

The Dispute Over Food Sacrificed to Idols (1 Cor 8:1-11:1)

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An insistence on exclusive loyalty to a religion was something uncommon in the great religious melting pot of the Hellenistic world. Tolerance and syncretism reflected the spirit of the times. People were accustomed to joining in the sacrificial meals of various deities, and none required an exclusive relationship.¹ The prohibitions against idol food in Acts 15:20, 29 (cf. also Rev 2:14 – 17, 2:20) and Paul's long discussion in 1 Cor 8:1 – 11:1 suggest that the problem of food dedicated to an idol was not easily solved.² Converts who turned from the worship of many gods and lords in their sundry guises were not so sure where to draw the line or if it was even necessary to draw the line when it came to food that had been sacrificed to idols as they tried to balance their identity as Christians with their assimilation to the highly competitive, pagan Corinthian culture. Dissociating themselves from all overtly idolatrous celebrations demanded of them an uncompromising devotion that could only invite ostracism from their unbelieving family and associates and lead to shame and material loss. The pressures have not changed for new Christians today living in cultures where food is regularly offered to one god or another.

The thesis of this paper is that, contrary to a popular reading of 1 Cor 8:1 – 11:1, Paul forbade Christians from any association with any food overtly connected to idolatry. He understands the Christian confession of one God and one Lord to require exclusive loyalty so that even a token or make-believe show of fealty to an idol compromises the loyalty owed only to God and Christ. Smit contends, "Here we encounter an unmistakably Jewish Paul for whom the Shema is the basic rule of faith: Hear Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."³ Paul's conversation with the Corinthians over this issue has been ongoing because some have resisted his prohibitions. Their recalcitrance necessitates his lengthy response. The argument is subtle. He does not immediately denounce their position but chooses a more circuitous route that winds its way through various facets of the problem turning it this way and that in an attempt to convince them to "flee idolatry" (10:14). His oblique argument has tended to throw off interpreters. Some have regarded the chapters to

¹Cf. N. Walter, "Christusglaube und Heidnische Religiosität in Paulinischen Gemeinden," *NTS* 25 (1979): 429-30; W. L. Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth: The Pauline Argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10* (SBLDS 68; Chico: Scholars Press, 1995), 213; and J. F. M. Smit, "'Do not be Idolaters': Paul's Rhetoric in First Corinthians 10:1-22," *NovT* 39 (1997): 48.

²Cf. A. T. Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth: Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy* (JSNTSup 76; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 165-284, for a discussion of the issue among Christians after Paul.

³J. F. M. Smit, *"About the Idol Offerings": Rhetoric, Social Context and Theology of Paul's Discourse in First Corinthians 8:1 – 11:1* (BETL 27; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 3.

be a patchwork of interpolations, while others misread Paul's unequivocal rejection of anything explicitly connected to idols and assume that he made concessions and permitted supposedly innocuous, social dining in an idol's shrine. Neither view is correct.⁴ Paul creatively adapts the foundational Jewish confession that God is one by adding "one Lord, Jesus Christ" (8:6).⁵ The upshot is that Christians may not consort with idols or even give the appearance that they do. Such restrictions were potentially onerous for converts since occasions for eating in connection with an idol or on the premises of an idol's temple were numerous.

Occasions for Eating Idol Food

The celebrations of many cults were closely bound up with civic and social life since religion and politics were indivisible in ancient Hellenistic city life. If Christians took part in civic life, they would have been expected to participate in a festival's sacrificial meals in some form of another.⁶ The imperial cult, which frequently combined statecraft with stagecraft, was especially important to Corinthian citizens, and sacrifices were part of the Isthmian games.⁷ Winter concludes: "Overconfident and weak Christians alike were in danger, such was the power of privilege and the importance of the imperial cult, and more so when it was established on a federal basis and celebrated in Corinth."⁸

Individuals who shared the same trades (cf. Acts 19:24–25) or a desire to worship specific gods banded together in voluntary associations (clubs, guilds). Many joined them for social reasons—"a sacrifice to a god, an occasional meal, a drinking party, an exchange of different political views or a confirmation of shared ones."⁹ In the Latin West, the poor formed funeral societies to celebrate a patron's memory and contributed to a common fund to insure that they would receive a proper burial. These associations "served religious, social and commercial ends," and some met in the dining rooms attached to major civic temples or their clubhouse might bear the name of a divinity.¹⁰ While the social and economic facets of

⁴On the unity of 8:1-11:1; cf. H. Merklein, "Das Einheitlichkeit des ersten Korintherbriefes," *ZNW* 75 (1984): 166-73; Smit, "About the Idol Offerings," 8-9.

⁵N. T. Wright ("Monotheism, Christology and Ethics: 1 Corinthians 8," in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and Law in Pauline Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 132) terms it "christological monotheism."

⁶J. F. M. Smit, "1 Corinthians 8,1-6, a Rhetorical Partitio: A Contribution to the Coherence of 1 Cor 8,1-11,1," in *The Corinthian Correspondence* (ed. R. Bieringer; BETL 125; Leuven: Peeters, 1996), 582. One wonders what this expectation must have meant for someone like Erastus (Rom 16:23) who served as a city treasurer.

⁷B. W. Winter ("The Achaean Federal Imperial Cult II: The Corinthian Church," *TynBul* 46 [1995]: 169-78) notes that the quadrennial Caesarian Games and Imperial Contests were held in 55. Paul's reference to "gods on earth and in heaven" (8:5) suggests to him that Paul is not speaking of traditional pagan deities but the deified emperors of the imperial cult, both living and dead.

⁸Winter, "Imperial Cult II," 176. Cf. also D. Newton, *Deity and Diet: The Dilemma of Sacrificial Food at Corinth* (JSNTSup 169; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 311-12.

⁹J. E. Stambaugh and D. L. Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 124.

¹⁰Stambaugh and Balch, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*, 125; cf. R.

the associations became increasingly important, Borgen notes, "Religious activities always played a role at such gatherings."¹¹ This religious link explains why Philo (*Ebr.* 14 – 15, 20 – 29, 95) vigorously opposed Jews joining associations because the lifestyle was characterized by gluttony and indulgence and necessitated not only breaking Jewish dietary laws but also eating idolatrous food.¹²

Individuals might also receive invitations to a banquet at a temple since rooms could be rented out for private functions, like church halls today.¹³ Extant papyrus invitations beckon guests to attend banquets in a temple dining room commemorating a variety of rites of passage: weddings, childbirth, birthdays, coming-of-age parties, election victories, and funerals.¹⁴ Others were more overtly cultic feasts celebrating, for example, a god's birthday.

Willis claims that the meals in temples centered on conviviality and that any "sacramental idea" was a later construct.¹⁵ He argues that if any sacrifice was involved, most participants would have dismissed it as a perfunctory and therefore

L. Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1986), 88; and Tod and Hornblower, "clubs, Greek," *OCD*, 352. C. L. Kennedy ("The Cult of the Dead in Corinth," in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope* [eds. J. H. Marks and R. M. Good; Guilford, CN: Four Quarters, 1987], 227-36) suggests that the meals in question were funerary.

¹¹P. Borgen, "'Yes,' 'No,' 'How Far?': The Participation of Jews and Christians in Pagan Cults," in *Paul and His Hellenistic Context* (ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 45.

¹²B. W. Winter ("Theological and Ethical Responses to Religious Pluralism—1 Corinthians 8-10," *TynBul* 41 [1990]: 218) cites the case of Alexandrian Jews abstaining from dining at guild meals in pagan temples even though they were members of the guild.

¹³J. E. Stambaugh, "The Functions of Roman Temples," *ANRW* 16.1:583.

¹⁴Cf. C. H. Kim, "The Papyrus Invitation," *JBL* 94 (1975): 391-402. Some have claimed that the temple "was the basic 'restaurant' in antiquity, and every kind of occasion was celebrated in this fashion; the meals included state festivals and private celebrations of various kinds" (G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 361). But this is somewhat misleading. In the ancient world, the wealthy ate in; the poor ate out. For example, archaeologists have uncovered twenty inns and 118 bars in Pompeii that would have served warm snack food (J. Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History* [2d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], 307, n. 3).

