

A little knowledge

I thought for a bit of a change, we might start off with a quick quiz. Not too difficult, but not too easy either. Five questions on the bible trivia. No prizes and no public scoring either. Just keep your own tally.

1. The oldest person mentioned in the bible is Methuselah ... how old was he when he died?
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2. What's the shortest verse in the bible? John 11:35 "Jesus wept"

3. What's the longest verse in the bible? Esther 8:9 "At once the royal secretaries were summoned—on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and to the satraps, governors and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. These orders were written in the script of each province and the language of each people and also to the Jews in their own script and language."

4. How many plagues did God send on Egypt? 10

Turning water to blood (Ex. 7:20), frogs (Ex. 8:6), gnats (Ex. 8:17), flies (Ex. 8:24), pestilence of livestock (Ex. 9:5), boils (Ex. 9:10), hail (Ex. 9:23), locusts (Ex. 10:13), darkness (Ex. 10:21-22), and Death of the firstborn sons (Ex. 12:29)

5. What are the fruits of the spirit? But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5)

How did you go? If you got four or five right, I imagine you're feeling pretty good.

And if you got two or three, you can probably be confident that you know more of this stuff than your average person.

And if you less than that, you might be feeling a bit embarrassed.

Now I don't think knowing how old Methuselah was or what the shortest or longest verses are or even being able to recite by rote the plagues are particularly important in terms of how we know and relate to God.

And neither do I think you have to name teach of the fruit of the spirit to benefit from them. the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – we all have them, and we can all grow in them, and we can all benefit from them.

But the point I want to make is that knowing this sort of stuff feels good. I know those things, most people don't.

I'm a fan of trivia. In my years at MLA I was a member of a number of victorious trivia teams. I had the reputation of knowing lots of trivia. I know the eight states of the USA which start with the letter M, the names of the seven dwarves, that the second tallest mountain in Victoria is Mount Weathertop. And so on and on.

Utterly useless information in day-to-day life, but invaluable on trivia night.

But it feels nice to know that stuff. It's nice to remember things that other people have forgotten or just never come to know in the first place.

It feels good, I think, to know things that other people don't know. To have secret knowledge. Or just special knowledge. And of course, it feels bad if you don't know, if you're left out.

But there is a danger in having that secret or special knowledge, as Paul tells the Corinthians in today's reading.

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that "We all possess knowledge." But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. (8:1)

Now the church in Corinth at the time was growing dramatically. It was bringing together people of Jewish and gentile backgrounds, people who had very different traditions and practices. And yet they were coming together as a church – in a multicultural and multifaith society.

Picture a usual day at the Apollonia Temple Plaza in Corinth. There was a ritual slaughtering of the bull as an offering to the various gods. If spectators liked, they could join the procession beneath the sacrificial platform to allow the bull's blood to drip on them, so the strength of the bull, and of course the god or gods represented by the bull, could transfer to the spectators.

The practice of public sacrifice required that the animal being sacrificed was then divided up. Part was burnt as an offering to the god – burned to a crisp. Part was taken by the priests for their meals. The rest was given to various public officials as part of their livelihood – their salary packages. What they didn't need, they sold to the shops and markets for general sale.

I won't bore you with the calculations, but let me assure you that you get a lot of meat from a single bull – 200 meals easily, even from a small animal. So, after the burnt offering, the food for the priests, and what the local officials needed for themselves and their families, there was a lot of meat left over – and it would turn up at the markets. It seems that most, if not all, the beef available in Corinth, had been part of an offering to one of the local gods.

So, for many of the Corinthian Christians there was this dilemma: in order to eat meat they'd be taking into their bodies something that had been made unclean by this act of pagan worship - either because they were from a Jewish background which totally excluded such things, or because they were from that pagan background, and that sacrificial meat reminded them of the life they'd left behind.

On the other hand, if they refused to eat that meat then they cut themselves off from most social occasions. And that would mean that not only would they miss out on fellowship, but they would also lose opportunities to share the faith that they'd recently become part of.

And that sort of thing been an ongoing problem for Christians ever since. Not so much the issue of eating meat sacrificed to heathen deities – though I admit that the closest I’ve come to doing that is eating Christmas cookies left out for Santa Claus. But think about alcohol. Gambling. Smoking. Dancing. Divorce. And so on.

Christians who have been concerned about those things knew what was right. They had their special knowledge. And they would condemn those that did the wrong thing.

The Corinthian believers were quite fortunate, though, because they could write to the Apostle Paul for an answer to the questions and uncertainties they had. In this case, it seems they had asked something like "Is it acceptable for Christians to eat food that’s been sacrificed to idols, or not? Should we become vegetarians? Should we avoid interacting with people who aren’t Christians?"

