

Jonathan Mark
FMC Reedley
1 Corinthians 8
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Doctrine is not enough. We need love

Good morning, church. Today, we are exploring the ageless question of getting along together through the example of idolatry or not idolatry. Does it matter if we Christians worship a piece of wood even if we know it is no different from firewood? Does an idol still have power over you if you know it is false? Let's explore together. Before I begin, let me beg forgiveness from Dr. Gering; I will be mentioning another Mennonite college on your visiting weekend.

I invite you to pray with me. May the words of mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, our one God and one allegiance. Amen.

What are our core values, and where must we learn to bend?

At Goshen College, one of the controversies was whether our sports teams would lead the national anthem. Some thought, why does it matter? This is the tradition of sporting since World War 1. Visiting teams won't understand why Goshen College is different, and it fell on the largely non-Mennonite athletes to explain the complicated history of Mennonite separation from the state. On the other hand, was the student body that felt ashamed that such a patriotic ritual took place in their college. They went to games and protested by remaining seated during the anthem. Standing up for the anthem felt like worshiping an idol. And if the school gave into idolizing the nation, these students feared this would lead to blind patriotism and war acceptance on the college campus.

I wonder if that was how the Jewish Christians felt in Jerusalem and Corinth when they told their Gentile Christian brothers and sisters the dangers of eating meat sacrificed to idols. I do not much like the wisdom of Solomon, the slippery slope argument that idol worship leads to adultery and such. But I can understand this sense of shame by being associated with idolatry. On the other hand, The idol-meat-eating Corinthians argued that "an idol is nothing at all in the world" and "there is no God but one." If you know in your head that idols are meaningless, like Isaiah talked about, is your heart unchanged? But what was eating meat sacrificed to idols anyway?

Thankfully, the eighth and tenth chapters of Corinthians give us two examples. First is an idol feast, Remember when Jesus was presented at the temple, and there was a sacrifice of two pigeons? It was a party. These idol parties would also be social occasions. Wealthy citizens and politicians would host these parties in the temples to show off their wealth and piety. So,

attending would be a time to rub shoulders with politicians and wealthy citizens. These idol feasts were part of playing the social ladder game.

The second is buying meat at the market. That may or may not have been sacrificed to an idol. I'm not sure what the big deal is here. Is it financially supporting the pagan temples? Is it something Paul could not let go of as an observant Jew for whom checking how meat was prepared was second nature? Is this because Paul must tow the party line from Jerusalem that was already trying their best to make conversion easy for Gentiles?

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Either way, we have a conundrum. The order from Jerusalem is that meat sacrificed to idols is a no-go. What should the church in Corinth do? Should the idol meat eaters and idol shunners strike out on their own, stick to their convictions, and let their brothers and sisters who think differently start a new church across town? Scism or separation has occurred in Mennonite history: Amish and Swiss brethren; General Conference and Mennonite Brethren. That is the choice that denominations and Mennonite conferences are making right now.

But Paul argues for the idol-meat eaters to let go of their doctrine for the sake of love. Paul does not refute their reasons. There is indeed only one God, and these idols are nothing more than wood and metal, which can do nothing. Instead, Paul ignores doctrine. Paul puts aside theology. Paul leans on the ethic of love.

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Putting people before doctrine is a scandalous argument today. It is difficult for Christians to weigh the two greatest commandments of loving God and loving neighbor. Do we stick to our knowledge of right and wrong, or do we love our neighbor? Paul does not give us an easy answer to this problem. He only urges us to be careful about each other's feelings.

“Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again so that I will not cause them to fall. For the gospel is not food or drink, but justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”