

KNOWLEDGE, LOVE, MEAT, IDOLS AND THE BRETHREN

"Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies."

-- 1 Cor. 8:1

What was a Christian; knowing "food does not commend us to God, for neither if eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse" (8:8); to do in a city where idolatry was common practice and the meat offered to idols seemed to be everywhere? What about going to a feast in the idols temple where that meat was served? What about eating that meat that was sold in the market place? How should a knowledgeable Christian behave under such circumstances? These are questions that the Corinthians faced and Paul answered in I Corinthians, chapters 8 - 10. We would do well to consider his inspired instructions in any comparable "liberty" that might be so closely related to any sin today.

Paul accepts their knowledgeable conclusion, that meats of themselves were not wrong, and agrees with it.

In saying that "knowledge puffs up", he is not playing down the value of knowledge. It is essential to spiritual growth and development (2 Pet. 3:18; Eph. 4:11-18). God's Old Testament people had been destroyed for lack of it. (Hos. 6:4). Israel in Paul's day had not submitted to God's righteousness because of ignorance. (Rom. 10:1-4). Why then did he say that "knowledge puffs up"? It is one of those "not - but" passages that does not criticize or depreciate the first thing but puts it in perspective by the second thing. Jesus said, "Do not labor for food which perishes, but for the food that endures to everlasting life". He is putting things into perspective. One is not to labor for food that perishes without laboring for eternal food. So, Paul is saying knowledge alone puffs-up but coupled it with love it will build-up. In the secular realm, I often told my children to get all the education that they had sense enough to use. The same is true of spiritual knowledge.

Love is not more important than being right in one's knowledge - but such knowledge without love is dangerous. It will cause one to misuse knowledge. This was likely the problem with the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7). She was commended for

several things that indicated that she was knowledgeable, such as: 1. could "not bear those who are evil" and 2. tried those "who said they were apostles and found them liars". It takes knowledge to do that. But they had left their "first love".

Paul tells the Corinthians that there is more to consider than just knowing that a thing is right. It may be right and not expedient or profitable ("helpful -NKJB). Now, the thing that these brethren were knowledgeable about was something that, even they, considered to be unnecessary to pleasing God. In fact, they understood that it did not matter one way or the other with God. Had it been something that they understood to "commend us to God" (8:8), or something that condemn us to God then they would have had to press the point upon others, regardless to who might be disturbed by it - love would have demanded their doing it (cf. 1 John 5:2). Such "knowledge" would have to be universally taught, pressed, and practiced.

Paul gave his inspired advice to them under these circumstances based on four important factors: 1. The practice itself was not sinful before God. 2. The practice was not required of God. 3. The practice did place them in close proximity to the sin of idolatry. 4. There were "weak" brethren who did not share their knowledge in the matter.

He warns them not to let their knowledge produce pride in them that would say in effect:

1. "I know that idolatry is wrong. I know that idolaters are lost. I know when I am worshipping an idol and when I am not. I know how far to go. I can handle it."

2. "I am free in Christ. I know my rights. I am not going to let a brother's ignorance keep me from enjoying what I know to be right. If the "weak" brother cannot see this, then that is HIS problem."

Paul gives them two basic reasons for abstaining from the feasts in the idols temple, even though they knew the practice to be lawful within itself:

1. Out of love for their brethren who would be offended by it.

2. Why see how close to idolatry they could get without actual becoming idolaters?

Chapters 8 and 9 deal with the first

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WATCH OUT FOR THE "QUICK FIX"

"And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not loose heart." - Galatians 6:9

Someone has said, "The American prayer is: 'Lord, give me patience and give it to me right now'". We want results right now, rather than in due season. We want our problems solved immediately, if not before.

The electrical system blows a fuse. Why spend valuable time and gas going for a new fuse? There is that penny in your pocket. Place it behind the old fuse and everything is fine - for now. So what, if the real problem is ignored? So what, if there is risk of burning your house down? It works! The lights are burning, the refrig is cooling, and the stove is cooking - what better evidence can you have than that!

God promised Abraham and Sarah a son. But God surely was taking his own good time to make good his promise. So, Sarah went for the quick fix. She persuaded Abraham to father a son by their handmaid. It worked! Ishmael was born! But he was not the son of promise. God still carried out his plan in due time. But, Sarah's quick fix to the problem brought sorrow upon sorrow to her and her descendants.