And in this letter, Paul writes back to them with a response which isn’t the cut-and-dried ruling, that the Corinthians were probably hoping for. Instead, he gives them an answer which is quite sensitive, but comes with a strong warning for them.

“We all possess knowledge,” He says, “But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.” (8:1b)

There is a danger in having knowledge, and that danger is that we think that that knowledge makes us important. If you’ve ever looked at a NSW drivers’ handbook, one of the things you’ll find it highlights is that, at an intersection, a vehicle will have right of way – and some vehicles will need to yield right of way to those vehicles, but you never simply take the right of way.

And a sensible driver will take action to avoid a collision, even if he or she technically has the right of way.

Similarly, we need to be careful about what impact the exercise of our freedom might have on other Christians. Whatever knowledge we have isn’t necessarily shared or understood by everyone. Some people need time to understand and take on board the freedom they now have, some people need time to adjust, some people need time to move on. The trouble is that if the knowledge we have is special or secret, it tends to puff us up rather than building us up. And so we need to ask what it is that builds us up? Paul tells us it’s love.

He goes on: Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves God is known by God. (8:2-3)

So if we just know the rules, then we’re missing the point of the rules. Paul reminds us that “whoever loves God is known by God”. What matters most is the relationship we have with God.

And with that in mind, Paul goes on to reinforce what they know about the acceptability of food offered to heathen dieties:

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.” For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many

“gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. (8:4-6)

So Paul going back to first principles; stating the faith that he has and that we share...

On the one hand, yes, some people do sacrifice food to idols or other gods – but on the other, we know God the Father through his only begotten son. The creator of the universe has made himself known to us through his son – so concerns about offerings to other gods should fade away.

Again though, Paul is concerned about what this knowledge can do, and he warns that:

But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. (8:7)

He says that while there’s technically no problem eating food sacrificed to other gods, if eating that food is going to make you feel bad – feel defiled – by it, then it’s okay not to eat it. You don’t have to do something, just because you can.

From there, Paul warns of the danger of going too far the other way:

But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. (8:8)

Our relationship with God isn’t based on what we do or what we don’t do, how many good deeds we do, how many temptations we avoid or how many commandments we refrain from breaking. Our relationship with God is based on us putting our trust in Jesus.

Paul says whether we choose to eat food sacrificed to other gods or not, is a personal choice, and it’s not going to affect the relationship we have with God. That’s clear. But then Paul comes in with a BUT:

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. (8:9)

So while we might be free to make various choices, if us making those choices affects other people, then there is a problem. I think, these days, many or even most Christians will drink alcohol from time to time or at least they won’t be particularly concerned if others do. But if we meet a recovering alcoholic, then we would be foolish to drink in front of them.

Or we might, in a church context, keep our traditions in place, even if we understand that we could change them, in order to help members of our congregations who can’t face a change.

We have an obligation, whenever we exercise our freedom, to be mindful of others. To be aware of them. To be sensitive to them. To be considerate of them.

As Paul says: if others see you ... eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. (8:10-12)

We need to remember as we think about these issues, that, put simply, Paul is urging us to be considerate, to be sensitive in exercising our freedom.

But in all of this, he is not telling us that we should compromise our faith. In fact, he reminds us here, as he does so often, that Christ died for us.

That is the basis of our faith, and not the subject of freedom. We must be careful not to compromise the heart of our faith - the gospel message - out of a misplaced desire to appeal to others.

We need to, as we gather together, to confess our sins – because we know we are sinful, we need to remind ourselves that we are forgiven by the grace of Christ, we need to open the scriptures and seek God's word in them – because we need to grow in the knowledge and love of God, and we need to pray, because our relationship to God is just that – a relationship, so as well as listening for God, we need to speak to God.

And we need to make people welcome, not hold on to secret or special knowledge. Within the body of Christ, the church, we don't have special knowledge. We are not an exclusive club or a secret society: Our scriptures are available to all, in an immense variety of translations.

And we make these things available because as Christians, we want to share our faith. We have good news, so naturally we want to share it. We don't want to hold on to secret or special knowledge.

People often think about faith – about religion – as being a private thing. But it's not – it is a personal thing – but it should also be a public thing. The gospel – the good news of Jesus – is a public thing, it is good news not just for each of us here, but for the whole world.

And as we show our public faith, we must always be aware of the danger of pride, of holding onto secret knowledge in an effort to make ourselves special. Of trying to lift ourselves up before God and before others, by pushing others down. Of closing doors rather than opening them.

Paul concludes by saying 'Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.'

Friends, in all things we need to remember that what brings us together is faith in Christ. And that is the important thing. But as we grow in that faith, we have a responsibility to our sisters and brothers in Christ, to help them grow to - a responsibility to be sensitive to and to be considerate of them.

We should rejoice in the freedom that knowing Christ brings, but I hope we also rejoice when we give up that freedom for the sake of others.

Amen.