

Eastwood Baptist (4/11/'18) **ALL FOR THE GLORY OF GOD** (1 Corinthians 8-10)

**Introduction** Have you ever wondered what to do as a Christian? Perhaps someone has invited you to go with them to a movie which you think might conflict with Christian principles. Or perhaps you have been asked to go to a party where you know that a lot of people will get very drunk. Or perhaps you have discovered that a product which you love is produced by exploiting underpaid or mistreated workers. You can probably think of other examples from your own experience. Such situations arise frequently for us today, and often the challenges which they present are difficult ones. In large measure this is so because we live in a pluralist society, in which contrasting standards co-exist, and a permissive society, in which there is often pressure to allow everyone freedom to do what they think is best. In addition to this, Christians often disagree about what they should do. This is exactly how it was for the Christians of Corinth in the first century. The main issues which Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 8-10 are related to idolatry, issues which few Australian Christians face in the twenty-first century. But the kind of world in which they lived, a pluralist and permissive world, was very like our world. Therefore Paul's guidance about what to do in such a world is very relevant to us. This morning I want to focus on three principles which can be identified in Paul's teaching.

**First, Honour the Lord** (1 Corinthians 10:14-22) I am starting in Chapter Ten rather than Chapter Eight because it is here that we see Paul putting forward the most fundamental principle. In addressing the issue of whether Christians can participate in idolatrous feasts Paul insists that to do so violates a Christian's first allegiance, which is to the Lord Jesus Christ. He puts this very forcefully in **v.21 – read**. Our reaction as twenty-first century Christians is likely to be amazement that Paul even had to say this. But we need to appreciate here a big difference between first century Corinth and twenty-first century Australia. Both are pluralist and permissive, but idol worship was part of the fabric of Corinthian society, which it clearly is not in our society. Many Corinthians did not believe in the existence of the old Greek and Roman gods, and would have been untroubled to know that the Christians did not. But they expected every citizen of Corinth to participate in the outward forms of pagan worship. For example, if a Corinthian was engaged in a particular trade or profession, it was difficult not to belong to the association of people engaged in that trade or profession. But then they were expected to join in gatherings dedicated to gods connected with particular associations, such as feasts where idols representing such gods were worshiped. It seems clear that some Corinthian Christians joined in these feasts, and believed that it was OK to do so. They asserted what Paul quotes back in 8:4, that "an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one". Therefore, they said, acts of idol worship meant nothing, and it didn't matter if Christians participated in them. Back in Chapter Eight, Paul objected to this on the grounds that this could damage others. Here in Chapter Ten, however, Paul makes another objection – **read 10:19-20**. How, then, does this apply to Christians today? For some Christians it is not a big step to contemporary situations. Those Christians who come from a polytheistic culture, such as Hinduism and one form of Buddhism, are often under pressure from family and friends to participate in polytheistic worship in order to express their solidarity with their family and friends. The pressure from family is particularly strong in cultures which practise ancestor worship.

Those of us who do not experience such pressures need to appreciate that it is not easy for those who do. We need to support them, not by telling them that it is easy but by offering them understanding and praying for them. And we need to recognise that the principle of honouring the Lord, and refusing to do anything which violates our allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord, has broader implications which are relevant to all Christians. An example which is fairly close to the situation of the Corinthians is if we asked to participate in any occult or neo-pagan practice, such as a séance. This is contrary to our allegiance to Christ. But many less immediate yet still valid applications of the principle are possible. A Christian must resist pressure to do anything contrary to honouring Jesus Christ as Lord.

