

Christians Gone Wild!
1st Corinthians, week 19
The Weaker Christian (1 Corinthians 8:1–13)
May 28, 2006
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Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

1 Corinthians 8:9

In every church, some of the most contentious and difficult issues arise when people with different Christian liberties fight over which of them is right. Examples in our own day would include fights over smoking, drinking alcohol, eating meat, and enjoying not expressly Christian music and film. In the days of Paul, the issue at Corinth was meat sacrificed to idols. Meat was an expensive delicacy that was not a regular part of the average person's diet. But it was often consumed after being offered as a sacrifice in pagan worship practices. The problem was that while some in the Corinthian church gladly enjoyed eating such meat without any conviction, others were horrified that Christians would seemingly endorse and participate in idolatry. The conflict grew so heated that they asked their pastor, Paul, to resolve their conflict, which he does in 1 Corinthians 8. Paul uses four timeless questions that are equally helpful in our own day.

1. What does my Bible say?

Sin is by definition the breaking of God's law as revealed in Scripture (1 John 3:4). The first question we must ask is if something violates Scripture. If something does violate Scripture then it is a universal sin for all people at all times in all cultures to be avoided and repented of if done. Examples would include lying, murder, rape, and stealing. But if something does not violate Scripture then we are free to consider doing it, though we may choose not to do so for other reasons as outlined below.

2. What does my conscience say?

In addition to Scripture, God has created within us a conscience as a sort of moral rudder to help us navigate through life by making wise decisions. Our conscience notifies us of particular sins that are to be avoided by some people in some times and in some cultures. As a result, in addition to obeying Scripture, we must also honor our conscience as it is also a way through which God speaks to us and the Holy Spirit leads us. We must be careful to obey our conscience or risk dulling it, which is as deadly as a captain breaking the rudder on his boat amidst a thunderous storm.

3. What does my weakness require?

Every Christian is both weak and strong. In some areas a person can be very spiritually strong, not prone to sin, and able to resist temptation continually. But in another area that same person is spiritually weak, prone to sin, and unable to continually resist temptation.

Therefore, we must each be honest about our strengths and weaknesses. We must also not bind others by our conscience and our weaknesses but allow

them freedom where they are strong while they also permit us to enjoy our freedom in areas where we are strong and they conversely are weak. As a result, the key to harmony and love in a church is an agreement on what constitutes universal sins that violate Scripture, and an agreement to allow diversity according to personal conscience and personal strength/weakness on particular sins without passing judgment on one another.

4. What does my friend need?

Nonetheless, no one is an island unto themselves and we each live our lives together in community as the church. Subsequently, when friends with differing consciences and weaknesses live their lives together, how should they resolve their differences?

For example, what if one person has no problem drinking alcohol in moderation but their friend is strongly convicted to abstain from alcohol and/or has been an alcoholic and does not want to revert to using alcohol sinfully and therefore abstains from even being around it?

God's Word to us through Paul is that while our freedom is important, our friends are more important. Because we love our friends, we must happily give up our freedoms in their presence so as to not cause them to sin or violate their conscience. In doing, so we retain our freedom but simply choose not to exercise it out of love. Legalistic churches—churches that forbid things that Scripture does not—believe they are promoting love when in fact they are robbing people of certain great joys. For example, the joy of explaining to vegetarian friends that the only reason I take them to vegan restaurants is because I love them. Or choosing not to order a glass of wine with dinner because a friend is a former alcoholic and the presence of wine might cause them to stumble.

At Mars Hill I have often spoken of this as being theologically conservative and culturally liberal, which is confusing for some. What I mean by that is that we are conservative on all that the Bible teaches and therefore do not endorse such things as sex before marriage, homosexuality, or drunkenness. However, we liberally allow freedom for conscience and wisdom to guide where the Bible is silent on such things as piercings, tattoos, moderate alcohol consumption for those of legal age, music styles, etc. But, like Paul, our goal must always be love and concern for our friends so that we don't enjoy our freedom at the expense of their faith.

Verses for next week: 1 Corinthians 9:1–18