

I do not have a perfect instinct for directions; I have gotten myself lost, especially in new places. But if I have been somewhere once or twice, I'm pretty good at remembering how to get back and how long the trip should take. Yet this is one of my most doubted abilities. For example, my co-counselor at camp one summer—who had never been on the trail we were hiking—was convinced that I had gotten the group hopelessly lost and that we would be hours late, when in fact we walked out of the woods and met our ride right where we were supposed to, with the front of the line arriving about three minutes early and the back of line straggling in just when we were told to be there. Or more recently when another self-proclaimed expert navigator insisted that my preferred route for a drive I made frequently *had* to be wasting *so* much time because I was going *way* the long way around. Turns out I was wrong about that one: he looked it up to prove his way was better, and Google Maps confirmed: my way took one whole minute longer. Those may be silly examples, if symptomatic of deeper issues, but if you've ever known someone who seems to care more about being right than about being in relationship, you know what I'm talking about. Paul and the Corinthians knew this as well.

Paul writes to the relatively new church in Corinth, a multi-cultural community where all sorts of gods were worshipped. Some of that worship included animal sacrifice, and the meat from those sacrifices was available for sale. A conflict breaks out in the church over whether or not Christians should eat what had been sacrificed to idols. Those who had a better understanding of Jewish and Christian monotheism—that there is only one God—didn't see a problem with eating sacrificial meat because if other gods don't exist, and idols are just inanimate objects, then there is nothing sacred *or* defiled about that food. But those who didn't understand those idols as empty statues didn't want to sin by eating food that had been sacrificed to some other god. Think of someone not eating Trick or Treat candy because they believe that Halloween celebrates evil. That may sound overzealous to someone who understands Trick or Treat as just a fun costume party, but we can see how someone who believes it is demonic would wonder how a faithful Christian (or Jew or Muslim or Hindu) could sell their soul to Satan for a fun size Three Musketeer bar.

The Corinthians to whom Paul is writing know that there is only one God and that there is nothing special or wrong with food that was offered to idols. Throughout his letter, Paul refers to the *knowledge* of those members of the church which the other newer Christians and nonChristians lack. But how we understand *knowledge* has changed since the Enlightenment

and the development of the scientific method. Belief is not the same as knowledge—that for which we can find empirical evidence. We turn to scripture to better understand God, but even scripture is a collection of people’s beliefs about God. And although there are thousands of denominations just in Christianity, we do tend to treat our own interpretations and beliefs as unquestionable knowledge. Yet Paul cautions that *knowledge puffs up, while love builds up*. Our knowledge—or what we might better call our belief—never excuses us from loving others as Christ commanded us to do.

Which way is right—eating the sacrificed meat or avoiding it— isn’t the point. *We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do...* so the eating or abstaining is morally neutral. But Christians from Paul’s day to our own have always fallen into the trap of elevating morally neutral acts as if they were matters of ultimate concern. Then we point fingers at those who interpret the faith differently, and the end result is the puffed up claim that someone can’t be a Christian if...and the ways that we have filled in that blank have caused unimaginable suffering all throughout history, right up to today.

That gets us closer to Paul’s point. He’s not just concerned with whether something is right or wrong but how those beliefs affect the way we treat each other. Now, we’re not talking about anything that causes actual harm to other people, but if doing—or not doing one of these morally neutral things—becomes a stumbling block to someone else, then it does become a problem. If we die on the hill of every theological arguments and puff ourselves up in the face of other people’s beliefs, it makes us lousy ambassadors for Christ. The question the Corinthians should have been asking wasn’t *Are we allowed to eat this food?* or *Shouldn’t we convince them to eat this food?* but *Is eating this food helpful to others, especially those who are looking to us to better understand the love of God?* And although we don’t know whether in practice he ever changed his diet or not, Paul ends this argument by saying *If eating this food is going to be an impediment to someone else’s faith, I just won’t eat it...because that other person is more important than me winning an argument and proving I’m right.*

Let’s just say that this is not the way our society approaches conflict today: not in churches, not in communities, certainly not in government. That’s why we call the way of Christ *counter-cultural*. Paul’s concession might be put this way: nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care. Before Jesus commissioned us to go make disciples and teach his commands, Jesus commanded us to love others as he loved us. So may God help us keep our priorities straight.