

1 Corinthians 8:1-3

PREFACE

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

v1

It will be worthwhile to define a couple of terms before we go too far into our passage. Two of those terms are “idol” and “god,” and we need to clarify their difference because it is easy to make them synonymous in our minds. It is true that to the Jews, they were virtually synonymous. But it is more important for us to understand how the *Corinthians* understood them.

In v1 the phrase “things sacrificed to idols” translates one long, almost unpronounceable Greek word (*to eidolothyton* [to ay-do-lothe'-oo-ton]). The root of that word is *eidolon*.

eidolon = from <G1491> (eidos); **an image** (i.e. for worship); by implication a heathen god, or (plural) the worship of such :- idol.

Hence,

eidolothyton = neuter of a compound of <G1497> (*eidolon*) and a presumed derivative of <G2380> (*thuo*); **an image-sacrifice, i.e. part of an idolatrous offering** :- (meat, thing that is) offered (in sacrifice, sacrificed) to (unto) idols.

Here the NASB gives us the most literal translation by using “things,” rather than “food.” (The sacrifice *could* be food, but didn't have to be.) More important is that these Greek words refer to an “image.” Jews at the time, as well as us today, can easily refer to a graven idol sitting in a shrine as “a pagan god”; I know that I have from time to time. But we need to delineate the two so as to understand how the Corinthians—and *all* idolaters at the time—perceived these statues.

These idols were *images*—tangible representations, but not the god itself. The worshipers bowing down before them or offering these statues sacrifices did not believe that the idol *was* the god. Nevertheless, by worshiping before the graven idol, the follower *was* worshiping the pagan god.

The god being represented by the idol was considered to be supernatural—dwelling outside the realm of mortal man—but was not the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent being that we know as the one and only true God. After the gods in the highest echelon of the pantheon—e.g., Zeus (Gr.), Jupiter (Rom.), Amun, Osiris and Isis (Egy.)—most gods were specialized (e.g., fertility, rain, crops, rivers) and local, in the sense that they would be associated with specific villages, towns and cities (*not* to the exclusion, however, of the other gods). Private households would have their favorite gods to whom they prayed, with small shrines located somewhere within the home. [Now back to v1.](#)

Now concerning...

The apostle probably refers to a topic about which the church has written him, but it is also possible that the way he begins this verse and chapter is just a literary device to demarcate one subject from another. In any case, the topic at hand is “something offered to images.”

Sidebar: One hesitates to paint too detailed and too critical a picture of the Corinthians. After all, this sequence of correspondence took place just less than 2,000 years ago; unlike the digital architectural recreation of the city itself, we cannot revisit the actual congregation and speak with its members to ascertain their motives, the depth of their combativeness with Paul. All we can work from is what we know of them from God’s word, references to them from other works, and what we know of the history of the region—and *that* picture is far from complimentary of the church. The evidence at hand suggests a group of people who thought far too highly of themselves, and were happily prepared to argue for their position and against the apostle’s.

we know that we all have knowledge.

As he did at the beginning of v7, regarding sexual proprieties, Paul quotes back to the church a maxim they had quoted to him: “we all have knowledge.” Gordon Fee points out that “they did not say, ‘we all know,’ but that ‘we all possess knowledge (gnosis).” That is, *we are in possession of a special kind of knowledge.* Just as in the first verse of Chapter Seven, where the Corinthians stated “It is good for a man not to touch a woman,” Paul, on one level, can agree with the premise—but not their reasoning behind it. It is true that “we all Christians have knowledge,” but once again, just as in Chapter Seven, the church in Corinth has run wild with the concept, infusing it (*gnosis*) with the super-irrigated spiritualism they have adopted from the resident Greco-Roman culture of the city. Paul tacking on his “we know that” before the maxim (or slogan) represents his agreement with it—in principle. But immediately he starts punching holes in their inflated pride.

Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

Let me channel Eugene Peterson, author of the sometimes grossly loose paraphrase *The Message*, for a moment: In place of the direct and succinct “Knowledge makes arrogant,” I can hear Paul saying something like, *Well now, it is clear from your attitude that the acquisition of gnosis makes people downright puffed up with themselves.* Like much of *The Message*, that is an embarrassingly loose paraphrase, but it just might reflect the apostle’s state of mind. “Puffed up” is a literal translation of *physioo*, which is how all but the NASB translate it (a picture of blowing up a balloon). Different “Ups”: Knowledge *puffs* up; love *builds* up.

