BUILT DIFFERENT

LESSON NINE

COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY NOTES

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-3

Thomas Schreiner, in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, shows how the discussion of love and knowledge sets the foundation for Paul's answer to the Corinthian question:

1. The matter of food offered to idols was quite controversial in Corinth, and since there were many temples and many gods, and since meals at temples were common both socially and religiously, those who did not frequent temples were excluded from a central dimension of the polis. The word for *food sacrificed to idols* (*eidolothyton*) reflects a Jewish estimate of the food offered in temples; this term is never used in pagan sources. Pagans used the word 'food sacrificed to a divinity' (*hierothytos*). The term used here adopts the negative perspective about such food common in Jewish circles.[15]

Paul focuses on two groups in Corinth: the knowers, who believe that eating such food is appropriate, and the weak, who believe that eating idol food is defiling. Paul actually ends up disagreeing with both groups and argues a distinct position. We are again faced with the question of whether Paul quotes the Corinthians. Paul may begin by citing the knowers (so niv), who claim that *We all possess knowledge*. The knowledge in question is knowledge about food offered to idols, and the knowers were convinced that their theology resolved any questions about the legitimacy of eating such food. Though Paul could be citing the Corinthians (per the niv), it is more likely that we have Paul's own words here. All believers have knowledge, but the weak do not yet see the full implications of what they know. Fortunately, whether Paul cites the Corinthians or not does not affect the interpretation of the text dramatically. In any case, Paul turns to one of his favourite words in warning the Corinthians about pride. *Knowledge puffs up* (*physioi*); the word puffs up surfaces a number of times in the letter (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 13:4), showing that the arrogance of the Corinthians was a major Pauline concern. Pride inflates self and is narcissistic and self-absorbed. Love, on the other hand, is others-centred and is concerned with building up (*oikodomei*) and strengthening others (cf. 10:23; 14:4, 17). Knowledge should not become an instrument to advance oneself, but should be a vehicle for helping others.

2. The pride of the Corinthians continues to be the object of Paul's criticism in verse 2. Those who are proud of their knowledge do not have true knowledge, in the sense that they have not applied the knowledge they have rightly. The Pauline statement could be read as endorsing philosophical relativism, with the consequence being that all claims to knowledge are subverted. Such a reading, however, does not take into account the context of the chapter and the larger context of Paul's writings, for he was clearly not a relativist. A more suitable parallel is 1 Corinthians 3:18, where Paul warns those who think they are wise to become fools so that they will become truly wise. Another apt parallel is Galatians 6:3: 'If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.' True knowledge is adorned with humility and accompanied by love, and if these qualities are lacking, one's knowledge has not been applied correctly.

3. Love is the signature and mark of being a Christian (cf. 13:1–13; John 13:34–35), and such love has God supremely as its object, though such love for God is also expressed in love for brothers and sisters. The knowers may have boasted in their knowledge, but what is decisive is whether one *is known by God*. To be *known* (*egnostai*) by God is another way of speaking of God's electing grace. For instance, the Lord declares to Israel: 'you only have I chosen of all the families of the earth' (Amos 3:2). The word 'chosen' here translates the verb 'known' (*egnon*). Similarly, the Lord says of Abraham, 'I have chosen [*edein*, lit. 'known'] him' (Gen. 18:19), which refers to God's election of Abraham. We find the same theme in the selection of Jeremiah as a prophet: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew [*epistamai*] you' (Jer. 1:5). The verb 'know' in Jeremiah 1:5 is translated as 'chosen' by some English translations (e.g. hcsb, nasb, net). Paul also uses the verb 'foreknow' (*proginosko*) to denote God's covenant affection which he bestows on his people (Rom. 8:29; 11:2). The Corinthians' pride in their so-called knowledge should be staved off by their recognition that their inclusion among God's people is due to his electing love.

