

# “Facing Controversial Issues”

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 8:1-4, 7-13; 10:23-30

1/30/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Christianity, in contrast to Judaism, brought a new freedom from the laws. As Paul explained in his letters to new church groups, Judaism had been treating the law as an end itself but Christianity considered the law as a means to learning what is good so as to help make doing right a pattern for life. Put differently, Judaism had made the law the condition of God’s acceptance – where as Christianity considered the law as a servant. In Paul’s view, the law was to get our attention – reminding us of needed changes on our part – but mostly we are to rely on God’s love as being what “saves” us. Once we discover God’s unconditional acceptance of us, we should be doing our best, out of gratitude, to keep trying to do what God suggests for our lives.

That’s about as briefly as I can summarize that complicated issue. The new Christians realized that their goal was no longer to try to fulfill the Mosaic law because no one could ever do that. This realization brought a feeling of release and a liberating sensation to know that God accepted them, no matter what. So while the new Christians were trying to follow the teachings of Jesus (instead of the Priests, Pharisees or Sadducees), they felt freed up from trying to obey all the ceremonial and dietary laws of these different Jewish groups. Naturally this created friction between the Christians and the Jews of the first century.

In the early congregations (that met in people’s homes), there were some Christians who had converted from Judaism. They felt that they should continue to observe their Jewish laws. They were generally thinking that they could believe in Christ as God’s Messiah but at the same time, they should keep their time-honored religious traditions. In the midst of the tensions between the different kinds of Christian expressions was the matter on whether or not to eat meat that had been offered to idols in the pagan temple ceremonies.

At that time, the Jews were surrounded by and controlled by the very diverse secular and pluralistic

Greek-speaking culture.<sup>1</sup> “What do we have as Jews that is different from these pantheistic religions?” they constantly asked themselves. And their answer was ❶ belief in just One God,<sup>2</sup> ❷ belief in the Torah and all of the temple cult and rules and regulations that went with it and ❸ the hope that someday they would get their own independent country.<sup>3</sup> People not following the strict rules of Judaism were thought to be threatening the very existence of Judaism itself. As if to say, “if you’re going to eat the same food and do the same things that everyone else (who worships at the Isis and Zeus temples), you might as well deny God and throw out everything for which your ancestors lived and died.”

When Paul was writing this letter to the Corinth house church around the year 55, people in that town would go to the market place to shop. Among the displays of meat, they would see some of it marked “Ceremonial meat from the temple of Aphrodite – one-half off.” The profit of the sale of the meat would benefit the temple cult to that deity.

For some of the early believers – particularly those who had converted from the Jewish faith – it became a pressing moral issue to them about whether or not to buy that meat – or eat it if it was made available in a shared meal. After all, that meat might be cheaper or a higher quality but if it had been involved in praise of a pagan god, they thought it might *appear* to support what is alien to Christianity. Christians who had come from the Jewish heritage were particularly troubled because of their tradition of avoiding such items which their priest had told them was ritually “unclean.” Perhaps one or two of the new Christian congregations in the region had made such an issue about it that they decided to take a public

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<sup>1</sup> The Hellenistic (Greek speaking) culture began when Alexander the Great conquered the known world and extended that control up and through the Greco-Roman culture lasting into the first three centuries in the common era.

<sup>2</sup> monotheism

<sup>3</sup> That didn’t happen until 1947 but even that is considered extremely controversial in terms of propriety in land rights and ownership.

stand. Maybe they went as far as to rename their group: “The Church of the Unfiled Table.”

For sure, the Corinthian house church was having arguments about it and they had written to Paul for advice about this issue – as well as many others. Now keeping in mind that Paul was a highly trained Rabbi, let’s see how he dealt with this dispute.

First, Paul essentially says that everyone ought to know that the meat isn’t bad in itself. Everyone should also know that those wooden and jeweled idols are just fancy sticks of wood – and they’re no more gods than a piece of discarded chewing gum on the ground or a piece of trash blowing by in the wind. There’s just one real God and that’s our God. So if those pagans are stupid enough to offer this meat, in gratitude or fear, to those blocks of wood, that’s their problem and it wouldn’t have any affect on the meat anyway.’

