

# **Idols, Eating, and Rights (1 Cor. 8:1-11:1): Faithful and Loving Witness in a Pluralistic Culture<sup>1</sup>**

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The Christian church in America carries out its mission today in a context in which its world view does not dominate. As is becoming more obvious each day, our culture approaches issues such as human sexuality, the value of human life, the origins of life, and the possibility of any religion making claims of exclusivity in ways that are very different from that of traditional creedal Christianity. With increasing frequency, individual Christians and their congregations encounter situations in which their actions would be viewed as unacceptable to most people in our society. Conversely, there is often immense pressure to conform to societal norms and practices, particularly where the beliefs and practices of creedal Christianity are most radically different from those of the prevailing culture.

While many Christians may feel that our society is moving away from its traditional Judeo-Christian roots and, in response, attempt to “restore” a Christian-American culture, the situation in which the church finds itself today is actually neither new nor unusual. During the New Testament period, Christians had virtually no impact on the thought patterns of the society around them. The preaching of the Gospel and instruction in the faith produced in Christians a belief system and moral outlook which were vastly different from those of their neighbors. Not infrequently, these different thought patterns resulted in friction, if not hostility. The riot that followed Paul’s preaching in Ephesus (Acts 19) is one of the more obvious examples. As a result, individual Christians felt pressure to adapt their behavior, particularly their public behavior, to societal norms.

Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth addresses several situations in which members of that congregation had succumbed to this pressure and compromised their behavior in order to conform to societal standards. In fact, nearly one half of the letter deals with exactly these kinds of issues: incest (1 Cor. 5), fornication (6:12-20), marriage and betrothal (7),

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<sup>1</sup>The author would like to thank Rev. Joel Lehenbauer, who was also a presenter at the conference, for his dialogue and insight on this passage before, during, and after the conference, and Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs for his comments on this print version.

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idol temples and food (8-10), and veiling (11:2-16).<sup>2</sup> The fact that their manner of conduct (περιπατέω) is a major problem in Corinth is shown by Paul's rebuke in 3:1-3:

And I, brothers, was not able to speak to you as spiritual people but as fleshly, as babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not food, for you were not yet ready. But even now you are not yet ready, for you are still fleshly and you walk in a human way (περιπατείτε κατὰ ἄνθρωπον).

This essay will examine in particular how conforming to societal expectations in the matter of idol temples and food (1 Cor. 8-10) led both to a fractured community and individuals who were at risk of falling from faith.

A major interpretive problem that must be confronted is whether Paul gives different or even conflicting advice in the different situations discussed in this passage. Some interpreters have found a radical break between Paul's language in 8:1-13 and 10:1-22, where eating with idols is strongly condemned, and 10:25-26, where Paul seems to adopt a libertine attitude that eschews any rules or restrictions. The perceived tension between these sections has led some commentators to posit an altered document, with 10:1-22 as a separate Pauline letter interpolated into another distinct letter (8:1-11:1).<sup>3</sup> Such hypothetical reconstructions have been disavowed, both for 1 Corinthians as a whole and for this section in particular, as the cultural backgrounds to the issues and arguments have become more clearly understood.<sup>4</sup> Similar in result (though not method) is a reading of 10:25-26 in isolation from its literary and cultural context, so that Paul is understood to advocate a libertine, "unlimited Christian freedom" attitude. It will be argued in this essay that these conclusions are unacceptable based on an analysis of the overall unity of structure and argumentation in 8:1-11:1. Furthermore, with these passages properly understood and the issues more clearly defined, Christians can continue to find

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<sup>2</sup>An excellent summary, with a helpful analysis of how the structure of the letter develops the argument against compromise, is provided by Bruce W. Winter, "The Underlays of Conflict and Compromise," in *Paul and the Corinthians. Studies on a Community in Conflict. Essays in Honour of Margaret Thrall*, ed. Trevor J. Burke and J. Keith Elliott (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 139-155.

<sup>3</sup>Most notably, Johannes Weiss, *Der Erste Korintherbrief*, Neudruck der völlig neubearbeiteten Auflage 1910 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), both as part of his larger discussion of the unity of the letter (XL-XLIII) and specifically on 1 Corinthians 8-10 (210-213).

<sup>4</sup>See especially Wolfgang Schrage, *Der Erste Brief an die Korinther*, 1. Teilband 1 Kor 1,1-6,11, Evangelisch-Katholisch Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Zürich und Braunschweig: Benzinger, 1991), 66-68 and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 608-609: "The coherence of these chapters and of Paul's argument may seem vulnerable *only if the passages are removed from their context, or if the varied circumstantial differences between specific cases under review are neglected*" (emphasis original).

value and relevance in the apostle's teaching as they live in their own pluralistic context and seek to "gain many" (1 Cor. 9:19).

### **Roman Corinth<sup>5</sup>**

Cities have personalities. No one would confuse New York with San Francisco or Miami with Chicago. In part because of location, and in part because of the people who live there, every city is unique. In Cleveland, where I served as a pastor, people still closely identify with their European ethnic roots. Pierogi and Baklava could be had from any number of small bakeries; sushi and tofu are not big sellers at the supermarket. The weather patterns, affected by the Great Lakes, mean that the sun does not shine in Cleveland for the entire month of November; Thanksgiving Day services there are not always attended by happy, thankful people.

The Corinth Paul knew was likewise unique, yet in many ways quite "American" in outlook. First it was unique because of its location, situated on the narrow, six-mile wide isthmus that joins lower Greece to the mainland, the city became a key trading center. Goods were unloaded on the Aegean Sea side and carried across to the Adriatic Sea. This saved months of sailing—depending on the season of the year, up to six months. Small ships were even hauled completely out of the water and dragged across on a specially built road. Any trade moving north-south in Greece or east-west through Greece went through Corinth. Needless to say, people who wanted to make money quickly went to Corinth.

Corinth was also unique because of its people. The city had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C., but ordered rebuilt by Julius Caesar. This meant that the city was rebuilt as a Roman city, not as a Greek city, with Roman religion, architecture, and economy. The people brought in to settle Corinth were not Greeks, but Romans. Veterans from Caesar's army were given allotments of land as a reward for their service. Freed slaves were permitted to make new beginnings in a new town, and the necessary merchants and tradesmen were also brought in. So when Paul came to Corinth, he met not native Greeks, but Romans.

As a result, Corinth became a Roman city. It did not have a built-in aristocracy, or ruling class, as did Athens and Sparta and other Greek cities. Power in Corinth came from money. One could be on top of the world one day, and have nothing the next. In contrast to other cities, the government did not set prices for grain and other commodities and services. Land ownership was not consolidated in a few families, so small farmers could own their land and make, or lose, huge amounts of money

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<sup>5</sup>This background information is synthesized from Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 5-35; Thiselton, 1-29; and Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 4-15.

depending on the market. Whether merchant, manufacturer, or farmer, massive wealth or destitution was always just around the corner.

When newly earned wealth moved a person “up” the social scale, their new status was made known through their social relationships. For example, when the congregation’s worship meals were celebrated at the home of one of the wealthier members, it would not be surprising to find their social “equals” in one room and their “lessers” in another, hence the problems that prompted 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.<sup>6</sup> Directly affecting 1 Corinthians 8-10 are the invitations to social gatherings which, in some cases, would have involved religious rituals. Another way people made their status known was by spending their money as visibly as possible, such as on large homes. In addition, contributions were made for public buildings, public statues, even sidewalks—all of these had inscriptions indicating their benefactor and highlighting the family’s new status.

