

Mine Fields of Faith

The reading from 1 Corinthians is a part of an entire chapter devoted to the question of whether a person should eat meat from an animal that has been sacrificed to idols. It probably provokes one of three reactions:

- 1) confusion, as in “what is this about and what is Paul trying to say?”
- 2) disbelief, as in “is this really an issue worth an entire chapter of the Bible?”
- 3) glazed over eyes, as in, “I couldn’t possibly care about any of this and I hope the sermon is really short.”

Well, no such luck. I think this passage is important for what it shows us about walking through mine fields of faith. Acting in faith is not always as simple as it sounds. It can often get us into no-win situations, in which, no matter where you step, you risk getting blown up.

In this passage, Paul provides a manual on how to act faithfully in no-win situations. First, let’s lay out the facts:

Paul was called upon to settle what seems like a petty dispute in the early Christian church at Corinth. Corinth was a city of very diverse religious beliefs. Christians and Jews were minority groups that lived alongside people who worship Greek gods, Roman gods, and a whole buffet of other gods.

Some of these other religious groups were into sacrificing animals to their gods at the local civic celebrations. Afterwards, they either sold the meat in the market or used it to throw a big feast for the community.

Some of the Christians in Corinth were saying, “Hey, free food! Why pass that up?” Besides that, they viewed it as a civic thing that drew the community of Corinth together, like the St. Paul Winter Carnival or the Eleva Broiler Fest, and so they wanted to support that.

Other members of the congregation were saying: “Are you crazy? That meat was sacrificed to idols. If you eat food sacrificed to idols, you’re taking part in the pagan rituals. You’re part of a celebration honoring these idols.

“Come on, you have to stand up for what you believe, even if it isn’t popular, even if it costs you a free meal. We who believe in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, must remain true our beliefs.”

The first group answered, “We’re not taking part in any pagan ritual. We’re only being good neighbors. Just because we’re eating their meat doesn’t mean we believe, endorse, or in any way acknowledge their gods.

“In fact, we believe there *are* no other gods. They are sacrificing to nothing, and so the meat isn’t any different than any other meat.”

As occasionally happens with church disputes, tempers flared, things were said, sides were drawn, and before you know it, there was an all-out donnybrook going on that split the church. Matters got so ugly that one group appealed to Paul to settle the matter. Of course, they expected him to settle it in their favor.

With a weary sigh and a shake of the head, Paul tries to negotiate his way through this minefield of faith. In responding to the group who wants to eat the meat, he concedes that they have a good case. Referencing their letter he says,

“You are right—idols are not gods. Yes, there is no God but one. Yes, it’s true that the measure of a Christian is not whether you do or do not eat certain foods. True, this is not a big issue: you’re not going to be any better off if you eat that meat or don’t eat it.

Paul validates virtually their entire argument. The faction in favor of the big backyard barbecue in Corinth has to be feeling smug about this as they read the first part of the letter.

But then he makes what may be the first reference ever to the concept expressed in modern times as “perception is reality.” What is important in this case is not whether you are right, but what will be the result of your actions?

There are people who will associate the meat with worship of that idol. They will not see the distinction you are drawing and will view your participation in this feast as paying tribute to idols.

Since you are prominent members of the Christian community, they will take this as an indication that it is acceptable Christian practice to honor idols. That will totally mess up their understanding of the Gospel.

So, Paul concludes, even though your reasoning may be sound, I would not eat that meat, because if you do, it will cause some of your brothers or sisters in Christ to stumble.

What does this ancient quarrel have to do with us today? Although this seems like an anachronistic situation, I am going to give a few of examples of almost identical modern day situations.

When our children were in elementary school, there was a fairly active DARE chapter at their school. DARE was a program coordinated with law enforcement designed to help kids resist pressures that lead to substance abuse, including alcohol.

Part of the DARE program was promoting healthy, family-oriented group activities and one of the things they did was rent a couple of buses to take kids and their parents to a Minnesota Twins game.

After arriving at the old Metrodome, we found our seats together on the third base side near the foul pole. Before we had even gotten settled, some of the dads immediately flagged down a vender and got some beers.

Now there's nothing wrong with having a beer at a Twins game. My publisher friend and I do just that when we have our annual meeting at the ball park. Technically, these dads could justify what they did, as long as they did it responsibly.

But in that context, it was the wrong thing to do. Sitting with a large group of kids, representing an organization whose purpose is to counteract peer pressure to drink—what kind of message are you sending?

What is important is not whether you can personally justify an action, but how are people going to interpret what you do? Might this cause someone else to stumble? Paul says Christians should at least consider the messages we are sending with our acts and deeds.

Another example would be this robe that I wear. When I first came to St. John's, the practice was for pastors to wear robes at what was called the traditional service and no robes at the contemporary service. I was a little surprised at the intensity of feeling on the subject, both ways.

What was *my* view on the subject? If you know me well, you *may* suspect that I'm not a robe person. After a lifetime of not wearing a robe or a uniform of any kind, it felt odd in my 50s to suddenly have to wear one. Unlike Pastor Rohland, who wore a robe even to nursing home services, I have never been comfortable with ritual formality. It's simply a matter of personal preference.

There is no Biblical or theological reason why I should have to wear a robe. In fact, I could make a case that my wearing a robe puts a distance between me and the congregation that is neither useful nor necessary. I know members here who feel the same way.