In the same line of thinking, Jesus had said: ‘nothing that goes into a person makes them unclean, but what comes from within is the problem – namely evil thoughts and twisted motives; so if you have to talk about unclean, that is what you should discuss.’ In other words, its not things that are evil but our use of these things and their effect on us and others.

But Paul knew that sometimes things and actions are so closely associated (in people’s minds) with evil doings, that sometimes people always associate the thing itself with that evil as a matter of principle. So while no material object is wrong in itself, Paul said, that doesn’t mean that everything we have or do will help all people grow spiritually. There are some things that might cause more harm than they’re worth. There are situations when we have to think about others, instead of just doing what we feel free, in conscience, to do. The example Paul cited was when someone would invite you out to dinner.

He says, in chapter 10, that if you’re a dinner guest and someone notices that the steaks were obtained from a pagan temple outlet, and if they have a problem with it and don’t want to eat it, you should just say, “Oh, O.K.” and go along with them in not eating it – without making a big deal about the difference between your belief and theirs. And the reason that we should think of others, he says, and not just ourselves or merely the freedom of our own

conscience – is because of our love for other Christians. The problem, then, is not with the thing itself, like temple meat offered to idols, but the problem is with the weaker Christian, who unfortunately associates a thing with evil. Paul was talking about the person who is apparently “weak” in not being able to grasp the difference between *associations* and what would be *an actual harm or evil*.

So, what are we to do about the problem of conflicts *others* have with matters of evil (or guilt) by association? Do we have to live the way everyone else wants us to live? Can we really live without fear of offending or turning off other Christians who have not yet, in our opinion, worked through an issue to resolution as we have? What is controversial and what isn’t?

The complication with this issue of “the weaker brother or sister,” is complex. Who determines who is the so-called “weaker” one? The nature of moral dilemmas is such that the conclusion to which you have come on an issue is not the same as that of others. You find you differ from others in thought or action – and sooner or later, unless you have no social contact with diverse people, you will meet strong feelings – even explosive feelings – with others who are just as sincere and intentional about their faith as you.

The Bible doesn’t list every moral decision in life and then provide “the” correct guideline on all matters. Fortunately the Bible does provide a consistency of character and attitude on most of the issues we run up against in life. That leaves us personally having to work on the newly emerging issues with considerable attentiveness to the vast differences between our 21<sup>st</sup> century life experiences and those of the audience of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish writers of the New Testament. Make no mistake – the moral issues addressed in first century Palestinian Judaism were vastly different from *some* of the newly emerging issues our society currently faces. We can confidently know that the concepts embodied in the ten commandments, profound reverence for God and Jesus’ teachings about valuing others equally with ourselves are the core of the Christian faith.

There are other issues you and I face that the Bible doesn’t even come near to mentioning –

primarily because they were not issues dealt with by anyone in the first century. Fortunately there are not many but back to what Paul was doing.

Some people in the Corinthian church would just go down to the town meat market and pick up a few steaks that had passed by the altar in a ceremony. Other people in the church would see it or hear about it and would struggle with it. Obviously many church members could care less.

In the subculture of the expression of the Christianity of my childhood, I was taught that going to dances was “wrong” – not because dancing itself was evil but because of what it led to. It was considered wrong *because of the association*, in some people’s minds, with other teen troubles. All of us can remember issues like this in our past but notice how our values have changed to be different, in some ways, than our parents or grandparents.

Theater attendance, in my youth, was also said to *lead* to depraved minds but television was somehow considered different. Some of you who are a little older can remember when it was considered wrong, by some, to enter a pool hall because after all; thugs like Humphrey Bogart hung around in those places, . . . and ‘P’ rhymes with ‘T’ and that spells trouble, . . . right here in River City, ...but that musical was before your time.

Students of history will recall that for years the majority of the Christian Church in England outlawed the use of pipe organs in worship because they were used by the pagans in theatres.

More seriously, though, we all carry around some cultural baggage which labels activity acceptable or ‘un’ by the part of society in which we find our personal worth affirmed. There isn’t one of us here who doesn’t think some behavior would make us *appear* less-than-Christian if we were seen involved with it. We all have our *present* conclusions on moral issues that are not directly or intentionally discussed in the Bible. We don’t struggle with an issue unless someone else, we know, is involved so as to make us focus on it. Paul was very much aware of this.

