

Conscientious Freedom

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It may be hard for us to understand, but this was one of the most significant theological disputes in the early days of the church.

Meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Here was the issue.

Greek and Roman temples were places of routine animal sacrifice. All kinds of animals would be killed in these temples to—folks believed—placate or satisfy the gods.

But in fact only small portions of the animals were actually burned as sacrifice. These temples were also the butchers of the ancient world, and most of the good meat was portioned out and either used to feed the priests, or sold.

So the early Christians in the city of Corinth had this basic question for Paul. Is it ok to eat a steak from a cow that had been offered to Apollo? Or Zeus? Or Poseidon?

Does the fact that this animal was used in a pagan ritual make it somehow unclean, or tainted?

So safe to say, sometimes the Bible has answers to questions that none of us asked.

I doubt that this issue has ever kept you up at night. It is one of those parts of the Bible, and there are several, that just speak to a different time.

And it is true that we might just safely thumb past this story. Except, for Paul's answer. Which is not really a simple yes or a no.

I mean, Paul doesn't really ever say anything too simply.

But here is what he says.

Paul says, look.

You and I know there is nothing wrong with this meat, because we know that these gods in these temples aren't real. So really who cares. It is not going to hurt you in any way to eat this meat.

But... its not just about you. Because even if you and I know these lamb chops are fine, what about those who don't know. What about those who are new to this faith, or checking us out from a distance.

What will they think if they see you heading in and out of that temple everyday?

So listen, its fine to eat the meat. But.. if you think that eating it will confuse other people, then don't.

He says, “take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.”

Be aware of how the freedom you embrace impacts others. In fact, Paul says, if I even suspected that my eating might cause others to stumble. I would never eat meat again.

You have to make these decisions with knowledge yes, but also with love.

So here we have in this little piece of scripture, the answer to a question we never had.

Yet, God is still speaking to us through Paul’s words.

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I have been doing a lot of thinking recently about pandemic ethics. About these new judgements and decisions we all have to make,

should we see grandma, only outside, can she hug the grandkids.

What is an essential errand? Is it ok to bring a cleaner back into the home, or employees back into the office. Should we have worship in person? Should I finally go back and see the barber?

These are not just logistical questions, they are, at their heart, moral questions. Its a whole new set of questions. Ones most of us never had to ask before.

And unfortunately, the way that people think about these nuanced questions has been pulled into the vortex of our national polarization.

But it doesn't need to be this way.

And I think, of all thing, Paul's words about meat sacrificed to idols, might light our way.

Paul doesn't take a side, he applies some moral imagination.

He doesn't give a simple answer, he explores the complexity of actual human community.

And what he offers is this reminder: that you have freedom, and you are responsible for how you use it. You have freedom. But you are accountable for how your actions impact others.

The truth of freedom is not a shield against all culpability.

And Paul does something here which I think we all would benefit from doing more often. He pushes moral imagination of those Corinthian Christians beyond the question of what is right or wrong for me. He asks them to put themselves in the shoes of the weaker and more vulnerable around them.

He asks them to not just lean on their own expertise, but to ask what love demands of them for the sake of others.

I wear a mask just about everywhere I go outside of my own yard.

Often it is because I know based on the best available scientific evidence and public health guidance that it is the correct and safe thing to do. At the grocery store. Taking the kids to the doctor.

But sometimes I am wearing a mask in a situation where that are a little more borderline. Walking on the sidewalk. Standing distanced in an outdoor crowd.

And in those moments I am not wearing my mask out of knowledge. I am wearing it out of love.

I am wearing it because I would rather be a little uncomfortable than make someone else really uncomfortable. 6ft may feel fine to me. But it might feel pretty close for someone with COPD, or who is caring everyday for an elderly parent.

It gets hot. But I am glad contribute even a momentary image toward helping this new thing we are doing feel a little more normal.

Personally, I would feel pretty comfortable now opening the door and accepting a delivery if we were both wearing masks, but I don't know how the driver feels about that, so we have them leave things on the step and offer a wave through the glass storm door.

This is just a glimpse of what I am doing. Its not perfect. I am sure that there are folks who I have stood too close to, and I am sure there are others who wish I would walk into their homes again.

We are not going to get this exactly right.

Each of us will make mistakes every day. Just like we do with every other part of our lives.

But you will be moving in the right direction the more often you remember the responsibility of your freedom, and chose to live your life in the way that is not only best for you, but that bears in your mind, and in your heart, the experiences of all those you meet.

And I am grateful for this little bit of scripture. And this amazing way that God finds to speak too us through these ancient words.

The answer to a question we never had.

Turns out to be the answer to a question we'd never imagined we'd have to ask.