

## PERPLEXITIES IN PAUL:

### THE MENU

I Corinthians 8:1-13

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, February 1, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

#### Focus Text

#### ***I Corinthians 8:1-13***

*Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.*

*Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists’, and that ‘there is no God but one.’ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*

*It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ‘Food will not bring us close to God.’ We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.*

The passages I have read earlier are some of the most comically specific passages in the New Testament. They are written by the Apostle Paul –

- ...who took Christianity from its Jewish roots and expanded it into Greco-Roman culture, leading it to become a world religion
- ...who was the first theologian of the church
- ...and whose Epistle to the Romans influenced Augustine, Martin Luther, and Karl Barth, giving rise to major renewal and reformation through each of them at different points in history.

In the passage we read, this brilliant and controversial expounder of Christian faith spends an entire chapter on the earth-shattering question: *Is it acceptable for Christians to eat meat that has been used in temple sacrifices?*

- With the Roman Empire near collapse
- With his own life under constant threat
- And with the Corinthian church to whom he was writing torn asunder by a variety of conflicts

Why on earth does this apostle from heaven spend over 500 words on matters of the menu? Is Christian faith that enmeshed in things trivial?

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When I was ordained, the first congregation I served had a full-blown Board of Trustees. Among members of the Board were a federal judge, a leading attorney in town, the sister of one of the first female presidents of a major university in America, and several self-made oil tycoons.

When I arrived to be Associate Pastor, the Pastor was showing me around the church. When we got to the room in which the Trustees had met the night before, he shook his head: “They spent forty-five minutes last night deciding whether or not to spend \$14 for a bag of fertilizer.”

*Food offered to idols....*

Have you ever been so turned off by the time and energy the church spends on trivial matters that you thought about leaving, or did leave, and stayed away for a long time?

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From 1987 through 1994 I worked on a Doctor of Ministry Degree through McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.

When it came time to write my thesis, I became so involved in the topic I had chosen that I took an extra year to do the research and writing. At one point I ensconced myself in a Spartan dorm room in Hyde Park (long before our new President arrived in that neighborhood) and did nothing but immerse myself in the subject at hand. When the thesis was completed, the one other person on the face of the earth who read it said that it was good.

But I have a confession to make: Do you know what the topic of my thesis was: This passage – *food offered to idols*. What compelled me to devote so much time to this “meaty” subject?

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My initial interest was the issue of “scrupulous behavior” in the church.

- I had grown up in the Deep South, where much of the Christianity that surrounded me seemed to consist of three commandments: “Don’t drink; don’t smoke; don’t dance.” Even though I never bought into that kind of “rule-based” Christianity, I was proud that I didn’t drink or smoke – mainly because I was a jock rather than because I was a Christian – and I knew there was never much danger in me dancing, at least very well!
- But when I went off to college, a family in the community I had distantly known invited me to dinner in their home. The host offered me a glass of wine. I asked for tea instead. The host had to find the tea bag and brew the water and retrieve a cup and saucer. I realized that my scrupulousness about not drinking wine was imposing on the host and I thought, “This is ridiculous.” My scrupulousness was a hindrance to the spirit of the meal.

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As I studied this passage more deeply, I became impressed by Paul’s “common sense” approach to the issue of idol meat.

- “Food will not bring us close to God,”<sup>1</sup> Paul said, quoting a bumper sticker of his day.
- Whether you eat or drink, whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.<sup>2</sup>
- If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.<sup>3</sup>
- But if someone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice’, then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— I mean the other’s conscience, not your own.<sup>4</sup>

I respected Paul’s open minded politeness, his concern for civility, his counsel not to put someone else on the spot. I appreciated his counsel to respect the conscience of the people we are with. I was glad I had chosen the topic, but I still wondered why this great theologian of the church was dabbling in such minor matters of menu.

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Finally, I came to understand that these menu matters revealed deep-seated issues being played out in the life of the Corinthian church and in the lives of individual Corinthians who had become Christians.

Among these were:

- Christians’ relationship to Jewish law and specifically the question as to whether or not matters of cleanness and uncleanness – binding upon Jews – were also binding upon Christians
- Christians’ relationship to the culture around them, in which allegiance to religions of the state, with its temples, gods, and rituals, was akin to allegiance to the state itself, something early Christians were accused of lacking
- The larger question of relationships between Christians and non-Christians, church and society, Christ and culture
- The relationship between an individual citizen and the *polis* (the city) and between an individual believer and the *ecclesia* (the church)

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<sup>1</sup> I Corinthians 8: 8.

<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians 10:31.

<sup>3</sup> I Corinthians 10:27.