Paul seemed to be saying that when we face an issue, that is not clearly dealt with in the Scriptural revelation, our basic approach should not be one of judgment toward other Christians. In facing these

“gray areas,” we should not act as if we are the only one around who has come to a conclusion on the issue. This is because in the end, each of us has to decide for ourselves and whatever is chosen will (in controversial areas) meet with the disapproval of others. In Romans,<sup>4</sup> Paul talks about being tolerant this way: “Accept, among you, the person who is weak in the faith but do not argue with them about their personal opinions. One person’s faith allows them to eat anything – but the person who is weak in the faith eats only vegetables. The person who will eat anything is not to despise the person who doesn’t – while the one who eats only vegetables is not to pass judgment on the one who eats anything, for God has accepted them.” *Easy to say, Paul, but hard to do.*

When our decisions about difficult issues involve only us, it is one thing, but things always start to heat up when that decision involves numbers of Christians. When we arrive at an opinion, we want everyone to think and act the same as us. Most of the time we are not secure enough to put up with someone else who disagrees, because there are precious few who are comfortable with differences of opinion – mostly because few people like themselves enough to accept themselves (and their own viewpoints) enough to tolerate those differing with them. It seems that people who argue to change other people’s opinions do so as if they are defending their own definition of their self worth – which they feel totally depends on everyone in the room supporting their interpretation of the world. Sometimes the people who are firing the most cannons are often the ones who have invested the least amount of time in thinking through the issue.

Back to the tension: are we supposed to live a double life, sometimes hiding, other times acting boldly? How do we know whether something is important enough to openly do– at the risk of experiencing the wrath of some other judging type of person? After all, Paul reminds us that we shouldn’t let our freedom depend on another’s conscience. Each of us have to live our own life.

One part of Paul’s teaching is tolerance on our part with respect to other’s right to disagree. Each of us, he is saying, should take into consideration where

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 14:1-3

the other person is, when we are doing something that may offend their ethical sensibilities. Sometimes we have to compromise by somewhat refraining from doing all that we feel free to do. We occasionally have to act a little more conservatively, simply because some people, who do not know us or the depth of our value system, *could* misinterpret something without some explanation or fuller context. When time and communication is limited, we have to exercise restraint for the sake of others. I think this is part of the wisdom of the ancient Biblical Wisdom literature<sup>5</sup> and the Chinese philosophy of the Golden Mean.

When the Pastoral Nominating Committee of our church took us out to dinner, I was the only one who ordered a glass of wine with the meal. I partially did that to send a message that I don't think it is a big deal so they should just be themselves as well. For all I knew, they were all alcoholics or they all personally didn't believe in having a glass of wine with dinner – or simply didn't feel like it at the time.

Other times, in more important matters, we're going to have to obviously go ahead with what we feel we have the freedom to do, for the sake of the issue and for the conscious raising of the other person. Time comes when we just can't let the other person (or even the majority of the social group) – not face up to the importance of dealing with what you have found to be a pressing issue of morality or justice. The answer is not to always be in the middle of the road – to never do anything. Already stated, we can't please everyone and certainly we're going to rub some the wrong way, simply because it is a different choice of action than what they would choose.

Public speakers are acutely aware of this. You can spend 25 hours in preparation of a talk and in the end, someone will come up and react negatively to only a few words of the over four thousand words spoken.

In summary, then, Paul is first of all teaching the concepts of freedom from the law and not living your life at the whim of everyone around you. At the same time, he is suggesting that we balance this freedom

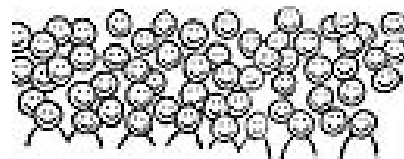
<sup>5</sup> Proverbs

with the sensitivity that comes from considering the weakness of others.

One implication of this, that is subtle, is that if we are ready to string someone up because they are doing something with which we disagree, maybe ... just maybe *we* may be the weaker brother or sister with whom the other Christian is having to be sensitive. What a stunning surprise it would be to realize that everyone else is tip toeing around *us* because of *our* weakness. But of course, it's always the other person who is the weaker one, right?

