

1 Corinthians 10:18-22

PREFACE

In this study we move from the example of the Christian “table of the Lord”—that is, Communion—in vv15-17, to the example of Israel and those who sacrifice to (and eat with) an idol that is not God. Let’s begin by reading the entire paragraph, vv14-22.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.

v18

Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar?

Sidebar: The KJVs have the most literal translation of this verse with, “Observe Israel after the flesh.” For that word translated “nation,” or “people” in the rest of our versions, is the Greek *sarx*, which is literally flesh, or the meat of an animal. David Garland bases his minority interpretation of this passage on this word, claiming that Paul here refers to the rebellious, sinful, “unfaithful Israel,” since Paul typically employs this term when speaking of man’s sinful nature, as he does throughout Romans and Galatians, for example. Most commentators, however, do not subscribe to that interpretation.

Even after all these years, it continues to amaze me how easy it is to miss something one has read many times. How often have you been reading along in the Bible and suddenly remark, “I didn’t know that was there!” Born and raised in the church, attending Sunday School, sitting under countless preachers, having read through the Bible many times—and I still can be surprised on occasion. How many times have I read in the OT about the various temple sacrifices and festivals, yet it was only within the last few years I realized that sometimes it was more than the priestly tribe that ate from the meat sacrificed on the temple altar.

Most of us understand that when the tribes of Israel were apportioned land and rights of inheritance in Canaan, the tribe of Levi—the priestly tribe—was not granted a section of land. They were granted pasture lands around the cities, and they were given forty-eight cities, six of which would be designated “cities of refuge” for those accused of murder, but they were not given tribal territory ([Numbers 35:1-7](#)). Their portion would be the Lord. In Numbers 18 the Lord told Aaron what would be theirs.

Read Numbers 18:18-21.

What I missed until recently was that the common people as well, when they brought their sacrifices, their tithes and offerings to the temple, they too, after the priests, would “eat before the Lord [their] God.”

Read Deuteronomy 12:5-7.

Paul's point here in our text is that not just the priests, not just the Levites, but anyone in Israel who ate from the altar—that is, food sacrificed to Yahweh—was thus a “sharer” or “participant” in the altar. We understand the true depth of this statement when we see the Greek beneath it.

koinonos = from <G2839> (koinos); **a sharer, i.e. associate** :- companion, × fellowship, partaker, **partner**.

The root word for these words—*koinos, koinonos, koinonia*, etc.—is, curiously enough, *syn*, which is almost always translated “with.”

syn (soon) = a primary preposition denoting **union; with or together** (but much closer than <G3326> (meta) [**accompaniment**] or <G3844> (para) [**near, alongside**]), i.e. by **association**, companionship, process, **resemblance, possession**, instrumentality, addition, etc. :- beside, with. In comparative it has similar applications, including completeness.

Years ago I sat in a Sunday morning service in the family church of quite a few of Linda's relatives in Alden, Iowa. They apparently had communion every Sunday, so at a point in the middle of the service they passed the plates with the elements. Every one ate and drank dutifully; I do not recall any mention from the pastor of what it meant, why we were doing this. The whole procedure was mechanical, done by rote, then we moved on.

My guess is that some in the Corinthian church were also conducting this holy ordinance mechanically, by rote. This is why Paul, in v16, so stridently grabs them by the collar and shouts,

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?

Don't you get it? He rails. Don't you see that when we partake of the wine and the bread we are declaring ourselves in union, in fellowship (koinonia) with Christ? It means something!

Then Paul cites the example of Israel: “...are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar?” Priests, Levites, common worshipers—probably as guilty as that church in Alden and the one in Corinth, guilty of it becoming just an empty, mindless ritual. But even if in their own minds it meant nothing, in reality, on a deep, spiritual level, it meant something profound. Partaking of a holy meal—one from “the altar”—links one with the deity behind that altar. One is then *associated* with that deity; whether you intend it or not, you become *partnered* with that deity.

v19

Then, in v19, the apostle anticipates their riposte.

