

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART NINE

After dealing with a series of problems of sexual morality and of litigation between believers with potential to cause division and damage to the church, Paul moved in chapter eight to a totally different kind of moral issue, idolatry.

The background to this next problem was the eating of meat in heathen temples. Some Christians saw no problem in eating the meat which had been sacrificed to idols because they knew that the idols were nothing but a piece of wood or stone. It may be that after killing many animals in sacrifice the meat was made available free or cheap by the priests to all who cared to participate. One can imagine budget-conscious Christians deciding that by doing this they were saving God's money while doing no harm. There may have been others who thought that just by being there they could be a witness of Christ to the heathen worshippers. The problem was that other Christians, younger in the faith, got the wrong message and assumed that they could take part in idol worship and at the same time follow Jesus, without coming to harm. Who was right? And does it matter to us today?

Paul was in a difficult position. If he made a rule that Christians were not allowed in such places, he might have been protecting vulnerable young believers, but at the same time it could be said that he had returned to the law, to 'do's' and 'don't's', an approach he had elsewhere strongly resisted.(Gal.2:16-21) On the other hand if he approved of involvement in heathen temples he could be accused of permissiveness.

He began with a startling proposition - knowing is not everything! Knowing things, even good doctrinal things, can make us arrogant. Being a Christian is about knowing, not just something, but Someone, which is based on love, not mere information.(8:1-3) Knowing about the Creator is very important. God, the Father, is the architect and owner of the universe. God, the Son, is the builder of all things. There are no other gods, so idols are nothing except in the minds of those who worship them. This knowledge leads us to be certain for ourselves that a heathen temple is simply a building with a block of wood or stone in it and nothing more. The sacrificed meat is therefore just meat.(8:4-6)

Those who lacked this knowledge could only rely on their old experience of idol worship which seemed very real. Being there again in a heathen temple took them spiritually back to where they used to be, in slavery to idolatry.(8:7) Food does not count as far as our relationship with God is concerned.(8:8) People do count - so don't let our freedom from the Law destroy another person who is young in Christ! Love matters so much more than liberty.(8:9-12) It is so much more important not to be the means of someone else falling than it is to eat cheap meat.(8:13)

This chapter provides us with a starting point for working out so many practical dilemmas in our Christian lives. All the questions which begin - 'Should a Christian do..?' or 'Should a Christian go to..?', find their answer here. Our problem is that we ask the wrong question. God's grace and strength mean that we can go anywhere and do anything He leads us to without fear of being dragged down by what those around us do. The real problem is our example to those who are watching us. Can they handle it or will they be pulled down by temptations they are not yet strong enough to handle? A mature Christian may choose to abstain from many things, not because he has made a law about it, but because he loves his brothers and sisters in Christ so much.

In chapter nine Paul provides a lovely illustration of the principle he has just taught in relationship to Christian ministry.

9:1,2 Q.1 What does Paul describe himself as in this section? What did he see his work to be? In what sense was he free? How do these verses help our understanding of Acts 1:21-26 and Rev.21:14?

9:3-14 Q.2 For what was Paul being criticised this time? How does he answer his critics? What does he set out as the rights of Christian ministers? What illustrations does he use to establish his point? How should these rights operate in practice in the church today? What is our responsibility to those who minister to us?

9:15-18 Q.3 How did Paul exercise his rights as a minister of the gospel? What reason does he give for taking this approach? How would it help those who heard the message he taught? How was his example an illustration of the principle of chapter eight?

9:19-23 Q.4 How did Paul go about ministering to different groups within his community? How would Paul exercising his rights as a minister have hindered his effectiveness? What in practical terms would his approach described in this section have looked like? How can we apply the same principles today?

9:24-27 Q.5 What picture does Paul use here to describe the Christian life and ministry? Just how does this illustration relate to the vision of ministry which Paul has given in this chapter? Is Christian service to be a competition with others in ministry to do better than them and win more people to our church or work than they have?