



How many people here remember the comedian Bob Newhart and his Bob Newhart show from 40 years ago or so? I have a clip for you:

Don't do it – 2 minutes

He goes onto say that she had paid for five minutes and only used three, so was there anything else that she wanted help with.

I mentioned last week my experience of coming into the kingdom and the first thing that I wanted to know are what are the rules. What's forbidden and what's allowed in this man's army? Black and white is so much simpler to live by, because I don't have to think that much just obey. It's the attraction of groups like the Destiny Church, the leadership will do your thinking for you and they will tell you what you need to do or avoid. Give me the simple straightforward honest to God truth, and I will do my best to live by it. Fair enough, sounded fair to me.

The Corinthians lived in an intensely pagan society, there was a god little 'g' on every street corner. Every professional guild would have its own patron god, and so did the city as a whole. If you were a wealthy person and you went out to dinner with your friends, you probably went to a pagan temple to eat. The food would be ritually offered to the god of the temple before you ate it. Likewise, at the stonemasons' guild dinner the grace would be said to the idol that they had adopted as their own. And once a year you were asked to say publically that Caesar was Lord, as an act of worship.

Some of the Corinthian church had got their heads around the fact that idols were just objects, there was no God inside the statue looking out at them. Furthermore, whatever demonic forces might have inspired the idol or might in some way have inspired it, they were as nothing against the power of the risen Christ. It would be like the Sydenham under 10 Tigers playing the all Blacks, or the Hurricanes playing the Crusaders – no contest.

So if that's true surely you can eat the food that has been offered to a nothing or at best a nonentity. The answer that Paul give is

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. <sup>2</sup> Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; <sup>3</sup> but anyone who loves God is known by him.

<sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—

<sup>6</sup> 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. (NRSV)

The Readers Digest answer – yes you are right, but there is the suggestion of a but coming. In verses 2 and 3 he is going on about love, now what's that got to do with it, and he has love and knowledge ranged against each other. He seems to be saying that we clever Corinthians are getting a little conceited, that our insight is puffing us up.

There is some profound stuff in this passage. I heard an interview with the famous physicist Steven Hawking in which he was asked whether he believed in life on other planets. His reply was that given the utter vastness of the universe he found it hard to imagine that it was all made for us. But it wasn't all made for us, it was made for the glory of God the Father.

And everything that has ever been including us was made through the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 1 he is described as the word of God, that was with the Father at the beginning of all things. If you read the Genesis story you will see that God spoke the universe into existence, let there be ... and there was, and it was good.

Paul goes on

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. <sup>8</sup> "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.

He reminds them that not everyone has grasped what they have grasped, particularly Jewish believers who may still have been eating kosher. They had grown up in a tradition that so abhorred idolatry, they just would not go anywhere near it. People would go to the markets where meat was sold, aware that some of it may have come from the temple butchery so may have been dedicated to one of the pagan gods. They were that sensitive to even the merest sniff of idolatry, that they would not buy it.

Were they over sensitive? Yes, they were.

Should they have been able to shop at the market without being concerned where meat had come from? Yes, they should have been.

Were they as free in Christ as they might be? No, they weren't.

How does Paul suggest that the people with freedom should respond to those without it? Does he talk about teaching programmes helping them to grasp this truth? No he doesn't, instead he says this:

But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup> 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? <sup>11</sup> So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. <sup>12</sup> But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup> 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. (NRSV)

There is something that matters more than being right and exercising your own freedom, that is the needs of your brothers and sisters in Christ. Remember his comment that knowledge puffs up, while love encourages.

We cannot exercise our freedom if to do so would be to someone else's cost. Paul stands on this principle of being other centred, the teaching here is to put others ahead of self.

We all have different flash points, sensitivities, areas that we don't not have freedom in. Whether it is food, alcohol, relationships, addictions, vanities, whatever.

One of mine is language, as several of you have enjoyed pointing out to me I said 'posterior about face' a few weeks ago in a sermon. Now for me that's how I talk and there is no real intent to offend or shock, I am not deliberately being profane. My late mother used to say to me, Roderick, you are just so vulgar! But I have to be careful with how I speak here. If I said well sod you / stuff it / oh blow you all – you can just get over it and I will keep revelling in my linguistic liberty, would that work. No it wouldn't, because my liberty would get in the way of you hearing the sermon and being encouraged or inspired or challenged, and that's what it is supposed to be about. It would be in the way.

But can I gently challenge those of you who are sensitive on this issue, are you truly offended? Example, If I said oh my God there would be a queue of people wanting to share their thoughts with me on that, and fair enough. But what about oh my goodness, it's a euphemism for oh my God but are you truly offended by it? Likewise oh my, or just oh.

I have a friend in Wellington who is semi-retired and he is an elder at his church, and he teaches yoga. He is not teaching it as a religious philosophy but as a technique to enhance fitness and physical wellbeing. Now he knows that it originates in Hinduism but he is not using it for that purpose. For him he has taken meat that was dedicated at the temple and he is selling it in the marketplace as food, and it's good food.

