, then the strong brother ought to love him enough so as not to put any stumbling block in his way that might hinder spiritual growth.

Abuse of Liberty Will Cause the Stranger Brother to Sin Against Christ

When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak consciences, you sin against Christ. Every Christian is in spiritual union with Christ, and any sin done against the believer is a direct sin against Christ. Whenever the stronger brother wounds the conscience of the weaker brother over any questionable practice, the stronger brother has sinned, not only against the weaker brother but against Christ. A warning is given to the strong brother by the Lord Jesus: "But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Matt. 18:6).

Abuse of Liberty Will Cause the Stronger Brother to Sin Against Christ 8:13

Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall. Notice what Paul concluded. He did not say, "I'll eat just a little meat," or "I won't eat when a weaker brother is around." No! He would not eat meat ever if that is what it took to help a weaker brother understand grace. As far as Paul was concerned, he was willing to forego any rights or privileges in order to keep a brother from stumbling and maintain the unity of the body of Christ. Paul's position was, "When in doubt, don't do it!" He did not walk the thin line between what is doubtful and what is sin. The important thing to him was not his own rights, nor his own comforts or his own pleasures, but the well-being of all Christians. Paul chose to operate on a higher principle than knowledge. He operated on the highest principle which is love. "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall (Rom. 14:21).

At the same time, Paul's principles of moderation may not be applied to murder, theft, extra-marital sex, gluttony, homosexuality, or a host of other sins that the Bible makes clear are always wrong. Nor may they be applied for example, to the use of certain narcotics that are immediately addictive and therefore destructive. And even when Christian freedom leaves the door open to certain practices, and even when no one will be hurt by them, that does not mean Christians should necessarily get involved, unless there is some way in which that behavior glorifies God (10:31) or benefits oneself or others (10:33). We should never ask, "How far can I go?" but "What are my motives in the first place?" (Craig Blomberg, I Corinthians).

CONCLUSION

There are some cautions and clarifications Christians should observe to rightly understand questionable practices. First, Paul is not deprecating knowledge. We must have knowledge to guide the conscience. He is appreciating love as the highest principle. Second, Paul is not saying that a Christian must abandon all Christian liberty to appease the ignorant prejudices of legalists and bigots. A person with a weak conscience is still sincerely wrestling with the right or wrong of a particular action. A legalist is set in his wrong, prejudiced convictions and demands that everyone conform to them. Third, Paul does not say the strong Christian must be permanently shackled by the weak brother. He does not say a Christian should never use his liberty, but he may temporarily set it aside to help the weak brother understand grace. Fourth, Paul does not say that strong Christians ought to be concerned about Christian taboos all over the world and seek to conform. The emphasis is upon offending a brother in your culture, and that only if someone sees you." Fifth, Paul is not teaching legalism. A legalist says you can't be a Christian and do certain questionable practices. This is not Christianity. When a person comes to Christ, he enters into a sphere of liberty where he is free to enjoy all the wonderful things God has provided for him if his conscience permits. Sixth, what Paul is teaching is that because of the stronger brother's concern and love for the weaker brother, he chooses not to exercise his right of Christian liberty for fear that he might influence the weak brother to violate his conscience and fall into sin. A strong brother is free to exercise liberty and he is just as free not to exercise it. Seventh, Paul is saying that with liberty comes more responsibility to use one's freedom wisely and discreetly, and to never abuse that liberty.

Have you been taught or told to be a Christian you cannot go to movies, watch television, dance, have a glass of wine, listen to rock music or a hundred other so-called taboos? You have been deceived. It is true that there may be questionable practices that may not be the wise thing for a Christian to do, but they never keep anyone out of heaven or send anyone to hell. You can do all the questionable practices and be a Christian and you may not do any of them and not be a Christian.

You need a right understanding of what sin really is. Sin is lying, cheating, stealing, swearing, jealousy, anger, hate, pride, sexual immorality, lust, homosexuality, slander, gossip, drunkenness, prejudice and a thousand other things. It is these kinds of sin which put a person into hell and keeps him out of heaven. All people are guilty of some or all of these sins. They need a Savior to forgive them.

What then is a Christian? A Christian is one who turns to Christ in faith and believes Christ died for his sins and his guilt because of sin, trusting Him as Savior. A Christian also bows to Jesus as Lord, recognizing that He is God and has the right to rule in his life. A Christian is a person who has turned away from his own righteousness to get him to heaven and turned to Christ for a supernatural righteousness that will make him acceptable to God and give entrance to heaven. A Christian is not perfect but he is under construction as he seeks Christlikeness in this life. Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (Jn. 10:27).