¹⁵Willis, *Idol Meat*, 8-64. This traditional view assumes that Paul made a distinction between innocuously consuming food associated with an idol (8:1-13) and participating in actual worship of an idol (10:14-22), but that conclusion is questionable. The translation "idol meat" reads a particular social situation into the text. G. Theissen (*The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* [trans. J. H. Schütz; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982], 121-43), for example, assumes that the issue revolves around the wealthier and poorer members and that the latter were accustomed to eat meat only at some public temple feast or holiday (cf. also A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 617-20). J. J. Meggitt ("Meat Consumption and Social Conflict in Corinth," *JTS* 45 [1994]: 137) dismisses this interpretation as based upon "some dubious inferences from some questionable 'evidence'" regarding the first-century meat consumption. *Εἰδωλοθῦτα* could include any kind of food consecrated to a deity in any sacred context (cf. G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Christianity* [North Ryde: Macquarie University, 1981], 1:36-37).

meaningless convention. He underrates the religious overtones of such meals by overstressing conviviality. Conzelmann adopts a similar conclusion that Paul “does not forbid the visiting of temple restaurants, which could be visits of a purely social kind.”¹⁶ The problem with this view is that neat distinctions between meals that involved overtly religious rites and those that were only convivial meals did not exist. The religious and the social functions were indissolubly bound together.¹⁷ The god or gods were honored by the meal and were conceived as present.¹⁸ Social meals in temples could not be purely secular or only nominally connected to idolatry since religious elements were always involved, even though opinion divided over what they meant. In the ancient world, people did not compartmentalize their religious, economic, or social lives, and it is anachronistic to think that they did.¹⁹ Schmitt-Pantel asserts that in the Greek city: “Religion is present in all the different levels of social life, and all collective practices have a religious dimension.”²⁰ It will not do to divide meals on temple grounds into those with social purposes, which Paul would have condoned, and those with religious purposes, which Paul would have prohibited. Gooch points to “the ubiquitous use of hallowed food to celebrate socially significant events” and concludes that “often the food (and fellowship) would be explicitly set apart as special by religious rite, and therefore—according to Paul—dangerous to eat.”²¹ Since Paul maintains in 10:28 that the food takes on a religious quality if a person says that it does and forbids Christians from partaking anything declared to be sacrificed to a god, he would not have sanctioned participation in anything idolatrous, even if it were only nominally idolatrous.

A second problem with Willis’s interpretation is that the suggested ambiguity of the religious status of dining rooms in temples does not mitigate the problem of participating in banquets there. Even if sacred food were not consumed, the location of the banquet would cast its idolatrous shadow on the meal. Diners could not eat in such a place without a heightened consciousness of the gods.²²

¹⁶H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 148, building on the work of H. F. von Soden, “Sakrament und Ethik bei Paulus: Zur Frage der literarischen und theologischen Einheitlichkeit von 1 Kor. 8-10,” in *Urchristentum und Geschichte: Gesammelte Aufsätze und Vorträge* (ed. H. von Campenhausen; Tübingen: Mohr, 1951), 1:239-75.

¹⁷Smit, “1 Corinthians 8,1-6,” 581.

¹⁸Cheung, *Idol Food*, 36.

¹⁹Cf. W. T. Sawyer, “The Problem of Meat Sacrificed to Idols in the Corinthian Church” (Th.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1968), 88; P. D. Gooch, *Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8-10 in Its Context* (SCJ 5; Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1993), 33; and B. J. Oropeza, “Laying to Rest the Midrash: Paul’s Message on Meat Sacrificed to Idols in Light of the Deuteronomistic Tradition,” *Bib* 79 (1998): 65. P. J. Tomson (*Paul and the Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* [CRINT 3/1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], 189) comments: “Religion was an integral part of ancient society at all levels and in all their relations.” Cf. also Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 64-101.

²⁰P. Schmitt-Pantel, “Collective Activities and the Political in the Greek City,” in *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (eds. O. Murray and S. R. F. Price; Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 200.

²¹Gooch, *Dangerous Food*, 38.

²²Cheung, *Idol Food*, 28-38.

Gooch asks, for example, “How could one eat in Demeter’s sanctuary and not remember, or be reminded by word or symbol or ritual act, that the fruit of fertile ground was her gift?”²³

Christians might avoid overt associations with idolatry by declining to attend meals connected to idols and their shrines, but what were they to do when they were guests at someone’s house and offered food sacrificed to an idol? They had colleagues, relatives, and patrons who were devotees of other gods and goddesses, and they would be put in socially awkward situations when invited to another’s home and offered food that had been sanctified by an idol by a religiously minded host.²⁴ Sacred food could be taken from the temple precincts and consumed at home, or religious rites could be performed over the food giving the meal a special character.²⁵ Gooch points out:

Meals involving sacrifice in private homes were not occasions focusing exclusively on high religious ritual and demanding solemn religious dedication from participants, but they also were not simple common meals bracketed by habitual, formal and essentially empty rites. Rather they seem often to be meals of some social importance . . . They are meals where quantities are eaten, wine flows freely, and conviviality reigns—true meals and not simply ritual events. At the same time, the rites performed over the food were of significance: just as the occasions called for serious eating, they also called for authentic thanksgiving to the gods.²⁶

The issue Paul addresses in chapters 8 – 10 involves three different types of situations: (1) eating food sacrificed to an idol at the temple of an idol (8:7 – 13; 10:1 – 22); (2) eating food of unknown history that is bought in the market (10:23 – 27); and (3) eating food in the private homes of unbelievers (10:28 – 31).²⁷

An Internal Squabble between the Strong and the Weak?

An underestimation of the religious nature of meals at temple shrines has led to a misunderstanding of the nature of the dispute Paul addresses. Many recent interpreters imagine that the Corinthians wrote to Paul to arbitrate an internal squabble between the “strong” and the “weak” who were of different minds regarding food offered to idols.²⁸ As Murphy-O’Connor frames it: “One group had no doubts

²³Gooch, *Dangerous Food*, 13.

²⁴Cf. the scenario creatively envisaged by P. Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (SNTSMS 110; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 90-91.

²⁵Philo (*Legat.* 356) mentions that some sacrificed to the emperor Gaius, and the worshipers took the flesh home and had a feast. Horace (*Sat.* 2.2.120-25; 2.6.65-66) speaks of a private dinner and making prayers to the god Ceres and dining before his own Lar with guests; cf. also Plutarch *Quaest. Conv.* 2.10.1 (642F).

²⁶Gooch, *Dangerous Food*, 125.

²⁷Willis (*Idol Meat*, 244) oversimplifies the situation Paul addresses by breaking it down into only two: (1) Eating at the table of demons and becoming a partner of demons (10:14 – 21), which Paul absolutely forbids; and (2) Eating that is permissible but qualified by consideration of the other person who may be offended (10:31 – 32).

²⁸It is widely reflected in the commentaries from Godet (1886) to Thiselton (2000) and in several influential articles: J. Murphy-O’Connor, “Freedom or the Ghetto (1 Cor,

about the legitimacy of eating idol-meat, the other had serious reservations.”²⁹ It is assumed that the “strong” argued in the name of knowledge and freedom that they had the right to continue to eat idol food because idols had no existence. Many detect the propositions of the imagined “strong” mirrored in Paul’s responses:

“All of us possess gnosis” (8:1)

“An idol has no real existence” . . . because “there is no God but one” (8:4)

“Food will not bring us before God; if we do not eat we are not lacking and if we do we do not excel” (8:8)

These conjectured slogans may have been combined with another, “All things are permissible” (6:12, 10:23), to reach the conclusion that eating food offered to the idols of gods that did not exist could pose no danger to Christians. It is then surmised that the “strong” reasoned: “What does not exist cannot contaminate us. Therefore, we are free to participate in these banquets if we so wish.”

This dominant view assumes that the “weak” Christians felt neither so free nor so bold. They were converted pagans—Jews could not be described as “until now accustomed to idols” (8:7)—and their past associations of the sacrificed food with pagan rites and shrines were simply too strong for them to eat in good conscience. They did not have the strong’s liberating knowledge in their emotions and sensibilities but felt pressure from the strong to imitate them and not be so squeamish or sanctimonious. Some contend that the so-called “strong” castigated their more scrupulous brothers and sisters as the “weak” in their letter to Paul and sought to raise their consciousness by encouraging them to attend meals in pagan temples and to consume the idol food.³⁰ By caving in to this pressure, however, the weak violated their own conscience. They ate idol food but were not yet fully convinced it was permissible.³¹ The letter to Paul from the “strong” tries to enlist his support in urging the weak to get with it and “enter the world of spiritual freedom enjoyed by those who possess *gnōsis*.”³²

This view assumes that Paul agreed theologically with the “strong” (10:19, 25, 27) but introduced a catch they failed to consider. On the one hand, he concurs that they were technically correct that consuming idol food *per se* was a matter of indifference for a Christian. He makes no attempt to controvert the slogans of those

VIII,1-13; X,23-XI,1),” *RB* 85 (1978): 544-56; R. A. Horsley, “Consciousness and Freedom among the Corinthians,” *CBQ* 40 (1978): 574-89; J. C. Brunt, “Rejected, Ignored or Misunderstood? The Fate of Paul’s Approach to the Problem of Food Offered to Idols in Early Christianity,” *NTS* 31 (1985): 113-24; T. Söding, “Starke und Schwache: Der Götzenopferstreit in 1 Kor. 8-10 als Paradigma paulinischer Ethik,” *ZNW* 85 (1994): 69-92; and D. G. Horrell, “Theological Principle or Christological Praxis? Pauline Ethics in 1 Corinthians 8.1-11.1,” *JSNT* 67 (1997): 83-114. Cf. also Willis, *Idol Meat*, 92-96.

²⁹Murphy-O’Connor, “Freedom or the Ghetto,” 544.

³⁰So K. K. Yeo, *Rhetorical Interaction in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10: A Formal Analysis With Preliminary Suggestions for a Chinese, Cross-Cultural Hermeneutic* (BIS 9; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 192.

³¹W. Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther (1 Kor 6,12-11,16)* (EKKNT 7/2; Zurich/Braunschweig/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger-Neukirchener, 1995), 256.

