

When the fun stops: 1 Corinthians 10.14-30

Looking at it one way, you could say, “Anything goes. Because of God’s immense generosity and grace, we don’t have to dissect and scrutinize every action to see if it will pass muster.” But the point is not just to get by. We want to live well, but our foremost efforts should be to help others live well. With that as your base to work from, common sense can take you the rest of the way. 1 Cor 10.23-25, The Message.

“When the fun stops, STOP.” If I’m honest, I’m constantly shocked at the free and open advertising of gambling sites on TV. It seems like every kind of sport is sponsored by businesses that make their money out of encouraging people to gamble. It’s legal — but that doesn’t make it a good thing. I suppose I’m showing my age: well, OK, it really wasn’t like that in my young day (we didn’t have TV, for a start). Of course there was plenty of gambling around, but you had to work a bit harder to find it: you had to physically go to the betting shop or the racetrack. Now it’s gone mainstream, it feels as if it’s been normalized — you can do it on your phone without leaving the comfort of your sofa. Never mind that gambling can easily become addictive and ruin lives. It’s protected by the small print — that little line that says, “When the fun stops, STOP.”

Well, that’s my little rant for the day. What’s yours? Maybe you spotted my split infinitive — ouch! Or maybe you get het up about people smoking, or drinking, or dropping litter, or plastic bags, or sitting in a car park with their engine running We’ve all got our “little lists” — things that are not illegal, not necessarily wrong in themselves, but addictive and potentially destructive — or just plain annoying. (And yes, since you ask, I do enjoy a glass of wine every now and then. Cheers!)

When I used to teach 1 Corinthians in Sheffield, I used to ask the students to think of activities that Christians disagree over. Things that might seem harmless to some, but a definite no-no to others.

Hallowe'en was one that often came up: a harmless bit of fun for the kids, or a dangerous flirting with evil spirits? The fact is, it can be both — it depends on the circumstances. One lad told us with feeling that his church wouldn't let him play his drum-kit in church, because they saw drums as a dangerous link with pagan African religion. And yet — another student, an African church leader, told me that in his church in Nigeria the young people were being drawn back into African traditional religion because it reconnected them with their culture. He blamed the Victorian missionaries who had tried to “westernize” their converts and so detached them from their roots. We need to rediscover our African roots, he said: to discover an authentic *African* way of worshipping the one God who made us all (and yes, that probably would involve drums).

Complicated, isn't it? That's why Paul says, “Judge for yourselves” (v.15). There isn't always a simple right-or-wrong answer to the questions we face. We need to discover the underlying principles that will help us thread our own way through the moral maze in a way that is authentically Christian. Meat that had been part of a pagan sacrifice was on the menu everywhere in Corinth — on sale in the marketplace, on offer at dinner-parties in the temples. It was the only way most people would ever get to eat meat. So what should Christians do? Avoid meat altogether? Or accept it with thanks? Right or wrong?

It's not that simple, says Paul — it all depends. Go back to the principle we saw back in ch.6 (v.23): “*All things are lawful*” — *but not all things are beneficial*. “*All things are lawful*” — *but not all things build up*. Is this issue going to build up the church — or pull it apart? Is my behaviour going to make things better for my brother or sister — or lead them into a path that would be damaging for them? The meat itself won't do you any harm. It isn't “tainted”, it's part of God's good creation (vv.25-26). But if by eating it you put yourself or someone else in danger of being drawn into a fatal addiction — then don't. It's just not worth it. When the fun stops, STOP.

Hidden in all this is a deeper insight that is going to become more and more important as the letter weaves its way through more contentious issues. To me, it feels as if Paul is pushing the boundaries here, edging his way into thinking about what difference it really makes being “in Christ”. What difference does it make to the way you think? Is it a choice between one moral code and another — or is it a different way of thinking altogether? We get glimpses of this every now and then, but it’s a work in progress — and I believe we’re still part of that ongoing story.

So in the middle of all this about butcher’s shops, he suddenly starts to reflect on the meaning of the Lord’s Supper — that small but significant ritual of sharing bread and wine that Christians do when they get together. What does it actually mean? *When we drink the cup of blessing, aren’t we taking into ourselves the blood, the very life of Christ? And isn’t it the same with the loaf of bread that we break and eat? Don’t we take into ourselves the body, the very life, of Christ? Because there is one loaf, all our many-ness becomes one-ness— Christ doesn’t become fragmented in us. Rather, we become unified in him. We don’t reduce Christ to what we are: he raises us to what he is.* (vv.16-17).

There’s a lot there to think about — and Paul will keep coming back to it in the next few chapters. I like to think about the horizontal dimension and the vertical one. The horizontal one is about sharing the bread with each other. These opposing views are being held by people who are Christian — so we are all part of the body of Christ, even the people I have radical disagreements with. (That’s one reason we act out that little drama of ‘sharing the peace’ before we share communion with one another. It’s important!) The vertical one is even more extraordinary: it’s about sharing in the very life of Christ. It’s about bringing our differences and or confusions to God and opening ourselves up to his Holy Spirit to let him make us more like Jesus — to open us up to how God wants the world to be. And maybe we haven’t even begun to see what that might look like.

In *The Screwtape Letters* (written in 1942), C.S.Lewis looks at the Christian life through the eyes of a senior demon who is doing his best to block the work of God in the world. Just think about all those disagreements in the Church, he says. “All the purely indifferent things—candles and clothes and what not—are an admirable ground for our activities. We [that is, the demons] have quite removed from men’s minds what that pestilent fellow Paul used to teach about food and other unessentials— namely, that the human without scruples should always give in to the human with scruples. You would think they could not fail to see the application. You would expect to find the ‘low’ churchman genuflecting and crossing himself lest the weak conscience of his ‘high’ brother should be moved to irreverence, and the ‘high’ one refraining from these exercises lest he should betray his ‘low’ brother into idolatry. And so it would have been but for our ceaseless labour. Without that the variety of usage in the Church of England might have become a positive hotbed of charity and humility.”

**God bless,
Loveday**

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5th October 2020**