

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

1 Corinthians 8

BE SENSITIVE TO THE CONSCIENCE & THE EXERCISE OF ONE’S CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

1 Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we **know** [*oida* – Gr. οἶδα] that we all have **knowledge** [*gnosis* – Gr. γνῶσις]. **Knowledge** [*gnosis* – Gr. γνῶσις] makes arrogant, but **love** [*agape* – Gr. ἀγάπη] edifies.

2 If anyone supposes that he **knows** [*ginosko* – Gr. γινώσκω] anything, he has not yet **known** [*ginosko* – Gr. γινώσκω] as he ought to **know** [*ginosko* – Gr. γινώσκω];

3 but if anyone **loves** [*agapao* – Gr. ἀγαπάω] God, he is **known** [*ginosko* – Gr. γινώσκω] by Him.

4 Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we **know** [*oida* – Gr. οἶδα] that there is no such thing as an idol 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 many gods and many lords, 6 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, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.

7 However not all men have this **knowledge** [*gnosis* – Gr. γνῶσις]; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their **conscience** being **weak** [*asthenes* – Gr. ἀσθενής] is defiled.

8 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. 9 But take care that this **liberty** [*eksousia* – Gr. ἐξουσία] of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the **weak** [*asthenes* – Gr. ἀσθενής].

10 For if someone sees you, who have **knowledge** [*gnosis* – Gr. γνῶσις], dining in an idol's temple, will not his **conscience** if he is **weak** [*asthenes* – Gr. ἀσθενής] be **strengthened** [*oikodomeo* – Gr. οἰκοδομέω] to eat things sacrificed to idols?

11 For through your **knowledge** [*gnosis* – Gr. γνῶσις] he who is **weak** [*asthenes* – Gr. ἀσθενής] is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.

12 And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their **conscience** when it is **weak** [*astheneo* – Gr. ἀσθενέω], you sin against Christ.

13 Therefore, if food causes my brother to **stumble** [*scandalidzo* – Gr. σκανδαλίζω], I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to **stumble** [*scandalidzo* – Gr. σκανδαλίζω].

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

In this chapter, Paul addresses the subject of Christian liberty and the responsibility of the believer with “knowledge” toward the weaker believer – one defined as having a weak conscience. In Corinth, meat that had been slaughtered and offered to idols would remain in front of the idol for perhaps several hours or even overnight. Later, it would be sold in the market for a lesser price than other meat. So, the question arose among the believers in Corinth regarding whether this was an acceptable practice for believers. Paul highlights three groups of believers in regard to this issue:

- The believer with the “*weak*” conscience who had eaten the meat, but whose conscience bothered him (v. 7). Paul indicates that this believer did not even have the knowledge or intellectual understanding of the truth [*gnosis* – Gr. γνῶσις] – not to mention the fact that there had been no internalization of such truth [*oida* – Gr. οἶδα] by the believer. (See definitions below for more information and support of the distinction between the two Greek words).
- The believer with the *strong* conscience – the believer who understood intellectually [*gnosis* – Gr. γνῶσις] the truth regarding idols (verses 1, 2, 7, 10, 11). Paul elaborates on the truth regarding idols and the truth that he and his fellow workers had internalized regarding the Lord in verses 4-6 where he uses a different Greek word for his knowledge [*oida* – Gr. οἶδα].
- The believer with the “*weak*” conscience who had not yet eaten the meat, but who might be persuaded to eat meat that had been offered to idols if he observed the believer with the *strong* conscience doing so (v. 10). This believer was effectively attempting to live out of the other believer’s soul.

DEFINITION AND ELABORATION OF KEY TERMINOLOGY RELATED TO THIS PASSAGE

Conscience – “the inner sense of what is right or wrong in one’s conduct or motives, impelling one toward right action...the complex of ethical and moral principles that controls or inhibits the actions or thoughts of an individual.”¹

- This definition is consistent with an understanding of the conscience to be that part of the individual’s soul that houses one’s **norms and standards** regarding what is acceptable thought and behavior.
- A new born child has no observable conscience since the conscience begins to develop concurrent with the function of one’s mentality.
- An individual can make decisions to accept norms and standards that result in a conscience that aligns with Biblical norms and standards – a conscience based upon truth.
- An individual can make decisions to accept norms and standards that result in a conscience that does not align with Biblical norms and standards – a conscience based upon that which is false.
- Examples:
 - True norm or standard – “trust or faith alone in the work of Christ alone is all that is required for obtaining eternal life with God.”
 - False norm or standard – “we must observe the ordinances of baptism and communion and we must name all of our sins in order to be eternally saved.”
 - True norm or standard – “dancing, having a drink, eating meat, playing golf, mowing the yard on Sunday are not sinful actions by the believer in and of themselves.”
 - False norm or standard – “dancing, having a drink, mowing the yard on Sunday are all sinful activities.”
- A false norm or standard that the individual accepts to be a true norm or standard is still a false norm or standard.

¹ Definition taken from www.dictionary.com

- The norms and standards of the conscience are shaped or influenced by a variety of often overlapping factors, but ultimately reflect that which the individual has accepted to be true.
 - Old man thinking or human viewpoint thinking can shape the conscience.
 - Rationalization and justification can shape the conscience of the believer and unbeliever so that false norms and standards are accepted to be true.
 - The culture (family, societal, national, ethnic, socio-economic, educational, generational, etc.) in which one is raised and lives.
- It is the conscience that makes an individual feel guilty when there is a violation of one of the norms or standards contained in his or her conscience.
- The Holy Spirit's ministry is not one of imposing guilt on either the believer or unbeliever – John 16:8-10 notwithstanding where the Greek word translated “convict” could be rendered “convince.”
- If there is no norm or standard established in the conscience, an individual will not feel guilty when he commits a sin for which he has no norm or standard.
- If there has been a “false” norm or standard that has been accepted to be true, then when a person acts consistent with the “false” norm or standard, there will be no sense of wrongdoing.
- On the other hand, if the person violates the “false” norm or standard, then a sense of guilt will result.

