

Some Meaty Knowledge

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

In January 1994, while bushfires raged on the Central Coast, we shivered in Melbourne at a missions orientation course. A young married couple heading to Papua New Guinea also attended that course – let's call them Phil and Jill. Phil was to be a school-teacher in the Western Province.

Jill's dress-code reflected our warm Australian culture – tops with narrow straps and plunging necklines; shorts that were indeed short and often tight-fitting. Within Jill's Christian faith, she believed she had freedom to wear such fashions. Jill was entering a culture where the church insisted on modesty in female dress:

- Shoulders should be covered at all times – even while swimming.
- Skirts and dresses should fall well below the knees.
- Jeans and trousers were forbidden.

What should Jill do?

- Should she still dress as in Australia, proudly proclaiming her Christian freedom to do so?
- Or should she conform to what she believes to be an invalid restriction of her freedom in Christ?

What would you do if you were Jill? Or what if you went to a Muslim culture where they believe the eyes are the only part that should be uncovered?

The precise issue Paul deals with in 1 Corinthians 8 does not readily grab our attention. Questions relating to sacrifices to idols or eating food involved in such sacrifices aren't part of our daily lives. These things aren't

even part of pagan Australian culture. It's foreign to us. Yet the underlying issue involved, and the principles Paul teaches about that issue are very much relevant to us. The underlying issue concerns the way we deal with practical matters where there are different beliefs among Christians as to what is and is not permissible.

Sacrifices to Idols

People disagree about the exact issue Paul deals with in 1 Corinthians 8. There are two main suggestions.

1. Paul talks about Christians who attend temples and physically involve themselves in the sacrificial feasts in those temples.
2. Paul talks about Christians who, in a home setting, eat meat previously dedicated to an idol in a pagan temple.

In those days, temples were a bit like restaurants. If you wanted to take your friends out for a good meal, you got your sheep and went along to the temple. The sheep was sacrificed on the temple altar before the idol. Some meat was given to the idol and its priests; some meat was returned to you for your feast in the idol's presence at the temple. Should Christians accept invitations from their neighbours to attend such feasts? Or should they refuse those sorts of social contacts with the people they want to evangelise?

In those days, temples were also like the abattoirs. Most meat that found its way into the markets did so via a temple. They killed the animals at the temples and drained the blood out of them. That happened during sacrifices. They sold the leftover meat to the markets – and so it found its way to the tables of ordinary people.

Should Christians eat meat used in sacrifices to idols? Should they accept an invitation to a meal where they might eat such meat?

They were the sorts of questions asked in the church at Corinth. These were real issues. They asked Paul about them. And, in chapters 8 to 10, Paul answers their questions about this. Tonight we're only dealing with the first part.

Do Other Gods Exist?

For the moment, I'm skipping the rest of verses 1 to 3. We'll come back to them. This practical issue has a theological dimension to it. That shouldn't surprise us – all practical issues have a theological dimension. Paul deals with this one in verses 4 to 6:

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." For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—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 theological question is: Do other gods exist? The theological answer is: No. That's plain from the Old Testament – although Paul doesn't quote it here. The Old Testament clearly teaches there's only one real God. For example, Deuteronomy 6:4

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

Or Isaiah 45:5-6

*I am the LORD, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God;*

*I equip you, though you do not know me,
that people may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is none besides me;
I am the LORD, and there is no other.*

God alone is God. All else is part of His creation.

So, idols are nothing. They don't really exist. Sure, the physical statue exists – but there's no real god behind it. Idolatry's stupid. For example, Isaiah 44:14-17

He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!"

God is unique. He's in a class all by Himself.

- He alone has always existed.
- He alone is all-powerful.
- He alone created everything else.
- He alone is sovereign of His universe.

From our Christian perspective, this one God reveals Himself as Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – yet He remains one God. Anyone else – anything else – that claims to be in the same class is merely a delusion.

Do other gods exist? No. And yet, some people worship other gods – "so-called gods" Paul calls them in verse 5. That's obvious to people living in Corinth. The city was

full of temples dedicated to many gods. They had gods for every occasion. They were happy to add others as the occasion arose. They had plenty of *gods*.

Yet they're *gods* with a little *g*. They aren't real gods. They aren't in the same category as the Christian God. They didn't make the heavens and the earth. They didn't make anything – except profits for their priests. They're false gods, with no real objective existence.