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Knowledge is subordinated to love in Paul's theology. As noted above, it does not follow from this that Paul believes knowledge to be unimportant, nor is he a relativist. Nevertheless, those who claim knowledge demonstrate, at least in part, the genuineness of their knowledge by their love and humility. Those who are proud of their knowledge have forgotten that they have been known by God; it is not what they know but what God knows which is of paramount importance.[1]

1 CORINTHIANS 8:4-6

Gordon Fee, In the *NICNT*, explains Paul's agreement with the Corinthian question, which will set the stage for explaining how he doesn't agree:

4 The clearly resumptive force of the "so then" and the repeating of "about eating54 food sacrificed to idols" indicate that Paul is returning to the topic at hand. With this sentence he picks up the two basic propositions of their argument. He begins as before (v. 1), "we know that," meaning that he is affirming as true what they have said.

The two propositions together form a strong affirmation of monotheism over against every form of polytheism or henotheism. Not only is there only one God, but there is a correlative denial that idols have any reality at all. This proclamation would not have been some new thing for the Corinthians; what is new is how they apparently have used it in their own argument. The order in which the two sentences appear suggests that the Corinthians' main point is that an idol lacks any reality. Although there is some ambiguity as to its precise nuance, what they almost certainly mean is that there is no reality to Isis or Sarapis or Asclepius. Idols, and thus "gods" to others, yes; but genuine reality in the world, no. This is so because of the basic theological statement of the Christian faith, "There is no God but one." The Corinthians' point will be that, since there is no reality to an idol because there is only one God, how can we be faulted for eating meals in the temple precincts, since the gods represented by these idols do not in fact exist?

That this is their point seems to be confirmed by the unusual qualification that follows. As a matter of fact, their premise is only partly true, as Paul will explain later (10:19–20). But for now his concern is altogether horizontal and completely practical, namely the effect that believing in such "gods" has had on their devotees. Hence in what follows he will both qualify and affirm even more strongly the theological predicate for their behavior. The problem does not lie with its content, but with their apparently unqualified use of it as giving them freedom to do as they will.

5 What became two verses when the fifteenth-century numbers were inserted (vv. 5–6) in fact together forms a single sentence, an anacoluthon in Greek (it does not follow grammatically), but one whose sense is clear.59 Indeed, even the reason for the anacoluthon can be fairly easily traced. The "for" is explanatory, picking up the theme of the two preceding propositions. Thus: "It is true that there is no reality to an idol and that there is only one God; *for* even if there are so-called gods (whether in heaven or on earth) …"; but right at that point Paul breaks off with a parenthetical aside, "just as there are indeed many gods and many lords."62 Precisely how Paul intended to conclude the sentence when it began cannot be known—perhaps with something like "they do not really have existence." In any case, the interruption calls forth an apodosis that does indeed respond to the opening concession, but does so by sharply qualifying the interrupting clause. Thus Paul posits in the first instance that the "gods" are only "so-called." This is true no matter what their abode, whether their natural one, "in heaven," or, as so often happened in the Greek pantheon, where the deities also had a very earthly existence as well, "on earth."64 Although this could represent the Corinthian position, it makes much more sense as Paul's own construct in which he is basically setting up the argument that comes next (v. 7) and anticipating the still later qualification (10:19–20). They are "so-called" because they do not have actual existence, certainly not in the form their worshipers believe them to have. On this point, therefore, the apostle and the Corinthians are on the same page.

[1]Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 167–169.

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But Paul also recognizes the existential reality of pagan worship, and he knows that some within the Corinthian community are going to be affected by that reality. Thus he interrupts the concession with the affirmation "as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords.' " He does not intend by this that the "gods" actually exist as objective realities. Rather, as he goes on to allow (v. 7), they "exist" subjectively in the sense that they are believed in. The two terms "gods" and "lords," which set up the Christian confession that follows (v. 6), reflect the two basic forms of Greco-Roman religion as it had been modified by the coming of the Oriental cults. The "gods" designate the traditional deities (Zeus, Athena, etc.), who are regularly given this appellation in the literature but are almost never referred to as *kyrioi* ("lords"). The term *kyrios*, on the other hand, is the normal title for the deities of the mystery cults, those religious expressions that had by this time become full-fledged competitors to the traditional *theoi* ("gods").