What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?

This was already in the mix; back in Chapter Eight, when he opened this portion of his letter, Paul answered an argument the church had probably sent him in writing.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

The Corinthians were saying that eating food that had been sacrificed to idols, even within the precincts of the pagan temple, meant nothing, because that pagan “god” did not even exist. In Chapter Eight Paul agreed with that—in principle. *You’re right: that god does not really exist. There is only one, true God, “...the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him”* (1 Corinthians 8:6).

What the Corinthians had failed to realize (at least as they presented their argument to Paul) was that, as Fee puts it, “To say an idol is not a god does not mean that it does not represent supernatural powers. Indeed, it is quite the opposite.” Just as there is more to Communion than just sipping wine and eating bread, just as there is more to partaking of the meat from Yahweh’s altar than just sitting down to a good meal, so there is more to eating meat sacrificed to idols than being polite, or establishing business contacts. And now, to the end of this paragraph, Paul heads toward his most powerful argument against their position.

v20A

No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God;

Just as the chariot race in *Ben-Hur*, without question the dramatic climax of the film, comes well before its end, so too Paul brings to a climax what he has been working toward for three chapters, before the end of the last chapter. In vv23-33 of Chapter Ten he lays out his practical counsel on how to behave as followers of Christ in a pagan world, but the climax, the punchline, comes in v21.

In v20 Paul gets one step closer to his powerful, climactic conclusion of v21. In this paragraph (vv14-22), the apostle has been systematically setting up a modified “if-then” statement: *If this is true, and if this is true, and most certainly if this is true, then, logically, this must be true.*

- In v16 he presents the Christian side of the equation, that by sharing in the ordinance of Communion the believer is spiritually, mystically joining with the blood and body of Christ Jesus.
- In v18 he points out that if that is true for Christians, it is and has been true for Jews: When they share in food and meat from the altar, they are associating themselves with, joining with the God whose altar that is.

- In the first part of v20 Paul establishes the third “if” in the “if-then” statement: Christians are partakers of Christ, Jews are partakers of Yahweh, and Gentiles—because they share in neither Yahweh or Christ—are sharers in demons.

demons = *daimonion* = neuter of a derivative of <G1142> (daimon); a dæmonic being; by extension a deity :- devil, god.

Gentiles, pagans = *ethnos* = probably from <G1486> (etho); a race (as of the same habit), i.e. **a tribe; specially a foreign (non-Jewish) one** (usually by implication pagan) :- Gentile, heathen, nation, people. *Although throughout the Bible *ethnos* is used for any nation that is not Israel (Hebrew, *goyim*), here and elsewhere Paul can use *ethnos* in a broader sense to refer to anyone who, by faith, has been “grafted into the rich olive tree” (Romans 11:17) that is the children of Abraham, by virtue of his faith in Jesus Christ. Paul has already revealed this distinction in Chapter Five: “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist **even among the Gentiles**, that someone has his father's wife” (1 Corinthians 5:1, emphasis added).*

Logically that is all that is left; if there is only one true God, worshiped by Christians and Jews, then that leaves only beings who are “not-gods” (i.e., “demons”) for them to worship. This connection was established by Moses, back in his “Song” of Deuteronomy 32.

Read Deuteronomy 32:15-22.

Lange: To partake of a Jewish sacrifice as a sacrifice, and in a holy place, was an act of Jewish worship. By parity of reasoning to partake of a heathen sacrifice as a sacrifice, and in a holy place, was an act of heathen worship.

v20B

...and I do not want you to become sharers in demons.

There is a generous dollop of humanity in what Paul adds at the end of v20. As a writer, I wouldn't do it; stylistically it weakens the run-up to v21. But Paul's thoughts are not on stylistic writing; his thoughts and his heart are all on the welfare of the Corinthians. So he must put down what is on his mind at the moment: *Oh, please, Corinthians, don't do this. Don't become sharers in demons!*

In our next session we will revisit v20 before we examine the most powerful v21, and the rest of this paragraph.