³²R. B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 136.

convinced of their freedom in Christ to eat anything they chose anywhere they liked. On the other hand, he reproaches them for being under-enlightened—they know but not as they ought to know (8:2)—and under-empathic toward the delicate consciences of the weak. They do not love and consequently disdain and bully the Christian brothers and sisters who were still influenced emotionally by years of conditioning regarding the temples and the gods (8:7). This view assumes that Paul is not vexed by their consumption of idol food in idol settings but by their lack of consideration for their fellow Christians. While the “strong” were certainly correct that eating is morally neutral and makes one neither better nor worse spiritually (8:8), he insists that under certain conditions eating has a moral dimension and can become a sin against Christ (8:12).

Instead of urging the ones with the scruples to quit being so uptight over nothing, as the “strong” Corinthians hoped he would do, this traditional view assumes that Paul directs his words to the so-called free ones with knowledge. He instructs them to be radically free (8:9). If they are radically free, they will never allow their freedom to ruin a fellow Christian whose conscience is weak (8:9 - 13). Many read Paul’s advice in Rom 14:23 into this situation. The weak person may be induced to “go along” with the crowd, that is, to participate in feasts without being fully persuaded that it was sanctioned by God. Since Paul believed that whatever does not proceed from trust is sin (Rom 14:14), when the weak do not eat idol food out of knowledge or a sense of freedom but out of a fear of being ridiculed, they are guilty of sin. According to this view, Paul did not object to the “strong” eating idol food because it comprised some inherent religious danger but because it caused the weak to take offense or to violate their conscience. His only concern is that the “strong” be more sensitive and cautious and show more Christian charity to their less progressive brethren. He instructs them to restrict their freedom because of their bonds with their fellow Christians who were weak. Willis, for example, concludes: “One must always forego eating when another person is thereby endangered. At no time is eating right ‘in itself,’ but all eating and drinking—indeed, everything one does (10:31!), is subject to this criterion of consideration of the other person.”³³ The corollary would seem to be that as long as no one is offended or compromised, eating idol food is not sinful and therefore is permissible. Concern for the welfare of the fellow Christian becomes the key for deciding what is right or wrong.

Brunt contends that Paul does not simply give an answer to the question but shifts the focus to Christian love, “and in doing so he presents an example of principled, ethical thinking where love and respect for others transcends the rightness or wrongness of the act itself.”³⁴ He believes that Paul’s main concern is not getting the Corinthians to avoid behavior that may be construed as idolatrous but getting them to live out the basic Christian principle: “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor” (10:24).³⁵ He therefore tries to persuade “the

³³Willis, *Idol Meat*, 244.

³⁴Brunt, “Rejected, Ignored or Misunderstood?” 115.

³⁵So W. A. Meeks, “‘And Rose Up to Play’: Midrash and Paranaesis in 1 Corinthians 10:1-22,” *JSNT* 16 (1982): 73-75.

strong” that the scruples of weaker Christians are not obstacles that stifle their freedom in Christ but opportunities to exercise their freedom.

This view also assumes that the church’s later treatment of the problem of idol food failed to grasp Paul’s sophisticated hermeneutic and vision and reverted back to Jewish legalism by demanding abstinence from idol food. For example, Barrett maintains that the next generations “could see no way of excluding idolatry that did not include rigid abstention from heathen food and heathen dinner parties. . . . The church as a whole retreated into a narrow religious shell. Jewish Christianity (in this matter) triumphed though Jewish Christians became less important in the church.”³⁶ Brunt avers that the other extant sources of Christianity speak only to the question of the rightness or wrongness of the act itself and failed to comprehend Paul’s reflective ethical approach to the problem that focused only on one’s responsibility to others.³⁷

A Dispute Between Paul and the Corinthians

The hypothesis that a dispute raged between “strong” and “weak” Corinthians does not bear careful scrutiny. Paul *never* identifies any particular group as “the strong.” He never addresses the weak and only describes them in the third person as reasons for giving up what one considers to be a right.³⁸ There is no indication in the text that the “strong” are trying to bend the will of the weak to see things their way. On the contrary, the weak in Paul’s scenario only happen *by coincidence* to see the strong reclining in a temple (8:10).³⁹ He does *not* suggest that they recoil in pietistic horror upon observing their fellow Christian dining in an idol’s shrine but instead worries that they might be drawn back into idolatry by emulating the example of

³⁶C. K. Barrett, “Things Sacrificed to Idols,” in *Essays on Paul* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 56.

³⁷Brunt, “Rejected, Ignored or Misunderstood?” 120-22.

³⁸Winter (“Imperial Cult II,” 170-72) argues that ἐξουσία should not be translated as “liberty” but as “right.” He argues that the problem arose after Paul left Corinth (cf. *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001] and understands “the right” to refer to the civic right that some Corinthian Roman citizens possessed to participate in feasts held in the temple of Poseidon in Isthmia celebrating the Games. Provincials (*incolae*) were excluded, and any Corinthian Christians who possessed these rights would be naturally reluctant to give them up “for reasons of social privilege or demonstrations of civic loyalty.” Winter makes a very strong case, but Paul uses the related words ἐξεστὺν and ἐξουσιασθήσομαι in 6:12 without any connection to citizen’s rights. In 9:4 – 6, 12, 18 it refers to personal “authority,” “right,” or “liberty” (different from his usage in Rom 13:1 – 3; 1 Cor 15:24; 2 Cor 10:8; 13:10). R. A. Horsley (*1 Corinthians* [ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998], 121) cites a parallel from Philo (*Prob.* 59) that captures Paul’s use of ἐξουσία in this context: The good man acts rightly and “will have the power (ἐξουσία) to do anything, and to live as he wishes, and he who has this power (ἐξεστὺν) must be free (ἐλεύθερος).”

³⁹If the division between the strong and weak is a social one, as G. Theissen (*The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* [trans. J. H. Schütz; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982], 137) argues, then it is only the wealthier ones who have the opportunity to join in the meat eating banquets. How can they encourage their poorer brethren to do so? Why would they want to be joined by poorer brethren?

those reputed to have knowledge. What he fears is *not* factionalism in the church over this issue or that the weak might act contrary to their beliefs but that they might be reeled back into idolatry. The basic issue has to do with what Paul regards as forbidden idolatrous behavior by those who perceive themselves as endowed with liberating knowledge.

Interpreters mistakenly have read the idea that the church was split over the idol food issue into the text from Paul's concern over factions voiced in 1 Cor 1-4 and from his seemingly analogous discussion of a dispute over food in Rom 14:1-15:13.⁴⁰ Both passages deal with the issue of how what one eats affects others. In both passages Paul cautions against causing another to stumble (Rom 14:13, 15, 20-21; 1 Cor 8:13; 10:32) and destroying another (Rom 14:20; 1 Cor 8:11). In both passages he mentions the weak (Rom 14:1, 2; 15:1; 1 Cor 8:7, 9, 10, 11, 12; 9:22). He also raises the question of your "good" being spoken of as evil (Rom 14:16; 1 Cor 10:30). Paul's solution in Rom 15:2, "Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor," matches his exhortation in 1 Cor 10:24, "Let no one seek his own advantage but that of another." The appeal to the example of Christ in Rom 15:3 corresponds to his conclusion in 1 Cor 11:1, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

These parallels have misled interpreters to think that the "weak" in 1 Cor 8 have the same problem as the "weak" in Rom 14-15. Several differences emerge from a careful reading.⁴¹ (1) In 1 Cor 8-10 the central issue is food sacrificed to idols ἐἰδωλοθύτα (8:1, 4, 7, 10; 10:19, 28 [τερόθυτον]). The issues in Rom 14-15 concern meat or vegetables (14:2) or what days to regard as holy (14:5), and Paul never mentions idol food or says anything about the context in which the food is eaten. Questions about food being "clean" or "unclean" (Rom 14:14, 20) are matters of *kashrut*. Idol food, *which is intended and known to be offered to an idol*, can never be clean.

(2) Paul never refers to "the strong" (Rom 15:1) in 1 Cor 8-10, and "the weak" are identified as "weak in conscience" (1 Cor 8:7).⁴² The problem in Romans 14-15 is a weakness in faith (Rom 14:1, 22, 23), not a weakness in conscience. The word "conscience" (1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25, 27, 28, 29) never appears in Rom 14-15, and the word "faith" does not appear in 1 Cor 8 – 10.⁴³

⁴⁰Cf. Cheung, *Idol Food*, 87.

⁴¹Cf. G. W. Dawes, "The Danger of Idolatry: First Corinthians 8:7-13," *CBQ* 58 (1996): 86-88.

⁴²Paul's only mention of strength in 1 Cor 8:1-11:1 comes in an allusion to the OT, "Are we stronger than he?" (10:22). The "strong" in 1 Corinthians does not refer to a specific group so much as an attitude of the Corinthians (4:10, "we are weak but you are strong").

⁴³Conzelmann (*1 Corinthians*, 147) claims that "conscience" and "faith" are identical. He substitutes "faith" for "conscience" (cf. also R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* [trans. K. Grobel; New York: Scribner, 1955], 2:220). J. D. G. Dunn (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 703), however, correctly recognizes that "faith" was the appropriate criterion for an internal issue but "conscience" was more appropriate for a boundary-crossing issue.

