

LIBERTY, LIMITS, AND LOVE

By Steve Zeisler

As we approach Mother's Day I want to read to you some nuggets of wisdom shared by mothers in a recent publication. "When we want some privacy," one mother wrote, "we throw jellybeans out the window and send the children to hunt for them. It can give us 10 to 20 minutes, depending on where the jellybeans land." Another wrote, "I told my two kids that although I cannot always keep everything equal as far as clothes, treats and time spent with them goes, when they reach adulthood and they add everything up they will find that it does come out exactly equal. They actually buy that!" Another said, "When my son was six he forget how to dress and brush his teeth, so I said I would not let him be seven. He got it together real quick!" Another shares, "When my son says he is going to run away, I ask if I can go with him." And finally, "I bake spinach into their cookies!" Truly, parenting is a difficult but wonderful calling.

As we have already observed in our studies in Paul's first Corinthian letter, the apostle frequently comes across like a parent giving advice to an unruly child. The Corinthian church could well be described as adolescent. The new Christians who made up that body tended to be arrogant, brash and enthusiastic-traits that are sometimes synonymous with adolescence. To put it mildly, the Corinthians lacked wisdom; the degree of maturity necessary to balance the enthusiasm of their fast-paced society. Thus, much of what Paul writes in his Corinthian letters is corrective in nature.

First Corinthians has a literary characteristic that is worth noting. Much of it was written in response to a letter which the apostle had received from the church in Corinth, a letter which raised several questions which he proceeds to answer. Thus, when Paul uses the phrase, "Now concerning," which he does in several instances throughout the letter, this is an indication that he is going to take up another of the Corinthians' questions. The opening verse of chapter 7, for instance, says, "Now concerning the things about which you wrote..." Again, in verse 25 of this chapter we read, "Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord,..." Chapter 12, verse 2: "Now concerning spiritual gifts..." And 16:1, "Now concerning the collection for the saints,..." This phrase then should alert us to the fact that Paul is about to answer another of the Corinthians' questions.

We take up our studies again in this letter this morning with chapter 8, yet another section which begins with the words, "Now concerning." In chapters 8 through 10, the apostle will be dealing with the subject of idolatry, of things sacrificed to idols, and with the problem that idolatry introduces into the Christian life. Chapter 9, however, is a bit of a digression from this topic. In using his own life as an illustration of the truth he has just taught, Paul raises an issue I would like to take separately next Sunday. Chapters 8 and 10, however, deal directly with idolatry and how Christians should live in light of it.

Idolatry is much easier to identify in cultures other than our own, just as idolatry is easier to identify in the lives of others than it is in our own lives. When as a staff we visited the Middle East earlier this year, we found that area to be extremely religious. There were manifestations of religion on all sides. To us, coming from California, much of what we saw expressed in religious activity looked peculiar, even idolatrous. As we visited the various ancient and contemporary sites we saw at times remnants of specific idols. We observed, for instance, Canaanite altars upon which these people sacrificed their own children in idolatrous worship. We saw empty pedestals upon which once stood Roman idols.

Modern religious practices, however, looked equally strange to us. Minarets sprout all throughout Middle Eastern cities, overlooking mosques where the call echoes five times each day summoning Muslims to observe rigidly controlled, repetitious prayers. I recalled the words of Jesus, "when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose they will be heard for their many words..."

The behavior of the Orthodox Jews seemed just as peculiar to us. They follow extremely detailed rules about

diet and dress, a practice which they feel will please God. Again, the words of Jesus came to mind, "it is not what enters the mouth that defiles the man but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles the man."

There is no lack of Christian shrines in these countries either. Sacred buildings are layered one upon the other. Inside, the smell of incense permeates the air. Icons hang in the dim light. People speak in whispers. We remember what Jesus said, "neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father. True worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth."

Exposure to forms of religious expression as they are practised in a foreign culture therefore enables us to easily identify what we could call idolatry. But although it may not be readily apparent to us, idolatry is no less prevalent in our own society. The problem is, we are so familiar with it we do not recognize it. It is idolatrous to appeal in a ritual to an unseen and secret world of spiritual powers to grant us life and blessing. In making such an appeal we hope to gain the attention of spiritual powers to do good to us, to grant us life within, to help us deal with our own sense of powerlessness. Idolatry thus is practised in order to gain personal advantage.

Consider how important a part appearance plays in our concept of self-worth. Many in our culture are so concerned with how they look that they base decisions about human worthiness on outward appearance. Ellen Goodman has written,

There are more than the usual number of unguents and elixirs that promise to rub the age out of our skin, and preserve our energy. There are more than the usual products to cover gray hair and fill in the face lines. There are more than the usual admonitions to leg-lift a path to eternally youthful thighs. Add to the list Minoxidil for the bald, Retin-A for the wrinkled, lipo-suction for the middle-age spread. Those of us who once had two scant choices, aging gracefully or foolishly, are offered a much larger arsenal of weapons for the battle against looking our age. Men who could accept their baldness, or the ridicule of a toupee, now have the chance to grow hair again. Women and men who had to accept their crows' feet, or risk the knife to retrieve the younger tauter skin, can now chemically iron their wrinkles. In modest ways, aging has begun to look like a personal choice. How far are you willing to go to stay the same?