I think the behavior and attitude of the Corinthians regarding their “knowledge” can be illustrated by a scene out of early school days. At recess someone (probably a boy) comes up to a group of his classmates and proudly declares that he is in possession of a special and unique ability. And he proceeds to demonstrate this ability for those at hand. His behavior and the expression on his face makes it clear to everyone that he thinks that this skill is his and his alone, thus setting him above everyone else. But then someone in the audience—and to his infamy and eternal shame, a *girl*—points out to him and everyone present, “So what? We *all* can do that.” And she, along with several in the group confirm her statement by demonstrating the same ability.

That’s a pretty good picture of what is happening here between Paul and the Corinthians (to be fair, a subset of those in the Corinth church). *Look what we can do*, they were saying. *We have a special knowledge that sets us apart.* Paul’s response? *“We know that” all believers have knowledge. But in you this knowledge has gone to seed and made you arrogant—you are puffed up like peacocks. But knowledge of God is meant to create in us a love that builds up the brethren—not tear them down with our arrogance.* Paul has already, in a different context, spoken of this earlier in the letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-7.

If you think we are being too harsh with the Corinthians, that Paul is only speaking generally about arrogance, let me remind you that this is a continuing riff in his letter to the Corinth church.

4:18-19 Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power.

5:2 You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.

5:6 Your boasting is not good.

13:4-5a Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own...

Clearly there were some in the church who had a problem with being too full of themselves.

v2-3

As he did in Chapter Seven, Paul continues to supply employment for the preacher and teacher by using shorthand in his statements. Just what sort of “knowledge” Paul speaks of here has been debated, but the best interpretation is that this knowledge refers to “the revealed illumination that comes from the Spirit” (Garland, Fee). So this was not a worldly knowledge that Paul wishes the Corinthians did not have, but a righteous knowledge given them by God that they were abusing. As Garland puts it, “The only knowledge that counts with Paul is that which is Christ-centered and results in other-centered loving behavior.”

There are some textual challenges with v2-3—especially v3; not so much in what Paul has said, but *why* he has said it. We can state the essential point of these two verses, *It is better to be known than to know*. The Corinthians were preening over what they thought they knew, but what was far more important was that God knew them.

If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know;

The translations that have “something” (NIV, ESV) instead of “anything” (KJVs, NASB) translate a two-letter Greek word that is probably not in the original. The word “something” places the emphasis on the *content* of knowledge, while the word “anything” places the emphasis on “the reality of *having* knowledge as such” (Fee).

We have a saying that fits pretty well here: knowing just enough to be dangerous. In that case, the Corinthians knew just enough to be dangerous to those who were stumbling over a brother eating meat offered to idols. But this situation is even more pitiable, more tragic, than that. The first half of v2 means, “If anyone thinks they have *arrived at knowledge*—that is, “having come to the full state of knowledge” (Fee). The Corinthians were especially dangerous, not only to others but to themselves, because they thought they knew it all! And the apostle points out, when you’ve reached the point where you think you know it all—paraphrasing here—you know nuthin’. Seriously, what Paul is trying to get across to them is an idea that takes more than a few gray cells to grasp.

v3

but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.

We might be inclined to read this, *if anyone loves God, then God will know him*—that is, our determination to love God results in God knowing us. But that has it backwards.

Again, the challenge of v3 is not what Paul is saying, but *why* he is saying it here. For now let's focus on *what* he is saying, for it is important.

The better way to read v3 is *if anyone loves God, this means that he is known by God*. That is, God knowing us comes first. The phrase "known by God" is wrapped up in the divine initiative of election and redemption.

Read Jeremiah 1:4-5.

In God's economy, to be known by Him is far more than to be known *about* by Him; it expresses a deep, sanctifying relationship. Out of His loving us comes our love for Him—and then for His people. This is the polar opposite of what was happening in the Corinth church, where individuals were so filled with "knowledge" (i.e., themselves) that it produced in them an arrogance that threatened to bring harm upon fellow believers. The normal, redemptive process had been short-circuited.

In Romans Chapter Eight Paul lays out the complete sequence of events that results from God's knowledge of us.

Read Romans 8:28-30.

Can this go sour, as we see happening in Corinth? Well, it seemed to have happened in the region of Galatia. Turn to Galatians Chapter Four, and note how Paul here blends together, as if they are synonymous, our knowing God and His knowing us.

Read Galatians 4:8-11.

Because of their arrogance, the Corinthians had lost sight of the fact that anything they "knew"—including God Himself—was only because of God knowing them, and loving them, first.