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**Dealing with Morally Questionable Issues**  
**Or “Where’s the Beef?” - 1 Corinthians 8: 1-13**

By Tal Davis

Forty years ago, Wendy’s Hamburgers had a TV ad in which an old woman pulled up to a drive-in window at a fast-food restaurant. She looks at the burger they give her and cries out, “Where’s the beef?!” Meat, of course, is a normal part of our diet (though some people choose to be vegetarians). I recall once seeing a sign on the wall of a restaurant in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, that read : “Of course we serve vegetarians, what do you think cows are?”

Though most of us have no qualms about eating meat, sometimes we may ask: Is all meat okay? We eat beef, chicken, ham, lamb chops, turkey, duck (and other birds), even gator and frog legs. But would you eat dog meat or horse meat? Yes, some people in Asia do. Likewise some aboriginal people Australia like to eat kangaroo. And, believe it or not, many wealthy people used to eat Mammoth meat that was frozen during the Ice Age thousands of years ago.

“So,” you may ask, “what does eating meat have to do with dealing with morally questionable issues?” Actually it may have a lot to do with learning important principles for addressing ethical problems that Christians may face. In his first letter to the believers in Corinth, the Apostle Paul addressed some of the internal problems in the church that was causing friction in the fellowship. Apparently one of those conflicts concerned eating certain kinds of food. Some in the church were offended by what others were imbibing, saying they were sinning by doing so.

In 1 Corinthians chapter eight, Paul provided some practical principles for dealing with some of those kinds of morally questionable issues. First, let’s take a look at a little background on the city of Corinth and the reasons for Paul’s letters.

The ancient city of Corinth had one the most fascinating histories of any mentioned in the Bible. It was located in

Greece at a narrow 4½ mile neck of land connecting the Peloponnese peninsula with the Greek mainland. Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia and, at the time of the Apostle Paul (mid AD 50s), was a major center of commerce and religion. Centuries before it had been a significant Greek city state until it was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BC. After nearly 100 years of desolation, it was rebuilt in 44 BC on the orders of Julius Caesar. The Roman dictator wanted a Roman colony of “freedmen” on that economically strategic location. It was a major crossroad for trade north, south, east, and west. Corinth also hosted the famous Isthmian Games every two years. These were athletic events second only to the ancient games of Olympia (see 1 Corinthians. 9:24-27).

The city was also notorious for its moral and religious depravity. Above the city stood the Temple of Aphrodite, which reputedly housed numerous religious prostitutes. Various pagan gods were worshipped and a diversity of religions flourished. Into that cultural environment, Paul came preaching the gospel – first to the Jews, but also to the multiethnic Gentile population (see Acts 18:1-8). This was during Paul’s second missionary journey, around AD 50. Paul’s mission was successful, and Corinth became one of the four most prominent cities where the early church flourished. The others were Jerusalem, Antioch of Syria, and Ephesus. Paul remained in the city for eighteen months working as a tentmaker and ministering with key leaders including Aquila, Priscilla, Silas, Timothy, Apollos, and Titus.

Eventually, however, God called Paul to move on to other fields. Nonetheless, he stayed in close touch with the leaders of the Corinthian church. Sadly, he began to hear reports of immoral behavior and other problems in the fellowship. Paul wrote four letters to the Corinthians to deal with these issues. Only two of them remain and are

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found in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians was actually Paul's second correspondence, the first having been lost. He wrote it in Ephesus about A.D. 54 during his third missionary journey. 1 Corinthians addressed a number of significant problems plaguing the church including immorality, spiritual gifts (especially abuse of speaking in tongues), factions in the church, legal issues, marital problems, the truth of Christ's resurrection, and questionable leadership.

Now let's see how Paul told the Corinthians to deal with one of the moral conflicts in the church: whether or not Christians should eat meat that was sacrificed to idols. To begin, with he said the most important principle is love.

*1 Now concerning food sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes one conceited, but love edifies people. 2 If anyone thinks that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; 3 but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him. (1 Corinthians. 8:1-3)*

When we read this section, we might wonder about this issue, "Wouldn't a Christian not want meat sacrificed to idols?" Two problems, however made this a complex moral issue. One was an accepted practice in that pagan society to have meals in temples. Second, most meat that was sold in the city markets had been sacrificed to idols.

The meat sacrificed to idols usually had three portions: first, that which was burned before the god; second, that which was apportioned to the worshippers to eat; and third, that "on the table of the god" which was tended by the god's priests and also eaten by worshippers. These common cultural practices, however, created ethical dilemmas for the Christian believers in the city. Apparently, after their conversions, some believers returned to the practice of going to the cultic meals. These believers could find nothing wrong with the practice claiming they had gained mature "knowledge" (*gnosis*) that the gods were not real and the meat was just food. Paul doesn't neces-

sarily disagree, but warns them, nonetheless, that such knowledge can make them conceited (*phusioo* - "puffed up" or arrogantly self-righteous). However, Paul knew it was causing some of the young believers to stumble. He says they should be directed not just by knowledge, but by love that "edifies people." If they say they have knowledge but do not show love, they really don't have the knowledge that comes from God. That knowledge comes only from loving Him.

