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EXERCISING CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

Are you influenced by what other people do? Maybe a more important question is "Are others influenced by what you do?" In most cases, the answer to both those questions is "YES." This influence reaches into such areas as the way we comb our hair, the clothes we wear, the kind of car we drive, where we live, if we drink alcoholic beverages, do drugs, cheat on our spouses, or if and where we go to church. In fact, we might even avoid certain behaviors because the wrong group participates in the action. We are influenced as well as being influential people.

Some might ask if it really matters that we influence others or that others influence us. That's a good question. We will find that there is not an easy straight forward and clear-cut answer that fits all situations. Most of the time, it really does not matter; however, there are exceptions that can have significant consequences in the lives of others. The most important issues of life are those that have eternal significance. Whether I wear a button-down shirt with a paisley tie or go with an open collar really doesn't have a lot of cosmic significance, although even something that simple has been known to influence the careers of people. You might stretch the point and argue that there are no insignificant issues. Maybe that is why we are told that in the Judgement that we will be held accountable for every idle word.

The level of the importance and whether or not we are greatly influenced or have great influence can be debated for any issue you might name. We aren't interested in doing that, but do want to raise our level of consciousness to the fact that such influence is there and that we have responsibilities to others even though we may be free to decide for ourselves what is important or unimportant to us. Paul addressed such concerns in his letter to the church at Corinth.

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-3 An issue with the church at Corinth was that of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols in the various temples in the city. Was it OK or not? Part of the membership said "No" and part said "Yes" and I would bet that the majority were just confused and didn't know what to say. Both sides were probably quoting scripture to each other to "prove" their point of view. This sounds familiar to what happens today in churches. We tend to latch onto a certain truth and then use that to build up our own egos to the detriment of other. Paul cautioned them to be motivated in everything by the love of God. Knowledge may inflate our self esteem but Godly love builds up the Body of Christ.

Paul makes an interesting observation: People who know a little about a subject tend to sound as if they were expert. On the other hand, those who have really gone into depth in a particular area realize how vast the "unknown" is about any subject. There is an adage that describes this well: "A little knowledge is a dangerous thing." True knowledge is humbling and causes us to realize our desperate dependence on God who is the Source of all knowledge, wisdom and understanding.

1 CORINTHIANS 8:4-6 Many verses written by Paul in the letter to the church at Corinth were simply restatements of what they had said to him. It appears that beginning with the middle of verse 4 and continuing through verse 6 is such a restatement. This was the essence of the argument by those who said it was OK to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Paul had referred to "knowledge" in the previous verse and we see that to which he was referring starting with the words "we know .." We read those statements and can see the logic behind them. With that logic we can conclude that some person chanting some mumbo-jumbo over a piece of meat does nothing to its food value and it has no spiritual significance to those who are in Christ Jesus.

The practitioners of the pagan religion believed that they would take on the character of the idol by eating the food that had been offered to the idol. This is not too far removed from the Roman Catholic belief that the elements in the Lord's Supper actually become the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus -- transubstantiation. They teach that the way Christians become more like Christ is by partaking of the elements. So, at Corinth, Christians were faced with the problem of giving others the impression that they were "practicing pagan religions" by eating food that had been sacrificed in the temples. One group of believers argued that since there is only One True God that the beliefs of the pagans were just superstitions and that it was a shame to let good food go to waste. These two different perspectives were causing division in the church. The group that thought it was wrong to

eat the food was being influenced by the group that argued that Christians are free from such superstitions.

1 CORINTHIANS 8:7-13 When the problem was presented to Paul, he saw that the real problem was not whether to eat meat or not but was really the trouble that such concerns were stirring up in the church. The attitude of the group that argued that since we are free that we should eat whatever we wish was not an attitude of concern and love for others. They were willing to ignore what influence and harm they were doing to others in an effort to preserve their "rights." This group would have fit in well with the "me first" generation that is causing so much difficulty in our society today.

Paul did not deny the truth that idols have no power. He also recognized the truth that whether we eat meat or practice being a vegetarian does not impress God. This is not what God is looking for in His children. The same thing could be said about long hair versus short hair for men. Do you think that God cares one way or the other? Man looks on the outward things, while God looks on our hearts.

One question I think God would be interested in would be "Why are we doing what we do?" For example, are you being a vegetarian to draw attention to yourself as a unique person? Do we eat meat because we think it makes us more aggressive and, therefore, we are more able to have our own way in dealing with others? Do we have wear long hair as a statement of rebellion against authority? Perhaps we wear short hair simply as a means to impress others with how "clean cut" we appear to be. In other words, what is the "intent of the heart?"

Another question is also important and that has to do with how our actions impact others. If we limit our freedom by love for others, then we are really and truly free. If we are driven to have our own way and get the most for ourselves, then we are going to miss the point of being free in Christ. Paul knew the freedom that came from giving consideration to others above yourself and he was not hesitant to use himself as an example to follow. Each of us should live our lives in such a way that we would not be reluctant to say to someone else, "Follow my example." You know, even though we don't really say it with our mouth, we really do, through the influence that we have, encourage someone to follow our example. Knowing that, make sure that others have a good example to follow.