<sup>4</sup> I Corinthians 10:28-29.

- And finally the fact that in Corinthian society, the only way many of the poor received meat was if they ate meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

All these factors played into Paul’s major attention to a seemingly minor matter.

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What continues to hold my attention in this text today is the way this menu matter serves as a window into Paul’s thought about the relationship between the individual and the community.

While Paul is concerned specifically about the relationship between the believer and the church, the wisdom he shares concerning this relationship may guide us as well in relationships we have as individuals within the family, the workgroup, and the larger community of city and nation.

Paul’s thesis in First Corinthians – written to a community as diverse as our nation – appears at the outset of the letter:

...I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement, and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.<sup>5</sup>

The professor who guided me in my thesis – Dr. Margaret Mitchell, now of the University of Chicago – asserts that Paul is using secular, civic language here – language from the great orators at the Roman Forum – to call Christians to unity of purpose. According to Mitchell, that unity is less about having the same viewpoints on particular issues than it is about being in a concord that puts the interests of the larger body – in Paul’s case, the church – ahead of narrow individual interests and ahead of any faction, party, or set of ideas with which we are affiliated.<sup>6</sup>

Paul expands on this theme in portions of the letter we did not read:

‘All things are lawful’ [he quotes the Corinthians], but not all things are beneficial [he adds]. ‘All things are lawful’, but not all things build up [the community]. Do not seek your own advantage, but [seek the advantage] of others.<sup>7</sup>

Among the values of

- Knowledge
- Freedom
- And individual conscience

Paul holds dear, he holds up as even more important the value he calls “love” – *agape* – not the *eros* of passion and attraction, but the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. He urges the Corinthians to live into that kind of love – *agape* – that builds up the community, not simply the self, that seeks the advantage of the church, not simply one’s own advantage, that benefits the many, not just the one.

A few chapters later, Paul expounds on this understanding of love – in what are probably his most famous words:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.<sup>8</sup>

(I know I may spoil the memory or anticipation of your wedding when I say the “love” in this passage is not *eros* – that attraction between two people who are in love -- but rather *agape* – the commitment that puts the interests of the community before the interests of the self. I will add, however, that since marriage is a community, and putting the interests of the other is a crucial component of marriage, I don’t veto couples from reading this passage at their weddings.)

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<sup>5</sup> I Corinthians 1:10.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of I Corinthians* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992), 65-80, 197-200. Mitchell argues that the four phrases in 1:10, translated “in agreement,” “no divisions,” and “united in the same mind and the same purpose” all serve as a call to unity of purpose against factional interests. It may be a stretch to include diversity of opinion among those things which can be included with concord, but given Paul’s allowances for different solutions to both idol-meat controversies in Chapter 8 and to marriage options in Chapter 7, I think not.

<sup>7</sup> I Corinthians 10:23-24. See the continuance of this chapter through 11:1.

<sup>8</sup> I Corinthians 13:4-7.

The bottom line is this: In the most diverse and divided congregation he founded, Paul calls people to focus on the central aspect of their faith that unites them – the death and resurrection of Christ<sup>9</sup> – rather than less essential matters that divide them. He calls them to lay aside at times the individual rights to which they are entitled for the sake of building up the community of which they are part.

Though the presenting issue – food offered to idols – seems trivial to us, the challenge to put what is best for the communities in which we are involved

- Family
- Workgroup
- Athletic team
- School
- Church
- Military unit
- Nation

above our own interests is one of the highest virtues we can attain.

(I add by way of parenthetical compliment that this is one of the virtues of this congregation.)

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David Brooks is one of the best chroniclers of the tension between individualism and community in American life. This past Tuesday, in his column in the *New York Times*, he quoted a speech Chicago Cub second-baseman Ryne Sandberg gave when he was inducted into baseball's Hall of Fame in 2005:

I was in awe every time I walked onto the field [Sandberg said]...

I was taught you never, ever disrespect your opponents or your teammates or your organization or your manager and never, ever your uniform.

Motioning to players previously inducted into the Hall of Fame, Sandberg continued:

These guys sitting up here did not pave the way for the rest of us so that players could swing for the fences every time up and forget how to move a runner over to third. It's disrespectful to them, to you and to the game of baseball that we all played growing up...

...I didn't play the game right because I saw a reward at the end of the tunnel. I played it right because that's what you're supposed to do, play it right and with respect....

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I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,  
By the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
That all of you should be in agreement  
And that there should be no divisions among you,  
But that you should be united  
In the same mind and the same purpose.

It's about more than the menu:  
It's about being part of a community,  
The human community,  
And  
The church of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> I Corinthians 15.