The Lord's church has had crisis after crisis beginning with the first congregation at Jerusalem. God gave the perfect plan for the church, but those who work that plan are not perfect. They make mistakes, some with little adverse consequences, others with major consequences. There are attendance problems, problems with getting folks to be baptized, with divisions, with fellowship, with internal sin, etc.. We would all like to see these problems resolved -- right now! How I would like to go to the next assembly and find every Christian along with every outsider in this community present! How I would like to baptize every sinner that I know! How I would like to announce to the congregation that all divisions have been healed, all controversies among brethren settled, all problems with internal sin solved! Would that not be wonderful? But that is not likely to happen and I need to be careful of "quick fixes" in an effort to make things happen.

Differences arise between brethren. Some are contained without open division. Others are not. Every Christian, who loves the Cause of Christ is concerned about any division. This tempts one to go for the "quick fix" - more love. Now that does sound

good! It WOULD solve all the problems - IF the root cause of all division was a lack of love for brethren. But, the problem is seldom that simple and the love-togetherness approach is not always adequate. It may ignore the real cause of the division in the first place. The cause may be conflicting "minds" - carnal vs. spiritual (Cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-5). It may be conflicting attitudes toward Scriptural authority, by brethren who dearly love each other. It may be conflicting concepts of the mission of the church. It may be over matters of conscience that carry people in different directions and cannot be resolved without basic change in convictions. The quick fix is to encourage someone to squelch his conscience for the sake of peace. It takes longer to educate consciences. But until that happens one cannot afford to override his conscientious misgivings even for the sake of peace. (cf. Rom. 14:23). Of course, if it is a matter in which one can yield his preference, without overriding conscientious doubts, then he should give in for the sake of peace now! Even where there are other basic causes for conflict, hatred sometimes raises its ugly head, then love must be restored.

I know of no congregation that would not like an overflow crowd at every service. Most would like to find some way to motivate folks to attend. It is a big problem. But, beware of the "quick fix". Most of these folks are carnally minded, so appeal to the carnal mind with the gimmicks of social activities, recreational opportunities, making it "fun" for them. Give material rewards and pride-appealing recognition to motivate them. Such may get them to "church", but not to the Lord. Only those taught, having heard and learned, are drawn to the Lord. (John 6:44,45). This method is usually slower, and less appealing to many, but it is the Lord's way of getting people "to church" and keeping them there!

There are problems with applying the New Testament teaching on "fellowship". In today's atmosphere, one is bound to be charged with inconsistency in his application of the matter. If one is not careful he will try to find a "quick fix" to the consistency problem. On the one hand he may decide that he should not fellowship anyone who is mistaken on any Bible subject. He reasons that since he does not fellowship some who hold different views on other subjects then he will not fellowship this brother -- to be consistent. It saves the

time of finding out the nature of the man's "error" and its effect upon the church, etc. Another knowing that he "fellowships" some brethren with whom he differs on what the Bible teaches on SOME matters, decides that to be consistent then we must fellowship ALL brethren with whom he has differences. Again, this saves the time of investigation and consideration for each matter. The truth of the matter is that several factors must be taken into consideration before deciding whom to fellowship. Attitudes, maturity, opportunity, ability, the effect upon the gospel and the church, etc. But, it is much easier to go for the "quick fix"; for the fellowship - ALL - with - whom - we - differ or the fellowship - NONE - with - whom - we - differ approach. But, Jude 22, tells us that some distinctions have to be made.

1 Thess. 5:14 shows that different ones need different approaches. "WARN the unruly, COMFORT the fainthearted, and SUPPORT (uphold) the weak." It is quite possible for each class to be doing the same thing, overtly:

1. Sister Worldly seldom shows up for services. She is approached and gives you to understand that what she does is her business and no business of the church. She and her husband like to go boating on week-ends and she intends to do it as long as the weather is pretty. She will be at services when and if she gets ready. She knows what the Bible says about assembling as well as you do - and when she gets ready to start attending she will let you know.

2. Sister Battered seldom shows up for any services. She is approached and you find out about her husband. He hates the church with passion. He makes sure that she pays dearly for every service she attends. The ones she does attend are attended over his protest and sometimes physical abuse. When she gets home 5 minutes later than usual because of a long-winded preacher, she catches the full blast of his fury. She is near the point of "throwing in the towel" and saying it is not worth it to attend.

3. Sister Novice seldom shows up for services. She is approached and you see that she just does not understand the importance of attending. She has not been a Christian very long. She was a member of a religious order that did not stress attendance to all services. While she learned and understands what she needed to do to become a Christian in the New Testament sense of the word - she still has a bit of the old concept of attendance as a hold over from her former

religious life. Once convinced of the necessity and importance, she would likely attend every service.

Now, all three sisters are doing the same thing outwardly. But the approaches taken to the problem are quite different. Sister Worldly is UNRULY (disorderly), so you warn her and if she doesn't heed the warning you withdraw from her (2 Thess. 3:6). Sister Battered is about to give up. She is fainthearted. You comfort and encourage her at this stage. Sister Novice is a weak babe, who needs teaching, so you set about to teach her, with patience, her responsibilities as a Christian.