People who choose to hide the aging process, however, forfeit an important part of themselves. They feel they must resort to science in order to retain their self-worth. But it is idolatrous to depend on physical appearance for personal value and inner peace.

Others subscribe to secret and mysterious founts of information that promise to maximize their money by helping them make judicious investments. They think that inside information will bring them the prosperity that eludes others. Just as the Canaanite idolators 3,000 years ago called upon their gods to bless them with rainfall, we today call upon the economic gurus to bring about economic well-being.

Some parents today are endeavoring to achieve eternal life through creating "designer children." Attempts at detailed manipulation begin prenatally and continue through high-pressure childhoods. Such children will somehow reflect credit on them, they feel. Their interest is not so much in the children but in their own sense of immortality. They want to continue living through their own creations. In this they are no different than the ancient idol-worshippers. Their motives are the same. Only their methods have changed. That is why the wisdom of the apostle Paul in these three chapters of first Corinthians is as pertinent to us today as it was two thousand years ago. We need to hear this just as much as the Corinthians needed it in the first century.

I would like to begin by summarizing in two main points what the apostle is getting at in this section. In these points Paul will illustrate a tension in which the Christian must live. Verse 4 of chapter 8 is an excellent summary of the first point:

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.

Idolatry is foolish, is what the apostle is saying. Man's attempts to influence his well-being by appealing to

anything or anyone other than the Living God is wasted effort. It's nothing but superstition. It won't work. There is but one God. Mankind must live in the light of his glory. All attempts to circumvent his sovereignty and transcendence are doomed to failure. Idolatry therefore is foolishness. In actuality there is no such thing as idolatry.

The apostle's second main point, the other side of the tension, is expounded in verses 19 and 20 of chapter 10:

What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons.

Although the idols which people worship are powerless-they are nothing, as we have already seen-behind them are wicked forces which, if we are not careful, can overpower us. Behind all worship of idols, from pillars of stone to high tech, are the designs of the evil one who seeks to take advantage of people's foolishness. We could summarize Paul's train of thought therefore in the two short admonitions: Be free!, and Be careful! Be free, because there is only one God; be careful, because the wicked one is the force behind idolatry.

BE FREE

Let us look more fully at the first part of the tension. Chapter 8:

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. If any one supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if any one loves God, he is known by Him. Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we exist through Him.

However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble.

In his commentary, Marcus Dods imagines the scene as it might have taken place in Corinth:

On the occasion of a birthday, or a marriage, or a safe return from the sea, or any circumstance that seemed to call for celebration, it was customary to sacrifice in some public temple. And after the legs of the victim, enclosed in fat, and the entrails had been burnt on the altar, the worshiper received the remainder, and invited his friends and guests to partake of it either at the temple itself, or in the surrounding grove, or at his own home. Here again a young convert might very naturally ask himself whether he was justified in attending in attending such a feast and actually sitting down to meat in the idol's presence.

A man just returned from a dangerous journey sacrifices to his god in gratitude. Then he takes

the leftover meat and invites his friends-including you, who have recently come to faith in Christ-to celebrate with him. As you sit down to eat you wonder if your partaking of the meat endows a degree of credibility on the idol to which the meat was sacrificed. Are you not denying your new Lord by your apparent affirmation of the power of the idol to deliver your friend? This is the difficulty which the apostle is addressing here.

Christians, Paul is saying, are free men and women. As such, they are free to eat anything. They can even eat sacrificed meat without fear of contamination. They do not deny their Lord by exercising their freedom. Why? Because "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it," as the apostle will go on to say in chapter 10. The Christian has been set free from superstitious restrictions. He does not have to worry about bringing ruin upon himself if he fails to comply with such externals. We are a free people, sons and daughters of the King. We do not need to concern ourselves with such trivia.

The apostle continues this argument in 10:23:

All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor. Eat anything that is sold in the meat market, without asking questions for conscience' sake "for the earth is the Lord's, and all it contains. " If one of the unbelievers invites you, and you wish to go, eat anything that is set before you, without asking questions for conscience' sake. But if anyone should say to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved.

Paul recognizes that the Christian's standing in Christ endows him with freedom to eat whatever he wishes without fear. That is why he says, "the earth is the Lord's and everything that is in it." If we understand the gospel in truth we have no need to live rigid, bound-up lives.

But there is another side to this. In our freedom we must be willing to forfeit our rights for the sake of others. We must not exercise our freedom at the expense of others who do not know better yet, those who still fear idols. If our freedom to indulge in what they consider forbidden inclines them to fall under the influence of idols once more, then we of course should deny ourselves. Now you do not have to agree with them. In fact you had better not agree with them. What you are doing rather is giving up your rights for their sake. Choose to act in love, not in arrogance.

