

PREFACE

With the page-turn to Chapter Eight, we not only leave behind all that discussion of marriage, divorce, and celibacy, but we begin a lengthy—three-chapter!—discourse on whether or not it is permissible to eat “food sacrificed to idols.” Now, before you answer with, *The last time I was tempted to eat food sacrificed to idols was—never!* be assured that the teaching in these chapters ranges far wider, and has specific parallels in our culture. In fact, even Paul’s opening salvo gives us a taste of his approach to this controversy: he does not just answer their errant position directly with a command, but immediately broadens it to a discussion of “knowledge” (*gnosis*) versus “love” (*agape*).

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

Does it sound to you like he has already gone off-topic? Read on.

Read v4a.

Beginning from the topic about which the Corinth church wrote to Paul, that of Christians eating food sacrificed to idols, in the next three chapters Paul will

- discuss “knowledge” versus love and consideration for fellow believers;
- in response to their accusations and doubts, make a defense for his apostolic authority (Chapter Nine);
- speak against their habit of eating with unbelievers at pagan temples; and
- draw a distinction between temple food and marketplace food.

THE INQUIRY

The traditional view of these chapters has been that the Corinthians sent an innocent and fresh inquiry to Paul asking for his counsel regarding an internal squabble between the strong and the weak: whether it was all right for them to purchase and consume food that had previously been involved in pagan worship or sacrifice. This question was raised because some believers whose conscience was stronger thought it was permissible—after all, these gods were not real anyway—but some whose conscience was more fragile or new thought it was not permissible.

But the traditional view breaks down at several points. W. L. Willis “thinks that the Corinthians had asked Paul in their letter whether it was permissible to eat in an idol’s temple. They not only asked for Paul’s view, but also ‘gave their reasons to justify their participation,’ perhaps anticipating his criticism or to show off their wisdom and knowledge” (quoted in Garland). Thus the issue really was a dispute not between the strong and the weak in the Corinthian church, but between the Corinthians and Paul.

So what we have here is another instance of a church whose members are pushing back against Paul's counsel.

- The Corinthians have done this regarding divisions in the church,
- they have done this regarding the "spiritual" and "wisdom" philosophies of other teachers,
- they have done this as they winked at extraordinary sexual immorality within the church,
- they have done this regarding lawsuits between believers,
- and they have done this regarding marital relationships.

They do not stop at seeking his counsel, but *question* his counsel, even argue against it—and, as we will see in Chapter Nine—go so far as to question the authority of his apostleship. Here in Chapter Eight Paul is not just answering their query, but refuting their rebuttal of him—their rationale for behavior destructive to the witness of the church, and the walk of fellow believers. As one commentator succinctly puts it, "They were not asking, 'Can we eat idol food?' but 'Why can't we eat idol food?'"

At first blush we might find this behavior hard to believe: *Why in the world would a Christian be in a pagan temple in the first place?* But it is really not difficult to imagine this.

THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Most cultures in the ancient world did not draw the bright line of distinction between religion and business, religion and social life that is more common today. On the other hand, however, there remain in place even in our culture, some lingering remnants from the first century, such as

- prayer at the beginning of Senate sessions;
- "In God We Trust" placed on our coinage after the Civil War, and in 1956 adopted as the nation's official motto.

Religion (i.e., the polytheistic beliefs of those in the region) was so suffused throughout every aspect of life that it was almost impossible to avoid it. Like today, when a business executive might find it advantageous to join a country club or civic organization to further his career up the corporate ladder, the merchant in Corinth—Christian or no—would by necessity need to associate with others who might not share his religious beliefs. And an otherwise innocuous business or social gathering would probably include offerings to, and blessings beseeched from, any one or more pagan gods.

Some of these business/social gatherings might even be held inside the pagan temple itself, where the food for the evening would be first dedicated to the temple's resident god. This is why Paul says what he does in v10.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:10.

It is easy to see how business or social gatherings—basic and often necessary interactions with non-believers—would bring members of the church into regular contact with pagan culture, and even have them sitting down to eat a meal that had or had not been part of a pagan devotion. As a member of the local Rotary Club, you could receive a parchment stating that this month’s meeting would be held in the banquet room of the temple to Apollo—dinner and dancing to follow. And the meal would probably have consisted of leftovers from that morning’s worship and offerings to the god.