The reason I wear a robe is because of this passage from Corinthians. I know there are also people for whom this particular symbol of the church is important. It represents a measure of respect for the traditions of our forebears who sacrificed greatly to establish the church and to bring us up in the faith.

Even more important, I know that for some people, my wearing of a robe is a sign of respect and reverence for God. If I never dressed up in this way for worship, they would take it as a sign that I don't feel I need to make any effort to show respect for God.

Because I am a leader in the church, they might get the message that they don't need to show any respect for God either.

The fact that I do believe strongly in showing respect and reverence for God is not relevant here. The question is how to navigate this minefield of faith so that it does not harm the all-important mission of the church.

With 1 Corinthians in mind, I initiated a compromise in which pastors at St. John's wear robes during the active, more formal part of the church year, and do not wear them during the off-season.

On a larger scale, that is the message of Paul. Don't go to war over things that are not central to the Christian mission. A Christian should be more concerned about caring for others than about being right.

When Paul wrote that "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up," he was not presenting an anti-intellectual argument. Knowledge and wisdom are revered by the Bible, especially Proverbs. But in this case, the Greek word translated as knowledge means a kind of sophisticated knowledge, an arrogance, a belief in one's superior intelligence.

Such knowledge is concerned with winning arguments at the expense of everything else. It is concerned with being superior to others. The Christian following in the path of Jesus is to be more concerned about caring for others than displaying knowledge.

As a quote attributed to Theodore Roosevelt says, "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care."

This does not mean that Christians are called to abandon their principles and beliefs just to accommodate others. The core of the Christian message does not change and cannot be compromised.

On the other hand, Paul cautions us that we had better be certain what the core of those principles and beliefs are so that we don't get sidetracked into arguing about things that don't really matter, and in so doing drive people away from the mission of Christ.

What Paul is arguing in this passage is not an archaic legal issue, nor a trivial matter. It profoundly affects the message of the Gospel. As proof of this, let us turn to a third example, having to do with of death.

Death is something we do not deal with very well in our society. When we are hit hard by the loss of a close friend or family, it can severely test our faith. I heard again just last week of two different cases where a person was so angry at God for having “caused” or allowed a premature death of a loved one that they ceased having anything more to do with Christianity.

Others, in a desperate search for comfort and hope, grasp at whatever folk remedy or flimsy religious straw they can find. To be honest, there is a lot of bad theology floating around in times of death.

One could argue, persuasively, against this bad theology. But when someone is hurting, suffering, grieving, the last thing we need to do is engage them in a theological argument to show them they are wrong. Theology lessons can wait for another time.

I saw this vividly demonstrated a few years ago when I attended a funeral for a young person whose parents I know. The service took place at a church of another Christian denomination, of which this young person had become a member.

Yet because of her family’s active participation in their own denomination, including the young woman’s growing years, more than half those in attendance were not from the host church.

The grief that accompanies the loss of a young person is staggering. The burden on a pastor to bring a word of comfort and healing at such a time is heavy. Even more so when hosting family and friends from outside one’s own tradition, who are not familiar, nor necessarily in agreement, with all your beliefs.

Yet these are the words of healing that pastor chose to bestow upon those who mourned: “I know it isn’t politically correct, but I’m going to say it anyway. We have the only true religion.”

Those words cast a shadow over the rest of the service. Many of those in mourning were stunned. They had come to hear a word of comfort and hope, and instead heard only what Paul had warned against--words of arrogance, a declaration of one’s superior knowledge.

The task at hand when people are suffering is to love them. We do not compromise our core Christian beliefs, even in times of death. At such times I will always try to steer the focus to the truth of the Gospel. But I will not argue with or correct or lecture people who are in mourning.

A time of grief is not the time to show others how wrong they are, and how right I am. It is a time to surround them with the love of God. Not to puff ourselves up, but to build others up.

There are congregations who drive out both members and visitors for one reason or another having to do with theological matters. Technically, they may have a rationale for their arguments.

But Paul tells us, that isn't always the point. There are times when we set aside theological arguments because our obsession with winning those arguments sets up stumbling blocks that drive people away from Christ.

The mission of the church is harmed when Christians become far more concerned with proving they are right in every detail than in building up the body of Christ. When their approach to mission is to set up a cultural war in which they proclaim all the ways in which they are right and the rest of the world is wrong.

This cultural war is fueled by the proliferation of quasi-Christian e-mails that sound so persuasive and get people emotionally riled up in support of a particular religious argument.

It is not surprising that the people who send these e-mails resort to distortions and outright lies to prove their case. When we become obsessed with winning every argument, cheating is inevitable.

In trying to win their arguments, they have set up so many minefields to Christian faith that they have made it very difficult for any thinking, objective young person in our society to get past them. They think they are preaching the Gospel and winning the argument, but all it does is push their audience far away from the mission of Christ.

I have found that a strange thing happens when you stop trying to win arguments over matters of faith that are not important, when you remove the minefields that surround faith, and proclaim the heart of the Christian message in a way that invites and builds up. People are more likely to listen to that message.

That is what Paul was telling the Corinthians in this letter.

Know what the core of your faith is about. Never, never compromise that.

But in all other matters, whether it is in witnessing, in the style of worship, in decisions that come before the council or the membership, in interactions with the secular world, or whatever—do not worry so much about being right, and proving others wrong.

The more important task, as Jesus told his disciples, was to love. Focus first on what builds up, what brings others to faith, and what allows them to experience the love of God.

Clear away the minefields that stand in the way of faith, and watch what the Holy Spirit can do in such a world.