

1 Corinthians 8-10
“How to be a people pleaser”
Notes from a Sermon Preached at Christ Church Liverpool

- Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.
- No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.
- Everyone charged with a criminal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law.
- Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
- Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.
- Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
- Everyone has the right to a nationality.
- Men and women of full age have the right to marry and to found a family.
- Everyone has the right to own property alone and in association with others.
- Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.
- Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country.
- Everyone has the right to equal pay for equal work.
- Everyone has the right to rest and leisure.
- Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.
- Everyone has the right to education.

These, as you may recognise, are some of the key provisions of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, approved by the UN General Assembly on 10th December 1948.

And, whatever we think of the United Nations, I'm pretty sure that most of us would agree that these are things that people throughout the world ought reasonably to be able to expect in their lives.

Mind you it's worth noting that the countries appointed by the UN to its commission on human rights to protect these valuable rights for us include those bastions of democratic good governance Sudan, Syria and Cuba and that the whole thing is chaired by Libya!

Of course the idea of declarations of human rights wasn't at all new back in 1948.

It was the French and the Americans (two nations closer in many ways than either of their citizens would probably care to admit at the moment) over 200 years ago who started putting declarations of human rights in their national constitutions.

In Britain we got started a little earlier with Magna Carta back in 1215 – but that was really only about the rights of people with titles not always to have to do what the king told them!

But well over 1,000 years before that both Roman and Greek thinkers were deeply concerned about rights – especially about the rights of citizens of those two great empires.

So it's not at all surprising that the Corinthian Christians were, like millions of other human beings, before and since, extremely interested in thinking about their rights. Not merely their rights as citizens (or in many cases slaves) of the Roman Empire. But in their rights as citizens of the kingdom of God – their Christian rights if you like.

The Corinthians thought they were a pretty clever bunch of Christians. And they had directed all their powers of giftedness to pondering the teachings of the Lord Jesus and of the whole of the Scriptures on the matter of their rights – particularly on the matter of their freedom, v1, to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols.

It is fairly certain that, apart from meat slaughtered Kosher for the Jewish community, almost every single steak, packet of mince or chicken drumstick that you could have eaten in Corinth would, have been sacrificed in a ritual involving a pagan temple.

Whether it was an everyday lamb chop in the marketplace, a nice pork fillet in a friend's house or an extravagant beef Wellington at a trade guild dinner held in a restaurant adjoining the temple of a Greek or Roman god your meat would have been offered to an idol.

But it was all OK. Because the Corinthians had looked into it. And they had concluded that Christians were free to eat anything that they wanted.

Not only that but some of them at least were completely confident that idols were nothing but pieces of wood and stone and that therefore it could do no harm at all to eat meat which had been offered to them.

They knew, v4, *that an idol is nothing at all in the world.*

So that was that then. Eat what you like and no worries!

Well as you'll have gathered from the fact that Paul's answer to them takes up three whole chapters of this letter it wasn't quite that simple.

Because in fact the Corinthians had completely misunderstood not only the specific issue of whether or not one should eat meat sacrificed to idols.

Even more fundamentally they had misunderstood the whole point of Christian rights and freedoms.

Their misunderstanding was so basic that this group of "freedom fighters" is leading themselves, other people in the church and the pagans they live amongst towards, not away from, God's judgement.

A key part of the problem is that the Corinthians have become obsessed with knowledge.

So Paul spells out in v1-3 that...

1 Love, not knowledge, marks a Christian (8:1-3)

"We all possess knowledge" is probably another of the Corinthians slogans that we have seen a few of during the last few weeks.

Well Paul agrees, v1. Every Christian does have knowledge – about what God has done, who he is and what he finds pleasing or not.

In fact in ch 12 Paul goes even further and says that knowledge is a spiritual gift. So all Christians possess knowledge – and some Christians have an additional gift of knowledge given by God himself.

But Paul says, just because the Corinthians all have knowledge, and even if some of them are additionally gifted by the Holy Spirit with

particular knowledge, does not mean that they have arrived as spiritual Christian people.

Because you need to consider the effect of knowledge. On its own all knowledge does, v1, is puff people up.

If the essence of your Christian life is believing that you are spiritually gifted with knowledge and discernment I will not help and encourage other Christians, which is what God's gifts are meant to be used for.

It will divide you. It will cause some people to think of themselves as more spiritual than others. It will puff them up.

So the person whose Christian life, v2, is characterised mostly by what he knows, is, in fact, a failure. Because the person for whom the most important thing in life is what he knows does not yet know as he ought to know.

In other words if someone is really knowledgeable he would know that being knowledgeable is really that important.

What matters is love. Love builds up. The man or woman who loves God is known by God.

The definition of the spiritual person is not that they know much about God and what he says. It is that they love God and so build up his people.