6 This clause forms the apodosis of the concession that preceded (v. 5), but it now exists as a sharp contrast to the interruption (v. 5b) that allowed that there are many so-called "gods" and "lords." The strong adversative, "but," sets what is true about "us," that is, " 'us' who believe in Christ," over against what has preceded. Although there is no formal equivalent to the words "for us," such as "for them" (meaning the pagans), in the preceding clause, this pronoun makes it clear that all of what is said in the protasis (v. 5) refers not to what really exists, but to what has taken a form of reality "for them." This will be made even more clear at the beginning of the next paragraph (v. 7).

What follows is one of three expressly monotheistic texts in Paul's letters where he uses the traditional Jewish formula "one God" (cf. Gal. 3:20; Rom. 3:29–30; 1 Tim. 2:5). Because of its rhythmic character and because there are some parallels both in Hellenism and in Hellenistic Judaism,69 this sentence is often considered to be a pre-Pauline creedal formulation that had its origins in Hellenistic Jewish Christianity. That can neither be proved nor disproved.71 It does indeed have a creedal ring to it, and reflects language found elsewhere in religious texts. But none of this means that it did not originate here with Paul. Most likely it is a Pauline construct, created *ad hoc* in the present argument, but making use of language that he has in common with his Hellenistic Jewish origins. In any case, it so thoroughly fits the present argument that the question of background or origin is ultimately irrelevant.

The text has several remarkable features. First, the formulae "one God" and "one Lord" stand in specific contrast to the "many gods" and "many lords" of the pagans. This means that the emphasis is not on the unity of the godhead, although that may be assumed, but on the uniqueness of the only God. The God whom Christians worship as Father and Son stands in singular contrast to all others who might be thought to be gods but are not. Furthermore, the two parts are in perfect parallel. The formulae "one God" and "one Lord" are followed by the personal designations "the Father" and "Jesus Christ" (the appellation "Son" being implied by the use of "Father" as the personal designation of God). These in turn are followed in each case by a set of prepositional phrases that express both the divine activity characteristic of each and indirectly the functional subordination of the Son to the Father. God the Father is both the ultimate source and the ultimate destiny of all things, including ourselves; the Lord Christ is the divine mediator, through whom God both created all things and redeemed us.

The first clause expresses three realities about God that are fundamental to Christian faith. First, Paul picks up the language of Jesus himself, the personal image of "Father," to set forth the Christian understanding of God. Such a designation existed in Judaism before him, but it was Jesus who expressly taught his followers to understand God in this way. For him it was not only a term expressing his own unique self-understanding, but also his gift to his followers. Thus they, too, may have this kind of personal relationship with God. Second, he is the source, the Creator, of all things. After the fact of God's unity, this is the next fundamental theological statement of the Judeo-Christian understanding of God. In contrast to the many gods, themselves often subject to the whims of the cosmos, the God who is known only by self-revelation and whom Christians worship stands apart from all things as their source. Nothing, absolutely nothing, lies outside the jurisdiction of the God with whom we have to do and who invites us to be related to him as child to father.

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Third, instead of the expected "all things are unto him" (i.e., God is both the source and goal of all created things), Paul says, "and *we* are for/unto him." The emphasis is on the "we," which is the unique feature of this present expression of the creed. The preposition here has a kind of built-in ambiguity to it. Ordinarily in such a creedal formula it is an eschatological term, expressing the fact that God stands at the beginning and as the goal of all things. But precisely because the creed has been personalized, that goal has a very strongly telic (purpose) force to it. God is not only the one to whom we are ultimately heading, along with the whole created order, but our very existence is for his purposes. Thus Paul's concern is not with philosophical theology, but with its practical implications for the matter at hand. Although he does not directly refer to it again, this is the ground of the entire argument that follows. By this phrase he places all of them—the Corinthians, both "gnostic" and "weak," as well as himself—under God's ultimate purposes, which will be spelled out more precisely in the next clause and especially at the end (v. 11).

