

THE POWER OF NEGATIVE INFLUENCE

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

"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?" - 1 Cor. 8:10

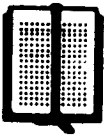
There were idols' temples at Corinth. A temple dedicated to Venus the goddess of love was there. The Corinthians had neighbors who worshipped at these temples. Many of the brethren were former idolaters. One would have had to have gone out to the world to have escaped the company of idolaters. (1 Cor. 5:10). The by-products of idol worship were everywhere. Much of the meat sold in the market place had been offered to an idol. There were temple feasts that served such meat. If a Christian was invited to dinner by a neighbor, there was a good possibility that the meat served had been offered to an idol. What should a Christian do about all of this? Should he simply drop out of society and avoid all association with such neighbors? To what extent could he safely have to do with those by-products of idol worship? These were questions with which they must grapple.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 8-10 to help them with this problem. Paul assumes that his readers had no problems in their own minds with idolatry. They understood that there was but one God and that an idol was nothing. They could make the necessary mental distinctions while eating meat that had been offered to idols. They could eat it as mere food for

the body without putting any religious significance on it at all. (8:4-6). They were not about to worship an idol. They knew better. Paul does not question their knowledge, ability, or lawful right to eat such meat. He warns them against the power of adverse influence - to themselves and to others.

There was a three-fold danger. 1. The misinterpretation of their action by the weak (8:10). 2. The damage it could do to their own spiritual strength (9:27; 10:12). 3. The abuse of their knowledge and liberty in Christ (8:1-3, 8-11).

One may know, teach, and practice religious truth and still be a powerful influence for error. He may carelessly leave his actions open to misunderstanding. Whether we like it or not, people (especially weak brethren) are more apt to be influenced by what they perceive us to be doing than anything else. It would have been easy for a brother at Corinth to think, "I know what I believe about this matter. Besides my teaching on the subject is well-known. The priests of the idols-temple know where I stand. They know I am not an idolater. They know I am just there for a meal. If my eating there is misinterpreted by anyone that is their problem. Besides, if anyone questions me, I can defend my actions." As long as one fully understood the true nature of God and of the meats being eaten, why should the Corinthians not have enjoyed the benefits of the good



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meals offered in the idols temple. There was nothing wrong with the food. It was nourishing to the body. It's quality may have been as good or better than that offered elsewhere.

One might think of any number of strong reasons to ignore the potential danger and continue "eating in an idol's temple". Yet, there is one nagging problem. The influence this might have on weak brethren. (8:11-13). What the weak saw the knowledgeable do in the idol's temple (though innocent within itself) would do more to shape their attitude toward idolatry than all that the strong believed and taught against idolatry. It would likely carry more weight than any explanations of his position. Even if one is discerning enough to safely engage in such a liberty without spiritual damage to himself, love demands that he put the spiritual welfare of others first. He should sacrifice any pleasure or benefit received for the general good of brethren - even though he knows he has a lawful right to such. (Read 1 Cor. 9). After all, he would not be sacrificing anything necessary to his salvation and/or spiritual edification.

I am aware that this principle is not always easy to consistently apply - because potential influences are not always uniform. Times, places and circumstances determine when one should exercise a liberty. I am aware of brethren who always talk in the "objective case and kickative mood". They see grave danger in nearly any liberty we may exercise. This does not take away from the fact that we need to use extreme caution. We still need to understand that our actions are usually stronger than our words - even the words that explain our actions.

J. W. McGarvey (1829-1912) is a good example of influence one's teaching versus the influence of his actions. He opposed instrumental music in worship. He spoke and wrote much and plainly against it. He would not be member of a congregation that used it. What about his influence? Read what J. P. Sewell wrote about him in the Gospel Advocate in December of 1902:

"Professor McGarvey may speak out against the use of instrumental music in the worship, as he does, and say things against it that those who refuse to use it would hardly say; but what do the people who want the instrumental music care about this thing so long as he gives his influence almost entirely (except in his home congregation) to those who use it? Brother McGarvey believes that instrumental music is wrong, and so teaches; still, he gives his name and influence to a paper that advocates its use and associates with churches that use it (except at home and possibly a few other occasions.) So, while he believes and teaches that the thing is wrong, there is not a church in the land that uses it that will not today point to Brother McGarvey as 'one of the strong men on our side.' His influence goes with his fellowship, not with his faith and teaching."

I know that instrumental music in worship does not belong in the same realm with meat eating. Meat eating is a liberty and instrumental music is an addition to God's word. The example of brother McGarvey's influence does illustrate that what one does is likely to be more influential than what one believes or teaches. So, one needs to be awfully careful about where he lends his influence, as well as what he personally believes and practices.

Paul gave the knowledgeable Corinthians another reason for not "eating in the idol's temple". It could harm their own faith. They should not arrogantly over-estimate their own ability to resist the influence of idolatry. He tells them of his awareness that he, as strong as he was, had to be careful about adverse influences (1 Cor. 9:27). He reminds them that the Israelites easily fell into idolatry and associated sins after being "baptized unto Moses" and drinking of the spiritual Rock that was Christ. (10:1-10). To those who had knowledge and felt that they could handle any negative influence of these feasts, he wrote, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (10:12). God would help those "overtaken" in temptation but not for those who unduly subjected themselves to temptation. (10:13). "Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry." (10:14).

While Paul discouraged the Corinthians

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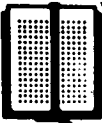
from "eating in the idol's temple", he recognized circumstances where they could be eat meat with less danger. There was nothing inherently wrong with the meat. They needed not question the meat sold in the market places (10:25, 26). They needed not refuse dinner with a neighbor who might serve meat that had been offered to an idol - unless the neighbor suggests that this is being done unto the idol. If he did suggest such, then influence must be come into play again. While one might still eat it without any personal conscience of the idol - he must consider the influence upon his host. (10:28-29).

To Paul, it was not a question of unlawful conduct (10:23). The practice could be lawfully and logically defended. The scriptures say, "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness". Therefore any meat from the Lord could be eaten anywhere. Its being offered to an idol was incidental. Its being served in an idols temple was also incidental. It was still good food from the Lord. Besides that, to the one who knows the truth about God, the idol is nothing. Its temple has no more significance than any other public building. To him, it was just a place to get a good meal and have a good time. He might even find the food better than offered elsewhere. Case granted. One must consider other factors. Is it expedient (helpful) or inexpedient (hinder) to the Cause of Christ? Does it edify (build up) or tear down? What effect will it leave on the weak? Will it encourage them to accept idolatry or at least weaken their resistance to it? (cf. Rom. 14:21).

What effect will it have on the one who eats? Will he continue to be as strong as he now is? Will constant feasting in the idols temple with idolaters effect his own opposition to idolatry? He may, at least for now, only participate in lawful aspects of the feast? Will his constant close association with idolatry sooner or later weaken his opposition to it? Will it cause him to accept some parts (maybe the more subtle parts) or all of idolatry? He must answer these questions for his own good?

I am sure "all things are lawful" would be all some needed to hear. If it is lawful, then full steam ahead. Let all questioning, criticism and opposition cease. If other things did not need to be considered, why did Paul devote three chapters of I Corinthians to the subject?

I doubt that Paul would have charged every brother who ate in the idols temple with having gone idolatrous or being soft on idolatry -- after all he did admit that it was lawful. This still did not keep him from pointing out the risks. He encouraged the brethren who were strong in knowledge to refrain from the practice for influence sake - the potential influence upon those weak in knowledge and the potential influence of idolatry upon strong ones themselves.



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