The people of Corinth were also like Americans in the fact that they were rather eclectic in their religious practices. Major temples have been excavated which associated Roman with Greek deities, as well as temples associated with the Eleusinian mystery religions and Greek gods for which there were no Roman equivalent, such as the healing god Asklepios. But Corinth, like all Roman cities, also strongly supported the cult of the emperor; this was not surprising when one consider its founder. These temples, and the food that comes from them, will become a major issue in our text. This essay will examine them later.

We know much about Corinth and its people. In many ways, the outlooks, expectations, and pressures faced by the Corinthian Christians are similar to those faced by American Christians: social mobility, use of wealth to gain status, and religious pluralism in particular. But in many ways, of course, their context was very different. In Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, we are trying to understand descriptions of situations and activities which are completely foreign to us: What is it like to eat in a temple dining room? How could a Christian possibly think that was acceptable? When was the last time any of us attended a dinner party in North America where we were offered meat that had been sacrificed to an idol?<sup>7</sup> The fact that Roman Corinth today lies in ruins reminds us that understanding these problems is not easy. We cannot ask anyone with firsthand experience what was happening, for these events occurred 2000 years ago. We have only bits and pieces of the situation, much like there are only bits and pieces of Corinth left. We must therefore be very careful when we attempt to draw conclusions and evaluate practices based on these situations.

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<sup>6</sup>Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth: Texts and Archeology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. and exp. ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 178-85; cf. Thiselton, 850.

<sup>7</sup>Anecdotally, international students at Concordia Seminary from places like Thailand and Hong Kong indicate that this takes place with regularity in their homelands.

## The Structure of 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1

Turning directly to 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1, we find a section of the letter that is a coherent, structured argument, with its own introduction, development, examples, and application. Not only does this section show unity in theme, rhetoric, and even vocabulary,<sup>8</sup> but structural indicators also set it apart.<sup>9</sup> In 8:1 Paul immediately raises the issue: "Concerning food offered to idols." This topic will continue to be addressed exclusively through the end of chapter 10. The letter's next topic is introduced at 11:2: "I am praising you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions." Clearly Paul is moving on to a new topic, and at this point even his tone shifts. In 8-10 Paul's language is very tense, argumentative, at times grammatically incoherent,<sup>10</sup> perhaps even sarcastic. But in 11:2 he praises the Corinthians when he instructs them on a different issue. This would indicate two things. First, Paul sees idol food as a major issue, since he devotes so much time to it and develops his arguments so carefully. He wants to be sure that the Corinthians get his point and modify their behavior. Second, since Paul's tone is "pleasant" in chapter 11 and perhaps unpleasant in 8-10, he is distressed, perhaps even angered, at what is happening in Corinth.

The discussion about food sacrificed to idols begins by taking on the arguments of the "strong" immediately. The "strong" are Christians in Corinth who have taken the Gospel and constructed their own way of relating to the world and to fellow Christians that is not consistent with what Paul had taught them. "Strong," in this case, does not mean "strong in faith" or "people of strong moral character," but people who are confident, even over-confident, about the rights and freedoms that they have as a result of the Gospel.<sup>11</sup> In Paul's characterization, they seem to operate

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<sup>8</sup>Wolfgang Schrage, *Der Erste Brief an die Korinther*, 2. Teilband 1 Kor 6,12-11,16, Evangelisch-Katholisch Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Zürich und Braunschweig: Benzinger, 1995), 211-15, esp. 212-13.

<sup>9</sup>Especially the use of  $\pi\epsilon\pi\iota\ \delta\acute{\epsilon}$  in 8:1, which has been shown by Margaret Mitchell not to indicate seams of a composite document nor responses to specific, written questions asked by the Corinthians, but "is one of the ways in which Paul introduces the of the next argument or sub-argument." See her "Concerning  $\Pi\epsilon\pi\iota\ \Delta\epsilon$  in 1 Corinthians," *Novum Testamentum* 31 (1989): 229-256.

<sup>10</sup>Note the difficult anacolouthon at 9:15, which most commentators take as evidence of emotion. See especially Roger Omanson, "Some Comments about Style and Meaning: 1 Corinthians 9.15 and 7:10," *Bible Translator* 34 (1983): 135-139.

<sup>11</sup>While the issue is debated, some commentators treat the "strong" as an identifiable group in Corinth (e.g., Thiselton, 25-28 and 607-612), while others (e.g., Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 4-15) do not see the "strong" as a group so much as an approach to moral issues which has affected some members of the Corinthian congregation. Schrage (1. Teilband, 46) concludes: "In any case, one should only with great caution see lines of connection between the different aspects and motives, people, and groups of the Corinthian congregation." For this essay, "strong" is used in this latter sense (placed in quotation marks) as shorthand for those people who show the attitudes and actions against which Paul is responding in 8:1-11:1,

with something of a “bumper sticker theology.” Their main slogan<sup>12</sup> is repeated by Paul in a couple of places in 1 Corinthians: “All things are lawful for me” (6:12, 10:23). This claim is made based on the fact that they have what they call “knowledge,” as shown by another slogan cited in 8:1: “we all have knowledge.” Based on this attitude, this knowledge, the “strong” believe, for example, that any food may be eaten without harm and that relations with prostitutes are not harmful (6:13-15). In our section of text, this “knowledge” leads to the claim that “idols are nothing” (8:4) and that eating food sacrificed to them is not a problem (8:4). Paul accepts the first claim but not the second because their actions are negatively affecting the “weak” in the congregation. Again, the “weak” Christians are not “weak in faith” or “weak in moral character,” but those who are not so confident about their “rights,” and who do not claim to have special knowledge about how to live and act. In fact, they have the “stronger” morality in these situations; they do not want to do anything which might be associated with an idol. The “strong,” on the other hand, are liable to fall (10:12) because of their “weaker” morality which is the result of their own “knowledge.”

So what is wrong with knowledge? Paul gives his answer immediately in an introductory paragraph (8:1-3). He begins with a broadside against this kind of knowledge in verse 1: knowledge is puffy. Knowledge benefits only the person with knowledge. Knowledge leads one to take certain actions for one’s own benefit. It also leads to the attitude that if another does not know what one knows, that is their problem—perhaps an attitude echoed in our own society. In its place, Paul encourages something else: knowledge is puffy, but love is not fluffy (“knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.”). That is, love is not a romantic, indefinable, abstract feeling or emotion, but an attitude given by God which is expressed concretely as the opposite of self-focus: seeking the good of others. What should determine the behavior of a baptized child of God is not “knowledge about” *something*, but “love for” *someone*: “If someone thinks he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought. But if someone loves, this one is known” (8:2-3).<sup>13</sup>

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while those who do not have these attitudes are referred to as the “weak.” This is legitimate since in this section there are two very different approaches to “knowledge” and behavior.

<sup>12</sup>Recent translations like the ESV and NRSV helpfully place quotation marks around these “slogans” to mark them off as something Paul is citing from those he is correcting. The NIV, NKJV, and NASB do not mark them, creating confusion as to what comes from Paul (and hence should be viewed positively) and what comes from others (which should be viewed negatively and the subject of Paul’s criticism).

<sup>13</sup>This translation adopts the reading of P<sup>46</sup>, which lacks the direct object (τὸν θεόν) and the prepositional phrase indicating agency (ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ, also omitted by N<sup>33</sup>). It is clear that in this context the issue is not having an improper *object* of love (God), but replacing love of brother with knowledge. In addition to Gunther Zuntz, *Text of the Epistles* (London: The British Academy, 1953), 31-32, see Fee, 364 n. 26. Thiselton (625-626) agrees with the argumentation, but hesitates given the “external” evidence. Schrage (2. Teilband, 241-2 n. 131) sees the omission as assimilation to the objectless ἀγάπη of 8:1,

This argumentation is repeated in the “Great Love Chapter,” 1 Corinthians 13: “If I prophesy and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” and, again, 13:12-13: “Now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I have been fully known...the greatest of these is love.” Love, not knowledge, is the key to how one makes decisions about what to do and what not to do. In fact, knowledge is incomplete in this life—“now I know in part”—but what gives true knowledge is being known by God.

