

On never posting (1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

Food offered to idols is not really a live issue for us, but social media usage is.

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January 26, 2024

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In the oral tradition of my denomination, there was once a seminary professor who occasionally dropped gratuitous f-bombs in class to, as I recall, make a point about depravity or grace or something. It sounded juvenile to me, even back when I heard it, but I suppose I understood the impulse.

We were Lutherans, after all, proclaiming a gospel of truly wild and uncabined grace from inside the stuffy confines of middle-American respectability. The rules of speech in my own upbringing were loose enough that I could not plausibly claim any instructive shock if a teacher swore in class, only the cheap thrill of watching someone break a rule no one in the room really believed in. The demonstration of grace through verbal transgression becomes a much grimmer idea if you imagine slurs or sexual innuendos instead of Anglo-Saxon terms for normal human things.

In any case, a showy disregard for the rules and expectations of one's community probably isn't the clearest way to demonstrate one's dependency on unmerited redemption. Even if you manage to do it out of the best possible motives, it is liable to be misunderstood.

When Paul writes about food sacrificed to idols, he proceeds from the premise that the food itself is harmless, but the act of eating it, in certain contexts, may be misunderstood. This becomes an intriguing, if necessarily cursory, exploration of the relationship between the freedom of Christians and their responsibility to guard the faith of others.

Food offered to idols is not really a live issue in any community I've served, but I can think of others. Social media usage is one. There's nothing inherently wrong with being opinionated, earthy, or overly revealing online. But in a world primed for offense, oblivious to context, and out of the habit of patient and charitable reading, it's just so easy to create problems when the innocent time-wasting of online life isn't surrounded by a high fence of discretion.

When I was on Twitter, I saw a lot of posts by pastors and bishops. Most were unremarkable, some were beautiful, but it was the outrageous or stupid posts that made the strongest impression. Worse, they factored more heavily into the way I thought about those individuals' respective traditions. I can only assume that my own batting average, as a pastor online, was no better.

It is genuinely difficult to prioritize the reaction of others to our own free and mostly innocuous choices. Pushed too far, it is impossible, or at least unwise. Surely, at a certain point, our sibling bears some agency for their own scruples about the behavior of others.

But as a general orientation toward forbearance, Paul's argument here deserves more consideration than I, at least, am always inclined to give it. If posting is a cause of my siblings' falling, I will never post. One privilege of becoming hard to shock is knowing when and how to tone it down for those who are in a different place.