

1 COR. 8:1 – 10:10

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B. Food Offered to Idols – (8:1 – 11:1)

Introduction to Section

Paul turns his attention to the matter of food sacrificed to idols, a subject that will occupy him for the next three chapters. I follow Gordon Fee's view that the basic problem to which Paul is responding throughout this section is the eating of sacrificial food at the cultic meals in the pagan temples. In other words, the primary problem is not idol food sold in the marketplace and eaten in private homes; that doesn't get addressed until 10:23-11:1.

Cultic or ritual meals were a regular part of worship in antiquity. Following the sacrifice, some of the meat would be burned before the god, some would be placed on the "table of the god," which was attended by cultic ministers, and some would be eaten by the worshippers as a feast. What was left over from the "god's table" was often sold in the marketplace.

These meals were both religious and social. The gods were thought to be present, since the meals were held in their honor and sacrifices made to them, but it was also the way in which almost every social occasion was celebrated. In this sense, one writer says the temple was the basic "restaurant" in antiquity. Gentile converts in Corinth had probably attended such meals all their lives.

Fee reconstructs the problem in the Corinthian church as follows:

After Paul left Corinth, some of the Christians there returned to the practice of attending the cultic meals. In his earlier letter Paul forbid such idolatry (note the reference to "idolaters" in 5:10-11), but they took exception to his doing this and in their letter made four points, several of which Paul will allude to in his response:

- They argued that "all have knowledge" about idols. Since there is only one God, the idols cannot be real gods, a point with which Paul will, of course, agree. Therefore, their eating in the temple was not an act of worship but a purely social matter. They were not worshipping what they knew did not exist.
- They also have knowledge that food is a matter of indifference to God, another point on which Paul will agree. Putting this with the first argument, their conclusion is that it does not matter *what* they eat or *where* they eat. So how can Paul forbid their going to temples?

- They seem to have a somewhat "magical" view of the sacraments, a view that those who have been baptized and who take the Lord's Supper are not in any danger of falling.
- A number of them also doubt that Paul has the proper apostolic authority to forbid them on this matter. In their minds, this doubt has been substantiated by the fact Paul did not accept support from them while he was with them and the fact he seemed to compromise his own stance on eating idol food sold in the marketplace (he ate when eating with Gentiles but abstained when eating with Jews).

Those pushing to eat the temple meals probably also were arguing that others would be "built up" by taking "authority" in this matter. In any event, they pressed for this right in the name of "knowledge" and would invite other brothers and sisters to join them at the banquets.

1. Christian behavior is not predicated solely on knowledge (8:1-6)

a. Paul opens his attack on their objection to his prohibition of attending temple feasts by challenging its faulty ethical premise. The assumption behind their argument was that Christian behavior is predicated solely on knowledge, that knowing that something is not forbidden automatically authorizes one to do it. Paul's point in this section is that even if their arguments about the propriety of eating in the temples were correct, which they were not (as he will make clear in 10:14-22), the principle of brotherly love would still require that they forego the practice.

b. Paul accepts the Corinthian slogan that all Christians possess knowledge, but as v. 7 makes clear, he realizes that there are varying levels of that knowledge. He breaks off his comment to attack the concept of knowledge as represented in Corinth.

(1) Knowledge by itself, without any other guiding principles, simply puffs a person up. It causes him to see himself as superior and then to run roughshod over those who are beneath him. They are the ignorant who are not worth worrying about.

(2) Love, on the other hand, builds up the community of faith. It focuses one on the welfare of one's brothers and sisters.

(3) Alluding to the knowledge that some were claiming authorized their attending the temple feasts, Paul says that anyone who thinks he is in the know on such a matter does not know as he needs to know. Such a person thinks he's got knowledge, but true knowledge has escaped him because he has overlooked the essential role of love.

(4) V. 3 makes most sense if read: "but if anyone loves God, the same has been known by him." This reinforces the point that love is an integral part of true knowing (see, 1 Jn. 4:7).

c. Having interjected a qualifying word about the way of love superseding the way of knowledge, Paul picks back up what he began in v. 1. He naturally agrees with the Corinthian position that "there is no idol in the world" and that "there is no God but one." The fact there is only one God means that the idols of the pagan world cannot be gods.

(1) Paul begins v. 5 with the phrase "For even if there are 'so-called gods,'" meaning things that are not really gods but are called gods by people, but he doesn't finish that sentence. It seems that he was going to say that even if there are so-called gods, they don't really exist.