So, in three verses, Paul gives his solution to the problem of idol food. Do not act for yourself, act for others. Love defines how one lives. If I may lead my brother astray because of my actions, I will not eat. But Paul continues, in 8:4-11:1, by making application to specific situations taking place in Corinth.

### **The First Situation: Eating in the Temple Dining Rooms (8:4-13)**

In verse 4, the topic is reintroduced (“So, concerning the food sacrificed to idols”). The argumentation begins where everyone agrees: that there is only one God, and that idols, while some people worship them, in fact are nothing (8:4-6). Notice that the problematic behavior of the “strong” is not the result of doctrinal error. They are not polytheists; their actions are not taken because they have wrong belief, but because they have wrong (non-loving) attitudes toward others. Both Paul and the “strong” firmly believe, in contrast to what their society thought (8:5), that there is one God, and one Lord Jesus Christ. The issue Paul had to address was not whether the Corinthians had the correct theological truths or principles, but how they put that theology into practice in a faithful and loving way. Significantly, the simple fact that the theology of the “strong” was correct did not necessarily lead to correct practice. This must give pause to us all. Simply having knowledge of the Scriptures and orthodox theology does not—without fail—result in scriptural, God-pleasing, loving practice. This is seen from Paul’s criticism of the “strong” eating in temple dining rooms (8:7-13). Such situations are completely foreign to our experience. But Paul uses very precise terminology which helps us to begin to untangle the actions being addressed.

The first term is used as the more encompassing, general term. “Meat associated with idols” (εἰδωλόθυτος / ἡ βρώσις τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων ) is used in 8:1, 4 to introduce the topic. In 8:7, 10 the term is used of meat that is then eaten in a “temple dining room” (εἰδωλεῖον). Later, it is served for a meal at a unbeliever’s house (10:27-28). The practice of using meat which

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but in fact this is what requires the shorter reading in 8:3. Furthermore, assimilation by omission is extremely rare. In addition to the coherence between this form of the passage and 1 Corinthians 13 (see the discussion which follows), the omission of ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ in Ν’ 33 is inexplicable had τὸν θεόν had stood in the text.

had been sacrificed was standard in the Greco-Roman world, regardless of the deity. People offering petitions or thanksgiving would present an animal to the temple for sacrifice. Part of it, usually the shoulder, would be reserved for the use of the priest. The rest would either be used in a banquet associated with the ritual or be sold in the temple dining room or in the marketplace.<sup>14</sup>

It is the meat used in the temple dining room which concerns us in 8:7-13. This is a situation which is completely out of our realm of experience. In Corinth, as in any Greco-Roman city, many temples likely had these facilities. The excavated temple dedicated to the healing god Asklepios in Corinth shows these clearly. The sanctuary, a large room with an altar in the center, is on the main level. A lower level, part of which is beneath the sanctuary and part of which extends out into a courtyard, had at least three rooms with dining couches which were used for dining or banquet facilities.<sup>15</sup> Other potential (though not archeologically certain) dining facilities include temples dedicated to Serapis and other sites dedicated to as yet unidentified gods. These temple dining rooms did not have an exclusively religious function. They were places to conduct business, hold celebrations and banquets, or for casual dining. Invitations to such meals, written on papyrus, have been preserved from Roman Egypt. Though not specifically from Corinth, they would likely have been quite similar to what Christians there encountered. Among the most clearly identifiable as invitations to meals at the temple dining rooms are:

Appolonius invites you to dine at the table of the lord Serapis on the occasion of the approaching coming of age of his brothers at the temple of Thoeris (P.Oxy. 1484; 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> cen. A.D.)

The exegetes [city officials] invite you to dine at the temple of Demeter today, which is the 9th, at the 7th hour. (P.Oxy. 1485; 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> cen. A.D.)<sup>16</sup>

The first clearly has a social setting, but also a clear connection to the “table” of the god. By eating at the temple dining room, even for a social event, one participates in the table of that god. The second makes no such clear religious connection, but appears to have been an invitation to something of a business meeting which happened to be held at the temple. The ambiguity of such statements makes clearer how a “strong” Christian might

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<sup>14</sup>For further description see Lesley Adkins and Roy A. Adkins, eds., *Dictionary of Roman Religion* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 195-197.

<sup>15</sup>Diagrams and further description are available in Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Text and Archeology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. and exp. ed. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2002), 186-190.

<sup>16</sup>Both texts published in B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, eds., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. 12 (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1916), 244.



have reasoned: idols are nothing, and all we are doing is going to the temple to eat food and make a business deal. What is the harm in that? Or, imagine having been invited to the boss' daughter's wedding. The banquet happens to be held at the local temple. Since idols are nothing, and one is just eating food, which God Himself gave us (and a pay raise sure would help), why not go?

Paul's response to such reasoning has two components. First, there is in fact no benefit before God to eating: "Food does not bring us near to God. For neither if we do not eat do we lack; nor if we eat do we benefit" (8:8). To paraphrase: "You will not lose anything before God by giving up your right to eat; you are not gaining anything before God by exercising your right to eat." Second, Paul does concede, given the fact that everyone agrees that there is only one God (8:4-7), that there may be a "right" (ἐξουσία) to eat such food. However, one must consider not only his own perspective but also that of his brothers and sisters in the fellowship. If the "strong" person chooses to exercise the right to eat, two negative results may occur. He may lead his "weak" brother or sister into sin (8:11) and, as a result, "sin against Christ" (8:12), i.e., risk losing his righteous standing before God. Thus, the "strong" are no worse off if they do not eat, but if they do eat, they (and their brother or sister) are much worse off.

There are two reasons eating is unacceptable. First, whatever "right" there may be to eat is put aside when it becomes a stumbling block, something which leads the brother or sister to sin. How this happens is explained in verse 10: a "weak" Christian for whom idols are still a reality sees this "strong" Christian—one with knowledge—eating in the temple dining room. So, this "weak" Christian thinks that he may also eat. But when he does, he cannot put aside his thoughts that he is doing exactly what he used to do: eating a meal with an idol. So the only building up that this kind of knowledge produces—puffy knowledge—builds the other up so that he is once again actually participating in the sacrifices made at the altar of a false god. In so doing, the weaker "conscience," that is, the weak one himself,<sup>17</sup> is "destroyed" (ἀπόλλυται, v. 11) and led away into sin (σκανδαλίζω, v. 13).

Second, this action offends God. According to verse 12, not only does it lead others to sin, but by causing others to sin one offends God Himself. It is not difficult to connect this to the words of Jesus Himself: "If anyone causes one of these little ones to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone be tied around his neck and be thrown into the sea."

These reasons for avoiding meat associated with idols have nothing to do with the meat itself. It is not somehow "tainted" or "radioactive," poisoned with an indelible stain that causes harm to the person consuming it. Rather, the meat is avoided because of what the action of eating communicates to those who observe the eating. What the action communicates is

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<sup>17</sup>For the meaning of *συνείδησις*, see the Appendix.

not controlled by the person performing the action. Whether intentionally or not, even if the person may be operating from what they think are sound theological foundations, the action of eating the meat associated with idols is to be avoided because it is the (potential) observer's interpretation of the action that is critical.