What does that have to say to us in a church which is stuffed to the rafters with clever people, with graduates and university students, with Doctors and lawyers and Christian workers?

Do we like to think we possess lots of knowledge – which puffs up. Or lots of love – which builds up.

But what, you may be wondering, does all that have to do with eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols?

Well Paul explains in the verses that follow...

2 Knowledge without love is inadequate (8:4-13 & 10:14-22)

The Corinthians were not wrong about the basic facts:

An idol, v4, is nothing at all in the world.

And Paul elaborates in his agreement with their basic view:

V5-6. But that does not mean, Paul says, that the Corinthians can just all go ahead and eat meat anytime, anywhere.

The problem is that they haven't thought through what they know in the light of love.

Their knowledge on its own is accurate as far as it goes – but it's not adequate. If only they thought through their knowledge in the light of love they would see that they can't just eat wherever and whenever they like for two reasons:

a) You can't love God *and* eat with demons (10:18-22)

The idols that these slabs of meat have been laid in front of may have been nothing more than lumps of wood and stone.

But they were part of a whole pagan religious system that was completely opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Bible.

A religious system, like every religious system that is not Biblical Christianity, whose ultimate source is no one other than Satan and his servants.

If you are a Christian, Paul says, you simply cannot participate in the religious ceremonies of pagan temples and say that it doesn't matter because there is no power in them.

Behind these dumb idols is the devil himself and to participate in their feasts is to align yourself with religions that spring from hell not from heaven.

b) You can't love other Christians *and* lead them astray (8:7-13)

And even if the Corinthian Christian, who knows that this meat is not dangerous just because it has been laid in front of a stupid carved block of wood, is eating it not as part of a pagan celebration but in the privacy of his own home, still his rights are not the only consideration.

Because not every Christian is quite so confident, v7.

Some Christians are still so messed up by their pagan backgrounds that they can't get their incisors into a piece of Peking duck without thinking of it as contaminated by the idol it was offered to first.

Their tender conscience tells them that they shouldn't be eating this.

And if that's what their conscience tells them then they shouldn't be eating it – Paul wants Christians to listen to their conscience – not because it's always right – clearly in this case the weak man's conscience is actually wrong.

But we should always listen to our conscience because, in the end, it is better not to do some things that are actually OK because our conscience is too tender, than it is to do things that are sinful because we have learned to ride roughshod over our conscience and dull its warnings.

So if a Christian sees others flaunting their freedom to eat this meat they may be encouraged to do the same, v10.

And the result of this could be, v11, that the weak Christian is led away from doing what his conscience tells him so that he ends up engaging in behaviour that really is immoral.

Being led by the example of other Christians to do something which is not wrong in itself could, in the end, lead to someone turning away from the very gospel message that can save them.

It's that serious.

For the knowledgeable and spiritual Corinthians to flaunt their freedom before every Christian they meet is not a sign of their great maturity. It is a mark of their lovelessness. And loveless Christians are never mature.

Paul was willing to give up eating meat ever again if that would mean that other Christians would be helped.

Who are we like? Are we like the Corinthians – people who love our freedom so much that we want to use it even to the destruction of others?

Or are we like Paul – who loved his freedom so much that he could give up his rights for the good of others?

3 Know your rights – so you can give them up (9:19-23)

And this isn't just to do with eating meat sacrificed to idols in pagan temples.

Because Paul sees that the Corinthians, and us, are in vital need of understanding the relationship between our Christian freedom

and our obligations to God and others in every area of life.

In chapter 9 Paul gives us an extended example of the way in which he understands the relationship between his rights as a Christian man and his role, his calling as a messenger of the good news of Jesus.

We don't have time to look at the whole chapter now but let's look at v19-23 which are, in many ways, a summary of Paul's attitude to Christian freedom.

V19-23. Have you ever worked with someone who will do anything to avoid conflict?

The kind of person who, when the office is split over some issue will say to the people on one side "well absolutely – I really don't see how anybody could argue with that"...

And to people on the other side "you know I think that your position is so reasonable that anyone who argues with it must be off their head."

We would often say, wouldn't we, that someone like that is trying to be "all things to all men". That they are seeking to please and satisfy others without regard for any principles or consistency.

That's how we use the phrase "all things to all men" – *as an insult*. But for Paul it's not an insult – it's a badge of honour. V22: "*I have become all things to all men.*"

That doesn't mean that Paul is a spineless man without any principles at all! What it means, v19, is that though Paul is free (that word again) and belongs to no man he makes himself a slave to men, to win as many as possible.

Paul knows his rights as a Christian. He knows, v20, that he is not obliged by Christ to eat Kosher food or obey the Sabbath.

But he is willing to forego those rights if it provides him with opportunities to share the gospel with Jewish people. He becomes like one under the law to win those under law.