That doesn't mean idolatry's neutral. Paul considers it satanic. That comes out in chapter 10 but it isn't a part of his argument in this chapter. Here, he simply affirms that these so-called gods aren't really gods at all. There's only one God.

The Weak and the Weak

The corollary seems to be – although Paul doesn't state it specifically – that it's perfectly acceptable for Christians to eat meat involved in sacrifices to these so-called gods. But not all Christians can affirm this as strongly as Paul and as some others in Corinth. Verse 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.

At this point, it's not merely head knowledge that Paul's talking about. All these Christians in Corinth knew in their heads the truth of what Paul says.

- An idol has no real existence.
- There is no God but one.

Their minds happily affirmed those truths. But at some inner experiential level – in their consciences – they still

struggled. Before they became Christians, they made those pagan sacrifices. When they did, those sacrifices had a reality for them. They attached significance to them. They weren't simply empty ceremonies. So, even after they became Christians, it's difficult for them to shake off the former associations at the experiential level. That's the religion they rejected. That's what they put behind them.

We saw this sort of problem in some students at CLTC in relation to music, among other things. I remember one student from a coastal area where the non-Christians still practised *sanguma* – witch-doctors and magic and things like that. In his mind, a certain style of music – a certain kind of beat – was associated with *sanguma* practices. Other Christians now used that style of music in their songs to God. Carl understood at an intellectual level that there's nothing in the music as such that was evil. He understood that the words being used by the Christians were good words – words he agreed with. But at an inner level – at the level of conscience – he had trouble with that music because of its past associations.

Paul refers to these people as having *weak* consciences. What's he mean by that? It's important to stress that these people aren't morally weak. They don't sin when they fail to eat. That's clear in verse 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.

In terms of whether or not God's pleased with them, their diet in this matter is irrelevant.

- Those with weak consciences who don't eat aren't worse off before God. They may miss enjoying a good steak, but that has nothing whatsoever to do

with their standing before God.

- And those without weak consciences who do eat aren't better off before God. They merely gain all the pleasures associated with blocked arteries.

The weakness isn't at the level of morality or sin.

Their weakness is their ignorance. Their conscience isn't a properly informed conscience. Their conscience hasn't fully assimilated the truths of verses 4 to 6.

Note that Paul doesn't simply tell them to ignore their weak consciences. That'd be sinful. Our consciences are strange things. Many things contribute to their ongoing formation:

- our families and their practices;
- our culture and its practices;
- our education system;
- our own thinking and investigation;
- the Spirit of God – if we are Christians.

All these things condition our consciences in different ways. No conscience is exactly the same as another – though you can often see family and cultural similarities.

These *weak* people in Corinth believed it wrong for them to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Imagine they went ahead and ate. That demonstrates an attitude of rebellion against God. The action itself isn't wrong – Paul states that plainly. However, these people believe it wrong in their conscience. Thus, by eating, they do something they believe wrong. Such an attitude is rebellious against God. It's sinful through and through. It's important to educate our consciences so they increasingly conform to the truth of God's word.

Note that Paul nowhere here uses *strong* to describe those who do eat. I think the reason for that is he considers them weak as well – but in a different way. He warns them very strongly about their eating.

- Take care not to become a stumbling block to the weak (verse 9).
- Beware of destroying the weak person by your knowledge (verse 11).
- To sin against your weak brother is to sin against Christ (verse 12).

On this matter, Paul basically agrees with their theological understanding.

- Idols have no real existence.
- There is no God but one.
- We're free to eat this meat.

Yet, Paul doesn't agree with the way these people use their theological knowledge. This chapter addresses them – not those with weak consciences. This chapter encourages them to examine themselves and change their behaviour.

Where does Knowledge Fit?

And that brings us back to verses 1 to 3:

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

Knowledge is important in Christianity.

- You must know things to be a Christian – things about Jesus and His death on the cross for our sins.
- You must develop your minds as a Christian –

renew your mind according to God's word.

- God communicates to us through His written word – He communicates Himself to our minds.

Knowledge is important to Christians.

But it's never just knowledge for its own sake. It isn't a matter of being able to boast about some esoteric fact I've now stored in some obscure part of my grey matter. That's merely the sort of knowledge that *puffs up*. It leads to pride in the one with the knowledge – a certain amount of arrogance and one-upmanship over those who don't have the knowledge.