This leads to the conclusion of this section in verse 13: "Therefore, if food causes my brother to sin, I will certainly not ever eat again, so that I will not cause my brother to sin." Notice how strongly this is worded: οὐ μὴ φάγω εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα—"I will not ever eat."<sup>18</sup> Now, this certainly would have profound social implications. The business meetings, weddings, and birthday parties in this setting are no longer possible. Knowledge does not define behavior. Rights do not define behavior. Paul does not even urge the "weak" to be "properly" instructed. They are not to teach the weak to know better, but the strong simply are not to eat (8:13).

One question remains: does Paul leave any wiggle room here? Can the "strong" say something like this: "Well, I used to eat in the temple dining room, and no one was offended. So I must still be able to do this, as long as no one sees me." There are two reasons this line of thinking is rejected. First, the temple dining room is a public event. One never knows who will see one there, or on one's way there, or on one's way out the door. Second, because, as we will see in chapter 9, Paul will argue that the goal is to save the non-believer as well. When a Christian eats in a temple dining room with a non-believer, he is simply confirming the non-believer's practice of eating with what the non-believer thinks is a real god. Further, as we will see in chapter 10, if a non-believer in a private home setting points out that the food is sacrificed to an idol, the Christian must not eat it. The practice prohibited in a private home, where others will certainly interpret the action of eating, cannot be proper in the very public temple environment itself.

### **Two Examples: Paul (9:1-27) and Israel (10:1-13)**

Chapter 9 will only be discussed briefly here, since it provides the Corinthians with an example of not making use of "rights." Paul had just instructed the "strong" to put off their rights for the sake of others, and now he spends the entire chapter pointing out that he has already done this many times. The primary issue is the right to be supported while doing his work as an apostle, though this is described in its different aspects: taking along his wife, receiving support, etc. What is critical to the flow of the argument is the point he makes near the end. Paul's focus is always entirely on "winning" as many people as possible: "I have made myself a slave to all, in order that I might win some" (9:19). The specific emphasis on the "weak" is significant: "To the weak I became weak, that I

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<sup>18</sup>See J. H. Moulton, W. F. Howard, and N. Turner, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, vol. 3: Syntax by N. Turner (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 96.

might win the weak; I have become all things to all people, so that I might save some" (9:23). This clarifies Paul's goals not only for his own behavior, but also for the "strong." Rather than putting the salvation of others at risk, one is to put off whatever real or perceived "rights" they may have. At the same time, this shows that Paul does not intend for the putting off of "rights" to lead to paralysis, in which one becomes so fearful of offending that one no longer has any interaction with the culture. One must be in the world in order to "save some." How this might take place in our own context will be discussed in the conclusion.

While chapter 9 provides a positive example of love for another person, chapter 10 returns specifically to the question of idols and eating with them. Paul reintroduces the issue with a lesson from history: What happened to God's people in the Old Testament when they ate with idols? The situation is the familiar golden calf incident of Exodus 32. With Moses on the mountain, the people decide they do not want such a slow god. So they make up their own, choosing Aaron as their new priest. God sends Moses back, who condemns the activity, while Aaron provides a sad attempt at an explanation: "I threw the gold into the fire, and out jumped this calf!" Notice that the only passage Paul cites from this incident (Ex. 32:6) deals precisely with eating. He calls the Israelites idolaters, but not only because they *made the idol*. They are idolaters because they *ate with the idol*: "Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play" (1 Cor. 10:7). In other words, the issue is not simply whether an idol exists—both Paul and the "strong" agreed that they do not in 8:4-6. The issue is whether or not one ought to eat and drink with an idol, even though the idol is not real. By participating in a meal with the idol, one makes the idol real. What happened to the Israelites when they did just this? In verse 5 Paul points out that most of the Israelites died in the wilderness—God was not pleased at their eating with the idol, and so destroyed them.

This advances the argument made in chapter 8. There the issue was: should I eat with idols when a fellow Christian is around? Now the issue is: should I eat with idols *at all*? Paul reminds the Corinthians in verse 11 that "these things happened to them as an example, and they are written for our instruction, upon whom the end of the age has come." The judgment that fell on Israel will all the more fall on those to whom the Gospel of Jesus Christ has come. The conclusion to this section is given as a result clause in 10:13: "As a result, let the one who thinks he is standing watch out, lest he fall."

Now, to whom is Paul speaking? Is he speaking to the "weak?" No, he already instructed them in 8:7-13 not to eat meat, and warned the "strong" not to eat in the presence of the "weak." Therefore, once again, he is speaking to the "strong," that is, to those who have convinced themselves that there is no danger for them in their actions. But notice again how this adds to the argument of chapters 8 and 9. It is not merely eating in front of

the weak that is a problem; any eating in the presence of idols is the problem. Do not eat with idols, because God may destroy you just as he destroyed the Israelites.

Yet, Paul offers pastoral encouragement. This will not be difficult for them—if they rely on God’s power and not their own. The words of 10:13-14 are familiar: “No testing (πειρασμός) has come upon you except what is human. But God is faithful, and He will not allow you to be tested beyond what you are able but will make with the testing also a way out so that you are able to endure.” While often applied to “temptation” in general, in this context the words are aimed directly at the “strong” and the “test” of idols. Not only is there a connection to the “testing” (πειρασμός) of the Israelites by God in the wilderness (especially Deut. 8), but in particular to the warnings against worship of idols in Deuteronomy 13:1-18, especially 13:4 (LXX). Therefore, when they stop being “strong” with their own knowledge and start relying on God’s wisdom, they will be able to “pass the test,” that is, to stay faithful (cf. 8:12).

### **Second Situation: Temple Worship (10:14-22)**

The argument of 10:1-13, that eating in the presence of idols at all is idolatry, has set up the second situation in which the Corinthians might associate themselves with idols: in the temples for actual sacrificial rituals. The inferential διόπερ takes the theological reflection of 10:1-12 and applies it directly to the situation of 10:14-22. It must be noted, however, that even here the issue is not simply idolatry itself (ειδωλολατρία, v. 14), but in particular eating what has been sacrificed to the idols (ειδωλόθυτος, v. 19; ἃ θύουσιν, v. 20; τραπέζης δαιμονίων,<sup>19</sup> v. 21). It is unclear from the text whether any Corinthians were actually participating in the rituals, or whether Paul feared that their eating practices might eventually lead them to this practice. For our purposes this question is irrelevant; the reasons the behavior is unacceptable remain the same whether the Corinthians were actually going to the rituals or not.

These passages could be, and in other contexts must be, analyzed for what they tell us about the theology and practice of the Lord’s Supper.<sup>20</sup> Here, however, we will focus on the question of whether or not one should eat the things sacrificed to idols. The community meal is Paul’s starting point, and he frames his discussion of idol meals based on the Supper. But the goal of his argumentation is to continue to demonstrate to the “strong” in Corinth that their actions are not only harmful to their brothers and

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<sup>19</sup>The term τραπέζης δαιμονίων may function as a metonymy in that it may not refer to the actual table/altar but to what is sacrificed on the table. See examples from sacrificial calendars discussed in G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1977* (Sydney: Macquarie University, 1982), 36-37.

<sup>20</sup>See in particular Jeffrey A. Gibbs, “An Exegetical Case for Close(d) Communion” *Concordia Journal* 21 (1995): 148-163.

sisters, but also to themselves.

So, he invites the “strong” in Corinth to “judge what I say” (10:15), to evaluate his argument. Again, as in 8:4-6, the discussion opens with what everyone agrees on: that in the Supper we, together, participate in the blood of Christ. Together we participate in the body of Christ. And, in verse 17, this shared eating of the body and blood creates unity one with another. Here, everyone agrees, strong, weak, Paul.