(2) Instead of completing his thought, Paul interjects an acknowledgement of the fact that there are many gods (traditional Greco-Roman deities) and lords (deities of the Oriental mystery cults). They were everywhere in the ancient world. But Paul is not saying that these deities really exist (at least not as deities - see, 10:19-20); he is simply saying that people believe they exist. They are "so-called" gods.

(3) He grants that there are many "so-called" gods and lords, but that is only true for pagans. Christians know better (at least intellectually); for us there is only one God, from whom all things have been made, and only one Lord, through whom all things have been made.

2. Brotherly love requires in this situation that they forego eating in the temples (8:7-13)

a. All the Corinthian Christians knew intellectually or theoretically that there is only one God, but not all had internalized that knowledge at an emotional or experiential level. They were so used to associating with the idol as a god that they could not return to their former place of worship and join in the temple meal without some sense of feeling that the idol to whom the food was offered was real.

b. In other words, because of the relative weakness of their monotheistic convictions, they could not participate in the temple feasts as a purely social matter. For them, it was at some level engaging in the worship of an idol, and the practice therefore defiled their consciences; it violated their sense of loyalty to the one true God.

c. Verse 8 is a reference to the Corinthian claim that food is a matter of indifference to God. (NIV's "But" is better translated "Now" in this context.) They had probably taken something Paul had said about the irrelevance of Jewish food laws and converted it into a justification for eating food being sacrificed to idols. (This explains the imprecise fit of the phrase with their argument. You would expect them to claim that

abstaining did not make one *superior* and that eating did not make one *inferior*, but v. 8 says the opposite.)

d. Verse 9 shows that v. 8 is part of the Corinthian argument against Paul. He cites their claim and then counters with, "But watch out lest somehow this authority of yours becomes a stumbling block to the weak." By dragging their freedom with regard to Jewish food laws into the issue of eating cultic meals, it would become a stumbling block for others. Paul explains:

(1) For the one with a weak conscience, meaning weak in terms of monotheistic convictions, who sees them (probably via invitation) eating in an idol's temple will have his conscience "built up" (a bit of irony) "to eat the things sacrificed to idols," i.e., to participate in idolatry! The weak one does not simply eat food; he eats food "sacrificed to idols."

(2) That is why Paul says in v. 11, "For the one who is weak is *destroyed* by your knowledge." By their so-called knowledge, they are pushing the brother for whom Christ died into eternal ruin. This is not simply a matter of causing someone to experience feelings of guilt. Paul's concern is that a former idolater, by returning to idolatry and opening himself to the demonic powers that lie behind it, will be captured by those powers and thus suffer eternal loss. See, Rev. 2:14, 20.

(3) By sinning against the brothers in this way, by pushing them to violate their idol-sensitive (weak) consciences in the name of enlightened freedom, they are sinning against Christ himself.

e. The bottom line is that even if their arguments about the propriety of eating in the temples were correct, which they were not (as he will make clear in 10:14-22), the principle of brotherly love requires that in this situation they forego the practice.

f. Given what he has just said, Paul sums up with a declaration of the principle of love put in the context of eating. Paul is not so concerned with his right to eat something that he will insist on it to the detriment of his brothers. This broader statement and shift to first person leads into the following section.

g. In applying the principle it is helpful to keep in mind:

(1) It involves conduct that a person is engaging in

(2) The conduct can be defended as being morally irrelevant and harmless

(3) Others will be persuaded intellectually to engage in the conduct (i.e., it is done openly and/or advocated)

(4) Some who are persuaded to engage in the conduct will, for reasons beyond intellectual conviction, be put in danger. The danger stems from their experience, not their intellect; it is not something that can be reasoned away.

h. The closest modern example I can think of is the social drinking of alcohol. You can make the case that it is acceptable to do so, but for some who are so convinced it may not be harmless. In fact, it may lead them to destruction. In the midst of a group of alcoholics, it would be sinful to insist on one's "right" to drink socially.

3. Response to those challenging the prohibition of attending temple meals by calling into question his apostolic authority (9:1-23)

a. Response re his not accepting their material support (9:1-18)

(1) He had a *right* to their support as an apostle (9:1-14)

(a) Paul now jumps the Corinthians for challenging his prohibition of attending temple meals by calling into question his apostolic authority. It seems that the challenge to that authority was being framed in terms of the fact he did not accept material support from them and the fact he seemed to go both ways on the issue of eating marketplace food.