If you jumped into a time machine and went back to the Corinthian congregation, even after reading Paul's lengthy advice on this issue about the meat, would you be able to stand up and tell them what they should do about the meat that had been offered to idols? It would still be difficult because it involves a struggle – a tension between two polls – each of which has some truth to it. It's hard to create a process that isn't a win-lose situation.

I suggest **a process – rather than an easy answer – when it comes to most controversial issues**. This process is simply portrayed in the drawing you see here in print. I don't think this is an all-inclusive scheme for facing controversial decisions but I do think it may be a start.



Those for whom it is not an issue



Those for whom it is an issue



You

First of all it is important to sit ourselves down and take a look at the groups of people involved in an issue. On a scale of one to ten, how strong would you judge the emotions to be on the different sides of the issue. Remember, whether it involves buying meat offered to an idol, or a church social group having spiked punch in its Fellowship Hall, you wouldn't be

talking about it unless some people had a strong and stated opinion about it. Conflict is frustrating and frustration produces anger. Remember, some of us wrongly tend to put our self-worth on the line when someone disagrees.

Secondly, it is useful, as you see in the drawings, to know more about the life-experiences of the groups of people involved in the issue. No matter what behavior around which the issue centers, people are standing with a formed opinion that has come from their experiences and reflection. But the discussion should center around *behavior*, not the *person*, because as soon as the person becomes the focus of the debate, you've lost all hope of a fair exchange.

First there is the “group” or individual who is involved in the specific behavior under question. Secondly, there is the majority of people in the church or group. Sometimes in a group there may even be a vote and you pretty much know what the majority think.

The third group relating to an issue are those who are the so-called “weak” Christians who apparently would just not be able to put things together in the way that other Christians can. Can you determine if there are some of these people requiring extra sensitivity?

And fourthly, there are those who are not in either of the two groups you're facing and who are out in society and not involved with the issue. Those are the people who would see or hear about the behavior being discussed and who are not really effected by it.

Lastly, which group are you in? Are you the one whose behavior is at the center of the discussion? I think that once we take the time to realize the different groups and the emotional force these groups and people have on an issue, we are more able to proceed to look at an issue fairly.

Once we are mindful of these things, the more demanding work involved in conflict resolution begins. Question ❶ is: **What is the theological or religious thinking of each of these groups on the issue?** Perhaps a group you're not in has already thought through the issue and happens to have arrived at a different place than you. Perhaps *they* have invested many more hours in studying the issue than

you have and maybe they have taken into consideration some things about which you have never come across. Or perhaps *you* are further along in dealing with the issue than one or more of the groups with which you're dealing.

Question ❷ is: **How do each of these groups view the behavior in terms of justice *from their own values standpoint*?** A person brought up in a oppressed environment is going to view an issue differently than one who has had a relatively easy life with a lot of power to choose the course for their life.

Question ❸ is: **If you could empathize with each of these people, how would they be thinking in a compassionate way about those (whom they believe to be affected by the issue)?** Imagine, taking the time to think about the issue from the standpoint of each of the other differing groups – before we even start to talk about a disputed behavior. Imagine going through the work of trying to empathize with all the characters before you even say a word.

There will always be people around who are toward either poll on an issue. There will always be legalists who want us to think that we can never be good enough and that life is a chore through which to work.

There will always be those who claim that this kind of moral work is oppressive and that life should be simple and all moral questions should be free of struggle and study. And on the other hand, there will always be people who just want to “do their own thing” – being limited only by what they feel would hurt others.

But Christianity offers an alternative in the middle ground. It says that God loves us with the intensity that we love our kids but that life is complex and in order to grow, work and struggle is involved.

I lift up to you this principle: “Be not conformed and shaped by this world but be transformed – by the renewing of your mind – so that you can pursue what is the good, acceptable and perfect will of God.”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus never said that life is going to be easy. He clearly taught that life is difficult and complex. But He also said that He is with us in our struggles.

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 12

Do others sense our empathy with them and our willingness to discipline in our struggle through complex issues; . . . or do we think that others will know we are Christians by “how right” we are?

It’s really the case that others will know we are Christians by our love – which is tempered by compassion, empathy and tolerance – and a genuine concern for where others might be in their struggles through their own faith journey? ■