Strong conscience – the individual with the strong conscience is the individual who is convinced that the norms and standards that he or she has accepted are “*true*” regardless of whether they are really “*true*” or whether they are “*false*.”

Weak conscience – the individual with the weak conscience is the individual who is not convinced of their norms and standards regarding a particular issue. If this individual engages in activities that are contrary to the norms and standards that they have so tentatively accepted to be true, then their conscience will prompt feelings of guilt.

Ginosko [Gr. γινώσκω] and *gnosis* [Gr. γνῶσις] - “The ordinary use is for intelligent comprehension (‘to perceive,’ ‘to understand,’ ‘to know’), at first with a stress on the act.” The word *ginosko* “emphasizes understanding rather than sensory perception, and ...it is a perception of things as they are, not an opinion about them.”²

Oida [Gr. οἶδα] – This word is generally synonymous with *ginosko*; however, in different contexts, it carries the idea of more intimate knowledge – a knowledge greater than simply that of comprehension. In contrast to the Judaizers, Paul insists on more than just a knowledge of Jesus’ existence on the earth (2 Cor 5:16). In this passage, *oida* and *ginosko* are set in juxtaposition to each other, thus making a distinction between the two words. John uses the word *oida* in reference to Jesus’ knowledge of God – not just an abstract knowledge, but a knowledge of mission that produces obedience in John 7:28-29. John contrasts the lack of knowledge (*gnosis*) of the Father by the unbelieving Jews with His own knowledge (*oida*) of the Father in John 8:55.³

Note: In our passage, Paul seems to be using the two different words for “knowing” or “knowledge” to highlight a distinction between believers. The distinction: *ginosko* and *gnosis* are used to refer to an intellectual understanding whereas *oida* is used to highlight the fact that the *ginosko* knowledge had been internalized – not just intellectually comprehended. The exception is when *ginosko* is used in reference to God’s knowledge of those believers who love Him (v. 3)

² Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, electronic edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996.

³ Ibid.

where such a distinction in terminology is not needed since Paul is not developing the topic of God's knowledge of the believer in this passage.

Agape [Gr. ἀγάπη] and agapao [Gr. ἀγαπάω]⁴ – these terms are used to highlight the love that exists between a subject (the “I” in the sentence “I love you”) and the object (the “you” in the sentence “I love you”) whereby the character and integrity of the subject is the issue. *Agape* love is often defined as “godly love” by many; however, while not necessarily inaccurate, that definition is lacking. In Scripture, the focus of the word seems to be upon the integrity of the one who is exercising the love rather than upon the one upon whom the love is being bestowed.

Stumble [*scandalidzo* – Gr. σκανδαλίζω] – a word meaning to “cause to be caught or to fall, i.e. cause to sin (the sin may consist in a breach of the moral law, in unbelief, or in the acceptance of false teachings).”⁵ In verse 13, Paul uses this term to refer to the effect upon the believer who has a weak conscience when that believer follows the behavior of the believer with a strong conscience. The believer with the weak conscience stumbles or sins by following the lead of the believer with the strong conscience in regard to activities for which the believer with the weak conscience is not yet convinced is right.

WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN IN REFERENCE TO OUR PASSAGE?

As noted in the introductory comments, there were three parties that had emerged in regard to this issue in Corinth. Two of the parties represented those with a *strong* conscience in regard to the eating of meat that had been sacrificed and presented to idols:

- Those who were convinced that there was nothing wrong in such activity.
- Those who were convinced that such activity was absolutely wrong (logically implied by the passage though not mentioned).

On the contrary, there was one party that had emerged in Corinth that wasn't sure. This was the party of the “weak” conscience.

The believer with a “strong” conscience in this matter who eats meat that has been offered to idols obviously has *gnosis* or understanding that to do so is of no consequence to his or her own spiritual standing or walk with the Lord. However, for such a believer to do so in such a way that does not give consideration to the believer with the “weak” conscience in such a matter manifests a lack of two things:

- Knowledge or *gnosis* [Gr. γνῶσις] that has not been internalized resulting in *oida* [Gr. οἶδα] such as that possessed by Paul and other mature believers.
- No “agape” love [Gr. ἀγάπη] toward other believers.

The principle that Paul is emphasizing in this passage can be summarized in the following points:

- The believer is at liberty [*eksousia* – Gr. ἐξουσία] or has the authority to engage in activities that are morally, ethically and spiritually neutral.
- However, such liberty should be subordinated to the principle of *agape* love toward others who may have a “weak” conscience.
- Paul does not address the believer who has a *strong* conscience regarding the legitimacy of an action or behavior when in the presence of another believer who has a *strong* conscience regarding the illegitimacy of that action or behavior.

⁴ I will not fully develop the support for this definition of *agape* and *agapao* in these notes since to do so would distract from the main focus of this passage. The support for the conclusions expressed herein will be the subject of a separate, more developed document.

⁵ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd edition from Walter Bauer's fifth edition (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1957, 1979), 752.

- The believer with a *strong* conscience regarding the legitimacy of an action or behavior that is morally, ethically, and spiritually neutral and who does not consider the believer who has a “weak” conscience has not internalized the truth and is not actualizing it into his life’s decisions.
- To cause a believer with a “*weak*” conscience to violate that conscience so that guilt results is to cause that believer to stumble in his or her faith.
- No believer should live out of the soul of another believer.