The second clause places the work of Christ, and our relationship to him, in the closest kind of relationship to God. Although Paul does not here call Christ God, the formula is so constructed that only the most obdurate would deny its Trinitarian implications. In the same breath that he can assert that there is only one God, he equally asserts that the designation "Lord," which in the Greek OT was used to replace the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) and thus belongs singularly to the one God, is the proper designation of the divine Son. It should be especially noted that Paul feels no tension of any kind between the affirmation of monotheism and the clear distinction between the two persons of Father and Jesus Christ. As with other such statements in the NT,74 Jesus is the one through whom God both created and redeemed. Thus together the two sentences embrace the whole of human existence. God the Father is the source of all things, which were mediated through the creative activity of the Son; the Son is the one through whom God also redeemed us, so that our existence is now "for" and "unto" God. As with the former clause the emphasis is on Christ's activity in our behalf, and is therefore especially relevant to the Corinthian situation. They are arguing in the abstract, that idols do not exist because there is only one God. Paul agrees; but the redemptive activity of the Father and Son is the basis of Christian behavior—not abstract theology, even if it is true.

In sum: The Corinthians have argued that there is no reality to the "gods" represented by idols, since there is only one God. Paul agrees, but he qualifies his agreement in two directions. First, the nonexistent "gods" have a reality of a kind that must finally inform both their relationship with other believers and their own relationship to the one true God. That will be spelled out in what comes next (vv. 7–13). Second, the fuller explication of Christian monotheism argues that "our" God not only exists in uniqueness but that the Corinthians have a relationship to the one and only God that must finally determine both their own lives and how they relate to other believers.

Here is a clear example of Christian ethics being grounded in proper Christian theology. It has become common in our day to give a variety of other bases for ethical behavior. For Paul, and therefore for all who would be truly biblical Christians, there is only one ground for such behavior: The unity of God, and the fact that our existence both by creation and redemption is grounded in the one God, whom we serve and with whom we have to do. It is out of this kind of reality that Paul will eventually appeal to the death of Christ as being for others as well as for ourselves (v. 11), and therefore that love, not knowledge, must serve as the primary motive for Christian ethics.[2]

1 CORINTHIANS 8:7-13

In the *Cornerstone Bible Commentary*, William Baker highlights how Paul intends to expand the Corinthian understanding of freedom and knowledge and how it relates to food sacrificed to idols:

In 8:7, Paul describes his understanding of the minority in Corinth, who were not only in disagreement with the majority about idol food but who were harmed by the practices of the majority. They were

[2]Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 409–415.

sincere Christian believers who were experiencing genuine conflict between their faith and their culture. In theory, they knew idols do not represent real gods, but in practice they found it impossible to enter back into their former pagan lifestyles that included ritualistic and social consumption of idol meat. Their consciences were weak in the sense that what they knew to be true had not penetrated deeply into their personhood. The reality could not overcome their misgivings about eating this food. To them, it seemed like worshiping a god other than the one true God and serving a lord other than *the* Lord Christ. Perhaps they believed, as many Jews did (Isa 8:19; Bar 4:7; *Jubilees* 11:4–6; 1 *Enoch* 99:6–10), that the power that lies behind these idols was exerted by demons working against Christ. Thus, for them to eat this meat in any cultural situation or even at home would taint their new Christian life in a way that could never be reversed. For them, this was a line that could not be crossed without doing irreparable damage to their spiritual condition. For them, it was a grievous sin.