When I think back a couple of years to my school days, what did the education system teach me? One major thing was how to pass exams and determine my place on the pecking order of school students. I tucked away all sorts of trivial bits and pieces of knowledge so I could reproduce them in an exam. When the results came out, I could feel *puffed up* in relation to all those who couldn't reproduce as many trivial bits and pieces of knowledge as I could – and not quite as *puffed up* as those who produced more.

That didn't stop at school. You see the same process in everyday life. What happens on a social occasion when people get together and start talking? Each one wants to demonstrate they have more expert knowledge on that subject than others in the group. They work out their own pecking order, as the self-proclaimed expert enjoyably dominates the discussion. The one at the bottom of the pecking order tries very hard to change the subject to something that *puffs up* them.

Christian knowledge is never like that. It's never merely academic. Its goal is always a godly life. In the Christian life, you only truly know something when you put it into practice.

- Someone may know in their heads that the Bible says Jesus died for their sins – but until they actually trust Jesus for their ticket into heaven, they don't truly know that.
- Someone may know in their heads the Bible says we aren't to gossip and may well be able to explain that in great detail in a small group Bible study – but until they get to the point of not spreading rumours about Mabel Smith (even the ones disguised as prayer points), they don't truly know that.

Knowledge is extremely important in the Christian life – but, if it isn't put into practice, it isn't truly known.

But that's only half of Paul's argument. These people could say to Paul – we're putting our knowledge into practice. We know idols are nothing and so we go ahead and eat this meat sacrificed to idols. We act according to our knowledge. Paul says that isn't the only test. There's a second one: Christian knowledge isn't self-centred.

This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up.

These people used their knowledge to demand their own freedom.

We have the right to eat this food – therefore we'll eat it. No one will rob us of our liberty in Jesus!

Paul asks: Does that display a loving attitude? What's that do to your fellow Christians who really struggle with this issue? What if they follow your outward actions while they have ill-informed, weak consciences? Won't you then encourage them to express rebellious attitudes?

Won't you move them away from growth in godliness?

Instead, Paul expresses his conclusion in verse 13:

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

That's the mature approach to this issue – not to look at my self-interest, but to work at lovingly serving others. Could you do that? Could you become a vegetarian for the sake of a fellow Christian? Could you surrender a God-given freedom for the sake of another person?

What about Today?

What about today? How's this relate to our lives? It's possible for this specific issue to come up in Australia. Devout Hindus often have shrines complete with idols in their homes or businesses. Visit Cabramatta and you'll see lots. They make various offerings at those shrines.

- Should Christians risk having meals in the homes of their Hindu friends?
- Should Christians purchase goods from shops that exhibit those shrines?

Yet, to ask the questions that way isn't quite the issue of this passage. The focus here isn't on the rightness or wrongness of the action as such – it's on the impact the actions of a Christian with a liberated conscience may have on the Christian with a weak conscience.

One issue that divided Christians a few years back (and may still do so today) was the Harry Potter books.

- Some thought the books promoted witchcraft and the practice of pagan rites and should be completely opposed by Christians.
- Some thought the books just a good story and obviously fiction and able to be enjoyed as such.

- Some even found Christian themes promoted in the books.

Who had the weak conscience? How do those without weak consciences cause them to stumble? What's the way of loving service?

This sort of issue comes up in many places.

- Some Christians believe it's wrong to dance; others feel it's OK.
- Some Christians feel it's wrong to go inside a pub; others feel it's OK as long as you don't drink; still others think it's OK to drink in a pub as long as you don't get drunk.
- Some Christians feel it's a materialistic waste to go on overseas holidays; others think it's OK.
- Some Christians meet on Sundays; others think it should be Saturdays.

And there are a whole host of other issues like that. As we think about the possibility of a merger with BCC, it's likely some things along these lines will come up.

What are the general principles involved?

- First, sometimes absolutes are involved. Suppose half the church thought Christians were free to commit adultery and the other half thought they weren't. Paul wouldn't approach that issue with the principles of 1 Corinthians 8; he'd take the 1 Corinthians 5 approach – those persisting in adultery require church discipline.
- Secondly, this passage isn't giving rights to those with weak consciences. Those with weak consciences can't now say to the others: You must give in to us because we have weak consciences. That would encourage the behaviour Paul discourages

here: namely, standing up for your own rights; knowledge that puffs up. It's not about clever Christians manipulating situations to get their own way.

- Thirdly, the way of maturity is love and service. The Christian life isn't about how many freedoms and rights I can win for myself. The Christian life's about serving the One for whom we exist. And that involves loving others through humble service.