(b) He begins with a flood of rhetorical questions, the answer to each of which is "of course." He asks "Am I not free?" which relates to their attempt to deny him the freedom to forego support from them and the freedom to eat or reject food. He picks this point up in vv. 15-23. The second question, "Am I not an apostle?" is the focus of vv. 1-14.

(c) Proof of his apostleship is in the following rhetorical questions. He reminds them that he had seen Jesus, referring to his Damascus road experience, and that they were the result of his labor in the Lord. Their very existence authenticates or serves as a "seal" of his apostleship because church planting is what apostles do.

(d) In vv. 3-14 Paul plays variations on the single theme that he had a right to their material support. It seems that his failure to take support from the Corinthians was used against him to call his apostolic authenticity into question.

[1] Philosophers in the Greco-Roman world were supported by four means: fees, patronage, begging, and working. Each of these means was viewed by some as unworthy of philosophy. By the time of his ministry in Corinth, Paul had chosen manual labor (tent making) as his basic means of support (2 Thess. 3:7-9; 1 Cor. 4:12; Acts 18:3).

[2] When later teachers, such as Apollos and possibly Peter, came to Corinth and accepted patronage, it focused attention on Paul's failure

to do so. His failure to accept patronage was interpreted to mean that he had no *right* to such support, which, given that other apostles (broader than the Twelve) were entitled to it, called his apostleship into question.

[3] So Paul first establishes that he was also entitled to their financial support before he defends his renunciation of that right.

(e) Verses 4-6 are a series of intense rhetorical questions designed to force them to recognize what they should already know, i.e., that Paul has all the rights of an apostle. The first two are best translated as beginning "Can it be that we do not have authority (or the right) to eat and drink? Can it be that we do not have authority to take along a wife who is a sister, as also the rest of the apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?" The expected answer is "No!"

[1] The question about the authority to take along a believing wife shows that the apostles' right to support extended to their wives as well. Not only were they entitled to support themselves but they were entitled to bring their wives and to have them supported as well.

[2] Given that others typically were accompanied by their wives, Paul's minority practice of not being accompanied by a wife was taken as a strike against his authenticity. His practice was attributed to the fact he lacked the apostolic authority to have a wife be supported. That was either why he did not marry or, for those who assumed he was married, why he did not bring his wife.

[3] V. 6 shows that v. 5 is related to the issue of support. Paul asks "*Or* do only I and Barnabas not have authority not to work?"

(f) In v. 7 he uses a soldier, a farmer, and a shepherd to illustrate his right to support. In vv. 8-10 he illustrates his right to support from the O.T. In v. 11-12a, he applies these points to his own situation in Corinth.

(g) In v. 12b he starts to explain why he gave up his right to support, but then adds two more pieces of evidence establishing his right to their support: general religious practice (v. 13) and the teaching of Christ (v. 14).

[1] Paul says he chose to give up his right to support so as not to hinder the gospel of Christ. By preaching the gospel "freely," meaning without pay, he is able to further illustrate the nature of the gospel, in contrast to those who peddle their wisdom or religious instruction.

[2] In both Jewish and pagan temples, the priest who served in making the sacrifices shared in the sacrificial food. So Paul is entitled to support from his religious labor.

[3] Paul clinches the argument with reference to the teaching of Christ. In Lk. 10:7 he says "The worker deserves his wages."

(2) His renunciation of his right to their support (9:15-18)

(a) Paul did not use his right to support and is not now seeking it. On the contrary, he is *firmly* resolved not to allow anyone to nullify his "boast."

[1] He feels so strongly about this because he has concluded that taking support from locals will hinder or undermine his evangelistic efforts. It would be better for him to die than to have that happen.

[2] Paul "boasts" in the fact he supported himself via manual labor because this was a humbling of himself for the sake of the gospel. God used this humiliation, this weakness, to save others. See, 4:12, 9:12b, and 2 Cor. 11:7-10.

(b) He explains that merely preaching the gospel does not provide him a reason for boasting (perhaps implying "unlike some others") because he has no choice in the matter. He was conscripted and is under divine compulsion to preach. The man who is drafted and ordered into battle stands on a different footing than the one who enlists and asks to go to the front line.

[1] For if he preached voluntarily, he would have a reward: the special honor that accompanies voluntary service. But since he was drafted, since he was involuntarily assigned the task of preaching, that reward, that boast, is not available to him. He is simply a slave discharging his duty.