But, the argument continues, if you are united with Christ, it is inconsistent to then unite yourselves to idols. This is where Israel is revisited (10:18): “Look at Israel according to the flesh: Are not those who eat the sacrifices fellowshippers in the altar?” Israel ate what had been sacrificed to an idol, and was punished. The unstated reference is “Do you think it will be any different for you?” Verse 19 then brings up again the argument of the “strong” in 8:4-6: food sacrificed to idols is nothing; idols are nothing. All agree on this. But Paul then breaks off with one of his loaded “however’s” (ἄλλ’, v. 20): that may be true. However—and here is the key—what is sacrificed is sacrificed to demons and not to God. If you eat it, you are participating in that table.

Here again we can gain insight into how these actions would have been understood by examining contemporary invitations.

Nikephoros asks you to dine at a banquet of the lord Sarapis in the Birth-House on the 23rd, at the 9th hour (P. Coll. Youtie 51).

The god calls (καλεῖ ὁ θεὸς) you to a banquet being held in the temple of Thoeris tomorrow from the 9th hour (P. Koln 57).<sup>21</sup>

These two examples are obvious enough as to what is happening: the gods are calling you to the banquet. This would account for Paul’s argument: however much of your theological knowledge you use, he tells the “strong,” you cannot disassociate the food from the idol. Everyone knows what it is, and you are fooling yourself if you think it is safe for you to eat. What is especially significant about the second example is that it echoes the vocabulary Paul uses in 1 Corinthians. Recall that in 8:4-6 he notes that some people call idols “gods.” This invitation uses this exact language. In addition, P. Koln 57 describes being called to the banquet using the verb καλέω, the same verb Paul uses in 10:27 for the invitation (though in this passage to a meal in a home). These invitations are therefore excellent sources for understanding the context of the meals. The false god is made real and present by participating in the ritual in the temple. The conclusions may seem to us self-evident (10:20-21): you are Christ’s, not a demon’s. You cannot be both in theology, and you cannot be both in your eating habits. Do not go to the temples to eat.

<sup>21</sup>Texts reprinted in G. H. R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity. A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Published in 1976* (Sydney: Macquarie University, 1981), 5.

In Paul's almost sarcastic way, he concludes in verse 22: Or do you want God to become angry at you (filling in the blank) like he did with the Israelites? Or—and catch this—are you “stronger” than God?<sup>22</sup> God has made clear that idols, and eating with them, cannot be tolerated. Do you dare make up your own rules with your knowledge?

### **Third Situation: The Marketplace (10:23-26)**

After two and a half chapters, Paul has finished his line of argumentation and is ready to give his solution to two specific situations in Corinth, which he has been asked to resolve. Before we look at these in detail, I do want to reflect for a moment on how we might come to apply these texts. We have observed Paul's lengthy theological reasoning and argumentation which point to four main conclusions:

1. A Christian has no rights when their actions lead a fellow Christian into sin.
2. This is not optional; everyone, including Paul, puts aside their rights.
3. The goal of putting aside rights is the salvation of others, both believers and non-believers.
4. Eating with idols angers God because it is idolatry.

Now, these seem pretty clear. We could honestly stop right here and have extracted about as much as we can out of these chapters. But Paul continues to make specific applications to specific situations in Corinth, and from where we sit, some 1950 years later, there are many blanks and unanswered questions as to exactly what is taking place. In other words, what we find in 10:23-11:1 should sound much like what we found in the rest of chapters 8, 9, and 10.

So, not surprisingly, Paul begins his application by quoting the “strong,” the same way in which he started his argument in 8:1-3. He writes, “All things are permitted! All things are permitted!” followed by two responses, “Not all things are beneficial! Not all things build up!” (10:22) Once again focus is turned away from “rights” (πάντα ἔξεστιν) to what is beneficial to others<sup>23</sup> and builds them up.

The first real-life situation Paul brings up is food shopping (10:25-26): “Eat everything sold in the marketplace (μακέλλον) without judging on the

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<sup>22</sup>While this may not be a direct allusion to the “strong,” the harshness of the language is unmistakable: if one adopts their own “knowledge,” it implies that their's is superior to God's.

<sup>23</sup>Both because “beneficial” (συμφέρει) in parallel to “build up” (οικοδομεί) and because of the context of urging action which benefits others, “not all things are beneficial” in 10:23 implies “beneficial to others,” not “beneficial to me.” Cf. Thiselton, 781 and Schrage (2. Teilband), 463.

basis of your personal moral code (συνείδησις),” because God has already declared all things clean. On the surface there appears to be a contradiction with the applications made earlier. In 8:7-13 it was argued that one should not eat in the temple dining rooms and in 10:14-22 that one should not eat in the temple rituals. Why is it now permitted? Is Paul granting a concession here to the “strong,” that as long as they avoid other situations the meat sold in the market is acceptable? Or is he instructing the “weak” here, that they should not allow their weakness to extend to the marketplace? Before arguing against both of these positions, it is necessary to clarify two key terms: μακέλλον (marketplace) and συνείδησις (personal moral code).

μακέλλον is a transliteration of a Latin term for a uniquely Roman structure, the *macellum*.<sup>24</sup> Virtually all translations unhelpfully render this term as “meat market” (NIV, NKJV, ESV, NRSV<sup>25</sup>). It is clear, however, that while meat was available there, this was not their sole function. Archeological remains of these buildings still exist in Corinth (built at end of Augustus’ reign), Pompeii, Lepcis Magna (North Africa, built 8-9 B.C.), and Rome (built by Nero). The design is consistent in all these examples: a rectangular area with shop stalls around the outside wall, centered on a rotunda (*tholos*); Lepcis Magna (in modern Libya, near Tripoli) has two *tholoi*. In Pompeii, Corinth, and Lepcis Magna there is close association with the emperor cult, either in proximity to the temple (Corinth, Pompeii) or by statues and inscriptions inside (Lepcis Magna). In Pompeii and Lepcis Magna, the *macellum* is distant from any temple at which animal sacrifices would have been offered. In Corinth, however, the *macellum* may have been located near enough the temple of Apollo to raise suspicions among Christian purchasers about the source of the meat.

In Pompeii, immediately adjacent to the *macellum* is a storage pen for animals. Excavations at Pompeii found numerous skeletons of sheep buried in the eruption, all of which were complete. Had these animals been sacrificed, the priest’s portion (the shoulders) would have been missing. This means that meat for this market was supplied, at least in part if not completely, with meat not associated with temples. Likewise in Lepcis Magna, an area behind the *macellum* has been tentatively identified as animal pens.

The dedicatory inscription from the *macellum* at Corinth has been located. It reads: [names of the benefactors] built this *macellum*...and *piscarium* (fish house). Fish scales have also been recovered from the *tholos*

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<sup>24</sup>This section is summarized from David W. Gill, “The Meat Market in Corinth (1 Cor 10:25),” *Tyndale Bulletin* 43 (1992): 323-337 and H. J. Cadbury, “The Macellum at Corinth,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 53 (1934): 134-141. See now also John Fotopoulos, *Food Offered to Idols in Roman Corinth*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2. Reihe, 151 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 139-142, which confirms the description given here.

<sup>25</sup>The KJV translates this as “shambles,” which is incomprehensible unless one has been to York.

in Pompeii, as well as the remains of chestnuts, figs, plums, grapes, fruit in jars, lentils, grain, loaves of bread, cakes. No organic remains have been recovered at Lepcis Magna, but stone basins carved out with measurements for the volume and lengths of items (in addition to balances and weights) indicate that more than meat was sold there.

