

MANS QUESTIONS, GOD'S ANSWERS

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Let's Begin

Every day of the week but Sunday, the U.S. Postal Service sells on average over 90 million stamps, handles in excess of 320 million pieces of mail and delivers a whopping 833,000 packages. Despite the arrival of the internet, so-called "snail mail" still remains a popular way to communicate!

The Apostle Paul had neither an email address nor could he send a "text message" to the Corinthians. He relied solely on hand-written communication, as did the rest of the ancient world. Men were employed as "runners" in that day to take important messages. Most of the time, however, mail was sent via friends or acquaintances who were going in the direction the letter was intended.

Paul had received a letter from his friends in Corinth (7:1). 1 Corinthians constituted an answer to their letter. The Corinthians dealt with many problems, problems that threatened their very existence as a church. And, as we will learn today, the Christians in Corinth even had questions concerning questionable behavior! In other words, they were struggling with issues the Bible clearly condemned (5:1ff), as well as with issues not directly addressed in Scripture. What the Word condemns we have no right to debate. But how do we handle issues not forthright in Scripture? No single issue is more relevant for the church of Jesus Christ today.

Hence, Paul responds with three overarching principles to discern God's direction concerning questionable behavior. As we study chapter 8, we will closely follow the outline below:

- I. The Intellectual Principle (vv. 1-4)**
- II. The Spiritual Principle (vv. 5-8)**
- III. The Social Principle (vv. 9-13)**

I. The Intellectual Principle (vv. 1-4)

Note the words of the Apostle Paul as he responds to the Corinthians' question, "Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. "But if any man love God, the same is known of him. As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one" (1 Cor. 8:1-4). At first glance, there seems to be no connection with us. We do not have a problem with offering meat to idols, as did they. True. Nevertheless, the occasion we have here opens the door for Paul to deal with an issue vital to every one of us. Namely, if there is no clear cut commandment in the Bible touching upon a certain matter, how do we determine if it is right or wrong?

Nor does the focus about which Paul speaks concern things explicitly forbidden. As we said earlier, believers possess no privilege of debating whether or not to follow a moral injunction plainly spelled out in the Bible. Rather Paul is concerned with issues where no apparent verses exist which apply to the situation at hand. For example, while Christians can and ought to be thankful to God for the advancements of medical science, these very advancements create occasions which call for Christians to think in categories not fully spelled out in the Word of God.

As a specific instance, consider the issue of human cloning. Since no such thought about human cloning ever entered the mind of the Biblical authors, how can any Biblical passage speak Biblical wisdom to this issue? Do we



conclude, therefore, the Christian faith can offer no real assistance to modern man at least in the area of advanced medical research? Paul actually addresses this dilemma in his answer to Corinth. And, it is his answer that gives modern believers confidence that God does not leave His people in the dark concerning His will!

The first principle Paul reveals is the *intellectual* principle. Paul affirms, “we all have knowledge.” The Greek term for “knowledge” is *gnōsis*, which literally means, “a knowing, knowledge.” It occurs 29 times in the New Testament, with Paul’s usage at 23. Almost half of Paul’s 23 uses of the term are found in 1 Corinthians. Hence, it is a special word for him and especially applicable to the Corinthians.

Reflection Connection

Do you think the church tends to assume people outside the church should behave “more Christianly”? Why or why not? What can we do to make sure knowledge does not make us appear self-righteous?

As we unpack Paul’s understanding of “knowledge,” we can view it from two different angles. Note first the *content of knowledge* (vv. 1, 4). Certain truths were revealed to the Corinthians. One such truth concerned idols, “an idol is nothing.” The prophets in the Old Testament were not hesitant to call the gods of other nations what they were—lifeless pieces of wood and stone. Hear Isaiah’s words which stand typical of their indictments, “Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I *am* the first, and I *am* the last; and beside me *there is no God*.” (Is. 44:6). Then, after affirming the God of the Bible as the only true and living God, Isaiah speaks concerning the false idols asking, “Who hath formed a god, or molten a graven image *that is profitable for nothing*?” (Is. 44:10).

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At this point we must remember that the only sure source of knowing the will of God is the Word of God. It is not that the Holy Spirit does not work in the hearts of believers, guiding and affirming God’s direction for the believer’s life. Rather it is the simple, indisputable fact that the Holy Spirit primarily employs the Scripture as He guides the people of God. We can put this down as a maxim: *if we do not know the Word of God, it is doubtful we will ever discover the will of God for our lives.*

The second angle from which we may view knowledge is the *control of knowledge*. Paul says that if a person thinks something is known, he or she probably is overestimating his or her abilities—“he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.” Humility should characterize every child of God who desires to know the will of God. Why? As Paul said, “knowledge puffeth up”; that is, knowledge has a tendency to build within us a tendency for arrogance. Knowledge inflates our egos. We easily become proud, conceited and perhaps even look down on other people. If we are not careful, we will develop a sense of intellectual superiority over others.

On the other hand, while knowledge possesses a tendency to bloat our egos, love’s contribution is edification. We simply cannot solve all questionable issues on knowledge alone. According to Scripture, love covers a multitude of sins



(1 Pet. 4:8). Without love, knowledge quickly becomes a weapon to tear down instead of a tool to build up. Knowledge says, “I can do as I please” while love says, “Somebody is watching and may be adversely affected.” Love looks to protect others while knowledge focuses in on itself. Paul tells us elsewhere that if we love as we should, we would never use knowledge to hurt anyone. He writes, “And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment;” (Phil. 1:9).

