

PREFACE

In our library there are a few books that, for one reason or another, you would not find in any church library. Even in the section reserved for biblical reference there are volumes some would regard as heretical, because they espouse positions diametrically opposed to what we believe. As an adult on the brink of old age, and a reasonably mature Christian, I can handle the content of these books; for me they reveal and substantiate the truth of Scripture even as they speak against it. If, however, there were small children living in our home, or I had impressionable youth traipsing in and out on a regular basis, I would not have these books on our shelves, for they could do damage to the conscience of someone less mature in the faith—which was a mistake I made many years ago.

At the ripe old age of nineteen or twenty, barely out of diapers myself, freshly wed and still in the navy, I found myself directing the youth choir at a Baptist church in San Diego. At some point in this perilous relationship Linda and I invited the choir to our home for a social evening.

Now, I have always had a library of books, but in these early days our “library” consisted of various and sundry volumes filling a rickety, slide-the-pieces-together contraption that could hold no more than an armload of books. And in that collection were a few paperback copies of books by and about the very late “prophet” Edgar Cayce, a subject that had piqued my interest at the time.

One of the older teenage girls in the choir spied those books on the shelves during that social event and, confronting me about them at a subsequent choir rehearsal, was literally in tears over the fact that I would dare possess such heretical material. At the time I dismissed her hysterical response to my reading material as little more than the rantings of teenage angst.

But she was right and I was wrong. To her credit, she knew the books to be heretical, but the incident damaged my witness—and leadership of the choir—for her. However, there may also have been someone else there whose curiosity was piqued by the books, and who may have been ultimately led astray by them. *Hey, if Dave reads these it must be good stuff.*

Bottom line: The books should not have been there.

In our previous session, as we opened this last paragraph of Chapter Eight, we established that within the body of Christ in Corinth there were some who “knew” that the idols represented nothing that was real, so food sacrificed to them was no different from food that was not. Nonetheless—because of their history, their upbringing, their “weakness”—it was a hurdle they could not surmount. They just couldn’t shake it. It was not so much that their *faith* was weak, but that because of their history whenever they sat down to a meal—especially one being offered in the precincts of a pagan temple—they couldn’t help but worry that the food had been previously offered to idols. Their conscience would not let them easily dismiss that association.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:7-13.

v8

But food will not commend us to God;

commend = *parastesei*; future active indicative of *paristemi* = or prolonged *paristano*, par-is-tan'-o; from <G3844> (para) and <G2476> (histemi); **to stand beside**, i.e. (transitive) **to exhibit, proffer, (special) recommend**, (figurative) substantiate; or (intransitive) to be at hand (or ready), aid :- assist, bring before, command, commend, give presently, present, prove, provide, shew, stand (before, by, here, up, with), yield. (For once the NIVs are the most literal with “bring us near”. Can be positive or negative, depending on context, i.e., commendation or condemnation).

Verse 8 presents some problems of interpretation, but probably the best solution (as Fee) is to see both parts of this verse as another position of the Corinthians with which Paul agrees—but which he is about to employ as an argument *against* their behavior (i.e., their supposed “liberty” or “right” to eat food in a pagan temple).

The first part is straightforward enough, a statement of fact that agrees not only with what Paul had written earlier about circumcision, but what Jesus taught about food in the gospel of Mark.

Read Mark 7:14-15.

Then, because his disciples didn’t get it, he had to explain further.

Read Mark 7:18-23.

Food, what goes into our mouth, is in and of itself morally neutral. And...

we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.

From the setting of Chapter Eight, and specifically the first part of v8, we would expect Paul to say something like (as Fee puts it), “therefore, abstaining is of no advantage to anyone [i.e., not eating food does not make you any more righteous to God]; nor is eating of any disadvantage” [i.e., eating food does not elicit God’s disapproval]. But Paul’s elaboration of the first part is precisely the opposite: “The one who abstains is not *dis*advantaged; and the one who eats is not advantaged.”

