

Week of July 15-21

BELLOWS BELIEVERS

Scripture Reading: Read 1 Corinthians 8

Paul has two primary purposes in mind for writing 1 Corinthians. The 1st purpose we explored in the devotional on chapter 4 – to respond to a report of problems in the church. Paul's 2nd purpose was to respond to a letter he had received containing doctrinal questions: “*Now for the matters you wrote about...*” (7:1). The phrase, “*Now about,*” will signal us to other questions raised by the church (e.g. 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).

One of the issues the church struggled with was the question of meat sacrificed to idols. In Corinth, life revolved around the temple. Folks offered food to the gods and then often had a feast with the food for their family and friends. Trade guilds held feasts in the temple of their patron god. The priest's leftover portion of a sacrifice would be sold in the marketplace and advertised as “sacrificed for sacred purposes.” How should a believer respond? Some turned legalistic and believed that no connection to the meat was possible at all and, therefore, thought no one should go to a pagan friend's feast, attend a trade guild dinner, or buy meat in the marketplace. Others felt that all these activities were permissible and looked down on those who didn't share their knowledge.

It takes Paul three chapters to deal with the issue and, while we may be tempted to pay little attention to these chapters since we don't deal with the problem of idol food at our local supermarket, Paul shares timeless principles that do apply to us today. One of those principles appears in today's chapter reading: loving concern for our brother and/or sister.

The chapter opens with Paul apparently quoting the Corinthian letter: “*...we all possess knowledge.*” Some of the Corinthians prided themselves on their knowledge that an idol is nothing in the world. It's just a piece of metal, stone or wood. It's not real. Any food offered to it, therefore, would not be tainted. The problem, however, is that not all believers had grown to the point where they were convinced of these truths. For them, eating the meat (even if offered in the marketplace) defiled their conscience and led them to lapse back into idolatry. Sadly, the strong believers with knowledge didn't care. They just wanted to exercise their freedom, even at the expense of a weaker brother or sister. It was evidence that they were puffed up with knowledge. Interestingly, the word Paul uses here for “puffed up” provides us with a powerful word picture. The root of the word referred to a bellows, a device used to produce a strong current of air. These believers, then, in a sense, were full of “hot air” because of their knowledge. They arrogantly looked down on those who didn't share their knowledge instead of looking in love to build them up. Such actions were unacceptable and, actually, a sin against Christ himself (8:12). It is here, at this point, that Paul drives home an application for the believers in the 1st century dealing with meat offered to idols (and to us today whenever we find ourselves in parallel situations): Loving our brother or sister means limiting our freedom and abstaining from practices that cause them to stumble and fall away from Christ (8:13).

Action Step & Prayer Focus: Ask the Lord to show you if you are a *bellows believer* or a *building others up believer*. If you're filled with hot air, it's time to repent and begin building others up instead in love. Use your freedom and knowledge to serve others this week.

Take-a-way: *Built up, not puffed up, is the way to learn, live and love as a believer!*