(3) In 1 Cor 8:9 (cf. 9:4 – 6, 12, 18), the key word is ἐξουσία (*exousia*, “authority,” “liberty,” “right”), which does not appear in Rom 14-15.

(4) In Rom 14 – 15, Paul clearly sides with the “strong” (Rom 14:20: “for everything is indeed clean”), and he sees no harm in their eating except for its potential effect on the “weak.” He warns against passing judgment on others with scruples (Rom 14:1-13a). They could pressure the “weak” to conform and be guilty in their own minds of sin (Rom 14:13b-23). By contrast, in 1 Cor 10:14-22, Paul brands their actions as a deadly communion with demons. He only agrees that the “weak” do not have “this knowledge” but does not offer any hint that their “scruples”—if that is the proper word—are “backward” or “unnecessary.” In Rom 14:5 – 6, Paul says that both the one who eats and the one who abstains give thanks to God and honor God. Can food that is publicly disclosed as offered to an idol be blessed and bring honor to God? Paul’s directive in 1 Cor 10:28 not to eat food that someone openly declares has been offered in sacrifice suggests not.

Romans 14:1 – 15:6 has to do with the social interaction between Jewish and Gentile Christians. 1 Corinthians 8:1 – 11:1 has to do with idol food and associations with idolatry—the interaction between Christians and idol worshipers. It does not follow that since Paul rejected Jewish food laws that erected barriers between Jews and Gentiles he condoned the eating of idol food. Idol food is a different matter entirely that introduces the baleful influence of syncretism and polytheism. Because Paul rejected narrow Jewish restrictions that separated Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians does not mean that he rejected restrictions involving idolatry that separated Christians, who were exclusively tied to the one true God, from idolaters, who related to many gods and lords. It is more reasonable to conclude that Rom 14 – 15 is an adaptation of principles found in 1 Cor 8:1 – 11:1 to a quite different situation. Consequently, Rom 14:1 – 15:6 should not be read into the Corinthian context. It is mistaken to assume that, as Paul was in theological agreement with the “strong” in Romans, he also agreed with the so-called “strong” in 1 Cor 8 and only wanted them to be more charitable to their theologically challenged brothers and sisters.

When Rom 14:1 – 15:6 is not read into the text, a careful reading of 1 Cor 8:7 – 13 does not suggest that the Corinthians were knocking heads over the idol meat issue and appealed to Paul to hold court on the matter. Hurd claims instead that the Corinthians were united on the issue of idol food and that Paul’s response in these chapters was another installment in the continuing saga of his disagreement with them.⁴⁴ The proudly enlightened Corinthians wrote to Paul defending

⁴⁴J. C. Hurd Jr., *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (New York: Seabury, 1965), 117-25, 143-48. His concomitant thesis that the dispute was provoked when the Apostolic Council adopted a new policy on idol food that conflicted with Paul’s earlier instructions unfortunately has made his arguments less compelling. Fee (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 358, 390) agrees that the letter to Paul was not a “friendly inquiry” but took exception to his earlier prohibition of idol food. He (362) contends that the Corinthians’ letter included these points: (1) All have knowledge about idols—“Monotheism by its very nature rules out any genuine reality to idols (8:1, 4).” Attendance at temples has no significance; they are just eating with friends, “not worshipping what did not exist.” (2) “They have knowledge about food—it is a matter of indifference to God (8:8).” (3) They had

why they believed they could continue their practice of associating with idol food. According to Hurd, the Christian with the weak conscience is only a hypothetical person conjured up by Paul as part of his argument to convince the Corinthians

Hurd and Fee help correct the mistaken view that 8:1 – 11:1 comprise Paul's first word to the Corinthians on the subject of idol food.⁴⁵ It is inconceivable that this letter would be the first time that Paul ever discussed that issue with them. Idolatry would have been one of the earliest and most pressing issues confronting new converts anywhere many gods and lords exist (cf. 1 Thess 1:9 – 10; Gal 4:8 – 9; 1 Cor 12:2; Acts 14:15; 17:16; 19:11 – 40).⁴⁶ Such a vital issue—whether Christians may or may not eat food sacrificed to idols or eat in idol temples—would not have been something that suddenly dawned on the Corinthians months later after the weak objected to “the strong's” exercise of their freedom. It is much more plausible that the Corinthians have engaged in an ongoing discussion with Paul about this matter, and some of them have not welcomed his prohibitions.⁴⁷

The traditional view is also fundamentally wrong in assuming that Paul would have jettisoned the basic covenantal demand of exclusive allegiance to the one Lord by permitting Christians to do things that implied that they formed a common front with anything overtly connected to idols (cf. 2 Cor 6:14 – 7:1).⁴⁸ For Paul, idolatry is the vice that leads to all vices (Rom 1:19-32) and prominent in the catalog of the works of the flesh (Gal 5:20). Idolaters (among others) will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9). He conveys his disapproval of idol food by

Christian baptism and partook of the Lord's Supper and were in no danger of falling (10:1 – 4). (4) They questioned “Paul's proper apostolic authority to forbid them on this matter.” He also suggests that the Corinthians may have claimed that the weak “will be ‘built up’ by taking ‘authority’ in this matter (8.9 – 10).”

⁴⁵Both succumb, however, to an over-reading of the text that finds the Corinthian position mirrored in too much of what Paul says.

⁴⁶Tomson, *Paul and the Law*, 190.

⁴⁷Cf. Willis, *Idol Meat*, 267. Newton (*Deity and Diet*, 264-65) allows that “Perhaps Paul had already tackled this issue during his eighteen months in Corinth, but because of misunderstanding, rejection, disobedience, confusion or the emergence of particular circumstances such the Isthmian Games, the conflict remained unresolved and compelled Paul to lift his pen.”

⁴⁸Cheung (*Idol Food*, 77) asserts that for Jews, “Idol food simply epitomized idol worship.” Philo, living in Alexandria, took pains to explain and justify the rules for *kashrut* often resorting to elaborate allegorical artifices. He did not explain why idolatry was forbidden and must have regarded it as self-evident from the Jew's exclusive allegiance to God. He ferociously condemns any connection to idolatrous behavior by Jews:

If anyone cloaking himself under the name and guise of a prophet and claiming to be possessed by inspiration lead us on to worship of the gods . . . And if a brother or son or daughter . . . or anyone else who seems to be kindly disposed, urges us to alike course, bidding us fraternize with the multitude, resort to temples, and join in their libations and sacrifices, we must punish him as a public and general enemy, taking little thought for the ties which bind us to him . . . and deem it a religious duty to seek his death. (*Spec. Leg.* 1.315-16)

Among the rabbis, idol food was absolutely banned when it was known to be such, and they only debated ambiguous cases.

the very term he uses for it—εἰδωλόθυτον. Idol worshipers normally used ἱερόθυτον (10:28) to refer to something “offered in sacrifice to a deity,” and the term εἰδωλόθυτον does not appear in papyri or literature before 1 Corinthians.⁴⁹ It has a caustic, polemical edge since the word εἰδωλα connoted to both Jews and most Christians something detestable (Deut 29:17), opposed to the living God (1 Thess 1:9; 2 Cor 6:16), lifeless and “dumb” (1 Cor 12:2), and demonic (Rev 9:20).⁵⁰ The phrase αἱ θυσίαι τῶν εἰδώλων αὐτῶν (“the sacrifices of their idols”) appears in Num 25:2 (LXX; cf. Exod 34:15; Lev 17:7), and it is possible that Hellenistic Jews or Paul himself coined a neologism from OT prohibition.⁵¹

Barrett is quite wrong in his assertion that “Paul was not a practising Jew” when it came to food sacrificed to idols.⁵² The anti-Judaism of Weiss is glaring when he comments that the enlightened Paul rejects the superstition and fearfulness of Judaism regarding idol food.⁵³ Paul had not become so “unjewed” that he tolerated things that overtly smacked of idolatry. For him, the issues concerning Jewish purity and impurity laws were entirely different from the issues concerning idolatry.⁵⁴ His rejection of idol food would fully accord with his Jewish background with its “long tradition of polemic against pagan cults.”⁵⁵

Hurd is correct. The Corinthians were not asking, “Can we eat idol food?” but “Why can’t we eat idol food?” and it is understandable why the dispute arose. Corinthian converts came from a quite different cultural heritage and might have downplayed any religious ceremony solemnizing a dinner party in a pagan temple as a bunch of religious mumbo jumbo that had no spiritual effect on them. The chief reason for their participation would have been the intense social pressure from their polytheistic culture. They are not exercising theological bravado and demonstrating their spiritual security and liberty by deliberately eating what had been offered to idols. They quite naturally did not want to give up their family and social connections, so they made compromises and probably justified them *post hoc*.⁵⁶ Philo (*Spec. Leg.* 1.28 – 29) complains about the attraction of idolatry even

⁴⁹B. Witherington III, “Not So Idle: Thoughts about EIDOLOTHUTON,” *TynBul* 44 (1993): 238-239.