One reason Paul might have worded it this way was that he was thinking about the identical situation he had earlier addressed (in Chapter Seven) regarding circumcision. But let’s look at how he said it to the Galatians.

Read Galatians 5:6.

To the Galatians he said the same thing he has been saying to the Corinthians: If one looks at our life under God—even life under the Mosaic Law, which *required* circumcision to be an obedient Jew—there are some things more important than strict adherence to his regulations, and one of these is *love*—especially love for the brethren. If our behavior, even in obedience to or allowed by God’s precepts, does harm to a fellow believer, that brother’s condition must take precedence. Once again, when all is said and done, circumcision means nothing and food means nothing. What counts is the condition of our heart, and our consideration for a brother or sister in Christ.

As the late theologian and scholar Hans Conzelmann wrote, “The neutrality of food does *not* mean neutrality of *conduct*.” Paul now, in v9, begins to focus on the damage—potentially fatal damage—we can inflict on a brother simply by availing ourselves of the liberty, or right, we have to partake of this seemingly insignificant food.

v9

But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

Verse 9 offers us evidence that this business of eating food in a pagan temple was an argument set forth in the Corinthians’ letter to Paul, and that v8 is the essential text of that argument. It might have gone something like this:

Corinthians: After all, Paul, mere food isn’t going to commend us to God; we are no better or no worse if we do or do not eat.

Paul: I agree, but you are missing something...

liberty^{nasb, nkjv}, **exercise of rights**^{niv2011}, **exercise of freedom**^{niv}, **right**^{esv} = *exousia* = from <G1832> (exesti) (in the sense of ability); privilege, i.e. (subject) force, capacity, competency, freedom, or (object) mastery (concrete magistrate, superhuman, potentate, token of control), delegated influence :- **authority, jurisdiction, liberty, power, right, strength.**

Paul did not pluck this term out of thin air; almost certainly he is responding to a popular philosophy at work in Corinth and members of the church (“liberty of yours”)—one, sadly, still prevalent today.

A. T. Robertson: It becomes a battle cry, personal liberty does, to those who wish to indulge their own whims and appetites regardless of the effect upon others.

Perhaps this is an appropriate time to recall what the apostle wrote to the church in Philippi—something else that Paul did not pull out of thin air.

Read Philippians 2:1-4.

What was his model for this philosophy and behavior? Read on.

Read Philippians 2:5-8.

In Chapter Nine Paul will return to this word, *exousia*. In his apologia against the Corinthians’ challenge to his apostolic authority, he will use the word, translated “right,” five times.

v10

For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?

Let’s consider, for a moment, this word translated “weak.”

asthenes (ahs-then-ace’) = from <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and the base of <G4599> (sthenoo); strengthless (in various applications, literal, figurative and moral) :- more feeble, impotent, sick, **without strength**, weak (-er, -ness, thing).

These were not bumbling idiots, they were not necessarily brand new believers, nor were they necessarily like those described by James as “double-minded” men, “unstable in all [their] ways,” “driven and tossed by the wind.” In this context I interpret this word “weak” as describing those lacking in the fullness of knowledge that would bring a foundational maturity to their conscience and faith.

We might say they were spiritually *malleable*, easily shaped by outside influence, either positively or negatively. This could be because of a lack of the knowledge their “stronger” brethren possessed, or simply because of their personality or life experience.

The impression we have of these more “knowledgeable” Corinthians—the ones “dining in an idol’s temple”—is that they were displaying an attitude toward their weaker brethren of, *Hey, just grow up!*, when what they should have been displaying was an attitude of spiritual noblesse oblige. Paul states this well in his letter to the Romans.

Read Romans 15:1-2.

The Corinthians thought they were edifying the weak by demonstrating their superior knowledge. Paul opened this chapter of his letter by stating flat out that it is not knowledge, but *love* that edifies.

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; (1 Corinthians 8:1-2)