In conclusion, the *macellum* of Corinth matches other Roman sites in both location and structure, and also, presumably, use. More than meat was sold there, and even the available meat was likely not exclusively meat that had been sacrificed to an idol.<sup>26</sup> How this evidence impacts 1 Corinthians 10:25 must wait until we clarify the meaning of *συνείδησις*.

The term *συνείδησις* has little contact with our modern English word, “conscience.” For us, “conscience” is a moral guide, something inside us like Jiminy Cricket: “The faculty, power, or inward principle which decides as to the character of one’s own actions, purposes, and affections, warning against and condemning that which is wrong, and approving and prompting to that which is right.” This definition of *συνείδησις* would render the argument of 8:7-13 virtually unintelligible, for how is one’s “inward principle” destroyed (8:11) by the actions of another? In 10:25 this definition is equally problematic. For if this were the meaning, Paul’s argument would be: “Eat everything sold in the marketplace; do not allow your inner principles of judging moral behavior to bother you.” In effect, he would be telling the “weak” to go ahead and eat meat sold in the *macellum* even though it might be food sacrificed to an idol—something he expressly instructed them not to do in 8:7-13. Instead, Paul’s use of *συνείδησις* incorporates several entailments, only one of which is somewhat related to one’s “inner moral voice.” In order to continue the flow of this discussion, a summary of Paul’s use of the term is provided in an appendix to this essay.<sup>27</sup> At this point it is enough to summarize what this noun entails: (1) it exists whether or not one is Christian; (2) it may be congruent with a Christian perspective, yet not derived from it; (3) it functions as a learned (not innate) guide to behavior; (4) it is closely identified with a person’s being/existence. It is particularly the third of these that is primarily at issue in 10:25. Should one use one’s own standards to judge the marketplace meat?

This can be answered by clarifying a few micro-structural and grammatical issues. The participial phrase in 10:25 (and the identical one in

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<sup>26</sup>Cf. Fotopoulos: “...this would make it likely that the *macellum* at Corinth was a meat market also having fresh fish for sale on the premises” (140); “*Macella* were primarily meat markets but also having facilities selling fish, bread, and other foodstuffs” (141); “These references add literary support to the archeological evidence of the Greco-Roman world demonstrating that *macella* were meat markets that sold other food provisions as well” (141).

<sup>27</sup>For secondary literature see especially Thiselton, 640-644; Schrage (2. Teilband), 256-259; and Philip Bosman, *Conscience in Philo and Paul*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2. Reihe, 166 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 191-275.



10:27), “not judging on the basis of ‘one’s personal moral code’” (μηδὲν ἀνακρίνοντες διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν)<sup>28</sup> is adverbial to the imperative “eat” (ἔσθιετε). Furthermore, while there is no conjunction at the beginning of the LXX citation in 10:26, the relationship to the previous clause must be causal. As a result, the logical structure of 10:25-26 is as follows: the earth is the Lord’s...therefore, do not judge things for the sake of συνείδησις; therefore, you may eat what is sold in the marketplace.

As a result, “do not judge on the basis of your συνείδησις” means: do not look at all the stuff you can get at the market from your own personal moral code but from God’s perspective, because the earth is the Lord’s. The idol is not present, you are not worshipping idols, and if you buy meat, whether or not it has been sacrificed, an idol cannot taint it or make it radioactive. Therefore, eat! Notice the situation, and how it differs from eating at the temple dining rooms or eating with idols. First, one is not with another Christian, so putting off rights so that another’s faith is not harmed is not an issue. Second, one is not buying the food to serve to another Christian, so again the perspective of a fellow Christian is not involved. Third, one is at the marketplace, not the temple. A *macellum*, a market place, is not simply the temple outlet store. All manner of things are sold in a *macellum*, including meat that has not been sacrificed to an idol. In conclusion, this action neither harms the “weak” nor sins against God. It does not harm the “weak” because they are not there; it does not offend God because it is not eating with idols.<sup>29</sup>

#### **Fourth Situation: Invitation to an Unbeliever’s Home (10:27-11:1)**

The final situation described closely corresponds to what was described in 8:7-13, only this time it is at the home of a non-believer: “If an unbeliever invites you (and you wish to go), eat everything set before you without judging on the basis of your personal moral code.” Notice that at this point nothing has been said about a connection with idols. Therefore, eat! The same principle stated in verse 25 is repeated here: it is not a matter of your personal moral code; though Paul does not cite it again, one should assume that Psalm 24 applies here as well. But if someone makes a point

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<sup>28</sup>The ESV translation of this verse is unacceptable because it appears to translate μηδὲν twice: “Eat *whatever* is sold in the meat market without raising *any* question on the ground of conscience” (emphasis added). This places unwarranted emphasis on the “freedom” of the action.

<sup>29</sup>It is worth noting that this practice is markedly different from that of Judaism: Mishnah, *Abodah Zarah* [“Idolatry”] 2,3: “Meat that is entering into an idol is permitted, but what comes forth is forbidden, for it is as the sacrifices of the dead (Ps. 106:28).” and *Hullin* [animals killed for food], 1,1: “What is slaughtered by a gentile is deemed carrion.” For Judaism, idol food is radioactive. Any possible taint must be scrupulously avoided. In contrast, for Paul the food itself is not the issue, but the worship of the idol. Both passages cited from Herbert Danby, trans., *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933).

of the fact the meat has been sacrificed to an idol, then it is not to be eaten. Again, this is not because the meat is indelibly tainted, but because the other person—here a non-believer (v. 26)—does not consider the meat something belonging to the Lord but in fact sacrificed to an idol. In fact, this individual does not use Paul's term for it, εἰδωλόθυτος = "sacrificed to an idol", but ἐροόθυτος = "sacrificed to a god," the more neutral term used by writers who are not from a Jewish or Christian background.

Several preserved invitations help clarify what a non-Christian would consider himself to be doing in these meals where the mention of "sacrificed to the god" is made:

Dionysios asks you to dine on the 21st at a banquet of Helios, great Sarapis, at the 9th hour, in the house of his father. (P.Yale 587; 2<sup>nd</sup> cen. A.D.)

Antonius son of Ptolemaus invites you to dine with him at the banquet of the lord Sarapis in the house of Claudius Sarapion on the 16th from the ninth hour. (P.Oxy 523; 2<sup>nd</sup> cen. A.D.)<sup>30</sup>

Notice in both cases the specific mention of the god. Roman coins have been preserved which depict a god reclining at a banquet, which implies that the understanding is that the god is actually eating at the meal with the participants. One archeologist concludes:

Although it was a matter of some disagreement earlier in this century, there is now a clear consensus that these banquets had a fundamentally religious character. We know next to nothing about what occurred at these banquets, but there will have been some kind of sacrifice to that god as a matter of course, in addition to the meal.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, it is not the meat itself that is the problem, but the fact that the non-believer thinks that the god is present at the meal, and that the meal is tantamount to a sharing of the sacrifice to the god. A Christian certainly would know better, that an idol is nothing (8:4-6). But because of the other person's interpretation of the event and for the sake of that person the Christian does not eat.

Were a Christian to receive invitations like these, Paul's arguments in 1 Corinthians should have led to that person declining it. But other invita-

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<sup>30</sup>Texts published in J. F. Oates, A. E. Samuel, and C. B. Wells, eds., *Yale Papyri in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library*, American Studies in Papyrology, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: American Society of Papyrologists, 1967), 264 and B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, eds., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. 3 (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1903), 260.

