



COMMENTARIES ON “1 CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 8

In 1 Corinthians 8, St. Paul appears to answer another question sent to him by the Corinthian Christians, this time about the permissibility of eating meat that had been offered to idols. This may seem a strange issue in twenty-first century North America, where most food is purchased and/or consumed in fully secular grocery stores and restaurants. In the ancient world, however, this was a significant problem, because meat - or at least a small, representative amount from a section of meat - was often burned before an idol as a way of participating in the holiness of the god being venerated. The Corinthian Christians were therefore concerned about avoiding idolatry, but also recognized that refraining from such meat might make purchasing meat difficult.

The purpose of this chapter is to go beyond the issue of meat offered to idols, and instead to look at the principles underlying the issue. He begins by discussing knowledge: Christians have knowledge in varying degrees and amounts - in this case, knowledge regarding prohibitions against idolatry, as well as the practice of offering meat to idols - but we must be careful to avoid being prideful and judgmental in our knowledge. Ultimately, it is more important - and more edifying - to be loving (8:1), because the person who knows a great deal, but becomes prideful in his or her knowledge, shows that they lack the essential knowledge about being loving (8:2). In the end, the most important thing to know about God is that we should love Him and be loved by Him (8:3).

Among the things a Christian knows is that idols are merely false gods, and that our God is the only true God (8:4; cf. Deuteronomy 32:17, 21). St. Paul clarifies this point: even if there are other so-called gods, we worship God the Father, the source of all life, and the Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist (8:5-6; cf. Acts 17:28). St. Cyril of Alexandria similarly says, “Just as there is one God the Father from whom all things are, so there is one Lord Jesus Christ through whom are all things.”

Despite this truth, St. Paul notes that there are some Christians who, believing that idols have some spiritual power, are made uneasy by eating food that was offered to these gods. Therefore, because their conscience bothers them when eating meat that was offered to an idol, they are “defiled” by the process (8:7). In reality, this food is neither spiritually beneficial or detrimental (8:8), but Christians must nonetheless be considerate of those whose faith is weaker and thus are bothered by consuming this food (8:9,10). This point is very serious: if the spiritually weaker Christian violates his or her conscience by eating meat offered to idols, then that person has sinned (St. Paul even warns that this process could ultimately lead to the person spiritually perishing) (8:10). Furthermore, if in the liberty accorded to them by their knowledge the more spiritually mature person causes a spiritually weaker person to violate his conscience, then the spiritually mature person has also sinned against Christ (8:12). St. Basil warns against causing another Christian to violate his or her conscience:

Either when something is done which is intrinsically evil and scandal results, or if the performance of a licit act and one within our sphere of competence causes scandal to one who is weak in faith or

knowledge, then the penalty is clear and unescapable... 'It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck' (Luke 17:12).

In the end, St. Paul concludes, he would completely abstain from eating any meat if he knew that by doing so he would be assisting a spiritually weaker brother or sister in Christ (8:13).