

The Weak Conscience

"Howbeit there is not in all men that knowledge: but some, being used until now to the idol, eat as a thing sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled" (1 Cor. 8:7).

One of the characteristics of Paul's letters is that frequently he may deal with a subject, digress to teach on another, and then return to his earlier subject. We see this in this section in which he deals with the conscience and eating meats sacrificed to idols. His subject of liberty in eating meats offered to idols led him to discuss liberty to be supported in his work of preaching the gospel (9:1-16); from thence to self discipline (9:19-27); to the fall of Israel because of their failure to exercise discipline (10:1-13); returning once more to meats offered to idols and the conscience (1 Cor. 10:14-33).

In 1 Corinthians 8:7 Paul has "echoed" what correspondents from Corinth apparently had written him when he wrote, *"... we know that no idol is anything in the world and that there is no God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or on earth, as there are gods many, and lords many, yet to us there is one God, the Father and we unto him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and we through him" (1 Cor. 8:4b-6).*

Some Corinthians failed to take into account that not all brethren in Corinth had advanced in knowledge to the level they had attained. Some still *"being used until now to the idol, eat as of a thing sacrificed to the idol" (1 Cor. 8:7)*. Because of this, the liberty of brethren to eat meats sacrificed to idols had to be tempered by what consequence exercising their liberty would have on the conscience of another brother. They had to remember *"All things are lawful ... not all things are expedient. All things are lawful; but not all things edify" (1 Cor. 10:23)*. In view of this truth, brethren were commanded, *"Let not man seek his own, but each his neighbor's good" (1 Cor. 10:24)*.

The apostle agreed that eating meats offered to idols was harmless in itself and he advised, *"Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, eat, asking no question for conscience sake ..." (1 Cor. 10:25)*. The *"shambles"* were markets where meats of all form were sold. To such places animals offered in sacrifice would be sold for profit to the priests of those idol temples, but since the meat of an animal which had been sacrificed to an idol could not be distinguished from one which had not been, then meat of neither animal would "defile" the one who bought and ate it, because, after all *"an idol was nothing."*

Should an unbeliever invite a believer to a feast and the believer was disposed to go, the believer was commanded, *"Whatever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience' sake. But if any man say unto you, This hath been offered in sacrifice, eat not, for his sake that showed it, and for conscience's sake: conscience, I say, not thine own, but the other's; for why is my liberty judged by another's conscience?"* (1 Cor. 10:27-29). The apostle does not say that the informant *"this hath been offered in sacrifice"* was the unbelieving host who had invited the believer; it might just as possibly have been another believer also invited to the unbeliever's feast. In either case the believer, upon being informed *"this hath been offered in sacrifice"* was not to eat. Were the informant the unbelieving host, the believer should not eat lest he send the wrong message to the unbeliever; were the informant a fellow believer, the believer was not to eat lest the believer had a weak conscience which might be lead to sin were he to see a fellow believer eat the sacrificed meat. The believer must be careful that *"whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give no occasion of stumbling, either to Jews, or to Greeks, or to the church of God"* (1 Cor. 10:31f).

Regarding the conscience Paul wrote to the Romans, *"Happy is he that judgeth not himself in that which he approveth. But he that doubteth is condemned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; and whatsoever is not of faith is sin"* (Rom. 14:22f). The word *"approveth"* sometimes is translated *"alloweth"*: a man might condemn himself should he eat meats sacrificed to idols if by his action he led a weak brother to do the same and thus condemn himself. The apostle reminded Romans that if one doubted, he was condemned should he ate, no matter that the meat was harmless of itself; for he would have regarded himself to have broken a commandment of God.

So, our rights, or liberties can only be exercised if we do not lead a weak brother, by our action, to do that which he believes is wrong. The second great command, *"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,"* must be exercised when we contemplate doing something which is a liberty but not a requirement of us by the Lord.

Jim McDonald