[2] Does he then, as a draftee, have a reward in preaching? Yes. His reward, his "boast," is the freedom to humble himself by preaching the gospel free of charge, to voluntarily forego his rights in preaching so as not to hinder the gospel. In other words, his reward in preaching is the freedom to preach without a financial reward!

b. Response re his seemingly wishy-washy conduct in matters of social relationships (9:19-23)

(1) Having defended his apostolic authenticity by arguing for both his right to their material support and his freedom to turn it down, Paul continues with the theme of his freedom to forego his rights for the sake of the gospel to explain his seemingly wishy-washy conduct in matters of social relationships.

(a) It seems (see 10:23-33) that the problem had to do in part at least with Paul's actions toward marketplace food. When eating with Jews he adopted their dietary scruples but when eating with Gentiles he adopted theirs.

(b) This seeming inconsistency struck some as conduct unbecoming an apostle, especially an apostle who would deny them the "right" to attend cultic meals with their friends.

(2) Paul says that though he was free from all men, harking back to 9:1, he gave up that right for the sake of the gospel. He lived how others wanted him to live in order to win them to Christ.

(a) To Jews Paul became like a Jew. In other words, he would adopt Jewish religious practices, such things as their food laws, which he as a Christian had long ago given up as being irrelevant to one's relationship with God. He would do so, however, purely as an accommodation, not because they were obligations.

(b) "Those under the law" is simply another way of referring to the Jews.

[1] He may have included this reference because the specific issue was especially related to Jewish legal requirements, not simply to matters of national origin.

[2] The parenthetical comment that he is not under the law is to clarify that his own conduct is a matter of freedom, not obligation.

(c) "Those without the law" refers to Gentiles, including the majority of Corinthian believers and those who stood against him. As he notes in 10:27, with them he ate whatever was put before him without raising questions of conscience.

[1] The fact he ate with them but abstained when with the Jews made them think Paul lacked principle.

[2] The parenthetical comment that he is not without God's law but under the law of Christ is to clarify that he is not lawless in the sense of behaving in a godless way. He is not under the Jewish law, but he is under the ethical imperatives of the Christian faith, the ethics of the new age.

(d) "The weak" are probably the socially weak, those without much social power or influence. That is the group into which most of the Corinthian Christians fell (1:26-31). Paul lowered himself by "stooping" to manual labor and doing without much (e.g., 4:8-13) so that his outreach to such not be hindered.

(e) V. 22b summarizes the argument: "I have become all things to all men, in order that by all means I might save some." That is why he made the choices that he made with regard to nonessentials, why he seemed to go both ways on such matters as marketplace food. The bottom line is that what some were interpreting as a strike

against his genuineness was in reality fruit of his zeal for the gospel, a hallmark of apostolic authenticity.

(3) In v. 23 he says that he acts in this way, that he does all things for the sake of the gospel, (literally) "in order that I might be a fellow participant in it." In other words, he does this so that he might be a fellow participant [with the Lord] in the [cause of the] gospel, that he might share Christ's cause as his own, rather than have it be just an assignment that he carries out.

4. Exhortation to put great effort into Christian living (9:24-27)

a. This is a transitional paragraph in which Paul moves from defending his apostleship against their criticism of his choices to exhorting them to put great effort into Christian living. He is turning the subject back to their insistence on eating cultic meals in the temples.

b. Being faithful to Christ requires discipline, self denial, and self control. If an athlete denies himself things he wants for the sake of a perishable crown, how much more should the Christian deny himself things he wants for the sake of an eternal one?

c. Christ calls us to deny ourselves, to live as he wants us to live, and if we reject that call for the sake of self indulgence, we will be disqualified for the prize. That is why Paul is so serious about obeying. He lives a life of self discipline and denial because he has his eye on the prize, the imperishable crown that follows a life of faith (see, 2 Tim. 4:6-8).

5. Baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper will not save them if they continue eating meals at the idol temples (10:1-5)

a. Having exhorted the Corinthians to live a disciplined Christian life and warned them of the danger of self indulgence, Paul wants to remove any notion that their baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper makes them immune or invulnerable to disqualification. Those sacraments will not save them if they continue attending the meals at the idol temples.

b. He does not want them to be ignorant of the fact that all the Israelites who came out of Egypt participated in a type of baptism and shared in a type of Lord's Supper, yet *most* of them were struck down in the wilderness.