**Love and Respect One Another (8:1-13; 10:29b-30)** When we move back to Chapter Eight we again find Paul addressing an issue connected with idolatry, but here the issue is less straightforward than that of participating in pagan worship. The issue is that of eating food which has been offered to idols, or even might have been offered to idols. This issue arose because much of the meat sold in the markets had been sacrificed to idols before being put on sale. Paul addresses those who say that it is OK to eat food which has been sacrificed to idols because they are not real gods, nor do they represent real gods. **Read 8:4-6.** Here Paul accepts their contention that idols are not real gods, and affirms that there is indeed only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. And later he will agree that Christians can eat meat from the meat market when they don't know whether it has been sacrificed to idols or not – **read 10:25.** But Paul takes a different view from some of the Corinthians where meat is known to have been offered to idols. At the beginning of Chapter Eight Paul implies that these people put knowledge, and their pride in knowledge, before love (vv.1-3). After verses 4 to 6, which we have just looked at, he comes back to the need for love and explains what he has in mind – **read 8:7-13.** We can be confident, I think, that the terms “weak” and “strong” are terms which Paul has borrowed from the people to whom he is speaking. These people who took pride in their knowledge called themselves “strong” and looked down on people whom they called “weak”. They didn't think that they needed to take any notice of these weak and ignorant Christians. They flaunted their freedom and probably scoffed at those who had scruples which they didn't share. Paul's view is very different. He says that the ones whom they dismiss as “weak” are their brothers and sisters in Christ, for whom he died. Therefore they should not scoff at their scruples and risk influencing them to act against their conscience. Instead they should be willing to curtail their freedom for the sake of their brothers and sisters. Later, in Chapter Ten, Paul addresses a balancing word to the more scrupulous Christians – **read 10:29b-30.** This is very brief, probably because the greater problem in Corinth was the arrogance of the self-styled “strong”. In Romans 14, however, Paul addresses both the “weak” and the “strong” equally, so we need to consider both. If others observe prohibitions which we think unnecessary, we should be considerate toward their conscientious scruples. And if others do not share our conscientious scruples, we should not condemn them but respect their difference of conviction. One contemporary example is differences of conscience concerning alcohol. All Christians should be able to agree that excessive consumption of alcohol is wrong, since the Bible clearly teaches this, and modern medical knowledge confirms the wisdom of this teaching. But we cannot expect similar agreement concerning moderate consumption of

alcohol, where there is no clear biblical condemnation of it and there is legitimate difference of opinion over the implications of broader biblical principles. A Christian who drinks moderately with a clear conscience should not be insensitive toward another Christian who believes that it is better not to drink alcohol at all. Equally, the one who refrains from drinking any alcohol should respect the convictions of the one who drinks moderately, and not condemn this brother or sister as a bad Christian.

**Seek to Win Others to Christ (9:19-23)** In between the two chapters about issues connected with idolatry, Paul addresses the question of why he did not insist on his rights as an apostle. Some of the Corinthians seem to have criticised Paul for this, making the inference that he wasn't a true apostle. Paul puts forward a different reason, that he didn't insist on his rights where it would get in the way of proclaiming the gospel. In so doing Paul provides us with a third principle which goes well with the two which I have already considered. At first glance, the other two might seem complete: honour God and love one another. This looks like Jesus' two great commandments: love God with your whole being and your neighbour as yourself. But Jesus taught that one's neighbour was not just one's fellow Jew, or fellow Christian. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, and taught that his followers were to love everyone whom they encountered, even their enemies. So Paul's principles in these chapters become comprehensive when we add to the call to love one another the call to love those who have not yet come to faith in Christ. Consider a few key verses of Chapter Nine – **read 9:19-23**. Paul was willing to modify his behaviour in order to bring people to faith in Christ. He was willing to behave differently among different groups of people in order to share the gospel effectively with them. He respected the beliefs of Jews, conforming to them where this did not require him to compromise gospel principles. He also showed sensitivity toward pagan Gentiles where this was consistent with serving Christ, for example in his preaching to the Athenians (where he refers to an altar "to an unknown god", and quotes pagan writers). As Christians, we need to look for ways to help people to come to Christ.

**Conclusion** This week it is hard to improve on Paul's own conclusion to this section of his letter – **read 10:31-11:1**. Let's follow Paul's teaching and example. Let's take up his principles by seeking to do everything for the glory of God, and for the good of our fellow Christians, and to help other people come to faith.