

In matters of Christian liberty, love is a better guide than knowledge; love sees the needs of others.

8:1 **things offered to idols** In those days this issue was hugely significant. Most meat sold came through the hands of pagan priests. Also, there was no such thing as a completely secular public event. Idols would routinely be displayed. Festivities normally honored the gods or at least saw them as symbolically present. Deities would be invoked as guests of honor or even as the hosts. Any meat served on such occasions would have been sacrificed to one god or another.

The Jewish position on eating such meat was always clear. Rabbi Akiba ruled, “Meat which is about to be brought into heathen worship is lawful, but that which comes out from it is forbidden, because it is like the sacrifices of the dead” (Avod.S.ii.3). A religious Jew would never sit down to eat meat at a Gentile table.

Some Corinthian Christians had formerly been in bondage to these idols. To a new convert, the gods still exercised significant power. Jewish Christians had a different struggle. They had to work through the issue that all foods were now clean. Add to the mix any converts trained in philosophy. The Cynics, for example, made it a point to pay no attention at all to social customs. Believers from a diverse assortment of backgrounds were now part of the church in Corinth.

Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. Love prompts us to seek the welfare of others. In questions of what is allowed or what is forbidden, our first goal should not be to win people to our point of view. Our first goal should be to listen, and maintain a spirit of unity. This way we can learn why people think the way they do and relate to them with understanding.

8:2-3 **Love without knowledge** can lead to sentimentalism, in which people accept anything and everything from anyone without regard for truth. They become so open minded that their brains fall out. **Knowledge without love**, on the other hand, can lead to a pride that will stand in the way of both fellowship and spiritual growth. A true knowledge of God will prompt us to seek the benefit of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

When I was young I was sure of everything; in a few years, having been mistaken a thousand times, I was not half so sure of most things as I was before; at present, I am hardly sure of anything but what God has revealed to me. JOHN WESLEY (1703–1791)

8:4-6 Paul is clear: Idols are not only powerless but meaningless. There is only one God, the creator of all things. He has most clearly revealed Himself through Jesus Christ our Lord. When Paul calls Jesus “the Lord Jesus Christ” he is putting Christ on the same level as God the Father. He is asserting the complete deity of Christ. This declaration relates to the doctrine of the Trinity, an idea which is basic to an authentic Christian faith. It is not, however, easy to understand.

[The Church] has never tried to explain the mystery of the Trinity, but only sought to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in such a manner that the errors which endangered it were warded off. (Berkhof, Systematic Theology, quoted in Grudem, Systematic Theology, p.256)

This was all hammered out by the IV Century, shortly after the Roman persecutions came to a close – and Christian thinkers had time to think. Consequently, it was among the first doctrines to truly solidify. The concept was formed by analyzing the biblical data and carefully forming statements to concisely express what the Bible says. It was not imposed upon Scripture from outside, but grew from within it. The Trinity is and has consistently been a part of the belief system of mainstream Christianity – east and west, north and south, before, during and after the Reformation. It's not an optional or marginal belief.

Here are three statements, which combine to express this idea of the Trinity:

1. God is three persons.
2. Each person is fully God.
3. There is one God.

In contrast to statement 1: *Modalism (Sabellianism)* or the [United Pentecostal view](#)

In contrast to statement 2: *Arianism* or the [Watchtower view](#)

In contrast to statement 3: *Tritheism* or [Mormon view](#)

It is especially when we reflect on the relation of the three persons to the divine essence that all analogies fail us and we become deeply conscious of the fact that the Trinity is a mystery far beyond our comprehension. It is the incomprehensible glory of the Godhead. (Berkhof, in Grudem, p.256)

8:7 To anyone steeped in idolatry, idols might still be very real. As a newer convert to Christianity, this person's conscience would be deeply affected by even the trappings of pagan worship.

8:8 Another thing Paul is clear on: Food has no spiritual value at all. There is nothing you can eat or not eat, which, in and of itself, has any bearing on your walk with the Lord. Many religions have strict regulations that link your diet to spirituality. Biblical Christianity has none.

8:9 **Beware** This is a warning to people with knowledge. Your **liberty**, privilege or right, may have a downside. If you exercise it too aggressively, it can easily cause problems for others.

The body of Christ is connected. Nothing we do is isolated. The enlightened, the smart person, the one with the most knowledge, must, therefore consider the good of the unenlightened, or else he does not have love. Love, not knowledge, measures our Christian maturity.

8:10-11 Here Paul gives an example. Say you're eating in the idol's temple because you know you can. You have that freedom. Along comes a weaker brother, still extremely superstitious, hardly removed at all from idolatry. He goes into the temple to join you for lunch. Remember, you're just eating, but all the while he's feeling kind of weird. Soon afterward, he falls right back into his old superstitions. He later falls out of fellowship and he's worshipping pagan gods.

Christ died for this weak brother, but you're going to kill him just because you think you're so smart – exercising your Christian freedoms.

If a "strong" Corinthian evaluates his choice on the basis of knowledge, he concludes he has a right to eat. But if the same Corinthian evaluates his right to eat on the basis of love, he will refrain in order not to do possible harm to a "weak" brother.

8:12 **you thus sin against the brethren ... you sin against Christ.** Paul calls this exercise of Christian liberty “sin”. It wasn’t necessarily a sin to eat the meat. It was lack of concern for a brother that became a sin against that brother. It was behavior not guided by love.

8:13 **If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.** Paul comes to a strong conclusion. His every act must be guided by love. Love, not knowledge, measures our Christian maturity and should govern our Christian liberty.

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Conclusions:

Three important words in this chapter: Knowledge Conscience Love

1. **Knowledge** in this case has to do with facts – even – or should I say *especially* – our knowledge of the Bible. On the basis of the Bible alone, we have enormous freedom in Christ. On the basis of the Bible alone, there is very little we can say against many things that many Christians probably have strong opinions about. Churches no doubt even come to have rules about things like:
 - a. **What you can or can’t do on Sundays – including sports**
 - b. **Smoking or alcohol consumption – not drunkenness, but the mere drinking of alcohol**
 - c. **Styles of clothing or music – especially what is appropriate for church**
 - d. **Tattoos, piercings**
 - e. **TV, Movies, theater or other entertainment - Computers, Internet use**
2. **Conscience** It would be hard to come up with a set of “one size fits all” rules about any of the things I just mentioned, but any one of them can have a downside. Any one of them might be a pathway to sin for the weaker sister or brother that Paul mentioned in this chapter.

Conscience is a tricky thing. Much of it relates to the place or environment in which we grew up. Some of it is childhood religious training – or a response to that training – even a rejection of it. Some is based reactions to the sins we’ve fallen into in the past. Therefore one person’s conscience will not perfectly match another’s. My conscience may give me little or no help in understanding yours. And that brings us to our third word:

3. **Love** If I decide up front, as Paul did, that **love** for others is going to guide my behavior, I suddenly become very flexible. I’m not insisting on my rights or too loosely exercising my freedoms. The rebellion, the shock value in my personality, the chip on my shoulder goes away. I can understand my freedom in Christ completely, but freely choose *not* to exercise it.

Be willing to limit your liberty for the sake of love. In Christ, liberty does not mean “anything goes”. It means that our salvation is not determined by good deeds or legalistic rules, but by the free gift of God. But Christian liberty is inseparably tied to Christian responsibility. My responsibility is to love others in the body of Christ. When we love others, our freedom becomes less important than building up the faith of that weaker sister or brother in the Lord.

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