

When I was in seminary we took couple field trips. Atlanta had much to offer us in the way of diverse religious institutions, and one particular field trip was to the local Hindu temple. The small flock of seminarians, myself included, were immediately out of their comfort zones. We removed our shoes and watched as the attendants woke up the gods for the day by ringing bells, waving light, and offering food and milk. The inside of the temples were no bigger than this sanctuary, but they were lined with alcoves each containing a different god or goddess which needed to be woken up and tended to.

Once the gods were, according to the attendants, awake, a man scooped up the basket of apples that had been offered to the gods and handed each one of us a fresh apple that had been offered to the gods. Another seminarian and I looked at each other and immediately tried to remember Paul's teaching the subject. We'd never imagined we would actually encounter a situation where we would actually be offered food sacrificed to idols. What did Paul say again? I know from experience people assume pastors have the entire Scripture memorized, but we don't. People will come up to us and say, hey pastor, what do you think of that Ezekiel 25:11? And fully expect me to know what that verse says and have an opinion on it. But this particular time my colleague and I stood there trying to remember what Scripture's teaching on food sacrificed to idols was, and how to handle the situation.

What we ultimately decide to do was to thank the man for the gift, and then discreetly offer the food to the wild animals. The subject has not come up again since.

For Paul, the matter was not as simple. The best that was being sacrificed to idols in this circumstance was cheaper than the meat the people might find in the market. Further, Christians were attending feasts which were held in false temples and served this meat in question. Some of the Corinthians reasoned that since the idols were false, since they were no more than statues much as the statues I saw being woken up at the Hindu temple, there was no harm in eating the meat because nothing had actually happened. There was no false god and so the meat couldn't be tainted by the false god. These were well meaning and practical Christians who had used their reason to reach this conclusion and felt in their hearts no sin was taking place. These Christians would have told my colleague and I to eat the apple and not worry about it.

Some of the other Christians, however, were agitated by this. They believed that it was wrong to have anything to do with false idols. They probably also believed the idols were just statues, but their conscious would not let them touch the meat because of its association with the false idol. These Christians would have thrown the apple away as I did, if they had even accepted it at all.

Now, one might think that there is an easy fix. You guys eat the meat, and you guys don't. It won't be any worse than when we have a potluck and we have little signs for gluten free or vegetarian. But human relationships are rarely that simple, and people have a need to try and convince others they are right. The meat-eating Christians were annoyed with the non-meat eating Christians. The meat eaters would invite the non-meat eaters to the feasts, and offer them the questionable meat. They likely lectured and explained their point of view. The non meat eaters were feeling pressured, and perhaps some fell to pressure and ate something they didn't feel comfortable with.

Paul tells us that this was the exact wrong path to take. Paul is far less concerned with whether or not the best is appropriate to eat than he is the relationship within church. He seems to agree the food will cause no harm if eaten, but more important than that, is the harm that's being caused by imposing on the conscious of another. For the ones who felt, rightly or wrongly, that eating the meat was forbidden to them, to pressure them to do so was to cause them to stumble, to violate their own conscious. To cause another to stumble *was* a sin, whether or not the meat was.

Now, except for the odd seminary field trip, you may think this passage has little to do with us today. The likelihood of being offered food sacrificed to idols is

pretty small. But this passage is not so much about food but the rules we impose on others.

Someone the modern church like to tell other Christians what to do and what they should believe. I'm not talking about clear sins. If your brother or sister is robbing banks, you should go to your brother or sister and tell them that robbing banks is a sin. We can safely say that Christians should not rob banks. Similarly, there are doctrines that one simply has to accept to accept to be a Christian. We are Christ's ones, we have to believe in Christ to be Christians.

The problem comes when people want to expand that to include areas of Christian liberty, things that are not defined in Scripture and have been left to Christian freedom. This sounds like this: You aren't a real Christian unless you speak in tongues. If you're a Christian, then you have to believe in this, or can't believe in that. If you're a Christian, you have to vote a certain way. Imagine my surprise as I enter my eighth or ninth year of ministry when I see a Facebook post that says if I voted a certain way, the way I did in fact, I'm not a Christian. You heard it here first, folks. According to an acquaintance on Facebook, I'm not a Christian.

That's a silly example and as you can tell, I'm not real broken up about it. One of the weird things about being in ministry is the strange judgement you get for really weird things. But this happens in more serious ways, when we tell

Christians that they must believe or do a certain, and force them to violate their conscience. One's conscience, one's relationship with God and the holy spirit, use to be a sacred thing that no one dared violate. More and more today, however, Paul's strong who have reasoned, the armchair theologians, push the weak to violate their conscience.

I had conversation with one lady who outright said that Christians should be forced to do things they don't agree with, because their views were, in her opinion, wrong. In her mind, forcing them was the kindest thing because it seemed right to her and affirmed other beliefs she held. But consider Paul's words. To do so is to make those people sin. Not necessarily because of the action, but because they are violating their relationship with God. They are doing something they believe God does not want them to do, and they will carry the consequences of that with them.

I have a confession; I love to read reddit drama. Reddit is an internet forum that I'm pretty sure is ninety percent just creative writing exercise because I refuse to believe like half of that stuff actually happened, but the story I want to tell came from there. If you've been to a wedding basically ever you've probably seen the couple cut the cake. Then a decision must be made, whether they feed each other nicely or smash the cake into each other's faces. I know plenty of couples who absolutely love that tradition and turn it into an all-out food fight, and that works for their relationship, the heavens. Consider the story of a woman, found on reddit,

that absolutely hated that tradition, had her head smashed into a cake as a child and cut her face, and so insisted there would be no cake smashing on her wedding day. Well, it wouldn't be much of a story if the groom didn't pretend to go along with her until the moment of truth, and then grabbed her head and smashed it into the wedding cake. It was a record short wedding, and a record short marriage, as the bride left that very moment. People told her she was being ridiculous because there is nothing morally wrong with smashing cake into one's face, it is a tradition, it was a joke, and so on. But the bottom line was that such behavior was not acceptable in HER relationship. It was a boundary for her. To violate it damaged the relationship beyond repair.

Before we encourage a brother or sister to abandon their belief, we must remember that we are speaking about their relationship with God. What is acceptable in our relationship with God may not be right for them. And to cause them to damage their relationship with God is a serious sin and a very unloving thing to do. Really, that's what this entire passage boils down to: love. Treat one another with love, even when you disagree, even when you're sure the other person is absolutely wrong. Love your brothers and sisters, and trust that God will be faithful to continue the good work God has begun.

Rev. Kate Mauch, January 28, 2024