

Cookie Cutter Christians

Sunday, January 29, 2012—Orion UMC

Pastor Dave Schultz

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (NLT)—

¹ Now regarding your question about food that has been offered to idols. Yes, we know that “we all have knowledge” about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. ² Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn’t really know very much.

³ But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes.

⁴ So, what about eating meat that has been offered to idols? Well, we all know that an idol is not really a god and that there is only one God. ⁵ There may be so-called gods both in heaven and on earth, and some people actually worship many gods and many lords. ⁶ But we know that there is only one God, the Father, who created everything, and we live for him. And there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom God made everything and through whom we have been given life.

⁷ However, not all believers know this. Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated. ⁸ It’s true that we can’t win God’s approval by what we eat. We don’t lose anything if we don’t eat it, and we don’t gain anything if we do.

⁹ But you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weaker conscience to stumble. ¹⁰ For if others see you—with your “superior knowledge”—eating in the temple of an idol, won’t they be encouraged to violate their conscience by eating food that has been offered to an idol? ¹¹ So because of your superior knowledge, a weak believer for whom Christ died will be destroyed. ¹² And when you sin against other believers by encouraging them to do something they believe is wrong, you are sinning against Christ. ¹³ So if what I eat causes another believer to sin, I will never eat meat again as long as I live—for I don’t want to cause another believer to stumble.

I don’t share recipes with people very often; my wife is the baker in the house and she’s much more likely to share recipes with others than I am. However, I came upon a recipe this past week and I thought I’d share it with you today. It’s not a new recipe; in fact it’s been around for a long, long time. But it seems as though folks frequently have trouble with the ingredients so I thought I’d share it with you: it’s my recipe for making Cookie Cutter Christians.

Ingredients: First, take equal parts of:

- Secret Spiritual Knowledge
- Quick and Ready Answers and
- Judgmental Moralism

These three items form the base for your batter. Now the base is extremely important because once the base is established you are then able to throw in the rest of the church and come up with a consistent dough mixture.

Instructions:

- Mix all of the ingredients together.
- Add a dash of sharp tongue.
- Knead mercilessly until the mix is consistent and free of all lumps of dissention.
- Roll out evenly on a hard pew.
- Cut out the desired shapes, making sure that all cookies conform to that shape.
- Bake until dry and hard.
- Whatever you do, do not simmer to a boil.

Result:

The results are Cookie Cutter Christians that will serve the needs of the base and will completely conform to the standards established by that base. This recipe exists to serve the base and of course the base is comprised of:

- Secret Spiritual Knowledge
- Quick and Ready Answers and
- Judgmental Moralism

Cookbook:

That's the situation Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 8.

Now it may seem like an out-of-date cookbook—after all, it has a whole chapter devoted to food sacrificed to idols and that's simply not an issue for us in America on January 29, 2012.

The recipes in this chapter are lifted from a time when there were questions in the church about whether or not it was permissible for a Christian to eat food that had first been sacrificed to some Roman god. Most people today, unless they've spent time in the remote regions of an undeveloped country, have not been exposed to any form of worship which includes animal sacrifice. But it was an everyday experience for first-century Christians. For one thing, such meat was less expensive to purchase because it had already been purchased once and then sacrificed. Then it was taken up from the altar and sold again.

There were several situations in which a Christian might be asked to eat meat which had been offered to one of the gods. He might have been invited by a friend to a special meal at the temple—an event which might not have any religious significance at all except that it may have included meat which had first been sacrificed to an idol. There were many in those days who no longer believed in the existence of such gods, but the festivals continued as family traditions and social events.

Or a Christian might be invited to have dinner in the home of a neighbor or friend who was not a Christian and discover that the meal included food which had previously been sacrificed to an idol.

Or there were some converts who considered it a matter of good stewardship: perfectly good lamb chops which had been sacrificed to an idol were cheaper than lamb chops which had never been so offered. Why not save a few shekels?¹

The chapter on **Food Sacrificed to Idols** may seem out-of-date, but Cookie Cutter Christians are just as popular today as ever. In fact, you can still find recipes for Cookie Cutter Christians in today's cookbooks: you just have to know where to look.

Nowadays you won't find the recipe in the chapter devoted to food sacrificed to idols because that is no longer in vogue. Instead, different Christian communities tend to tuck their recipe for Cookie Cutter Christians in different chapters.

Many Christian communities tuck their recipe for Cookie Cutter Christians in the chapter on **Conduct** because they expect all Christians to behave in exactly the same manner. This affects the way they dress and the way they cut their hair—or don't cut their hair.

In other settings it affects their behavior toward education or music or whether or not it's okay to play cards or go to movies.