⁵⁰Idols are reviled in the OT as mere sticks and stones, no better than scarecrows (Jer 10:5). The Psalmist mocks them not only for being the creation of human hands but for having human features, mouths, eyes, ears, noses, hands, feet, that do not work (Pss 115:4-8; 135:15-18). Not only are they not divine, they are manifestly less than human.

⁵¹The word εἰδωλόθυτον appears in Acts 15:29; 21:25; Rev 2:14, 20; *Did.* 6:3; 4 Macc 5:2; *Sib. Or.* 2.96; *Jos. Asen.* 12:5; and *Ps. Phoc.* 31. Cf. the neologism ἀρσενοκοῖται in 1 Cor 6:11, which appears to be coined from the phrase ὅς ἄν κοιμηθῆι μετὰ ἀρσενοῦ κοίτην γυναικός in Lev 20:13 (cf. Lev 18:22).

⁵²C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (HNTC; New York: Harper and Row 1968), 146-47.

⁵³J. Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief* (KEK; 9h. ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), 264.

⁵⁴Gooch, *Dangerous Food*, 135.

⁵⁵Borgen, “‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ ‘How Far?’” 32.

⁵⁶Cheung, *Idol Food*, 121-22. He wisely cautions that we should not confuse any justification for their eating with the motive behind their eating.

for Jews steeped in their monotheistic faith. Rabbinic literature testifies to the lure of pagan society with the idolaters coaxing, "Come and intermingle with us" (*Mek. Shirata* 3 to Exod 15:2). It is not surprising that newly converted Christians would have bent under this significant pull to compromise with idolatrous practices, and we need not assume they did so with theological deliberation. 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 practice love, and ultimately not to be Chinese."⁵⁷

Joining in meals was extremely important in the ancient world because they served as markers of socio-economic class divisions, as opportunities to converse and build friendships, and as a means to fulfill socio-political obligations. "Anyone desisting from public sacrificial events was unfit for political functions."⁵⁸ To shun gatherings that lubricated social and economic relations would make Christians conspicuous outcasts who held outlandish, anti-social, perverse religious beliefs.⁵⁹ More prominent Corinthian Christians would have been reluctant to draw hard and fast lines that would alienate important persons in their lives and exclude them from society.⁶⁰ Willis thinks it most probable that "those who ate simply were unwilling to remove themselves from normal social life."⁶¹

In these chapters, Paul responds to the Corinthians' resistance. He is fully aware of the intense pressure to join in the hale-fellow-well-met conviviality, but he maintains that no temptation has overtaken them that is not common to humans (10:13). He insists that God is faithful and will not allow them to be tempted beyond what they can withstand.

A major error of the traditional view is the weight it places on Paul's warning about the potential harm that eating idol food might cause a Christian with a weak conscience. It assumes that this was Paul's only problem with eating idol food. The subtle nuances of Paul's argumentation contribute to this misunderstanding. Understanding chapters 8-10 as Paul's reaction to a previous protest from the Corinthians helps shed light on why his arguments may seem to be so complex and circuitous to modern readers.⁶² The confusion may be caused by the fact that he did not start his argument by condemning outright the behavior as presumably he had done in his previous discussion on this issue. Paul was interested in persuasion, not coercion.⁶³ He did not pass off eating of idol food,

⁵⁷K-K. Yeo, "The Rhetorical Hermeneutic of 1 Corinthians 8 and Chinese Ancestor Worship," *BibInt* 3 (1994): 308.

⁵⁸Smit, "1 Corinthians 8,1 - 6," 582.

⁵⁹Borgen ("Yes,' 'No,' 'How Far?'" 35) cites the case of the Ionians' insistence that if Jews were to be their fellows, they should worship Ionian gods.

⁶⁰Juvenal (*Sat.* 5.12-22) explains that dinner invitations from a patron were regarded as repayments for services rendered (cf. the parables of the banquets in Matt 22:1-14 and Luke 14:12-24).

⁶¹Willis, *Idol Meat*, 266.

⁶²Cf. Fee, *First Corinthians*, 474; J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Food and Spiritual Gifts in 1 Cor 8:8," *CBQ* 41 (1979): 292.

⁶³T. Engberg-Pedersen ("The Gospel and Social Practice According to 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 33 [1987]: 579) contends that in situations where the gospel requires certain

with full awareness of its idolatrous connections, as a matter of indifference. It is a dangerous, sinful act since Paul explicitly links idol food to idolatry in 10:19-20 and never says, "Eat idol food as long as the weak are not caused to stumble." He allows one to eat any food bought in the market or offered in another's home without asking its origins or history. If one somehow were informed that the food was idol food, then Paul insists that one must abstain.

Because the Corinthians did not yield to Paul's prior objection to idol food, he recognizes that a lengthier, more subtle approach is demanded. Yeo is correct that Paul did not attempt to give an easy answer of "yes" or "no" in 1 Cor 8 and that he did not resort "to absolute prohibitions concerning idol meat eating."⁶⁴ But he does not understand why this is the case. It was not because the situation was too complex for a simple solution. Paul adopts this tack because he intends, as he does throughout the letter, to exercise love in directing them. He wants them to flee from idols (10:14), but he also wants them to see the theological implications of their behavior and the necessity of the norm of love for guiding all their behavior. Consequently, he employs indirect means.⁶⁵

How Paul's Argument Against Idol Food Works

I. Introduction and Refutation of Their Practice

Because of its Danger to Fellow Christians (8:1 – 13)

Wright correctly recognizes that the "major issues at stake were monotheism, idolatry, election, holiness and how these issues interacted."⁶⁶ Paul begins his counter-argument in 8:1 – 6 by going back to first principles, "the reassertion of Jewish-style monotheism," something the Corinthians would readily accept. He does not, however, draw out the full implications of what their monotheistic confession and allegiance to one God entail until 10:1 – 22.⁶⁷ He introduces the dispute over idol-food by establishing common ground: We Christians know that God is one and that idols have no existence despite their many adherents. He builds

behavior and is in reach of his addressees, Paul uses imperatives—"but always with the sense of reminding his addressees of things they already know and subscribe to." In situations where a certain behavior is required by the gospel is "not within immediate reach of Paul's addressees," Paul does not use imperatives but exhorts by means of examples and "showing what application of the gospel in such situations *would* consist in." Engberg-Pedersen considers 8:1-11, which he characterizes as "not offending the brother," as fitting the first situation. I would argue to the contrary that the situation concerns idol food and fits the second case instead. Paul does not think it is quite in reach because of the social complexity involved in idol food.

⁶⁴Yeo, "Rhetorical Hermeneutic," 310.

⁶⁵J. F. M. Smit, "The Rhetorical Disposition of First Corinthians 8:7-9:27," *CBQ* 59 (1997): 477.

⁶⁶Wright, "Monotheism, Christology and Ethics," 122.

⁶⁷Fee (*First Corinthians*, 363) claims that Paul's "first concern is with the incorrect ethical basis of their argument. The problem is primarily attitudinal." But the problem is idolatry—behavior, not merely a bad attitude expressed in an imperious contempt for the weak.

on this consensus about the non-existence of idols to introduce two key principles that will inform his argument. First, Christian love is to override knowledge that feeds arrogance. Second, Christian monotheism defines who the people of God are as distinct from those who worship many gods and lords.

The second principle undergirds all that Paul says against eating idol food, but he develops the first principle. Mentioning Christ in the confession in 8:6 recalls God's supreme act of love that made Christians a unique people. Christ died for them (8:11). This act of love that brought them into God's family requires that they respond to others in the family with love—putting others' needs and interests ahead of their own. In 8:7-13, Paul explores the potential effect of the "knowers" eating idol food on a fellow believer who may not have the same level of theological sophistication to rationalize such behavior or to apprehend its theological consequences. He assumes that as Christians they have a loving concern for others and do not wish to lead them into sin. His first argument against eating idol food is his assertion that their actions are not neutral but may cause another Christian to stumble and fall.

He presents a hypothetical example. The emphasis is on "if"—if a fellow Christian observes another Christian, esteemed as a person of knowledge, eating food in an idol setting (8:10). The other Christian is identified as programmed by habituation to think in certain ways about sacrificed food and as having a "weak conscience."⁶⁸ The conscience is not "the inner voice which warns us that someone may be looking," as H. L. Mencken defines it. Paul uses the term to refer to that faculty of moral evaluation that adjudicates whether an individual's actions are right or wrong and directs behavior according to recognized norms. It is a moral compass. A panel from the cartoon *Dennis the Menace* unexpectedly captures what Paul means. Consigned to sit in a corner as punishment for some misbehavior, he reflects: "I got some bad advice from my conscience." The conscience comprises the depository of an individual's moral beliefs and principles that makes judgments about what is right and wrong.⁶⁹ A "weak" conscience is one that is unable to make appropriate moral judgments because of a lack of proper edification. Eriksson points out that "weakness" was used in the philosophical schools for "the moral sickness suffered by those recent converts who were not yet able to make correct moral judgments" (cf. Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.15.20).⁷⁰ A "weak" conscience is prone to give assent to false judgments and to sanction actions based on faulty criteria,

⁶⁸P. D. Gardner (*The Gifts of God and the Authentication of a Christian: An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1* [Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994], 43) notes that Paul was writing at a time "when the connotation of the words relating to 'conscience' was changing" and that the meaning of the word therefore must come from "the local context" of chapters 8-10. Paul describes it as something that can be "polluted" (8:7), "built up" (8:10), or "wounded" (8:12) and connects it to raising questions (10:25, 27) and "judging others" (10:29).

