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GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS
#20

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY
1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13

INTRODUCTION

We are in a section of 1 Corinthians where Paul is responding to numerous questions posed to him by the Corinthian church. They have already asked about singleness, marriage and divorce. 1 Corinthians 7 records Paul's answers to those questions. Now the Apostle begins to answer another question on the topic of whether the Corinthians should eat meat that had been offered in idol worship. Apparently, this issue was another source of division within the congregation and it needed to be wisely addressed. Behind this particular issue lies the larger issue of Christian liberty and how that liberty must be characterized by love for one another. In chapter 6, Paul introduced the concept of Christian liberty [6:12-20]; now he will provide additional principles to govern our freedom in Christ. The Corinthians relished their freedom, but they lacked the necessary love which was necessary to promote the spiritual health of the church. Paul offers wise remedies for this situation.

1. THE PROBLEM IN CORINTH

Like so many other problems in the Corinthian church, the problem Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 8 stems from the idolatrous culture of Corinth seeping into this local church. Idol worship was a common part of the Corinthian lifestyle. Prior to conversion, the Corinthians frequented the temples [6:9], participated in the feasts [10:21] and even visited the temple prostitutes [6:16]. When they bought their food at the market place, they thought nothing of buying and eating the meat remaining from an animal sacrificed to an idol. In short, idolatry pervaded their lives. It was essentially connected to everything the Corinthians did.

Then, Paul arrives and proclaims the gospel's exclusive claims: there is one God and His name is Jesus. To be saved from coming wrath, one must forsake every false God and trust that Jesus alone saves through His life, death and resurrection. Because of the Holy Spirit's effectual workings, many in Corinth believed this message and were converted. Apparently, they left the idol temples, feasts and prostitutes, but now that Paul had been gone for some time, some within the church experienced a desire to return to these things which characterized their lives before Christ. And it seems that there were probably some internal disputes about what was allowable for a Christian to do regarding these issues. Can a Christian go to a temple where an idol is worshipped? Can he eat the meat at such a celebration or can he buy it in the open market? Can he visit a prostitute? Paul has already answered the prostitute question in 1 Corinthians 6 and given related teaching on marriage, singleness and sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 7. Now he takes us to the basic question of attending the idolatrous feasts.

The Corinthians reasoned this way; "we have the true knowledge that there is only one true God and He is revealed to us through Jesus. We also have the knowledge that food, whether eaten or abstained from, is not a vital part of worship. Therefore, an idol is nothing so our participation in

these feasts is nothing as well" [8:1, 4-6, 8]. In other words, the Corinthians were claiming that their knowledge gave them the "right" to participate in such feasts.

The critical problem arises because not all in the Corinthian church are able to work through the nuances of this issue. Some Christians with a "weaker" understanding were invited to attend these feasts where they saw more mature Christians eating this meat, and then the weaker Christians joined in the feast at the expense of their consciences. The weak conscience is the one that is not rooted deeply in God's grace. He still thinks he is accepted or rejected based on some code of behavior. Therefore, if he eats this meat, the result is, *he who is weak is ruined* (v11). His conscience is now plagued with guilt and accusation. For him, this becomes a major stumbling block and he is thrown into a state of confusion over what is lawful or unlawful. His joy is now gone and his faith is in danger. This was quite a serious issue that demanded a wise solution.

2. THE SOLUTION IS CHRISTIAN MATURITY WHICH IS ALWAYS CHARACTERIZED BY CONSIDERING OTHERS

Paul begins to offer a solution by correcting their attitude. Their knowledge, which was true knowledge [one God, food is nothing, etc], had only led them to behave in a selfish manner. Before he addresses the behavior, he must address the heart (vv1-3). These knowledgeable Corinthians were arrogant. They were not acting in love toward their weaker brothers. Check your own attitude; when contemplating doing something, do you consider its wider effects on the body of Christ? Our lives are not to be built on knowledge only, but love as well.

Paul affirms the Corinthians' basic theology: *there is no such thing as an idol in the world* (v4); *there is no God but one* (v4); *there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ* (v6). But the Corinthians only have a partial knowledge. They do not realize the demonic presence inherent to idol worship; they do not fully grasp the danger of such events as an idolatrous feast. Paul will ultimately forbid them from attending these events [1 Corinthians 10:14-22], but for now he must point out one glaring problem with their reasoning; *However, not all men have this knowledge* (v7).

In verses 7-13, Paul explains the effect of the Corinthians' selfish knowledge; *he who is weak is ruined* (v11). There are weak Christians who do not share the same degree of Christian liberty as a mature believer. The mature Christian sees these kinds of issues with objective knowledge, but the weak Christian *being accustomed to the idol until now* (v7) still believes this action is wrong. In other words, his past experiences will not allow him to reason biblically and objectively about this issue. If he follows the example of the mature Christian, here are the results: (1) his conscience is defiled (v7), (2) he had stumbled over our example (v9), and (3) he is ruined (v11).

CONCLUSION

Our goal must be to present a gracious maturity to the world and especially to other believers. Let me offer a few practical points of summation to assist us in reaching this goal. (1) Do not focus on disputable matters which often lead to contentions [Romans 14:19]. Rather, give time and attention to those things which promote peace and build one another up in the faith. (2) Pray for greater degrees of Christian liberty and when the Spirit gives it, do not flaunt it. Enjoy your liberty judiciously. Limit the enjoyment of your freedoms to those who can enjoy them with you. Wisely restrain yourself so that you do not become an unnecessary hindrance to weaker Christians [1 Corinthians 8:10 & Romans 14:20]. (3) Be clear on your convictions and refuse to force your convictions onto another Christian [1 Corinthians 8:8 & Romans 14:22]. We must

accept all those whom God accepts through the cross; we are not free to exclude anyone whom God calls His own.