

God's Heart for the Nations
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Lesson 18
Part 1. Cultural Issues & Syncretism

Introduction

The meeting of the apostles in Jerusalem teaches us that conversion to Christ suffices, whatever culture or religion we come from. We convert to Christ only, not to a certain church or form of Christianity. Unfortunately, in church history this rule has been trespassed against very often.

Missionaries must understand that there is a huge distinction between theological and cultural issues. Issues of biblical, theological principle should be maintained strictly, whereas issues of secondary, cultural matters should serve as exercises of love. It is good to realize that people's theology changes long before their cultural habits change.

About syncretism we learn that the New Testament regards it as religious idolatry. Syncretism is a mix of truth and lies that make it a dangerous deception. It is one of Satan's vilest tactics to deceive the church. Syncretism can have many, even quite modern-looking appearances. It thrives well on a bed of carnal, egotistic Christianity, and can only be defeated successfully by the cross of Christ.

Scripture reference

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the *Pharisees* stood up and said, "The *Gentiles* must be *circumcised* and required to *obey the law of Moses*." ... James spoke up ... "It is my judgment ... that we should *not make it difficult for the Gentiles* who are turning to God ..." (Acts 15:5,14,19).

The story

Shortly after the stormy meeting in Antioch, a meeting was held by the leadership of the Jerusalem church that would enter history as 'the Jerusalem Council'. Paul and Barnabas attended as representatives of the church in Antioch, but in fact they were ambassadors of all other churches that they had planted in the countries abroad. There was in essence only one dominating question: Are people saved by grace, and through faith in Jesus Christ alone, or are they required to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses as well?

A long debate took place after which Peter, who had become more determined than ever after Paul's reprimand in Antioch, spoke up in favor of Paul's 'Christ-only' theology. He had clearly taken the time, forced through the present circumstances and his own failures, to think through the issues thoroughly. James, the Lord's half-brother, backed him up and so agreement was reached. The decision was made that a letter would be written to all churches, in which it was stated that 'it should not be made difficult for the Gentiles to receive Christ'. In other words, adherence to Jewish laws and customs would *not* be demanded of gentile converts to Christ. One conversion, to *Christ* was sufficient;

conversion to *Judaism* as only accepted form of Christianity was abolished. *Single* conversion was enough; *double* conversion was rejected.

Scripture reference

He came to ... Lystra, where a disciple named *Timothy* lived ... whose father was a Greek ... *Paul* wanted to take him along on the journey, so he *circumcised him* because of the Jews who lived in that area, *for they all knew that his father was a Greek* (Acts 16:1,3).

The story, continued

Paul and Silas went to South Galatia again and one of the first people they visited was Timothy. Paul had been right in his assessment: Timothy was willing and ready to join the team. Paul made sure that this time he had a new missionary who would *not* be put off by the suffering the ministry entailed. Timothy was well aware of Paul's suffering the first time he had come to Lystra and Paul may have warned the newcomer, using Mark's story of desertion. Soon Timothy would see his two colleagues suffer for the gospel.

Hardly had that lesson sunk into the heart of the new candidate, when his new mentor came up with the first challenge. Timothy needed to be circumcised because his father was a Greek. The team would be ministering not only to Gentiles – if that were the case circumcision would be unnecessary – but to Jews as well. For many Jews Christ was already a stumbling block, and Paul didn't want to make things worse by adding other stumbling blocks. However, he hadn't made this a rule. He had already traveled with another man of Greek descent, Titus, whom he had not circumcised. Paul explained to Timothy why *he* needed to be circumcised, and why for *Titus* this was not necessary.

And so Paul told Timothy about his visit, with Barnabas, to the Jerusalem apostles, some years before, not long before he had met Timothy for the first time. He told how he had explained to them his way of teaching the Gentiles, and about the controversy between salvation through faith in Christ alone, and that of people being required to keep the Law and be circumcised. This was just like it was in the Galatian churches, where Timothy came from, and which had prompted Paul to write his letter to them. Around the same time, some legalistic Pharisees had come from Jerusalem to Antioch, trying to insert the same wrong teaching there, and the big uproar that this caused at the time.

Scripture reference

I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I ... set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles ... Yet *not even Titus* ... was *compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek* (Gal. 2:1-3).

The story, continued

The apostles in Jerusalem had no problems with Paul's Christ-only theology. They understood very well, that circumcision could add nothing to Christ's perfect work. And because their theologies were in harmony, they did not demand that Titus should be circumcised.

