

"Food for Thought"

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January 28, 2018

¹Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. ²Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³but anyone who loves God is known by him. ⁴Hence, 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." ⁵Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords— ⁶yet 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. ⁷It 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. ⁸"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. ⁹But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For 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? ¹¹So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. ¹²But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

(1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

There is a Hebrew midrash, or a story that stands as an interpretation of the scriptures, that tells the story of the Old Testament patriarch, Abraham and his father, Terah. Terah was an idol maker and owned a shop in which people could buy idols or come to give offerings to idols. This shop had been owned by Terah's father and it was tradition to pass the family business down from father to son. The story goes that one day Terah had to go out for the day and he left Abraham in charge of the store. Now Abraham could not understand why people purchased idols – and certainly couldn't understand why people would worship them. Abraham knew how the idols were made –he had even helped to make them from time to time. For him, the idols were merely stone...with eyes that could not see, ears that could not hear, mouths that could not speak, feet that could not move. That day after seeing too many people spend their money uselessly buying idols, Abraham smashed all but one of the idols in the shop with a stick then placed the stick in the hand of the largest idol. When Terah returned he asked Abraham what happened to all the idols. He said, "A woman came to the store to make an offering, then the idols argued about which one should eat the offering first. Then the largest idol took the stick and smashed the other idols." Terah was furious, "Son, do you take me for a fool?," he yelled at Abraham, "these are nothing but stone creations; they have no knowledge!" Abraham responded, "If you know that they are but



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stone, why do you sell them – why do you allow people to believe that they are more than just sculpted rock?”¹

Much like Abraham pointed out to his father, one might say that in today’s world carved idols are for the most part irrelevant. Sure there are things and ideas that we have a tendency to make into idols, like time or the ever addicting cell phone even, but the notion of worshipping statues in today’s world is pretty archaic. Even religions that appreciate carved images, like Hinduism, would be quick to remind us that the objects themselves are not a god, but just a depiction. In the Catholic Church even, the use of relics and idols isn’t meant to take the place of God, but to inspire devotion to God. These days, the mention of carved statues as idols might make us think more about Indiana Jones, rather than meaty theological arguments.

But Paul lays it out pretty clearly in his letter to the Corinthian church, “we know that no idol in the world really exists, and that there is no God but one.” The issue, however, like issues that tend to arise in the church today, is a little more nuanced than it appears at surface level. Paul is quick to agree that idols are not real, but the issue at hand, and what stands as a potential dividing threat to the Corinthian church lies in the question, “is it acceptable to eat meat sacrificed to idols?” In that time, meat was a very rare commodity, found usually only on the tables of the very wealthy. For the rest of society, the only meat that they would ever have to eat was the meat that was sacrificed to idols, because after it was sacrificed it was given out for free in honor of the god. Typically a whole community would join in the meal, like a modern day block party. So for those who would abstain from eating this meat and share in the celebration would not only miss out on a free meal but they would also miss out socially. If one were to reject the eating of meat offered to idols, it would have excluded one from sharing in the social life of Corinthian society and so it would call them to live in an entirely different and countercultural way.

Perhaps at this point you might be wondering just why Paul would spend so much time talking about idols in our reading today, and why he would be giving out so much advice concerning eating meat. We certainly have our own camps we choose when it comes to meat, grass fed or grain fed, can a veggie burger ever replace a beef burger, or is the perfect steak cooked to medium rare or rare. But most of our debates about meat start usually from ethical arguments or environmental concerns, but this is not the fuel of the argument for Paul and the Corinthians.

For Paul, it has nothing to do with the meat. Eating meat has nothing to do with your faithfulness, whether it was bought in the market or sacrificed in a temple to pagan gods. But what is at “steak” for the Corinthians is how those who are so freely eating the meat that has been offered to idols might confuse other followers of faith. This passage illuminates the balance between one’s individual freedom and the responsibility one has for the overall health of their community.² For indeed we can eat or drink almost anything we choose, although it is good to remember that we are called to glorify God in our embodiment. But, our freedom is not solely individualistic, and it matters how we choose to embody God’s love for the whole community. Minister Frank Crouch offers a contemporary example, “ Suppose that there is a covered-dish supper at your church. Someone brings a platter of food saying, ‘The local Satan-worshippers had a table set up

¹ Barr, Robert B. “Abraham and the Idols.” *Our Jewish Community*, 2018, www.ourjewishcommunity.org/learn/midrashim-legends/abraham-and-the-idols/. January 25, 2018.

² Bartlett, David, L. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 1*. Westminster John Knox Press; Louisville. 2008, p 303.

at the mall giving away this food. It's delicious!' Would you eat it in front of everyone? There would be no actual power of Satan in the food. It would be fine to eat it. But, what impact might it have on a new convert or on someone who would take that to mean that there's no real difference between things offered to Satan and things offered to God? In a context where no one would have a problem with it, it would be fine. In a context where someone might be led to "fall" (to use Paul's word) because of it, it would be wrong."³ The same dilemma is happening in the Corinthian church. Paul says, "It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge that idols are not real. 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 closer 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 others." The problem is not *what* they ate, but *because* they ate. The argument is not just about holiness, it is also about wholeness.