<sup>31</sup>Horsley, *New Documents* (1981), 6. The religious nature of these meals in the different venues (temple dining room, private home, etc.) is discussed in Oates, Samuel, and Wells, eds., 262-263.

tions to meals in homes are more ambiguous, without implication of any religious significance:

Xenicus also called Pelius invites you to his wedding, today, Pharmouthi 22, at the 8<sup>th</sup> hour. (P.Oxy. 1486; 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> cen. A.D.)

Theon son of Origenes invites you to the wedding of his sister tomorrow, which is Tubi 9, at the 8<sup>th</sup> hour. (P. Oxy. 1487; 4<sup>th</sup> cen. A.D.)<sup>32</sup>

In this case, a Christian ends up at the home of a non-believer, and, apparently without warning, the meal becomes a religious event. The reason this food cannot now be eaten is that one is worshipping idols as soon as the idol is brought into the picture. Therefore, Paul concludes, do not eat it—for their sake. In his refusal to eat, the Christian defers to the non-believer’s interpretation of the event (the idol is present), not his his own (an idol is nothing). The non-eating is not only for the sake of keeping the Christian pure, but a direct application of what Paul encourages in 9:19: “I have made myself slave of all in order that I might win many.” In other words, the goal is the salvation of the individual of whom the Christian is a guest. To eat would imply that the idol is real, and the individual would not be challenged to evaluate that perspective.

In 10:29b and 30 Paul anticipates the objections he will receive from the “strong”: Why is my freedom judged by another’s (weak) moral code? If I receive it with thanks, why am I blasphemed?” Paul’s response is again similar to chapter 9: because in everything I glorify God—and glorifying God is accomplished, according to verses 32 and 33, by saving others. In other words, evangelism is the goal. Saving others is the goal. Therefore, the right to eat is put off because they have brought their false god into the room, and I do not want to confirm them in their worship of idols. In the end, “follow my example,” he says in 11:1. I have put off my rights, you must put off yours, so that some may be saved.

### **Implications for Faithful and Loving Witness**

Several clear conclusions may be drawn from this passage. First, idols and participation in rituals that invoke them offend God. Some Corinthians Christians were doing this in temple dining rooms and private homes; whether they were in, addition, attending temple worship services is not clear. Even if they were not, the fact that Paul discusses the issue at all indicates the serious nature of the problem. He condemns the flawed “knowledge” which would lead to the conclusion that such eating rituals are “neutral” before God. Second, fellowship with Christ rules out fellowship with

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<sup>32</sup>Both texts published in Grenfell and Hunt (1916).

demons. One should not even contemplate sharing in the altar of demons if one has been to the altar of Christ. Here again, flawed knowledge leads to behavior which condemns. Third, the First Article does have a place. Eating is permitted in situations where the idol is not there, either physically or by implication (e.g., in the market place, or the unbeliever's home where the invoking of idols has not taken place). Eating, however, is not permitted when the idol's presence is invoked. Finally, and this should be considered the most important because it is the goal to which the apostle returns several times in the passage, whatever "rights" or "freedoms" people may think they have are of no account when the spiritual well being, even salvation, of another is involved.

How, then, does this passage provide guidance for us as we seek to "save some" in our pluralistic society? One cannot make application merely by trying to figure out which situation is most analogous to the situations in which we might find ourselves and then apply that portion allegorically. For example, one might wander over to the community "taste of" summer festival at the local park. One of the food booths has been set up by an Indian Hindu group. There are statues of gods and goddesses on the tables. One might think this situation is parallel to 1 Corinthians 8:7-13, since it is not in a temple itself but the people in the booth think the idols are present. The person that makes this link would not eat for fear that a fellow Christian might mistake their eating for worshipping false gods. This reasoning is incorrect because the simple act of eating food does not imply the invocation of false gods so that they are present and participating in the bowl of curry. It is doubtful that there can ever be complete correspondence between the circumstances described in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and our own day. As much as recent archeological and textual research has clarified many items in these passages, there are still many "blanks" which we will never be able to fill in completely.

The difficulty lies in the fact that we must try to interpret the significance of actions, or what the action "counts as." More specifically, the challenge is to determine how Paul interpreted the actions of the Corinthians, how the Corinthians interpreted the same actions, and then why Paul either condemns or encourages those actions and interpretations. What this passage does make clear is that the actor does not control how others might interpret his actions. Some Corinthians felt that eating in the temple dining room was harmless, but Paul did not. On the other hand, some felt that eating meat from the marketplace was harmless, and Paul agreed with this interpretation. We constantly encounter similar difficulties in the interpretation of actions. For example, a pastor might show up an hour late at the home of a shut-in because he wanted to finish his Sunday sermon while the ideas were still fresh and flowing. The pastor would probably interpret that action as a valid example of prioritizing activities, of giving priority to the preached Word of God in the worshipping community, of finishing one task so that he can focus fully on his visit with a

member of his flock. His parishioner, however, might interpret that action as proof that the pastor does not really care for her, that the elderly are considered useless by society and even her pastor, and that if her pastor does not think she is important, then perhaps even God does not. Certainly the pastor would not consider any of these to be proper interpretations of his action. He cannot, however, control how the parishioner reaches those conclusions.<sup>33</sup>

In this passage, it is critical to note that Paul sees these actions as having implications for salvation; both Christians (8:7-13) and non-Christians (10:27-28) might be destroyed or lost because of the action. For this reason, Paul places the burden on the person who believes their actions are proper to give up their “rights” (legitimate or self-bestowed) if there is even the smallest possibility that it might lead another away from salvation. The issues here are not merely “offending” someone who has a different view on whether or not to eat meat or vegetables, as is the issue in Romans 14. There the issue is not “food sacrificed to idols” (εἰδωλοθύτος), but simply “food” (βρῶμα). Again, while the goal of 1 Corinthians 8-10 is the salvation of others, in Romans 14 it is maintaining peace in the community (Rom. 14:19). Once idols enter the picture, the issue becomes completely different. In 1 Corinthians 8-10 the salvation of individuals is at stake, for if they worship what is not God, they cannot worship the true God.

It is because of these salvific implications that Paul insists that the Corinthians must allow the other person’s view of the actions to be the interpretation which is “correct,” even if there may be theological reasons that it is not. Recall that in 8:4-6, Paul agrees with their theology, but continues in the next verse to remind them that “not all have this knowledge,” so their behavior must be conformed to the other person’s perspective. There may come a point where the other person may come to have genuine “knowledge” and see that “idols are nothing.” But helping (much less forcing) a person to reach that point is not encouraged in this passage. Instead, because of the dangers of idols, Paul encourages the “strong” to proceed with extreme caution, always being mindful of how their actions will be interpreted by those who do not share their “knowledge.”

Would this attitude lead to paralysis? If every action I take might be interpreted in a way that I do not intend, should I do nothing at all so that no one is offended? It is clear that in Corinth certain actions were indeed to be avoided. But both chapter 9 and the conclusion of the section in 10:31-11:1 also make clear that one must be engaged in the culture in order to “save” others. This engagement, however, is not on the culture’s terms. Instead, one keeps in view two potentially—but not necessarily—

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<sup>33</sup>A helpful discussion of these issues and their implications in public settings may be found in Paul W. Robinson and James W. Voelz, “What Am I Doing Here?: The Semiotics of Participation in Public Gatherings,” in *Witness & Worship in Pluralistic America*, ed. John F. Johnson (Office of the President, Concordia Seminary, 2003), 61-65.

competing boundaries. On the one hand we must remain faithful, i.e., not offend God. One cannot become “all things to all people” by sinning against God (in this context, by participating in idol rituals). On the other hand, we must not limit our outreach by rejecting an action for which there is genuine “freedom” (before God), but at the same time we must constantly be aware that what we think we are communicating is not necessarily what is being received. Some may interpret what we consider to be a clear and unambiguous Christian statement or action as a confirmation that their rejection of Christ is acceptable. By acting with both of these in view, we are prevented from potentially harming ourselves as well as leading people away from God to something that He in fact condemns. In addition, we are compelled to not simply “preserve the truth of the Gospel” without making every effort to make it known to others. But in so doing, genuine love would lead us to find out just where they are—how they view the true God, and themselves in relation to Him—so that what we attempt to communicate is what is received. This may require stepping out of our comfort zones so that we can both understand and communicate with non-believers. The goal is not only keeping ourselves unstained by the world; it is also bringing salvation to the stained world.