In case of the Jews *Paul's team* would be ministering to, things were different. Firstly, those Jews wouldn't have the same understanding of and trust in Christ that the apostles had. Then, they had just come to faith. They were not leaders in the church and lacked maturity. Therefore Paul could not expect from them the spiritual insight, necessary to discard old covenant teachings. They needed to grow out of that system. This took time for the apostles themselves. Paul reminded Timothy of the story about Peter and Cornelius. The apostles were Jews by birth, but their *theology* became Christian long before their *culture* changed likewise. The Jews *Paul and his team* would be evangelizing, should not be put off by *Timothy's* Gentile *culture* before *their theology* could change, because otherwise it wouldn't.' Timothy understood . Somehow.

Then he instructed Timothy about syncretism, explaining that one of the smartest tricks of the enemy is to mix lies into the doctrine of truth, so that what appears to be true, remains only half true at best and therefore becomes more dangerous than a blatant lie. Such mixes of truth and lie are called 'syncretism', which means literally: something that is added to Christianity. That 'something' is distinctly *not* Christian. For instance, when one serves Christ and yet sacrifices to idols, he adds something to his Christianity that is not of Christ; in fact it is anti-Christian. Paul had seen it in the churches of Galatia, as soon as they had added Mosaic legalism and circumcision to their service of Christ. The reverse is true too. When former Gentiles *retain* certain religious rituals from their past after coming to Christ, it can also be called syncretism.

Comment

Had the church in later ages abided by this decision, to just preach the gospel and not cultural forms as well, much damage to God's Kingdom could have been avoided. The *Church of Rome* now became the first norm, presenting a Christianity with uniform teaching, liturgy, habits and language, foreign to the world where it was preached.

The *Protestants* made similar mistakes: the Gospel was preached in many parts of the world, but almost exclusively dressed in a western-cultural garment. Their churches, organs, liturgy, hymnals and clerical robes look the same the world over – as is the case with the Roman Catholics.

Many *Evangelicals* made the same mistake by teaching their styles of worship, democracy, leadership and ministerial ethos as forms, foreign to the mission fields they served.

They all wrapped the Gospel in forms which became just as much 'gospel' as the Gospel itself. Throughout church history, double conversion as discussed and *disagreed* with in Jerusalem, was the rule rather than the exception. It was only in the 2nd half of the 20th century that the beginning of indigenous forms of worship and theology became visible in parts of the Church in the Developing World.

We must learn to distinguish between biblical non-negotiable doctrines, such as faith in Christ for salvation, or the necessity of Christ's blood-shedding for our forgiveness on the one hand, and biblical non-essentials, such as whether a woman should wear a hat in church or whether men should have short hair. The latter two issues are of a *cultural* nature, whereas the former two are of a *supra-cultural* nature. The word of God in essence stands *above* culture but has several *culture-related expressions*. The *essence* of course can not be tampered with, but culturally related expressions can not be elevated as norms for all times and places. It is of great importance to learn to distinguish between the two, and never preach biblical culture-related expressions as if they were biblical essential doctrine.

The result of long centuries in which double conversion was practiced as norm produced a syncretistic church: biblical Christianity was mixed with pagan culture. Foreign and local world-views were mixed; problems like demon-possession, sickness and polygamy were addressed on a secular rather than on a biblical basis. The result was that Christianity became an optional extra, a thin veneer over traditional beliefs. A church, thus weakened by conflicting worldviews failed to make Jesus Lord of all, failed to transform converts into disciples and largely failed in cross-cultural missionary outreach. In places where Christianity became biblically indigenous through revival and spiritual renewal, the church regained her biblical fervor to reach the nations. Indigenous mission movements, as we see them for instance in Nigeria, Ethiopia and China – initiated in the early seventies of the 20th century – prove this.

For Paul and the apostles in Jerusalem, circumcision or no-circumcision had nothing to do with salvation. Salvation was by faith in the work of Christ alone, regardless of the presence or absence of a piece of skin. Only at the moment that others disagreed and made that piece of skin a *condition* without which there could be no salvation, did it become a matter of theology. In issues of *theology* Paul would not budge; he never departed from his theological principles and defended them as matters of life and death – which in fact they were.

Scripture reference

Though I am free and belong to no man, *I make myself a slave to everyone*, to win as many as possible ...To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. *I have become all things to all men* so that by all possible means I might save some (1 Cor. 9:19,22).

