

PALS AMONG THE PAGANS? IDOL MEAT AND THE BONDS OF COMMUNITY

PREPGUIDE

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Most of the Christians in Corinth began their lives and had lived most of them as garden variety Greek gentiles. Their religious lives consisted of occasional stop-offs at the temples and shrines dedicated to the pagan gods that were honored in their city. Most prominent among them were Aphrodite (goddess of love), Apollo (god of music, etc.), Poseidon (sea god), Demeter (goddess of agriculture), and Helios (sun god). And we shouldn't picture little shrines. The Temple of Apollo in Corinth (the remainder of which is pictured below) was huge, and it was one of the most ancient in the world.



When these everyday Corinthians made stops at these sacred spots, they would leave a sacrifice on the altar and request some sort of favor from the god. Animal sacrifice was common. The sacrificed meat that was burned on the altar would then, later, be served as food around the city. In fact, Dr. Stanley Stowers, Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Brown University, has estimated that 99% of the meat that was consumed as food in Greco-Roman times had been sacrificed first to one god or another.

Now, picture the social cost of all this to these recently -converted Christians, who had left the everyday practices of Greco -Roman religion and its pageantry, but were a tiny minority in a large city. What would these new followers of Jesus do about those normal habits of dining, now that they had renounced the pagan gods and turned to the one God Paul and others had introduced to them? When the local ancient equivalent of the Rotary Club or a supper club or an invitation to dinner would pose a decisive question challenge. Would eating meat imply a return to the worship of Corinth's gods?

In 1 Corinthians 8–10, we discover that this social dilemma has led to an internal Christian conflict. Some in the group were sure that confident monotheism freed them to eat meat without fear; others were not so sure and worried that their participation in such meals would be a betrayal of their faith – or a bridge backward to their former lives.

For Paul, this offered an opportunity to teach about the trademark agapeic deference he saw as central to Christian ethics. And so, for us these chapters offer a window to the moral formation Paul found central to proper participation in the body of Christ .

For 21st-century Christ -followers in the U.S., who abide in a me -first culture built on individual rights and freedoms, Paul's teaching here offers a salient Christian contrast with the prevailing ethos that surrounds us.

This prep guide tracks briefly the order and logic of Paul's conversation with one vocal part of the Corinthian Christian group.

PART ONE: THE PRESENTING ISSUE OF MEAT (8.1-13)

We know that the Corinthians have strong opinions about their beliefs and spiritual practices. We know it because Paul has already quoted them in 6. , 7.1, and 7.25. In 1 Corinthians 8—10, Paul quotes and then answers the Corinthians' stated convictions regarding "EIDOLOTHUTRA" (meat that has been sacrificed to idols).

The "Corinthian Position" on Idol Meat

Claim #1: We are Monotheists

“all of us possess knowledge...no idol in the world really exists [and] there is no God but one...(1 Cor 8.1-3)

Claim #2: Food Rituals are Powerless

“Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do (1 Cor 8.8).”

Paul's Conversation with Them

In 8.1-13, Paul has interlaced

C: *“all of us possess knowledge”*

P: True, but knowledge puffs up, while love builds up.

C: *“no idol in the world really exists [and] there is no God but one”*

P: True, but not all of us have that knowledge.

C: *“food will not bring us close to God.”*

P: True, but this knowledge can become a stumbling block to others.

Competing Central Questions

The Corinthians' Primary Concern: “What is it my right to do?”

Paul's Concern: How will my actions impact my brothers and sisters in Christ?

PART TWO: PAUL OFFERS HIS OWN EXAMPLE (9.1-27)

Many interpreters of 1 Corinthians have been puzzled by what they consider Paul's defensive, self-serving autobiographical tangent in chapter 9. The least agile among them see no connection between the content of chapter 9 and that of the two chapters that flank it.

These readers have cause to think this way, because Paul's first words out of the chute are, "This is my defense to those who would examine me..." But Paul's letter had no chapter numbers, and Paul's habit was not to interrupt a cogent and connected flow of argument (chapter 8 and chapter 10) with an unrelated walkabout.