⁶⁹Dawes, "The Danger of Idolatry," 96. Cf. H.-J. Eckstein, *Der Begriff Syneidesis bei Paulus* (WUNT 2/10; Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), 56, 287-300.

⁷⁰A. Eriksson, *Traditions as Rhetorical Proof: Pauline Argumentation in 1 Corinthians* (CBNT 29; Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1998), 143.

particularly when it has been defiled. It is untrustworthy because it does not possess the necessary knowledge.⁷¹

The Christian with a weak conscience does not have the knowledge to make correct moral judgments. Paul worries that this person's conscience might follow the example of those presumed to have knowledge and eat idol food as truly offered to an idol, that is, as a sacrificial act. He will be led astray in his moral judgment to think that it is permissible for Christians to pay homage to both Christ and pagan deities.⁷² His conscience is then "defiled" through idolatry (cf. Rev 3:4), which is akin to a compass becoming demagnetized so that it no longer points to true north.

Paul is anxious that the Christian in this example will be sucked back into the vortex of idolatry and face spiritual ruin. He concludes with a hyperbolic example of what he would do to avert such a catastrophe. He would abstain from eating meat altogether (8:13). Love may require giving up things that one regards as a right for the sake of preventing other Christians from falling.

II. Paul's Own Example to Undergird His Counsel (9:1 – 27)

The choppy transition from the discussion of idol food in chapter 8 to the right of an apostle to receive aid from a congregation has caused some to suspect that the section beginning in 8:13 or 9:1 represents an interpolation⁷³ or an unconnected digression.⁷⁴ Most now recognize that this section is integral to Paul's argument about idol food and takes it a step further.⁷⁵ In 9:1 – 27, Paul develops the example of his own behavior. Everything he does, including not exercising his rights as an apostle, is aimed at winning others to the gospel and avoiding anything that might needlessly hinder another from coming to faith.

⁷¹A. J. Malherbe, "Determinism and Free Will in Paul: The Argument of 1 Corinthians 8 and 9" in *Paul in His Hellenistic Context* (ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 240.

⁷²Borgen, "'Yes,' 'No,' 'How Far?'" 51; Dawes, "The Danger of Idolatry," 94-95. Fee (*First Corinthians*, 386, n. 56) cannot understand why the weak would eat idol food unless they were pressured in some way. This impression stems from the mistaken assumption that the weak primarily faced a moral struggle about eating idol food or dining in temples and that they would act *against* their conscience because they cannot counter the knower's arguments. The social pressure to mix in the society and not to be perceived as misanthropic would be sufficient motivation for them to join in the banquets. The example of the knowers would be enough to persuade their consciences that this activity was permissible.

⁷³Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief*, xl-xliii, 212-13.

⁷⁴W. Wuellner, "Greek Rhetoric and Pauline Argumentation," in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant* (eds. W. R. Schoedel and R. L. Wilken; Paris: Beauchesne, 1979), 186-88.

⁷⁵H. P. Nasuti, "The Woes of the Prophets and the Rights of the Apostle: The Internal Dynamics of 1 Corinthians 9," *CBQ* 50 (1988): 246. Vocabulary links reveal its direct relationship to chapters 8 and 10; cf. ἐλεύθερος (9:1, 19; 10:29); ἐξουσία (8:9; 9:4-6; 12-18; 10:23); ἀσθενής (8:7-12; 9:22); μετέχειν (9:10-12; 10:17, 21, 30); "obstacles" (πρόσκομμα, 8:9; ἐγκοπὴ, 9:12); and two antonyms σκανδαλίζειν (8:13) and κερδαίνειν (9:19-23).

Some contend that Paul is defending himself against the winds of criticism shaking the Corinthians' confidence in his apostleship, something that surfaces in 2 Corinthians. His exclamatory question, "Am I not an apostle?" (9:1), sounds defensive; and his statement, "This is my defense (ἀπολογία) to those who would examine me" (9:3 NRSV), seems plain enough to support this view. It may seem that Paul unleashes a torrent of rhetorical questions that vigorously defend his apostolic right to receive support in response to his detractors and then offers his rationale for having waived that right. Rhetorical questions, however, do not indicate that the writer has adopted a defensive mode. They simply invite the audience to give its opinion.⁷⁶ They are part of Paul's style in this portion of the letter; six occur in 10:14-22 (cf. also 8:10, 10:30).⁷⁷

First, the notion of his apostleship only appears in 9:1-2 in which he establishes his right to earn material support. These remarks are too brief for a substantive defense. The rest of his argument appeals to the everyday examples of the soldier, farmer, and shepherd (9:7), the plowman and thresher (9:10), and the priest (9:13). These illustrations simply point to "the universal norm that every person ought to profit from his labour."⁷⁸ The authority of the law (9:8-10a; Deut 25:4), the precedent of others who already have received benefactions from the Corinthians (9:12a), and the command of Jesus (9:14) further buttress the right of an apostle who labors in the gospel to earn his living from the gospel. These arguments do not furnish support for Paul's apostolic standing but simply remind readers what everybody knows and make the point that apostles have the right to be supported.

Second, rhetorical questions that could just as easily be answered negatively would hardly win the day in a defense. Apparently, Paul did not anticipate that the Corinthians would contest the points because he phrased the first four questions in 9:1 to expect an affirmative answer.⁷⁹ The question, "Am I not an apostle?" does not challenge any misgivings about his apostolic rank but instead establishes at the outset the premise of his discussion. He is entitled as an apostle to receive support, as they must admit, but they know he has waived those rights. He is not defensively claiming rights in this section but hammering home his renunciation of them! His statement in 9:15 that he does not write to secure his due rights for financial backing assumes that they would pay him *if* he would accept it.

Third, if the Corinthians did not regard him to be a true apostle, he wastes his time describing at length his refusal to use his rights as an apostle. The key as-

⁷⁶H. Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study* (trans. M. T. Bliss, et. al.; eds. D. E. Orton and R. D. Anderson; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998), §§776-79; H. F. Plett, *Einführung in die rhetorische Textanalyse* (4h. ed.; Hamburg: H. Buske, 1979), 64.

⁷⁷The question in 9:13, "Do you not know?" does not indicate that he is on the defense any more than do the six other similar questions in the letter (6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19; cf. also 1 Cor 3:16; 5:6; Rom 6:16; 11:2).

⁷⁸T. B. Savage, *Power Through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (SNTSMS 86; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 94.

⁷⁹W. L. Willis, "An Apostolic Apologia? The Form and Function of 1 Corinthians 9," *JSNT* 24 (1985): 34.

sertion comes in 9:19 where he maintains that he is free from all men (cf. 9:1)—not that he is an apostle.⁸⁰

Fourth, Kistemaker inadvertently highlights a problem with the view that Paul is on the defensive with these comments: “We would have expected Paul to provide further details [about the opponents] (compare, e.g., Gal 1:6-7; 5:10), but conclusive evidence is lacking. We lack sufficient information about specific charges Paul’s opponents are leveling against him.”⁸¹ The most obvious reason for the paucity of details is that there were none to give. No one in Corinth was raising charges against him related to his refusal to receive support.

Fifth, the focus of this section falls on rights and the waiving of rights (ἐξουσία, 9:4, 5, 6, 12, 18; τούτων, 9:15). It develops the issue of ἐξουσία raised in 8:9. Paul’s development of the theme in 9:19 – 23 further explains that he sets aside his own advantages for the sake of others. The argument in this section establishes his high status to set the stage for his willing acceptance of low status. Martin comments, “Low-status persons, the weak, by definition have no exousia to surrender.”⁸² The things connected with high status, rights, and freedom, are the very things that those who have them recoil at surrendering. This is Paul’s point. The overall argument is intended to promote a certain kind of demeanor and conduct. Having established his rights, he can then feature his refusal to profit from them.

Finally, it is a strange defense of his apostleship for Paul to point out several respects in which he has not acted like an apostle. Why cite a command of the Lord (9:14) that seems to undermine his position? If the problem is that some have disparaged him for failing to live according to the standard ordained by Jesus, Paul says nothing to offset this perception. The best answer to these questions is that Paul is not on the defense and not insisting on his apostolic rights. Instead, he insists that renouncing these apostolic rights is the right thing to do for one captured by Christ. He is controlled by necessity to win others to Christ that his calling as an apostle imposes upon him, not by any selfish desire to promote his own advantage or to indulge his own fancy. He cites his own practice as an example of the attitude he wants them to adopt. The task of advancing the gospel totally dominates his life, inspiring his willingness to make any sacrifice to win others. He wishes that this attitude was more evident in their lives.