Comment, continued

It was totally different with matters of *culture*. There Paul would always try to meet people where they were, adapt and adjust, making sure that he would not offend the 'weak', as he calls them. To understand Paul's view of freedom we must recognize that he was so free that, unless a theological issue was at stake, he could surrender his freedom to facilitate the spread of the Gospel. He was willing to be a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks. Truly free persons are only free when they can surrender their freedom out of love for the weak.

For Christians in the 21st century total different issues may be at stake. We must learn to distinguish between core issues of biblical doctrine and secondary issues, maybe of cultural nature. The first can not be trifled with and with regard to the second, people of other cultures should be accommodated to the best of our knowledge. The first is a matter of principle and conscience; the second should be an exercise in love.

Scripture reference

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that *if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law (Gal. 5:1-3).*

Comment, continued

In Galatians five we see Paul's plea against reverting back to circumcision as an unnecessary addition to being saved by grace through faith. Nowadays we see the relevance of his statements, when we watch the syncretistic belief forms that we often see in the church of the Developing World. The following parallels become visible:

Being saved through faith in Christ is the 'big prize' in life: the permanent delivery from spiritual poverty. Jesus called it 'the pearl of great value'. After obtaining His salvation, complete as it is, no addition is necessary. Nobody who has become a billionaire will want to earn a few more pennies through hard labor, to add to his tremendous wealth.

Even more strongly, Paul says that he who has himself circumcised as condition for salvation alienates himself from Christ to such an extent, that Christ is of no value to him at all. Such a person has fallen away from grace. In other words: by trying to bring in your own pennies, you lose your fortune.

The little yeast that works through the whole batch of dough in this context, means that mixing human works into the process of divine salvation will eventually spoil that salvation entirely. People who cause such confusion will pay the penalty for advocating lies.

In conclusion we can say that if any action is undertaken to appease gods, to venerate ancestors, to seek protection from shamans, to seek physical healing or spiritual deliverance outside Christ, to gain power or influence over people, to gain fertility to bear children, to manipulate weather conditions and to receive mediation between himself and God, all fall under the heading of syncretism. Syncretism therefore, is a form of idolatry. All the above goes hand in hand with fear for the revenge or other actions of evil spirits.

The indescribable gift of God – Christ, and Him crucified – contains the solution to all the above-listed practices which are just pathetic man-made ways to help God along in saving us. Adding 'help' to God's solution by any other means is an insult to Him that He

will not tolerate. His only way of salvation is Christ. Either we have Christ alone or we have nothing at all. In the last part of Galatians five we learn how to live the Christian life through the Holy Spirit, where we learn the difference between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit.

Discussion & dialogue

Discuss what 'missionary non-essentials' the Gospel was wrapped in, when it first came to your country, and in what ways that may still be visible today

What 'missionary non-essentials' are you, or is your church in the danger of exporting to the mission fields, along with the essential Gospel message?

Explain the difference between 'cultural' and 'supra-cultural' and state which one missionaries should NOT export to their mission fields

As an exercise, try to assess what sort of comparable issues you will run into, when you would minister to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists or adherents of folk religions

Discuss what forms of syncretism you have come across and explain what biblical truth you have used to combat it

Explain how theme five features in this story (think about forms of syncretism)

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Lesson 18

Part 2. To Europe!

Introduction

Sometimes the Spirit hinders lesser efforts to accomplish greater ones. In case least-expected directions are needed, He will reveal those clearly. It is important that the whole team is in unity about such new guidance. We also see that the main leaders often receive the main beatings, and when these have to flee, his helpers take over from him. It is important that after pioneer evangelism, church planting and discipling follow. We may feel encouraged, that not even Paul enjoyed the same amount of successful ministry everywhere, and that he despaired sometimes about whether his work would be fruitful.

Scripture reference

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit

of Jesus *would not allow them* to ... During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him “Come over and help us...” (Acts 16:6-9).

The story

After Paul had instructed Timothy of many more things he needed to know, the four men traveled on, but wherever they wanted to enter, they felt the Holy Spirit say ‘No’ all the time. That was strange, because there was no Christian presence in those areas, apart from the Jews who had believed in Jesus during the first day of Pentecost, seventeen years earlier in Jerusalem. It was only later that the team understood why the Spirit had not given them permission to evangelize those areas.

After having arrived at the harbor city of Troas, Paul had a dream that directed the team to Europe. Total new territory, but he could understand its strategic importance. The first main city there was Philippi, situated at the great Roman trade route from west to east, the Via Egnatia, connecting it with the next major city of Thessalonica. And so they booked passage on a boat to Europe.