In 8:8, Paul defines the position he held on this matter of eating idol meat. He voiced the position of the majority that idol meat is nothing, but he observed that this assertion actually undercuts their insistence that every believer agree with their lifestyle choice to eat idol meat. "Nothing" means nothing. If the meat is nothing, then not eating it poses no more of a problem than eating it does. Whether believers eat it or not makes absolutely no difference to their spiritual nearness to God (Witherington 1995:186). Eating does not make people super Christians, better Christians, or more godly—nor does not eating it. "Nothing" makes it neutral and thus either position is a defensible choice for a conscientious believer.

So, in 8:9 Paul begins to dash the hopes of the majority that he would side with them. Rather than support them, he starts to mount considerable arguments why they are wrong in the way they are handling this situation. Rather than insisting that the minority participate in their choice to eat idol meat, he will encourage the majority to be willing to abandon their choice to eat it. He pins the problem on their insistence that this is a right earned for them by the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ. Their personal, self-serving arrogance, noted in 8:1–2, surfaces again. Paul insists that this right does not support their freedom to exercise it at all costs and at every opportunity. Nor does it give them the freedom to look down their noses at those who in good conscience cannot embrace the majority's exercise of freedom nor embrace it for themselves.

In 8:10, Paul pictures a public scene in which someone of the majority was enjoying a meal at one of the pagan temples in Corinth. To participate in this would be a very common practice for people living in Corinth as part of the many festivals for the general populace or for those who could afford it at marriages, birthdays, or even celebrations of restored health (noteworthy for the temple of Asclepius). Paul believed that many of the minority position would be unduly influenced to let down their guard, to allow the social situation to override their religious scruples against eating the idol meat, and to ultimately join fully in the festivities. The resulting violation of their own beliefs about what is involved in being committed to Christ could cause them to question other aspects of their commitment. Perhaps, they would begin to think, "If it doesn't matter whether I segregate myself from my non-Christian neighbors in the matter of food, maybe other ways I have been instructed to separate myself from my culture don't matter, either. Maybe my Christian faith isn't as uniquely true as I was led to think it was." Paul was concerned that such scenarios could cause believers ultimately to lose their faith and thus their salvation. His concern continues to speak to all manner of situations contemporary Christians continue to face involving parties, movies, and social Web sites.

In 8:11–12, Paul pits the "knowledge" of the majority and their insistence on exercising their rights against sacrificing their rights for people they love. For Paul, Christ is the model in all things, and it is so here. It is not just "what would Jesus do?" but "what has he already done?" He let go of his rights. He relinquished his freedom and became human, even submitting himself to scorn and death on a cross (Phil 2:6–8). There was absolutely no question in Paul's mind about what Jesus would have them (or us) do in such situations—abandon the freedom for Christ's sake. To not do so with regard to a fellow believer is unconscionable.

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The sin, then, is not about eating idol meat; it is about Christians not loving their brothers and sisters, and thus not loving Christ either. Given this spiritual reality, eating idol meat, Paul observes in 8:13, simply is not worth it. The clear implication is that the Corinthian majority should not find it difficult to draw the same conclusion. However, the conditional clause Paul constructs does not mean that Paul has taken up a vow to never again eat idol meat, nor that he was insisting the majority do the same. His condition does allow for other scenarios that would allow for eating idol meat. Among those could be perhaps in evangelistic situations when refusing to eat meat served would unnecessarily put people off from hearing the gospel message, or when one is eating with other believers privately who also consider eating idol meat a freedom that should be practiced (10:23–11:1). This gospel imperative or matter of church unity would, then, supersede the normal ban on eating pagan idol meat for those who could in conscience do so, even if doing so overstepped the deal made at the Apostolic Council described in Acts 15:1–29.[3]

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Mark A. Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary
Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, New International Commentary of the New Testament (NICNT)
Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (NIGTC)
Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary
Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, IVP New Testament Commentary
David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, The Bible Speaks Today
William Baker, *1 Corinthians*, Cornerstone Bible Commentary
Paul Ellingwroth and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on 1 Corinthians*, UBSH

[3] William Baker, "1 Corinthians," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians*, vol. 15 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 122–124.