A case in point in this very letter is 1 Corinthians 12 –14, where Paul begins to answer the Corinthians' questions about spiritual gifts. There, he uses the same language – PERI DE in Greek– that he has used to introduce excerpts from the Corinthians' letter in 7.1 ("concerning the things about which you wrote..."), 7.25 "concerning virgins"), our passage of this week in 8.1 ("concerning meat sacrificed to idols"), and 15.1 ("concerning the resurrection"). Chapter 12 begins, "Now concerning spiritual gifts..., a topic that fills chapter 12 and chapter 14. Between them lies 1 Corinthians 13, the famous "Love Chapter", without clear connections to the issue of spiritual gifts. But a closer reading of 12 –14, as with 8 –10, shows that the middle chapter is essential to the flow of the argument. In this case, Paul offers the Corinthians his own positive example before he offers Israel's negative example. (10.1-5)

Paul had learned from Greco -Roman philosophers of his time (and probably from the rabbis who had formed his Jewish faith and leadership style) the power of personal example – both positive and negative – to communicate important truths by offering a visible picture. (For an excellent scholarly work on personal example among the philosophers, see Ben Fiore's Yale dissertation, *The Function of Personal Example in the Socratic Epistles and the Pastoral Epistles of Paul* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1986). In this letter, we've already seen Paul call the Corinthians to become imitators of him ("I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me." 4.16), and he will do it again in 11.1 ("Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.") Chapter 9 is his extended portrayal of the deferential, other -serving attitude he hopes will break out among the Corinthians.

Rights

A central point of contrast between some of the Corinthians' focus on their right to eat meat, compared to Paul's hope that they will prioritize their brothers' and sisters' well-being over their own rights.

Here, Paul emphasizes that he and Barnabas could easily lay claim to two rights:

1. The right to have others pay their living expenses (9.4)
2. The right to travel with a Christian wife. (9.5)

He argues persuasively for these rights using general human logic and scripture. But just when you think that Paul is trying to get some sort of compensation after the fact, he turns the tide. He makes it very clear that he and Barnabas had never taken advantage of these proper rights – and why. In the first mention, he attributes this relinquishing of rights to his preference for the gospel of Christ.

“Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.” (9.12)

But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case. (9.15)

What then is my wage? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel. (9.18)

Paul makes all these sacrifices in order to save the Corinthians.

I have become all things to all people so that I may by all means save some...I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might become a partner in it.

Paul's allegedly self-serving narrative of his actions repeatedly demonstrates the very same deferential attitudes and actions that he has recommended to the confident Corinthians in chapter 8.

PART THREE: QUESTIONING THE CONFIDENT CORINTHIANS (10-22)

Paul moves from direct exhortation to the presentation of his own positive example and the negative example of ancient Israel in order to persuade the Corinthians to give up their rights for one another and not fall back into a former slavery to idols. (See Galatians 4.8-11)

The Negative Example of Israel

To scare the Confident Corinthians just a little, Paul offers a negative example to dissuade them from falling prey to idol worship. He tells the story of the Hebrew people, who had experienced the brilliant displays of God's power that accomplished their escape from enslavement in Egypt into a new freedom as a God's people. The whole generation was privy to these marvelous, miraculous acts, yet a whole lot of them went back to worshipping idols within weeks of their deliverance. (10.1-5)

Paul wants them to take a clue from Israel's vulnerability.

These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. (10.11)

He also wants the Confident Corinthians to steer clear of arrogance, by questioning two of their assumptions:

Assumption #1: The Confident Corinthians' Monotheism

If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall (10.12).

Assumption #2: The Powerlessness of Ritual Food (10.14-22)

Are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar? (10.18)

If Paul has succeeded in his argument, the Confident Corinthians will not only consider the frailty of their “weaker” brothers and sisters’ faith, but the fragility of their own faith as well. If they do all this, they will be ready for his middle-ground solution.



The Final Word (1 Corinthians 10.23 —11.1)

The apostle brings the whole section to a close with practical advice for the Corinthians.

Finally, he wraps the whole section up by moving this lesson to the rest of life, beyond meat and altars to everyday living. Paul hopes they will live to God’s glory and the salvation of the whole Corinthian body – and that as they strive to do this, they will use his example to help them.

So, whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage but that of many, so that they may be saved. "Imitate me as I imitate Christ (10.31–11.1)"

We'll pick all of this up on Monday evening. Enjoy your reading, and I'll see you then!