There are many issues today where Christians differ over what is right and appropriate for them. Some of us have invitations into associations and friendships that others fear and guard against. Dancing, the theatre, certain sporting events, etc., can be a source of struggle for some. There are some who worship sports teams. Their relationships and personal well-being depend on how their team is doing. Going to a ball game, or watching one on television, may be a perfectly acceptable pastime for me, but for another this seemingly innocent and neutral choice may be an unhealthy reminder of a time when his involvement in these things approached idol-worship.

In other words, something I can live with or without may be a threat to someone else's young spiritual life. For instance, I play golf occasionally with a friend who cannot even abide a semblance of competitiveness about the game. Once he had a philosophy that demanded he compete all the time. To him, everything became a matter of winning or losing. Although the other partners in our foursome have no problem with buying a coke or a hot dog for their opponents if they lose, even this insignificant reward for success in competition is for him a distraction that he cannot handle at this stage in his growing Christian life. We try not to even keep score because that plays to a weakness which he still struggles with.

Other Christians feel that certain types of humor cannot be entered into by them. We could expand the list to include country clubs, rock music, junk food, jewelry, alcohol, even certain aspects of parenting. What may be perfectly acceptable behavior for you and your children may be disturbing to others. Because they associate certain practices with memories of their own past, you who are free should seek to be generous and loving toward those who perhaps have good reason for their fears.

Christians ought to know that they are free people. They should live their lives openly before God and man, but they should never allow this knowledge to become arrogance which diminishes others. I know some Christians-they describe themselves as former Catholics-who ridicule other Catholic believers because they still retain a commitment to their church. They feel that some Catholic worship practices are superstitious, thus they affect an air of self-righteousness when they interact with believing Catholics. Their arrogance only serves to produce division, not love and understanding.

Others who have become charismatic Christians look down upon those who are less spiritual, those who are not privy to their mystical knowledge. Some ex-charismatics in turn condescend to charismatics whom they feel are immature and have not discovered higher truth. One is as arrogant as the other. But the apostle's word to all is that Christian freedom at times had best play a secondary role to Christian love. Be free, yes, but be willing to give up your rights.

All of this comes through recognizing the fact that idols are nothing and need not be feared. There is but one God. We need not be bound by superstitions and fears. We stand free before our Lord.

But there is a tension, another side to this. Christians are required to be careful, as we will see in chapter 10.

BE CAREFUL

For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.

Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved. And do not be idolators, as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play." Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able; but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

Here, Paul reminds the Corinthians of Israel's history in their wilderness journeys. As God's chosen people the Israelites had unparalleled advantages. They had been freed from Pharaoh's tyranny. They were present when the Red Sea parted to allow their escape from Egypt. They had seen many miraculous occurrences in their wanderings. Furthermore, they had the spiritual ministry of Christ always present with them to sustain and encourage them. Despite these many blessings, however, they began to "crave evil things," according to Paul. They became idolators. They practised immorality. They tried the Lord. They grumbled. Dark and evil forces began to get their attention.

Christians, too, are prone to do the same thing. We, too, have all the advantages-in fact, many more advantages than the Israelites did-yet we too can find ourselves entrapped by wickedness. Thus there is no

contradiction between Paul's word in 8:4, "there is no such thing as an idol," and his admonition in 10:14, "flee from idolatry." Both of these concepts are true. If you are a free man or woman in Christ you need not be bound by superstitious restrictions. Yet at the same time we must be careful. We must flee idolatry. No temptation in itself has the power to require your falling to it. You do not have to sin. The Lord will provide a way of escape. We never have to be taken advantage of, but we are in danger of succumbing if we do not choose his provided "way of escape." So while we are free, we yet must be careful.

Verses 15 through 22 set out a twist to the problem of being trapped. This deals with the assimilation of two things, "the table of the Lord," and, "the table of demons," i.e. mixing together Christian worship and the worship of other things. Do not attempt to do both, is what the apostle is saying. You cannot be involved in full Christian worship and yet worship money, or immorality, or other things.

So there is a tension in the apostle's advice in these chapters. There are no such things as idols, yet we must flee idolatry. Fears, superstitions and hang-ups should not lord it over us. The gospel empowers us to rise above such things and makes us free. Yet, look what happened to the Israelites. Despite all the advantages they possessed they began to crave evil things. Christians too are prone to crave evil things. There is no idol, yet we must flee idolatry.

"Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ," says Paul in 11:1. This verse really belongs at the end of chapter 10. It is possible to walk Christianly in the midst of these tensions. We do not have to forfeit our freedom, nor do we have to succumb to temptation and evil. Here Paul is suggesting that he succeeded at imitating Christ as he walked one day at a time, as he made godly decisions one at a time. "Follow me," then, is the apostle's advice to Christians who are coming after him. We do not have to be fearful and bound up, nor do we have succumb to wickedness. We can live up to our calling.

Lord, we know that we are prone to lose our way. We can fear the power of idols and live huddled, frightened lives, or we can give in to the siren song of arrogance and license. Make us capable, as you did with Paul, to live upright, Christian lives. Make us loving, strong, honest and righteous. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Catalog No. 4069
1 Corinthians 8,10
Eleventh Message
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May 1, 1988

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