But it bothers some of the church people who would say that he is leading people to worship Hindu deities. I suspect that he may end up giving it away because it is rapidly becoming a significant stumbling block for some, regardless of the rights and wrongs of it.

Chapters 8,9 and 10 are really one block dealing with these questions of conscience and how we manage them. Karen is going to dig into chapter 9 next week so I am just going to graze briefly in that paddock.

Listen to chapter 9:19-23

<sup>19</sup> For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. <sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

So here Paul is taking this principle of giving up your freedoms and applying it to our role in connecting with people who do not yet know the Lord, to evangelism. It's a really good question to ask ourselves might how I am or we are being an obstacle to people coming to faith.

An example, when I was a youth pastor the local teenage hoods of the area started coming to youth group, and they were a real hand full. Most of them smoked, several of them were pot smokers and a couple were known to carry knives. So after they started coming along our

camp consent forms had this clause added for the young one to sign, that they would not bring alcohol, drugs or weapons to camp. We were occasionally dealing with guys who came to youth group stoned on pot, so you just put them in the corner and they smile goofily all night and ate all the biscuits.

But right before youth group and straight after all of the smokers would light up. Teenage smoking is a terrible idea, its anti-social and will have health consequences all of your life and may end up killing you – and in the church it's become a big no no. But I knew that if we banned it we might lose these kids who were hearing the gospel. What do you do?

We made a designated smoking area and I would go out and chat with them while they smoked. In my view it was not a hill worth dying on. After I left they tightened up on what youth groupies could and could not do, and most of these kids left. It grieved me.

To the young hoods I became as a friend of young hoods, in order to win them to Christ.

At another church I was at they had a thriving old people's group, led by a very dynamic woman. People were bringing their friends along and they were becoming part of it, and one day this guy who was in his mid-80s got saved. It was fantastic. He was just so full of joy and told them all that he had simply buggered around with his life up to that point. And time stopped as everybody glanced at each other.

He said the inappropriate B word, so the leader resolved to take him aside and sort him out. We can't have that. That big a deal?

When I first came into the church I found that most people did not drink, or if they did they were very discrete about it. I knew nothing so I asked why, and I was told that we don't drink so that we do not give offence to non-Christians. Now that puzzled me because I did not know any non-Christians who had an issue with drinking, such that they would be offended by it. Most of the non-Christian people that I knew which was all of my family and friends, found being teetotaler quite curious.

I was told that these non Christians might be alcoholics and us drinking might encourage them to relapse. I can understand that if we were the Salvation Army but we weren't. Actually the consciences being protected were those Christians who felt that Christians should not drink full stop.

One of my mentors is a retired pastor and missionary, and his mission field now is a Zonta group and the local squash club. For the sake of the gospel he will now take a drink so that he is a normal part of the social life of these groups, and can engage people on the big issues of faith and life. For the sake of the squash players, he has become like a squash player in order that he might save some.

Does this passage mean that anything goes with idolatry? No it doesn't, here is chapter 10:14-22

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. <sup>15</sup> I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. <sup>16</sup> The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup> Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. <sup>18</sup> Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? <sup>19</sup> What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? <sup>20</sup> No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. <sup>21</sup> You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. <sup>22</sup> Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

So for the Corinthians they were not to be an active part of pagan temple life, you cannot worship Jesus and other gods or idols. Put simply, an idol is something or someone who takes the place of God in our life as our first love. It could be a sport, a relationship, a lifestyle or another God.

The question that the Corinthian church posed was can you eat food offered to idols. They probably thought that it was a simple question but three chapters later I doubt that they still thought that.

Paul's answer is multi layered

1. You cannot eat food offered to idols at a pagan worship service, or a pagan dinner.
2. You can eat food offered to idols that is sold at the market or offered to you at someone's house, if you will not cause others to stumble or obstruct the gospel.

Forrest Gump said that life is like a box of chocolates, Rod says that life is like an old fashioned doughnut with a hole in it. Some things like real idolatry are wrong every day of the week and five times on Sundays. Other things like eating food offered to idols or doing yoga are discretionary, they are not wrong in themselves by may do harm to others. Our freedoms are not meant to cause harm to others, and indeed must not cause harm to others, that is what it is to be in loving community with others. So I will work hard not to say 'posterior about face'.

The thing that really has stuck with me as I have sat with this passage is the gospel is far more important than our clubhouse rules and values. Someone asked me this week what I would do if an unmarried defacto couple showed up here, would I run at them with my 10 steps to 'marrying as fast as possible' programme along with the gospel? No I wouldn't.

I would want to get to know them, hear their story, and talk about the Jesus who loved them enough to die for them. Their marital status would be a discipleship issue for down the track.

So the question that I will leave you with today is whether you agree with me.