A few days later they reached Philippi, where they ministered to Lydia and her household, and cast out a demon from a girl. That landed them in prison after being flogged. They sang worship songs and an earthquake destroyed their prison, after which they led the whole jailer’s family to Christ. The next morning they decided to leave for Thessalonica to preach. But from there they even had to flee within three weeks, because the local Jews were opposing the team fiercely. The next port of call was Berea, where the people were much friendlier, until the Jews came from Thessalonica and stirred unbelieving Jews up against the team. Again Paul had to flee, but he left Silas and Timothy to disciple the new believers. Paul and Luke left for Athens.

A while later Paul sent for Timothy with the request to join him in Athens. Once the younger man arrived, Paul sent him to Thessalonica to see how the church there was doing. Paul and Luke then went to Corinth, where Silas joined them.

Scripture reference

So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. *We sent Timothy*, who is our brother and God’s fellow-worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith ... I sent to find out about your faith. *I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless* (1 Thess. 3:1,2,5).

The story, continued

Paul had not been very successful in Athens. Once in Corinth, after Timothy had come back from Thessalonica with good news, he wrote his first letter to that church, and a short while later a second one. Both spoke mainly about things concerning the end times. Meanwhile Paul had been ministering in Corinth, that melting pot of nations and cultures, with its disgusting immorality. There was a lot to do in Corinth. He received a vision of

the Lord, telling him not to fear anything because nobody would harm him, promising that many in the city would come to faith!

After about 1½ years Paul decided that it was time to see his ‘home-church’ again and traveled to Antioch via Ephesus. His second missionary journey had come to an end, but not for long. Five important cities in Greece had heard the Gospel. Now it was time to go back and consolidate the work in Asia Minor. Phrygia still needed to be reached. Galatia could use another visit. The work grew, and more workers needed to be recruited.

Comment

It is interesting to see how the Spirit of God can close doors for ministry that we think is important. He does not do that because they *are* unimportant, but because He wants to open *greater* doors for ministry of *more* significance and impact. We need to be careful that we trust His ‘no’ as much as His ‘yes’. With much work remaining in Asia Minor, nobody thought Europe. That is why the Holy Spirit was very specific in His communications. He also worked a wonderful unity among the team.

The main leader, Paul, received the guiding revelation, and paid for his obedience with suffering. In the next two cities he had to flee. This was not so bad, since he had colleagues with him who could stay behind to finish the job. In this way the ‘master’ did not do all the work, but was forced to leave some of the follow-up ministry to his ‘disciples’. Paul had wisely chosen to take other believers with him on his trips, and along the way turned them into genuine missionaries.

Paul concentrated mainly on pioneer-evangelism and although he did plant churches, churches were also planted by his associates. Although he did disciple new believers, it was often his group of co-workers who consolidated this work. Paul strongly supported their discipling ministry with his letters to the different churches.

Did Paul make mistakes in his Gospel presentation in Athens? Or was the spiritual ground unusually hard? We don’t know; who are we to judge? The fact remains that Paul’s fruit in Athens was less than elsewhere, whereas in the next city, Corinth, it was very fruitful again. All of us need to be reminded from time to time that our success in ministry is God’s blessing, rather than our correct methods – or even the lack of these.

Paul was human enough to suffer under lack of communication. We know from his letters that he prayed a lot for the believers in the places he visited, and like all of us, he needed to hear some good news, some answers to prayer. Means of communication were almost non-existent or unreliable. So he sent Timothy to Thessalonica to see how things went there. After that he exhaled a sigh of relief. Thank God he had Timothy. And Silas, and Luke. But he needed many more – and kept working at it, as we are about to see.

Discussion & dialogue

Describe how the Holy Spirit gave expression to God’s heart for the nations (theme nine) in the night vision that Paul received

Which other four themes of the ten feature in this story and how? (Answer is in the Teacher's Guide)

Discuss what happens, if pioneer evangelism is not followed by discipling and church planting



Lesson 18

Part 3. More Co-Workers

Introduction

Apart from the apostolic team in Jerusalem Paul's team grew from 2 to 12, and so the Holy Spirit brought balance between local and foreign ministry. Of 22 other workers only Demas fell away eventually. Today's church fails miserably in the recruitment of new missionaries. The church's spending pattern on international missions is pathetic. When this does not change, we won't see the Great Commission finished. So what can we learn from Paul's example, when we want to change this sad situation?