II. The Spiritual Principle (vv. 5-8)

When we come to spirituality, there were two kinds of Christians at Corinth—strong and weak. Recall Paul’s words earlier, “And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, *even* as unto babes in Christ... For ye are yet carnal: for whereas *there is* among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?” (1 Cor. 3:1, 3; cp. Rom. 14:1-6). As we tease out the spiritual principle, there are two considerations we must examine.

The first consideration is *spiritual reality*. Paul writes, “For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) But to us *there is but* one God, the Father, of whom *are* all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom *are* all things, and we by him” (1 Cor. 8:5-6).

Understand: Paul was not denying other “gods” existed. In fact, he plainly says, “there be gods many.” But he does not mean more than one true and living God exists. The “many gods” are imaginary gods. They have no significance in heaven or earth. They are “so-called” gods. The psalmist wrote, “Their idols *are* silver and gold, the work of men’s hands. They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: They have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: They have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; *so is* every one that trusteth in them” (Ps. 115:4-8). The reality of the matter is this: only one true and living God exists and He has fully revealed Himself in the Lord Jesus Christ (v. 6).

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Reflection Connection

Since love seeks to edify one another, does that mean believers must consider how their actions will affect other people? Explain. If we are to govern our actions by what others think, what if what others think is not supported by God’s Word? How do we strike a balance?

The second consideration is *spiritual maturity* (vv. 7-8). For Paul, the bottom line concerning meat offered to idols is this, “But meat commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse” (1 Cor. 8:8). Food in and of itself cannot make one a saint or a sinner. Food does not determine our relationship with God. However, every Christian may not know this reality. In fact, some of the weaker brothers still had reservations in their consciences pertaining to eating sacrificed meat. Perhaps it was because he or she recalled the idolatry associated with the meat before conversion to Christ. Consequently, to him or her, coming to Christ meant a clean break with the old forms of worship.



The last thing Paul would have is for the Corinthians to be accomplices in assisting weak Christians to take up their old ways. In essence, if the weak believers did partake of the sacrificed meat, knowing fully what the sacrifice meant, and did so with reservations in their heart, they would be committing sin. Their conscience would stand defiled before God. In this respect, what is safe for one Christian is not safe for another. Love demands, however, that if an act is unsafe for another brother, we must assist him in his journey to an undefiled conscience. Hence, we cannot plead our “freedom in Christ” to make us exempt from the restricted behavior. To do so is selfish and voids love for one another. Our responsibility is to edify the body of Christ.

III. The Social Principle (vv. 9-13)

The third principle Paul explains is the *social principle*. There is simply no way around this reality: *others are watching how the believer behaves*. Indeed there may be a multitude of things I can do in my private life that will not adversely affect my own walk with God. In that sense, I am perfectly free to do the act, bearing no guilt whatsoever in doing it *per se*. Paul’s point is, while it may be true your actions will have no negative impact on your life or walk with God, many of the free acts we may do could significantly impact others in a negative way. Here is how Paul puts it, “But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol’s temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols;” (1 Cor. 8:9-10).

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Paul lists at least two prohibitions about which every believer must be aware. The first prohibition is to not *hinder* one’s brother. We are not to become a “stumblingblock.” The Greek word translation “stumblingblock” is *proskomma*, which means an obstacle against which one may dash his foot. Figuratively, Paul is cautioning us never to trip anyone up morally. Never should we throw stones into someone’s path so that the person trips and falls.

Hence, if a weak believer sees another doing an act and he or she reasons, “If they can do it, I can do it,” Paul indicates we have just become a stumblingblock for that person. Our liberty has just exploited the weakness of a brother or sister in Christ. Hindering our brother’s walk with God is a sure sign we have never grasped the price Jesus paid for him.

The second prohibition Paul lists is to not *hurt* one’s brother. Paul speaks of the brother’s “wound.” He writes, “But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ” (1 Cor. 8:12). The term translated “wound” is *typtō*, which means “to strike, smite with the hand, stick, or other instrument repeatedly.”

The picture is one of a strong man repeatedly pounding blow after blow on a weak person. When we cause our brother or sister to sin by following our

Reflection Connection

Reflect on a time when a Christian influenced you in behaving in a way you later came to regret. If you are comfortable, consider sharing it with the entire group. Also, it may be you feel comfortable in sharing a time when you may not have been the example you should have been, causing another to stumble.



example, we do the worst possible harm. We scar them for life. Furthermore, we not only wound their conscience, sinning against them, Paul emphatically states we “sin against Christ.” Being a bad moral example to others harms Jesus Himself. Unless our hearts are firmly calloused, we clearly see the mature responsible Christian takes note how his or her behavior plays out in the larger scheme of things.

Golden Greek Nugget

Twice Paul uses the term “offend” in speaking about the believer’s responsibility to his or her brother (v. 13). The term is *skandalizō*, a term meaning “to put a snare in the way, to trap.” Ancient usage spoke of the spring in a trap that caught wild animals. We get our English term “scandalize” from this term. Hence, the caution every believer faces is to not trap one’s brother or sister into sinning against God.

Wrap Up

Paul gave three principles which, when heeded, will guide Christians through virtually any behavior they may consider questionable. We must never forget the intellectual principle, always keep in mind the pursuit of humility. Love edifies but knowledge alone may do more harm than good. This is a spiritual principle we have no option to ignore. Mature believers have an assigned responsibility to watch and care for weak believers. No person is an island. We are social beings. The church is the body of Christ; therefore, we have the social principle to guide us along the way.