Now the "quick fix" approach to the problem would be that since all are not attending as they should - that we will just treat them all alike. If we comfort one - comfort all. If we withdraw from one, then withdraw from all - regardless to any extenuating circumstances. That might simplify matters for those who have to make the day to day judgments about church discipline - but would it be right?

Brethren let's be careful with "quick fixes". -- Editor.

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Our mailing address:

The Reflector

3004 Brakefield Drive

Fultondale, AL 35068

Editor:

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Elders of the church:

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Tom Gowen

Lee Jones

SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

SUNDAY

Bible Classes.....9:45 A. M.

Worship.....10:45 A. M.

Worship..... 6:00 P. M.

WEDNESDAY:

Bible Class.....10:00 A. M.

Bible Classes..... 7:30 P. M.

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reason. Surely, these "knowledgeable" ones could eat in the idols temple without sin. They could handle it. They could control things without any thought of worshipping an idol. They might be strong enough on the subject that they could eat it without any pangs of conscience or doubt. Yet there were some brethren there that, in all likelihood, would slide over into sin in the same situation. They could not eat the meats without either revering the idol or having other conscientious problems with it. Their seeing a strong (knowledgeable) brother eating the meat might well encourage them to eat even to the point of either worshipping the idol or overriding their conscientious misgivings. In either case the brother has sinned. His "weak conscience" has been wounded. He has been sinned against by the "knowledgeable" brother - but not only has he been sinned against - Christ has been sinned against. (8:12). The offending brother may have been right in his knowledge - but he surely was deficient in love!

Paul then uses his own conduct as an example for the "knowing" brother. Paul had not always insisted on ALL his rights, at ALL places, and under ALL circumstances. He had the right to live of the gospel. (9:3-12), but did not feel it necessary to press for that right in every situation. He exercised it when it was profitable and expedient. He did not feel that it was surrendering his freedom to the ignorance and prejudices of others to forgo his rights when circumstances and the attitudes of others warranted it. (9:19-12). He did not even say that what is right and expedient in one place and circumstances would be in all. In some places he received financial support in others he turned it down. He was not even dealing in vague imagined hypothetics. It was not that "someone", "somewhere", "might" be weak - but there were such brethren at that place. At another time and another place it might be expedient - but not at that time and that place. It was in circumstances where it was real possibly that it would have a negative effect upon conscientious brethren and the Cause of Christ. What if he had defended and insisted on his rights to perfection and showed all by his actions that he had such rights - would it have been worth the damage done to his relationship with brethren and possibly their relationship to God? Even though the thing was good of itself, why "let your good be spoken of as evil" - Rom. 14:16,

especially when it can be so easily avoided? To say, "But, you can't do anything without someone speaking of it as evil", does not erase Paul's teaching in these chapters and the need to try do follow his teaching.

Paul deals with the second reason for avoiding those temple feasts in chapter 10. Why tempt their own strength by playing around with a practice that placed them so close to the threshold of sin. How could they be so sure that they could always handle these feasts without actually stepping across the threshold into idolatry itself - a thing that they knew would condemn their souls? With the knowledge that they knew they had and in the pride that went with it, no doubt, they had no doubt that they could handle it. But, Paul says don't be too sure. Why take the risk? Again, he uses himself to illustrate the point (9:27). Though he was strong in the faith, having preached the gospel to others, he could not take his strength for granted, much less tempt it by seeing how close to sin he could get without actually sinning or having fellowship with it. (10:14-23) He then shows that many Israelites, after being delivered by God from Egypt, were tempted and tempted Christ and fell into sin. (10:1-11). He then warns them again about the pride associated with their knowledge: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands (the one whose knowledge had puffed him up - EOB) take heed lest he fall" (10:12). Besides, the effect that their feasts in the idols temple would likely have on others - they could not be that sure that it would not cause them to sin. So, he says, "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry." He was not accusing them of practicing idolatry. To the contrary, he says they knew that the "idol was nothing" - but they would do well to stay away from any practice that had such a high risk of involving them in the sin. They needed to "flee" (10:14) - put some distance between them and idolatry.

May God give us the wisdom to understand the principles that Paul taught and to apply them today. Knowledge is wonderful - but let us learn to not to abuse it. Let us develop more concern to the happiness, spiritual welfare, and peace of brethren - even "weak" brethren - than we have for making sure that our rights are always pursued. Let us not think that we are so strong in knowledge that we can play with fire without getting burned. Or, that we can safely walk the fine line so near to the border of sin.--Ed.