Paul's conclusion to this whole debate is to say that even though the side that knows the idols are not real are theologically correct, there is more to just being right and wrong when it comes to living and being together in a community of faith. And love for the community must come first, and out of that love, one must keep careful consideration for the "weaker" ones in the community, to use Paul's words. For this reason Paul ends the chapter by saying, "Therefore if food is a cause of another falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall."

While the meat-eating example and situation happening in the first century church is a little abstract and can be a little tough to chew, the message that is at root of it all is that love for the church and for one another has certain self-restricting qualities that should build up the whole community. The relevance for us today is that we are all called to ask and answer the same question, how far are we expected to go out of our way to accommodate a viewpoint that is different than our own, for the sake of the community or the church? Perhaps it is questions like these that reveal why we tend to have issues with Paul.

"Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." I cannot think of a better slogan or bumper sticker for these days. We're living in a time where we are bombarded by memes, letters to the editor, or social media posts that support our views and condemn the other who we consider to hold the weaker position. We engage in Facebook battles of who is right and who is wrong, thinking that with them we can change people's minds or positions with just 140 characters. We tune into news that tends to share a similar view as ours and labels others as fake or false. And please don't get me wrong, I think it is a very important thing to be informed and engaged with issues that we care about and to work to stand up for our beliefs, but Paul is asking the Corinthians to go beyond puffed up knowledge to see that underneath opinions, whether right or wrong, there is a person who has intrinsic value, even if their argument does not. Knowledge without love "puffs up," while wise and knowing love will build up the community. That is what self-restricting loves look like, and it is worth it in the long run because that kind of love can build up to teach and even create change. Love that builds up is what opens doors to have conversations. Love that builds up is what takes time to listen, to educate, and to work together for understanding. That kind of love

³ Crouch, Frank L. "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 8:1-13." *Working Preacher - Preaching This Week (RCL)*, 2012, www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1197. January 25, 2018.

builds up a healthy church, which carries a diversity of thought, even disagreements, but leans on a greater love of Christ that holds it all together.

This love, Christ's love, is the hope and mission of the church. It is this love that keeps the church from being just another social club or community organization. If we hope to continue to be a church that has a prophetic message for these days is that the only way to love one another is to be in relationship, which is why this is all so difficult in a world where we can quickly hit unfollow or where we can go for days without encountering someone who looks, thinks, sounds, and acts differently than we do, if we choose to. And so Paul suggests to the people of Corinth and to us today, that if you have to make a decision between being loving and being correct, choose to be loving. We might find ourselves in positions in which we think it wise to apply our knowledge, but it can end up hurting another member, and what we actually end up doing is destroying the body of Christ in the process. For Paul, there is a direct correlation that when the Corinthians hurt one another they hurt Christ himself because they cause pain in his body, the church. We are all called to live out and share a love that builds up, a love that heals wounds in the church and community, and that has everything to do with how we interact with one another. It is why objectively Paul is theologically correct in siding with the group that eats the sacrificed meats, but also why in his actions he chooses not to eat meat out of loving consideration for the others who are still learning and growing in their faith and understanding. He points out that there are those who might be watching, perhaps even outside of the faith community, to see how he models both his faith and how they will all model God's love, especially when there is a difference of opinion.

In all times, but especially in times of doubt, disagreement, and distrust people are always watching the church with every bit the same scrutiny as the church in Corinth, to see if we really model a community where love builds up. People might not fully understand what the church is or why we choose to be church today and act the way that we do, but they can certainly see if we practice what we preach. They can see a puffed up church from a mile away, just as they can easily see a community that truly builds one another up in love. Any time we are able to model that we are a community that holds a variety of opinions, theological beliefs, and social viewpoints, we show that we are church that is built upon and building on the foundation of love. They use to say that the football stadium was the last place that so many people of differing views, backgrounds, and beliefs could come together, but now I think that place is the church. And that is both a rarity and a gift these days. Together we can be an example of a community that builds up, even with our disagreements, because we are called to love one another.

In the 1960's, a parish priest at St. Brendan's on the South Side of Chicago was leading a youth choir that met in the church basement.⁴ They were called upon to prepare a song for a series of ecumenical and interracial events. When he couldn't find a song that seemed to work, he sat down and wrote a song in a single day. A simple song, that inspires us even today, that sings of how those who watch and look to us will know who we are not by if we are right or wrong, not by if we are weak or strong, but they will know us by our love.

We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord. We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord. And we pray that all unity may one day be restored and they'll know we are Christians By our love by our love. Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

⁴ "Peter Scholtes." *Hymnary.org*, [hymnary.org/person/Scholtes_P](https://www.hymnary.org/person/Scholtes_P). January 26, 2018.

When we come together to build one another up in love, nothing else has to be the same, not our dining preferences of meat, our age, our gender, our race, our theologies or opinions, not even our faith journey. For at the center of it all we are called to be a people who understand that knowledge without love puffs up, but knowledgeable love, like Christ's love for us, builds us all up together. May we all be known by that love. Amen.