

Let us pray together: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

I don't know about you, but I've not been to the meat market recently to purchase meat that I suspect may have been part of a sacrifice to what we Christians would call an idol. Probably the closest to this situation might be if we were to stop at a wiccan booth at a street fair and purchase something from them and then take it to our first Sunday meal.

For meat-eating Americans, our concern is, "Do I want chicken, beef, or pork tonight?" "Is the beef grass-fed or grain-fed?" "Do I want regular bacon, low-sodium bacon, or turkey bacon?" I don't think too many of us are concerned about the issue of food sacrificed to idols.

So, what's going on in this scripture? What's causing this food fight among the members of the followers of Christ in Corinth? In ancient Greece, animal sacrifice was practiced just as it had been practiced in the Old Testament in the Temple. In the sacrifice, some of the flesh would be burned in the fire, and then those who sacrificed the animal would have a feast. Kind of like a worship service followed by a barbecue.

If there was meat left over, that meat was sold to meat markets who offered the meat to the general public. Some folks in the Corinthian church didn't want to eat sirloin that had been sacrificed to idols. However, it was difficult to avoid this type of meat. A person may be offered such meat while eating at the home of neighbor who was not a Christ-follower or at a public festival.

From reading First and Second Corinthians in the Bible, we know that this meat-eating issue was only one of many issues that divided the Corinthian church. There are those who idealize the early church as 'pure,' seeing it as problem free, but the early church was hardly pure and issue free, especially in Corinth. The Corinthian church had many of the same issues that churches deal with today.

The question the Corinthian church was asking Paul: what shall we do about this issue? When we read these verses, we see that for Paul a piece

of meat is a piece of meat. Paul doesn't get drawn into the meat sacrificed to idols debate. He steps back from the issue and broadens his response. Paul reframes the issue. He doesn't agree with those who would not eat meat sacrificed to idols and he doesn't agree with those who think it is silly that a person would be concerned about that issue. He rises above the 'I'm right, you're wrong' stance that both sides of the debate take.

Paul says, Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him (God).

Many people today believe that if you just know the facts, that's all you need to know to make a decision. For Paul, this idea would be foreign. Making a decision based only on the facts as the individual sees it may mean making a decision that excludes and belittles others' input. I'm not saying knowledge is bad, but when there's an 'I'm right, you're wrong' attitude behind a fact-filled decision, it can harm the community. Such an attitude separates us from community, it drives people apart.

In his marvelous little book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis envisioned hell as a realm in which people are forever moving farther away from one another. This hellish vision is becoming a reality in Western culture, and it's something that Christians should passionately revolt against.

Christ followers need to come closer together, not further apart. Paul believed that decisions by Christ-followers involved the community. Every Christ-follower is linked to every other Christ-follower. This interconnectedness is how Paul casts the meat sacrificed to idols issue. How one's behavior influences others in the community is of ultimate importance. The good of the community comes before anything else.

If you don't consider the value and worth of those who think differently from you, you are misunderstanding the heart of the Gospel. Paul reminds us that Christ humbled himself for each of us, so our sins may be forgiven, and we may have life eternal. We need to express humility before God and our fellow human beings because of God's gift of Jesus Christ. We need to be aware of the immensity of our own ignorance and the real possibility of our own ability to fall into error.

So, if knowledge is not the answer, what is? Love. **Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.** Love is what should guide your and my actions. As Christians we are a part of a community, not individual Christ-followers acting alone. In this Christ-centered community, Paul is saying that the community's actions should be oriented to those who are less certain of their faith.

Love. I'm not talking about love as in a sweet, affectionate type of feeling, but about love that is translated into behaviors. Probably for Paul – and for you and me – this love expressed in community does not mean that you have to like the other people in the community or you have to agree with what they decide or agree with how they understand the world.

Some of you are probably saying, 'now that's a relief!' And it is. According to Paul, what each of us needs to do is modify our own behavior in order to protect those less certain about their faith. Can we do that?

One person puts it this way: I think more emphasis could be made on the "hard work of getting along." We must cooperate with God and be willing to put in the hard work of making relationships work. A good illustration of this is the first year of marriage. Although the couple loves each other, the first year is often full of stress, making adjustments required by the complexities of living with one another. It is way different than dating! It often takes a lot of hard work to get along in family, church and community relationships. God is not an island unto God's self and neither are we. (Angel Christ, in e-mail correspondence with Homiletics.)

For Paul – and I hope for us – facts are not the only criteria for making decisions within a community. We must make decisions that are for the good of the community. And those decisions are to be based on love – the love expressed through Jesus Christ to all humanity.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *Life Together* writes: Christian [community] is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.