You see for Paul his rights matter. He is clear what they are and he thinks it is important for Christians to understand the freedom they have in the gospel.

But one of the key reasons WHY it is important is not so Christians can exercise their rights but so that they can voluntarily

give them up to serve a higher purpose – the purpose of the gospel.

Paul becomes all things to all men not so everyone will think he's wonderful but. V22, *so that by all possible means I might save some.*

Obviously Paul knows that salvation is God's work. But he also knows that he must do everything he can not to put any stumbling block in the way of people from all sorts of different backgrounds coming to hear and believe the Christian message.

But surely, you might object, the Bible says we shouldn't be about people pleasing – we should be pleasing God.

So shouldn't we just get on with doing what we know we are free to do as Christians and not worry at all what anybody else thinks?

Well not quite. Because the Bible doesn't simply say we should please God not other people.

What the Bible teaches is that where we have a choice between obeying God and making others happy we must, at all costs, obey God – in that sense no Christian is to be a people pleaser. If it will offend your colleagues that you won't join in some activity in the office that you think is ethically unacceptable for a Christian – say, the lottery syndicate or the gossip about someone who is off on long term sick leave. In that case you mustn't give a monkey's what they think and just do what you know to be right.

But where there is a choice between making other people happy and pleasing yourself Paul is quite clear that we must be people pleasers.

I am sure it gave Paul no joy whatsoever to go back to eating kosher food and keeping the Sabbath – in fact I'm sure it just painfully reminded him of a way of life he had turned his back on when he realised it was, ultimately, bankrupt and godless.

But he did it anyway because it was a way to bring the gospel to people.

So what about us?

Are we people who know our rights – so we give them up for the sake of our calling to be ministers, sharers of the good news of Jesus?

It is remarkably easy for us to delude ourselves into thinking that we are pleasing

God by living out our Christian freedoms and not conforming to people's expectations. When in fact all we are doing is pleasing ourselves.

4 Loving Christians seek the good of others (10:23-33)

In the end the Corinthians attitude to eating meat offered to idols flowed from the same misconception as their attitude to sex – everything, they said, is permissible.

But, Paul says, not everything is constructive.

And that, in the end, is a much more important question for the Christian to ask.

Not, "am I allowed to do this." But "is this thing good and constructive?"

In practice, for the Corinthians, that meant that they were free to eat whatever they brought in the market with thanksgiving as they recognised that all the good material things in the world come from and belong to God.

And it meant being free to eat out in the homes of pagan friends unless the way the friend presents the meal explicitly ties it in with their false religious beliefs.

But most of all, v31, it meant completely changing the kind of questions that they asked about their lives.

They were no longer to be driven by thinking principally about their rights. They were to reject the rights and freedoms culture of their day. And they were to ask one question: does this glorify God?

And the answer to that question was to be determined by two other questions:

- Does it cause other people to stumble – either Christian or not?
- Does it make it harder for people to be saved?

And if the answer to either of those questions was yes then the activity cannot be said to glorify God.

So often in the Christian life we ask the wrong questions. We want to know if it is our right to do something or not. We want to know about the boundaries of our freedom so that we can push at them and indulge our sinful natures while still calling ourselves Christian.

- We want to know: exactly how out of control must we be before we can be described as drunk and therefore behaving unchristianly.
- We want to know how physical we can be with our girlfriend before we cross "the line" into sin.
- We want to know whether it is Ok to cold shoulder someone we don't like in our flat, corridor, course, ward or office as long as we don't actually hate them or say anything rude.
- We want to know how often we can be absent from church meetings on a Sunday or housegroups before someone starts asking questions about whether we are doing all-right.
- We want to know how much of our cultural preferences and home comforts we can retain if we go on mission to another culture.

Well whenever we ask those kinds of questions – and I'm sure we all do and that it's not just me – we have failed to do what Paul tells us to do.

Whenever we ask those kind of questions we have failed to submit our rights to our calling.

We have failed to see that what matters ultimately is not that I exercise my freedoms, even though those freedoms are God given, but that seek the good of others and the glory of God.

My rights and freedoms as a Christian are myriad.

But none of them are as important as my calling: to build up the church of God and share the message of Jesus with those yet in God's family.

So all my rights must, if necessary, be submitted to that calling.

Not a calling for an elite few but for every Christian.

There are three purpose statements in these chapters; three things that focus Paul's life and shape his behaviour and principles.

If we share those purposes we will live lives that ask different questions to the world around us.

Not because we are legalists or moralists. But because we believe in the free gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ and we want all people to know that grace.

- 8:13 Paul lives so that I will not cause my brother to fall.
- 9:23 Paul lives so that by all possible means he may save some.
- 10:33 Paul seeks not his own good but the good of others so that they may be saved.

May we live likewise.

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October 2004