Scripture reference

Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by *Priscilla and Aquila* ... They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left *Priscilla and Aquila* ... *Apollos* ... was a great help to those who by grace had believed ... He sent ... *Erastus* to Macedonia ... (Acts 18:18,19,27; 19:22).

The story

Strange enough, it had all started with the 'desertion' of John Mark and the conflict between Paul and Barnabas that came from it. From that time, with the temporary disappearance of one would-be missionary, the band of missionaries grew steadily. The facts are almost hidden between the lines of Paul's missionary journey stories, but they're there nevertheless! First of all, *John Mark* was not lost for the mission field; he was just re-deployed under Barnabas' leadership. Paul had chosen *Silas* and together they recruited *Timothy*. Although we haven't heard from him for a while, we must not forget *Titus*, who had already worked with Paul before the latter started his first missionary journey with Barnabas and Mark. *Luke*, the silent witness and recorder of it all, has of course to be counted as a full-fledged missionary himself. The fruit of *his* missionary ministry throughout the ages would be of equal significance in comparison to that of his preaching colleagues. How many missionaries would Luke have recruited in centuries past, merely by writing his book of Acts? Only eternity will tell!

The next couple of co-workers were a Jewish/Christian couple that had been expelled from Rome by emperor Claudius. Their names were *Aquila and his wife Priscilla*. They

were tent-makers by profession, a trade that Paul had also learned in his young years. Paul worked side-by-side with them, first in their secular profession and later in ministry. When Paul left Corinth for Antioch, he traveled with this couple via Ephesus and left them there to minister. When he was in Antioch, these new colleagues in Ephesus met a believing Jew from Alexandria. His name was *Apollos*. He knew the Scriptures well, had the gift of teaching and was good at defending the Christian faith. Aquila and Priscilla had no trouble recognizing that Apollos would be an asset to 'St. Paul's World Missions Team'. They invited him into their home and told him all about Paul and his teaching, which enriched Apollos greatly.

Scripture reference

Greet *Andronicus and Junia*, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are *outstanding among the apostles* ... Greet *Urbanus*, our *fellow-worker* ... (Rom. 16:7,9).

When Paul is in Ephesus, having started his third missionary journey, he turns out to have trained another co-worker, *Erastus*, whom he later sends on a mission trip to Greece with Timothy. Other people that worked with Paul, and who he himself called 'apostles', were Andronicus and his wife Junia who were Jews from Corinth, and Epaphroditus from Philippi. It doesn't stop there, because also the ones who were not called 'apostles' played their role as brothers, co-workers and deacons. Their names have been recorded: Achaicus, Apphia, Archippus, Aristarchus, Clement, Demas, Euodia, Syntyche, Fortunatus, Justus, Mary, Onesimus, Persis, Phoebe, Quartus, Sosthenes, Stephanas, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Urbanus. Paul calls them 'fellow-slaves', 'partners', 'toilers', 'fellow-soldiers' and 'fellow-prisoners'.

Is it not beautiful to realize that your name and mine plus hundreds of thousands of others, have been added to that list in the mean time? It is written in one of God's books and will be opened when the time has come to receive our reward!

Comment

It is really hard to miss the message here. Paul recruited co-workers *all the time, throughout his whole career*. He chose them in dialogue with the Holy Spirit's vocation on people's lives, which he recognized. He was an inspiring example to them, never demanding a price from them that he was not willing to pay himself. He showed them how he worked, then watched them do the same work and eventually sent them out on their own, just like Jesus had done it. We know of nobody else in the original apostolic team of twelve, who also recruited and trained new missionaries.

Isn't it weird, that at the time that Paul and Barnabas set out on their first missionary journey, there were twelve apostles to serve a population of three million Jews – and just two for all the rest of the world?!

That situation appears to be symptomatic of today's church practice. Nowadays the vast majority of the church does almost nothing about local evangelism and even less about cross-cultural missions.

The missionaries that are on the field perform their ministerial tasks, almost to the total exclusion of recruiting and training their own disciples to become their successors in world missions. Worldwide, the church's financial spending pattern shows the pathetic little sum of less than one percent of its income being used to evangelize the unreached people groups in the world.

If the church continues like that, it will be a long time before the Great Commission will be finished. Let's go back to the missionary methods, as exemplified by both Jesus and Paul, if we want to see true progress being made in world missions.

Themes three and four feature dominantly in this chapter.

Discussion & dialogue

Discuss with your study group the plans YOU have made – in addition to your own ministry – to select, train and send new missionaries to areas where the Gospel has not yet been made available. If you never made such plans, do it as soon as possible!