That Paul intends in this section to offer himself as a model of one who voluntarily relinquishes his rights is confirmed by the athletic metaphor that spotlights his own conduct (9:24-27) and the concluding admonition to imitate him as he imitates Christ (11:1). He does not use autobiographical information for its own sake but to establish ethos to persuade.⁸³ Holladay notes that using ethical

⁸⁰M. Pascuzzi, *Ethics, Ecclesiology and Church Discipline: A Rhetorical Analysis of 1 Corinthians 5* [TGST 32; Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1997], 25-46) makes the case that the situations of 1 and 2 Corinthians should be kept separate. The characterization of situation in 1 Corinthians as one of intense enmity is not sustainable.

⁸¹S. J. Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 287.

⁸²D. B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven/ London: Yale University Press, 1990), 121.

⁸³G. Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding* (SBLDS 73; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 226.

paradigms was typical of Greco-Roman moralists who believed that “example was far superior to precept and logical analysis as a mean of illustrating and reinforcing appeals to pursue a particular mode of life, normally the life of ἀρετή (virtue).”⁸⁴ They would present themselves as paradigms for their audience to follow. Paul’s personal example as an apostle, who unselfishly sacrifices for others in his missionary service, is particularly appropriate for the Corinthians who have demonstrated a tendency to seek their personal gain. They appear to insist on a right that might cause the weak to stumble. Paul purposefully surrenders a right and adapts himself to the weak (9:22) and to others to win them. The implication is that those with knowledge should follow his example by abdicating their so-called right to eat idol food (8:9) so that they would avoid any possibility of causing others without their endowment of knowledge from falling back into idolatry. The issue of food appears in 9:4, 7, 9, 10, 13 and reveals that he does not ask them to give up anything more than he himself has given up. Knowledge (8:1), rights (8:9), and freedom (9:1) must be directed by love and concern for the spiritual well-being of others.

He drives home the point that the Christian life requires effort and the suppression of appetites and longings with a sports analogy in 9:24 – 27. The metaphor allows him to play on the Corinthians’ craving for honor and to contrast the ephemeral reward bestowed on the winner of an athletic contest with the eternal prize that God will award the Christian victor. The prolonged, rigorous training required for success in athletic competition was a well-known image in the ancient world, and it sheds light on his own voluntary restraint in his refusing to exercise his apostolic rights so that he might successfully attain his goal of saving others. The metaphorical language may cloak how it applies to the Corinthian situation, but it is all part of his argument that “believers should abstain from sacrificial meals.”⁸⁵ The images of an athletic competitor enduring a rigorous training regimen, running determinedly, and bruising the body to bring it under rein disclose that Paul is not asking the Corinthians “knowers” to try to be more discreet when they join in any festivities on an idol’s grounds to protect the weak brother. He expects them to abandon any and all such participation. Paul cites the catchphrase “Everything is permitted” in 10:23 (cf. 6:12), but he first emphasizes that everything is *not* permitted the athlete who hopes to win. Christian life “involves the limitation as well as the enjoyment of freedom.”⁸⁶

The athletic simile also serves as a transition to the warning example of Israel in the next section (10:1 – 13). It warns that any who fail to exercise self-restraint when it comes to the delights of this world may be disqualified from the ultimate race directed by God. It is more than a general warning against complacency. It reminds Corinthians of the difficulties of living out their Christian commitment. Entry into the contest does not guarantee a prize, and they cannot repose in the illusion that they are safe from failure.

⁸⁴C. R. Holladay, “1 Corinthians 13: Paul as Apostolic Paradigm,” in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. D. L. Balch, et al; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 84.

⁸⁵Smit, “Do not be Idolaters,” 490.

⁸⁶Barrett, *First Corinthians*, 218.

III. Refutation of Their Practice from the Negative

Example of the History of Israel in the Wilderness (10:1 – 13)

In 10:1-13, Paul turns up the heat of his argument against idol food by appealing to a negative example from Israel's history. The move from personal example to extended biblical exposition again makes 10:1-13 appear to be a digression, but it fits perfectly his purpose. Israel's demise in the wilderness is directly applicable to Christians in Corinth. The "fathers" horrifying end in the desert highlights the peril the Corinthians risk by consorting with idols. Violating their covenant obligations and putting the Lord to the test is suicidal. Though the "fathers" experienced divine provisions, the presence of Christ, and a prefigurement of baptism and the Lord's Supper, they failed to enter the promised land because of their idolatry. Their fall is a direct warning to the Corinthians since Paul underscores that the Scriptures directly apply to them (10:11).

Of the four warnings from the wilderness experience adduced in this section, Paul quotes only one passage (10:7): "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play" (Exod 32:6b). He highlights this one verse because it ties into the theme of eating and drinking that reverberates throughout chapters 8-10.⁸⁷ It is suggestive that he does not cite a verse emphasizing their worship and sacrifice before the calf, for example, Exod 32:6a, 8, 31, 35, but chooses instead to cite their eating, drinking, and playing that *followed* their sacrifices!⁸⁸ Fee comments that the text specifically indicates that the people ate in the presence of the golden calf. He infers from this that idolatry for Paul is "a matter of eating cultic meals in the idol's presence."⁸⁹ While Paul's concern is not limited only to Christians eating in an idol setting, this connection reveals that he certainly regarded eating in the presence of an idol as idolatry.

The point should be clear to the Corinthians. If they dally at pagan feasts, they can expect the same fate as Israel in the wilderness. They are not to be cravers of evil (10:6) or idolaters (10:7-8) and are not to put the Lord to the test (10:9) or grumble (10:10) if they expect their relationship to God to remain secure. The bold Corinthians may not fear the power of idols, but they should fear the wrath of God. They cannot grouse that being forbidden from participating in idol feasts places them in an untenable position. If they are faithful exclusively to God, they will never be in a situation too difficult for God to sustain them and to empower them to endure (10:13).

IV. Refutation of Their Practice from the Example of the Lord's Supper (10:14 – 22)

In this unit, Paul strikes directly and hard commanding them to flee idolatry (10:14) and connecting idol food to demons. He refutes their practice from the example of the Lord's Supper and the danger of "serial fellowships." As the Lord's Supper is a

⁸⁷ Hays, *First Corinthians*, 163.

⁸⁸ Paul also does not refer to God's penalty for the sin as he does in 10:8, 9. B. J. Koet ("The Old Testament Background to 1 Cor 10, 7-8," in *The Corinthian Correspondence* [ed. R. Bieringer; BETL 125; Leuven: Peeters, 1996], 613) claims that Paul presupposes his audience has knowledge of "the dynamics of the story of the Golden Calf."

⁸⁹ Fee, *First Corinthians*, 454.

sacred meal that represents and creates a fellowship of believers in the worship of Christ who is considered to be present, so pagan meals represent and create a fellowship of worshipers of pagan deities who are also considered to be present. Idols, however, represent the realm of the demonic. Participating in the one meal precludes participating in the other. Believers should not fool themselves into thinking that they are strong enough to try to merge the two meals, to affiliate with Christ and demons. To attempt to do so only kindles the jealousy and judgment of God.

V. Practical Advice for Dealing with the Issue of Idol Food in Pagan Settings (10:23 – 11:1)

The question of temple dining and eating food sacrificed to idols is now left aside as Paul addresses the question of food of questionable origins—food that may have been sacrificed to idols before it comes into the hands of a believer. To answer the question how a Christian can act with integrity in a world brimming with idols, he moves from an absolute prohibition based on general arguments about the dangers of associating with anything idolatrous to conditional liberty based on the biblical tenet that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it (10:26; Ps 24:1). He gives the go-ahead on everything that is beyond an idol's orbit. It is not permanently poisoned.

Paul clarifies that food is food and permissible to eat *unless* it is specifically identified as idol food, which puts it in a special category that is always forbidden to Christians. They need not abstain from all food on the chance that it may have been sacrificed to idols. He basically says, "Of course, you can buy food in the provision market" (10:25). "Of course, you can dine with friends" (10:27). His prohibition of idol food does not mean that they must retreat to the seclusion of a gloomy ghetto. Nevertheless, he anticipates potential problems presented by food that a Christian might purchase from the market or food that a Christian might eat in the home of an unbeliever who might have offered it to idols. Smit contends that Paul's shift in 10:23-11:1 from his discussion about the idol offerings to an adjacent issue transgresses an important rhetorical rule. The transition may have made his prohibitions "easier to digest," but he does not go unpunished by the misunderstanding of his later interpreters who think that 10:23-11:1 refers to the idol offerings mentioned in 8:1.⁹⁰ This shift has also led interpreters to suggest that Paul contradicts himself or to conjecture that the confusion is created by a later interpolation.

Many mistakenly assume that in this section Paul encourages the "weak" to ease up on their criticism of the so-called "strong." Hall states, "He now asks the weak to do something for the strong—namely, to begin to free themselves for their tyrannical scruples?"⁹¹ Nowhere does Paul mention the weak in this section or talk about scruples, let alone "tyrannical" scruples! The maxim, "All things are permissible," which Paul amends with an emphasis on what is beneficial and builds up, hardly seems appropriate for launching a response to the so-called "weak." Hall

⁹⁰Smit, "1 Corinthians 8,1-6," 591.