It can affect their behavior when it comes to lifestyle decisions such as those concerning drinking or abstaining from alcohol.

Oddly enough, some feel it is a sin to go to the movie theater but it's all right to rent those same movies on DVD and watch them at home.

Kenneth Chafin tells the story about preaching at a church and then being invited with the pastor to eat in the home of a prominent parishioner. On the way, the pastor whispered to

¹ The preceding three paragraphs are adapted from Kenneth Chafin's commentary on 1 Corinthians in the Communicator's Commentary series (pg. 102).

Kenneth, “Whatever you do while we are here, please don’t say anything about bowling.” Before Kenneth could ask why, the door to her home opened and they were ushered in.

They all enjoyed a lovely meal together and on the drive home, Kenneth asked about bowling. It turns out that the lady had been raised in a small mountain community where the bowling alley was the place where the less savory element of the community hung out and she projected her perception of that bowling alley on all bowling alleys. In fact, she had once said to her pastor, “I hope I don’t live long enough to see my pastor coming out of a bowling alley.”

Thanks to her Secret Spiritual Knowledge, her Quick and Ready Answers and her Judgmental Moralism, that woman had the recipe for Cookie Cutter Christians in which no Christian would ever enter a bowling alley.

Another chapter where many Christian like to tuck away their recipe for Cookie Cutter Christians is in the chapter on **Politics** because they expect all Christians to vote the same way depending on the Secret Spiritual Knowledge, the Quick and Ready Answers and the Judgmental Moralism of the base.

What’s fascinating is how very different those Cookie Cutter Christians come out, despite the fact that the recipe comes from the chapter on Politics. On the one hand there are those churches in which the base is all about social justice issues: they would have their Christians come out of the oven and vote for the Democratic candidates.

On the other hand there are those churches in which the base is all about traditional values and they would have their Christians come out of the oven and vote for the Republican candidates.

The Apostle Paul does something novel with his recipe for Cookie Cutter Christians: he throws it out of the cookbook all together! In 1 Corinthians 8:1 he writes, “Now we know that we all have Secret Spiritual Knowledge, blah, blah, blah. But guess what: nobody cares! The only thing that Secret Spiritual Knowledge does is make you feel important. You don’t need Secret Spiritual Knowledge; what you need is love because love builds up the body of Christ and that’s what we should be all about. Anyone who claims to have Secret Spiritual Knowledge doesn’t know squat! But love builds up the church.”

As you can well imagine, once you throw out Secret Spiritual Knowledge, then the two other basic ingredients become useless. After all, what’s the point of mixing Quick and Ready Answers into the mix if you don’t have Secret Spiritual Answers? What’s the point of mixing Judgmental Moralism into the mix if you don’t have Secret Spiritual Answers?

That means that those Corinthian elders who got all judgmental and moralistic about food sacrificed to idols—trying to create Cookie Cutter Christians out of other Corinthian believers—were missing the boat. (Please excuse me for mixing my metaphors!)

It’s not about conforming to arbitrary standards: it’s about love. It’s about knowing how to accept one another without trying to change that other person into the image of the one who has the Secret Spiritual Knowledge.

And here’s the thing that Paul really wants us to understand: *it works both ways*. Let me go back to the bowling illustration I mentioned earlier:

If I’m going to operate on the basis of love, then I’m going to recognize that for some believers, bowling is going to harm their relationship with Christ. For some believers, bowling is going to stunt their spiritual growth.

However, I’m also going to recognize that bowling is not inherently evil. It can be a good source of fellowship and fun and it may even give you a little exercise. Bowling is morally neutral and love helps us to identify those things which are morally neutral.

It’s a little bit like food allergies: as far as I know, I do not have any food allergies at all. And believe me, I’ve sampled every food I possibly could just to see how I would react. And I can tell you that I’ve reacted favorably to everything I’ve tried. And I mean everything!—with the possible exception of grapefruit. But if you have a severe peanut allergy, it would be wrong for

me to insist that you eat some peanuts. Actually, in the words of St. Paul, it would be *unloving* of me to insist that you eat some peanuts.

If I'm to operate on the basis of love rather than on the basis of Secret Spiritual Knowledge, then I'm going to be sensitive to your needs and to your spiritual growth.

Love helps us to know how to appropriate those things in our lives which may be morally neutral as well as how to flee from those things which truly are immoral.

When we throw Special Secret Knowledge out of the batter—along with Quick and Ready Answers and Judgmental Moralism—and instead throw in a generous amount of love, we find that the result are Christians who are properly and scripturally diversified. God has no stomach for Cookie Cutter Christians. Rather, God is looking for Christians who can think for themselves and make wise, loving and considerate of others.