THE WEIGHT OF EARLIER TRADITIONS

It is safe to say that virtually all of the members of the Corinth church came from either different traditions from Christianity, or no religious traditions at all. If you had been born into and raised in the religious traditions of your parents and grandparents, it would be very difficult to, first, let loose of those traditions and, second, not see them as relatively benign. Even after being converted to Christianity, you would retain fond memories of the faith with which you grew up—especially when one mixes into that a devotion to family.

We have a niece who is Japanese, raised on a small island. She became a Christian before she married our nephew. I have no evidence to doubt that she is truly born-again. Yet family and ancestors are very important to her; while growing up she surely was part of the annual ancestral ceremony called *Bon*, which takes place in either July or August along with the New Year’s celebration.

Bon is considered to be one of the two most important observances in Japan (Yanagita 1970). During *Bon* ceremony, family members return to their parental homes to honor all spirits of the dead who are believed to return to their homes at that time. As was the case in China, fresh fruit, flowers, and cooked rice are offered on the family altar. Many family members go to meet the souls of their ancestors in the cemetery or at the temple. In many neighborhoods, an annual *Bon* dance is held to celebrate this special observance in which adults and children dance to Japanese folk music.

I remember our niece more than once raising questions to me regarding her sainted grandfather—someone still holding to the traditional beliefs of his people. As a Christian she believed that there was only one way to salvation: the eternal life in Christ Jesus. Yet she could not get past her deep love and devotion for a dear grandfather who was such a “good” man. Even if left unstated, her pained expression revealed the content of her heart: *A loving God would not send my dear grandfather to hell, would He?*

Multiply that sentiment, that tenacious hold of family traditions, by tens, maybe even a hundred, and you have the church in Corinth, dwelling not in the modern United States but in a time and place where the traditional family gods still held powerful sway over every aspect of life—their statues on every street corner, on the parapets of buildings, their shrines nestled in every business frequented on Main Street and every home on every other street.

One reason the apostle takes the long way around in refuting their practice—as we see in the opening verses and throughout the three chapters—is that he understands the familial, business, and social pressures to compromise and continue to join in the idol-associated practices with which they were accustomed. This is the context for that familiar verse in Chapter Ten.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:13.

Paul understands how thoroughly intertwined the worship of these pagan gods is with every aspect of their former, and even present lives—and how personal some of this can be. The ramifications for some members of the church extend well beyond just stopping their eating of meals at the temple: it would be tantamount to denying their heritage.

David Garland: K. K. Yeo puts it in a modern Chinese perspective: “To advise the Chinese not to offer food and not eat the food in ancestor worship may be implicitly advising them not to love their parents, not to practise love, and ultimately not to be Chinese.”

Telling our niece she must now, as a Christian, shun certain religious traditions of her Japanese family would, to her, mean showing disrespect to her beloved grandfather, even denying her Japanese heritage. Of *course* it would be a struggle for her.

Nevertheless, Paul follows v13 with a command: “Therefore, my beloved” he concludes in v14, “flee from idolatry.”

CHOOSING

Paul opens this long passage couching his argument in love over knowledge, because, as he states in v1, “Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.” Thus he continues throughout Chapters Eight to Ten to speak quietly with reason and love, rather than shouting orders. He wants them to understand “the theological implications of their behavior” and decisions, and “seeks to convince them as reasonable persons to act out of love for others” (Garland).

But the inescapable message of these three chapters is that the follower of Christ must choose what he or she is going to be. Are you a Christian? Then you cannot continue to pay respect to the idol of a false god—you cannot even *appear* to be doing so. You must get off the fence. One either loves God and His Christ, or one loves the false gods of this world—you can’t do both.

And if we say we love our friends and family who persist in their idolatry, then we cannot express our love by turning a blind eye to the consequences of their beliefs. Our niece loved her grandfather dearly, and she did not want to be disrespectful to him and his traditional beliefs. But he, now deceased, is now in hell. No matter how hard it is for her to accept that, that is the cold truth. Paul closes this section of his letter at the end of Chapter Ten with counsel that speaks to this.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:31-33.

That word “no offense” (*apros’kopi*) means, as the NIV has it, don’t cause anyone else to stumble. So let’s quickly break out the bullet points of this. The Christian is to

- do everything to the glory of God (i.e., not the glory of an idol),
- do nothing that would stand in the way of anyone being saved by Christ.

How much do we love those who are on their way to hell? Which is more important, that we show our love for them by respecting their pagan traditions, or by loving them into the arms of Christ Jesus? The choice is ours.

There is much to glean from these three chapters, and I look forward to digging into the treasure to be found within—which we will begin in our next session with Chapter Eight.