So then the first principle dealing with ethical dilemmas is love – love of God and love of our fellow brothers in Christ. In John 13: 34-35 Jesus gave this command:

*"34 I am giving you a new commandment, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are My disciples: if you have love for one another."*

He also said that the whole Law is summarized in two basic commandments:

*37 And He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38 This is the great and foremost commandment. 39 The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 Upon these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40)*

The point is that whenever Christians are faced with an ethical question, our first concern must be if our choice reflects our love for God and our love for others, especially our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second principle for dealing with morally questionable issues is that we must remember is only One True God exists whom we worship and to whom we are accountable.

*4 Therefore, concerning the eating of food sacrificed to idols, we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and that there is no God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are*

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*many gods and many lords, 6 yet for us there is only one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him. (1 Corinthians 8:4-6)*

In this section, Paul acknowledges an important truth about idols - they are not real gods. In fact they are nothing at all but wood, stone, or metal. He then reasserts the absolute truth that there exists only the One True Eternal God. In verses five and six, he does say that there are many false “so-called gods” that people worship. He says even if they did exist (and he is not implying that they do), that for believers in Christ there is only our One True Creator God, the Father, and One Lord, Jesus Christ, who is also our Creator God.

This is a great statement of the deity of Christ and two of the three eternal Persons of the Trinity. It shows three key realities about God. First is that Paul uses Jesus’ own language about God – He calls Him “Father.” In the last several decades, most mainline Protestant denominations in the USA no longer address God as Father in their literature, prayers, or use the male pronoun when speaking of Him. They just use a neuter term “God.” For instance, they might say, “Let us praise God for God’s blessings” (instead of “His blessings”). The problem with this practice that it tends to depersonalize God. We must accept no substitutes for the real God, nor stray from the biblical language when addressing Him. This is, of course, out of sync with modern America. So many people today say: “All religions worship the same God.” That is a false assertion. If it is true, then God will have to apologize to the Baal priests and other pagan worshippers He destroyed in the Old Testament.

This passage also teaches us that God (the Father and the Son) is the Source, Creator of all things, and that we exist for Him and through Him. Paul’s purpose for making this point is that he wants his Corinthian readers to understand that he knows the fallacy of the pagan gods and the foods sacrificed to

them. Nonetheless, we should keep in mind the consciences of our brothers so not to hurt their faith.

The third principle when dealing with morally questionable issues is that there are some behaviors wherein we are free to do as we please. (I Corinthians 8:7-8)

*7 However, not all people 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. 8 Now food will not bring us close to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.*

In this section, Paul reminds his readers that not all understand this principle of showing concern for others. He says some believers are still eating food sacrificed to idols as though it gave them spiritual power to eat without feeling any guilt. Paul says, however, they have weak and defiled consciences, because they do not realize it’s a bad idea. If they think they will get greater power by defying the pagan gods they are wrong. It has no effect, good or bad, in their relationship to God.

It is true that some moral issues are not explicit in the Bible. Recently a friend of mine told me that when he was young he was told he would have to cut his hair if he wanted to play in the church orchestra (it barely went over his ears). Christians have in the past debated such issues as whether dancing is sinful, drinking alcohol is wrong, if gambling is a sin, if smoking is bad, if women should wear makeup, how long men’s hair should be, or even what kind of clothes to wear.

The fact is, in most cases, as Christians, we are free to do as we please on minor ethical questions. But our freedom must always be balanced with responsibility – which leads to Paul’s fourth principle.

The fourth principle for dealing with morally questionable issues is that we must always be mindful of the effects our actions may have on our fellow believers.

*9 But take care that this freedom of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if someone sees you, the one who has knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will his conscience, if he is weak, not be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? 11 For through your knowledge the one who is weak is ruined, the brother or sister for whose sake Christ died. 12 And so, by sinning against the brothers and sisters and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food causes my brother to sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to sin. (1 Corinthians 8:9-13)*

So Paul brings his thesis down to this point. He warns them that though they are free to eat or not eat meat offered to pagan gods, their liberty may be a stumbling block to the weak.

He says in verses ten and eleven that if the one who has “knowledge” eats the pagan meat and the weaker brother sees him, it will cause him to think that the meat actually does have spiritual power which could damage his conscience and ruin him spiritually. So, he says, in verse twelve, that this kind of indifferent attitude toward his brother is a sin against his brother and against Christ. The better way, Paul asserts in verse thirteen, is that if eating pagan food causes his brother to sin, for his brother’s sake he will never eat meat again!

This takes us back to Paul’s first principle: love for our brother. We must always think more of others than ourselves. We live in an era when so many people demand their “rights.” But Paul’s and Jesus’ ethics demand that we should look out for what is best for others. As Christians, we may be free to engage in some activities that are basically morally neutral when done in moderation. But that does not exempt us from making sure we are not putting a stumbling block in front of one of our fellow believers who may be struggling with a specific behavior or sin. Our love for him or her must always override our personal freedom in Christ.

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