Lesson 18

Part 4. Meat, Idols & Ancestors

Introduction

Eating meat, sacrificed to idols can *not* demonize believers automatically. Meat, sacrificed to idols, should not be eaten in pagan temples, because Christians should avoid table-fellowship with idol-worshipers. One's conscience should either *permit* or *forbid* the eating of such meat. Conscience's *permission* can only come by *faith* – that it does not harm. Conscience's *forbidding* comes from *fear* that it will harm somehow. *Strong* consciences should always respect and honor the *weaker* ones.

Scripture reference

Be careful, however, that the exercise of *your freedom* does not become a *stumbling-block to the weak* ... When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ (1 Cor. 8:9,12).

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and *the table of demons* (1 Cor. 10:21).

The story

During his third missionary journey Paul spent a bit over two years in Ephesus. In this period he wrote to the church in Corinth. We will look at some issues that played a role there, which he addressed in his first letter. One is about the practice of sacrificing meat to idols, which is then sold in the market place, or offered for consumption in the eating

establishments that were attached to the idol temples. Could Christians eat such meat with a clean conscience or not? That was the big question, and Paul spends considerable space in his letter to address that issue.

Missionaries on the field may encounter practices where meat, if not sacrificed to idols, may have been sacrificed to ancestors. Young Christians on these mission fields may then encounter similar problems to those the Corinthians had. The *two issues* Paul addresses are *whether eating such meat is permissible or not* and *how this affects the conscience of the believers*. The *first* has less relevance in the world outside the context of traditional religions, but the *second* is of relevance in the whole Christian world and applies more widely than the first, because our consciences monitor and judge our Christian walk.

Comment

When we look at the *first*, it seems as if there is a contradiction between Paul permitting it on one hand, and forbidding it on the other. On the *one hand* he seems to say that it doesn't really matter, because food doesn't change when it is offered to idols and that it can be eaten without asking questions. The origin of meat doesn't have to be questioned. On the *other hand* he seems to forbid it when he says that, because the meat has been sacrificed to demons, it is not good for believers to have fellowship with demons. So, how are we to understand these seeming contradictions?

The solution is found in the term 'the table of the demons'. Although we might not have expected this, it has everything to do with location. The table of the demons was found in pagan temples, where meat was eaten in idolatrous surroundings, in fellowship with idolatrous people. This is where the core of Paul's warning lies: don't go to *those places* and don't mingle with *those people*. **There is no such magical thing as spiritual contamination by demons, just through eating meat**, sacrificed to them. That is, if you are able to eat it *outside those places* (for instance at home) *without being condemned by your conscience*.

Scripture reference

But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23).

Comment, continued

About the *second* point Paul explains that people with *weak consciences* cannot eat such meat without feeling guilty. If that is the case they shouldn't do it, for what is not done by faith, with a guilty conscience, is sin. If on the other hand *your conscience allows you* to eat meat, offered to idols *outside the place of those idols*, there is nothing against it.

BUT if somebody with a weaker conscience *than yours* warns you, then you should not violate *that person's conscience* by exercising your freedom. People with *stronger* consciences should honor those with *weaker* consciences, whatever the issue is.

It would be simple, if the matter ended here, but it does not. There are many things among Christians that can present a bone of contention. We only have to think about watching TV, going to the cinema, women using make-up or wearing jewelry, certain ways of dressing, and the use of alcohol or tobacco.

These potential stumbling blocks have made God's people fight and destroy each other. Many other issues could be mentioned, most of which depend on culture, habit and attitude.

Some things, acts or behavior of certain Christians offend other Christians. The problem comes in when general laws are made by some, to be kept by (all) others – and if they don't, they don't belong to 'our' faith. *We* feel then free to gossip about *them*, either with regard to their presumed carnality or their supposed legalism.

It is incredibly sad to *know* that a worldwide war for the salvation of the nations has to be fought against the devil, and then to *see* that Christians largely fight each other. Once we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. The question whether you were right in these trivial issues will *not* be asked. The question that *will* be asked is 'What did *you* do to finish the Great Commission? Did you bury your talents in the soil of discussion, or did you exploit them in the toil for the Kingdom?'

Discussion & dialogue

Discuss what challenges, similar to the ones Paul mentions, are found in your church, denomination, or on the mission field you intend to serve – and how they can be addressed in a biblical, spiritually mature way

Which four themes of the ten feature in this story and how? (Answer is in the Teacher's Guide)

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