⁹¹B. Hall, "All Things to All People: A Study of 1 Corinthians 9:19-23," in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul & John In Honor of J. Louis Martyn* (eds. R. T. Fortna and B. R. Gaventa; Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 143.

wrongly claims that Paul “belongs to the strong, and in his abrupt challenge to the weak he speaks not only for himself but also for those who see themselves as the strong in Corinth.” He has just declared that he identifies with the weak (9:22), not the so-called strong! Even if the argument that the person with a weak conscience is a hypothetical construct were incorrect, how could Paul encourage them to take a more relaxed view toward food when he expresses concern that they are extremely vulnerable to reverting to their former idolatrous practices (8:10)? This section is directed to the whole church, but if Paul were addressing a particular group, it would be the “knowers.” They are most likely to seek their own advantage, be invited to a banquet in an unbeliever’s home, and object to another’s conscience constricting their liberty.

Paul permits buying food in the market place that may or may not have been sacrificed in a pagan temple. But if its history was disclosed and it was announced to be idol food, then he forbids eating it. He permits dining with friends who may be worshipers of idols, but if the food is announced to be idol food, then he forbids eating it. Christians may not participate in any function that overtly smacks of idolatry.

He basically “defines what is idol food in doubtful cases”—when it is not specified as idol food.⁹² All food outside of the idol’s orbit is permitted, so he gives them leave to eat anything sold in the public market without investigating its history to certify that it is free from any idolatrous contamination. Christ has not called them to be meat inspectors. Outside of its idolatrous context, idol food becomes simply food and belongs to the one God (Rom 14:14). This ruling is far more liberal than one found in the *Mishna* that states: “Flesh that is entering in unto an idol is permitted, but what comes forth is forbidden” (*m. ‘Abod. Zar. 2:3*).

When giving his advice about buying food in the provisions market or dining at a private gathering, Paul again mentions the conscience: buy or eat “without inquiring [about its history] because of conscience” (10:25, 27). In the first case, it is not clear whose conscience is in view, the purchaser’s or an observer’s. Many conclude that he has in mind the “bad feelings” of the weak who might spot a fellow Christian in a compromising position. In this scenario Paul’s advises them to ignore the weak Christian’s misgivings. This interpretation mistakenly reads into the text the presumed conflict between the so-called “strong” and the “weak.” Paul is not mediating this imagined conflict but offering general advice to all Christians about buying and eating food sold in the provision market. He recognizes that perceptions about idols are real. In the immediate context, Paul has raised their consciousness that idol food is hazardous material by linking it to demons. This new consciousness of the danger attached to idol food may encumber their decisions about purchasing food in the market that might have come from temple sacrifices, and he counsels them not to brood on that decision. He permits them to buy and eat whatever they like and can afford. Idol food is not dangerous outside of its overtly idolatrous context. To ask questions about the food’s history in the open market would unnecessarily burden their conscience.⁹³ In this case, ignorance is

⁹²Tomson, *Paul and the Law*, 208-09.

⁹³J. Schneider, μάκελλον, *TDNT* 4:372; C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament: A Study of Syneidesis in the New Testament* (SBT 15; London: SCM, 1955), 76.

bliss. It is not simply that “what you don’t know won’t hurt you,”⁹⁴ but why worry needlessly about something that is clearly a matter of indifference? In the same way that they need not worry that marriage to an unbeliever might somehow contaminate the believer (7:13 – 14), they need not worry that they will be contaminated by food that may have pagan antecedents.

The premise behind this instruction comes from Ps 24:1 (cf. 50:12; 89:11), which, in Judaism, shaped the prayer to be voiced before a meal (*b. Šabb.* 119a).⁹⁵ It affirms that God is sovereign over all things (8:6) and that everything created by God is good (cf. 1 Tim 4:4). The whole creation belongs to God, not part to God and part to idols.⁹⁶ Idol food therefore loses its character as idol food as soon as it leaves the idol’s arena and the idolater’s purposes. Paul does not complete the thought with a conclusion from the biblical citation, but it is implicit: “Nothing is unclean in itself” (Rom 14:14; cf. Acts 10:15). If it can be eaten in honor of the Lord (Rom 14:7), it is permitted. What Paul finds sinful is eating idol food in any setting that might give others the slightest hint that Christians sanctioned idolatry, no matter how attenuated the religious aspects attached to the meal or the place might be.

In the second scene, Paul adds a caveat, “If someone should say to you, ‘This food is sacrificed to the gods,’ do not eat, out of concern for the one who informed you and because of conscience.” He identifies the conscience as belonging to one who makes the declaration but only gives sketchy details about the informant, who it is, why he speaks, or how his conscience would be jeopardized. It is most likely from what follows that Paul envisions a pagan making the announcement. Ultimately, it makes no difference; the result is the same. The case is hypothetical offering instruction on how a Christian should respond in pagan surroundings, and there is no need to identify or to untangle the motives of the informer. Most likely the host proclaims his intentions about the food, but it could be “anyone” who makes any such announcement. The declaration makes clear that the meal’s atmosphere is distinguished by an act of idolatrous piety.

Paul instructs them not to eat because of the one who makes the disclosure and because of the conscience (συνείδησις). He clarifies in 10:29a that he refers to the conscience of the one who made the announcement, not the believer who accepted the invitation. What does the word conscience mean here? The discussion in 8:7 reveals that it is a slippery word whose meaning was in flux. Many assume that it must refer back to the weak conscience of the fellow believer in 8:7, 10, 12. But Paul says nothing about the conscience being weak or in danger of being wounded (8:12). It may simply mean that the person who makes the announcement is conscious that the food is religiously significant.

⁹⁴Contra R. Jewett, *Paul’s Anthropological Terms: A Study of Their Use in Conflict Settings* (AGJU 10; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 428.

⁹⁵D. F. Watson (“1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1 in the Light of Greco-Roman Rhetoric: the Role of Rhetorical Questions,” *JBL* 108 [1989]: 305, n. 24) notes that its function as a premise is indicated by the addition of γάρ to what otherwise would be an exact quotation from Ps 23:1 (LXX).

⁹⁶C. Maurer, “σύννοιδα, κτλ.,” *TDNT* 7:915

Paul formulates a key hermeneutical principle underlying his advice. The food's past history only matters when it matters to someone else who considers it sacred. Christians may know that idols do not exist, that there is no God but one, and that all food belongs ultimately to God. In this sticky situation, however, it is not their consciousness that counts, but that of the other. His approach to this issue is very close to that of rabbis. Tomson concludes (from *t. Hull.* 2:18; *m. Hul.* 2:8; *m. Zeb.* 1:1):

The Rabbinic view of idolatry is not so much concerned with material objects or actions as with the spiritual attitude with which these are approached by the gentiles. Correspondingly, the essence of idolatry is a ceremonial act of consecration, most typically expressed in slaughtering 'in the name of the deity.'⁹⁷

The rabbis absolutely forbade direct or indirect contact with pagan rites, but they ruled that Jews could intermingle with Gentiles unless it became clear that they were engaged in some religious activity.⁹⁸ They assumed that individuals could discern when the Gentile was engaged in idolatrous practices. Paul takes a far more liberal view in doubtful cases. Christians may assume that all is well and need not become sleuths trying to detect if the food has idolatrous connections. Instead, they may depend on the pagan's own pronouncement, "This is sacred food." When Christians find themselves in this situation, then they must abstain from eating lest they be drawn into idolatry.

Paul is not concerned here that they might endanger another Christian with a weak conscience. Their willing consumption of what has been announced as food sacrificed to idols would do three things: (1) It would compromise "their confession of the One God" with a tacit recognition of the sanctity of pagan gods. (2) It would confirm, rather than challenge, the unbeliever's idolatrous convictions and would not lead the unbeliever away from the worship of false gods. If a Christian were to eat what a pagan acquaintance regards as an offering to a deity, it signals the Christian's tacit endorsement of idolatry. (3) It would disable the basic Christian censure of pagan gods as false gods that embody something demonic and make that censure appear seem hypocritical.⁹⁹

Paul expresses concern about the Christian's witness to the unbeliever. The announcement presents an opportunity to expound one's faith in the one God and one Lord. Meeks observes that "to go the whole way, to 'turn from idols to serve the living God' . . . was an act that entailed a profound resocialization, a change of identity and primary allegiance."¹⁰⁰ Paul expected Christians who turned from idols to create boundaries where there were none before. The pressure on Christians to conform to cultural norms, however, was enormous. When clever converts could construct abstract theological arguments that would make such

⁹⁷Tomson, *Paul and the Law*, 214.

⁹⁸G. G. Porton, *Goyim: Gentiles and Israelites in the Mishnah-Tosefta* (BJS 155; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 258.

⁹⁹Cheung, *Idol Food*, 159.

¹⁰⁰W. A. Meeks, "Corinthian Christians as Artificial Alien," in *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (ed. T. Engberg-Pedersen; Louisville: WJK, 2001), 134.

potentially costly disassimilation seem unnecessary, Paul has his work cut out for him to convince them otherwise. It explains why his argument must start with their perspective and is seemingly roundabout. His expectations demanded of converts something that no other religion except Judaism required—avoiding anything that might hint that Christians sanctioned idolatry. Failure to repudiate all idolatrous associations would have dire spiritual consequences.



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