The reader of this passage may have noticed that Paul spends relatively little time on “theology” *per se*, but a great deal on how that theology is witnessed by others through actions. Paul had substantial theological agreement (8:4-6) with those in Corinth who nonetheless had a different attitude toward others. By way of reflection, as Lutheran Christians, we might ask ourselves where we spend most of our efforts and energy. Is it in studying our theological positions carefully, so that we can agree amongst ourselves on what is “faithful?” Or do we spend it studying our culture and the people in it carefully, so that we might lovingly bring that faithful message to them? Both are necessary tasks, and any attempt to compromise God’s truth for the sake of “witnessing” only leads to a witness which is no longer to Christ, but to ourselves. Nonetheless, this passage requires us to ask ourselves whether we often downplay the need to find out “where people are” and assume that this is the easy part of outreach. In reality it requires as much—and probably more—time, effort, insight, critical thinking, and hard work than finding out “where the right theological answer is.” Unfortunately, it appears that the latter task consumes the vast amount of our time, energy, and resources. Paul demanded of the Corinthians both faithfulness and a faithful, loving witness in their pluralistic culture. In our own pluralistic culture no less is required.

In every situation where the worship of false gods is involved, extreme caution must be used. Every attempt must be made to avoid giving the impression that such worship is valid or acceptable, while at the same time never forgetting that those who worship false gods must hear the Gospel. In some ways, we may wish that Paul had said more. What happens at that meal in the unbeliever’s home after the refusal to eat (10:28)?

No suggestion is made. In this situation one cannot “become all things,” both because God would be offended and because the unbelievers would think that idol worship was not harmful to their salvation. However, since the goal is to save all, the proclamation of the Gospel must take place. With the refusal to eat will inevitably come dialogue, and in that dialogue comes the opportunity to give a clear explanation of one’s behavior—to testify to the one God and one Lord Jesus Christ (8:6). This is where the text leads us: both to faithfulness to God and an unrelenting love for others which does everything possible to build up fellow Christians and bring salvation to the lost. Recalling that “true doctrine” does not inevitably lead to “true practice” (8:4-6), we are called to strive for both, always “so that they”—whoever they are—“may be saved” (10:33).

### Appendix: “Conscience”

When the King James translation was made, many difficult words were simply transliterated from the Greek or from the Latin Vulgate equivalent. One example is δικαιοσύνη, which the Latin had translated as *iustificatio* and became our English “justification.” Another example is the Greek συνείδησις, which in Latin was translated as *conscientia* and brought into English as “conscience.” These words entered the English language and became standard Christian vocabulary. But the meanings of words change over time. Further, several English words have derived from the Latin *conscientia*: “conscience,” “consent,” “consciousness,” “conscientious,” etc. So the question becomes, is the way we understand “conscience” the same as what Paul understood with συνείδησις? Or, did he mean something more like “consent” or “consciousness,” or something altogether different? And, from our own American vocabulary, would Paul allow for things like “conscientious objectors”? Or would he agree that there is such a thing as “freedom of conscience”?

A standard dictionary definition of “conscience” is: “1. The faculty, power, or inward principle which decides as to the character of one’s own actions, purposes, and affections, warning against and condemning that which is wrong, and approving and prompting to that which is right; 2. the moral faculty passing judgment on one’s self; 3. the moral sense.” Most of us probably think of meaning “1” when we hear the word “conscience.” But based on Paul’s use of συνείδησις, as outlined below, the word is best understood as slightly different from meaning “3”, that is, “moral awareness, which is intimately associated with the person.”

An examination of the other examples of συνείδησις in Paul’s writings will help clarify the entailments of the word.

1. A person has a συνείδησις whether or not they are Christian.

Romans 2:14-16: “For when the Gentiles, who do not have the Law,

naturally do the things of the Law, although they do not have the Law they are Law for themselves. Whoever shows the work of the Law written on their hearts, their consciences are co-witness, and their conflicting thoughts either accuse or even excuse them on the day God judges the hidden things of people in accordance with my Gospel, through Jesus Christ.”

Here “conscience” is parallel to what is written on their hearts as a “second witness” which leads to a certain behavior. In this case it happens to be congruent with the Law. In other words, it is their current way of thinking, which has not come from God but elsewhere (culture? custom? habit?).

2. A *συνείδησις* may be congruent with a Christian perspective, yet not derived from it.

Romans 13:5: “Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”

The “therefore” relates this conclusion to the previous verse, in which Paul warns that if you do wrong, the ruler will punish. So not only should one fear God (the Christian perspective), but one should also fear the ruler (even the non-Christians do this). “Conscience” here is not “inner pangs of guilt,” but “what everyone does naturally.”

3. A *συνείδησις* functions as a person’s moral code.

2 Corinthians 4:2: “But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to any conscience of people in the sight of God.”

The translation “to any conscience of people” is a bit awkward. I have translated it literally (grammatically, “any” modifies “conscience,” not “people”); the NASB translates the phrase: “to every man’s conscience”; ESV = “to everyone’s conscience.” Paul’s emphatic call for judgement by “anyone” is striking. He is not simply asking the Corinthians to judge his behavior, but any “person.” This implies that every person, even a non-Christian, will have a personal moral code which forms the basis for their judgment of behavior.

4. A person’s *συνείδησις* is closely identified with a person’s being/existence.

2 Corinthians 5:11: “But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.”



In this passage it is clear that Paul sees one's "conscience" as virtually identical with oneself. The word is used in this passage because Paul is again asking for someone's judgment on his actions (as in 2 Cor. 4:2).

With this background the examples in 1 Corinthians 8-10 may now be examined. The three examples in chapter 8 are similar to each other. In 8:7 Paul is referring to a person's moral awareness, which might be "weak" (or, apparently, "strong"). Here, the perspective on idols that converts to Christianity have has not yet changed. They still look upon idols as "real." Yet one's moral awareness is so closely identified with a person's being that wounding a person's "conscience" wounds them. Likewise in 8:10, 12, the emphasis is on the close relationship between one's "conscience" and oneself. In fact, wounding another's "weak conscience" sins against Christ!

The four examples in chapter 10 are likewise similar to each other in focus. Whether or not one eats something is not a matter of personal moral decision: "You may eat what is sold in the market without judging on the basis of 'conscience'" (10:25). The identical wording is used in 10:27 of food served by an unbeliever to a Christian: "You may eat what is set before you without judging on the basis of 'conscience.'" However, if a non-believer declares that the meat has been "sacrificed to an idol," then the other person's, the non-believer's, conscience becomes involved (10:28-29a). Here, the focus is more on one's personal moral code than on the close relationship between that of this code and one's being. Furthermore, it is also clear that non-believers have a personal moral code. It is not uniquely Christian to have a "moral code," rather, all people form one, whether through experience or learning.

Therefore, to base one's actions on "freedom of conscience" would be foreign to a New Testament, Pauline way of thought. "Conscience" as we typically understand it is, for the New Testament writers, simply not a known conception of the human psyche.



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