(1) Ancient Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage was finalized by their passing through the Red Sea, a passage that began with their going under God's guiding cloud as it moved from their front to their rear to separate them from the Egyptian army (Ex. 14:19-20). Paul characterizes this water passage of deliverance as a baptism into Moses, paralleling it to their baptism into Christ.

(2) After their "baptism," all of the ancient Israelites were sustained in the desert by the food (manna) and drink (water) that were supernaturally provided for them.

(a) Manna was a bread that God rained down from heaven. He provided it for the Israelites throughout their wilderness period (Exodus 16). The drink referred to is the water supplied from the rock at Meribah in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20.

(b) The manna and water from the rock were "spiritual" in the sense they had a special spiritual significance. They signified the spiritual reality of God's provision for his people and served as a type or analogy of the Lord's Supper.

(c) Paul ties the wilderness provisions of the ancient Israelites directly to Christ, thus giving the type or analogy even more punch, by pointing out that it was Christ, the spiritual Rock, who accompanied them and was providing for them. This identification is no doubt traceable to O.T. references to God as The Rock (Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 30-31).

(3) Despite these sacred privileges, which were similar in kind to those the Corinthians felt made them invincible, God was not pleased with *most* of the them, as evidenced by the fact they were killed in the wilderness.

6. Warning not to follow Israel's example (10:6-10)

a. God's repeated striking down of "baptized communicants" of Israel serves to warn us that we should not be people who lust after evil things as they did. Paul's specific concern here is with their idolatry in attending the temple meals, as suggested by his examples of evil things.

b. Paul first urges them not to follow the Israelite example of idolatry and refers to the episode in Exodus 32 when they worshipped the golden calf.

(1) He cites Ex. 32:6b ("The people sat down to eat and to drink, and they rose up to play") rather than a text more specifically related to idolatry *per se* (e.g., 6a or 31c) because it involves the people *eating* in the presence of the calf, precisely his concern with the Corinthians attending their cultic meals.

(2) The phrase "they rose up to play" (NIV "to engage in pagan revelry") probably has sexual overtones (as in Gen. 26:8 and 39:17). It was so understood by the rabbis and by the early church. There was a connection between idol worship and sexual immorality (e.g., Num. 25:1-9), a connection that continued into the N.T. era (see, Rev. 2:14, 20).

c. The reference to sexual immorality leads into Paul's next example. They are not to engage in sexual immorality as some of the Israelites did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day!

(1) Paul probably raises this subject, not as an isolated word against sexual immorality, but because of the connection between sexual immorality and idol worship. Not only does the preceding text link idolatrous eating and sexual play, but Paul is most likely referring to the event in Num. 25:1-9 where sexual immorality is specifically joined with eating in the presence of Baal of Peor (vv. 1-3). (Paul apparently had access to a tradition that of the 24,000 who died as a result of this sin, 23,000 died in a single day. If he is referring to Exodus 32 instead of Numbers 25, he may have had access to a tradition that 23,000 died in a day from the plague in Ex. 32:35.)

(2) Rev. 2:14 and 2:20 connect eating idol sacrifices with sexual immorality, and 2:14 refers to the same event in Numbers 25.

d. The third example they are not to follow is the Israelites "putting Christ to the test," which resulted in some of them being destroyed by snakes.

(1) This is a reference to Num. 21:4-7 where the Israelites complained against God and against Moses because they had to eat manna rather than more ordinary food (see, Num. 11:4-6). They detested the food God had made available to them. The Corinthians were doing the same kind of thing in complaining against Paul's prohibition against their eating idol food. What God made available, the universe of non-idol food, was not acceptable!

(2) Paul describes the conduct of the ancient Israelites as "putting Christ to the test," the very thing that, according to 1 Cor. 10:22, the Corinthians were doing by insisting on their right to eat the temple meals.

e. The final example they are not to follow is the Israelites grumbling or complaining, which resulted in some of them being destroyed by the destroyer.

(1) Paul is probably referring to Numbers 14 where the community, following the bad report about Canaan by all the spies except Joshua and Caleb, grumbled against Moses' leadership and spoke of returning to Egypt. Num. 14:37 states that those responsible for the bad report were struck down by a plague, which Paul understands to have been carried out by the Destroyer of Ex. 12:23.

(2) The Corinthians were doing the same kind of thing in grumbling against Paul's (and ultimately against God's) prohibition of their attending the temple meals.