

May Christians Eat Food Offered to Idols?

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Surely Christians in our modern age need not be concerned with the question of eating or not eating food sacrificed to idols. Or should they? While seeking to obey God's word, may Christians eat food offered to idols? Does the New Testament really teach what some have supposed about this question?

Isn't it interesting that the first sin of mankind involved the eating of food forbidden to them? (Genesis 2:16-17; 3:11-13). The tree in the Garden of Eden represented the knowledge -- or better understood the designation -- of good and evil. It represented mankind usurping God's prerogative as the One Lawgiver (James 4:12), deciding for themselves right and wrong, good and evil. By eating with Satan (he was the first rebel -- the first to partake of the forbidden fruit) they yielded to his influence and control. Thus they worshiped a demon, and in effect sacrificed to him, while cutting themselves off from subjection to God and his Spirit (Genesis 3:8, 22-24; 1 Corinthians 10:21). Have we now become so "wise" that we can partake of Satan's table without sharing in his evil?

God's Word condemns idolatry in no uncertain terms. In the first three of the ten commandments God condemns in various ways the worship of false gods (Exodus 20:3-7). And the other commandments all relate in principle to various aspects of idolatry, as well. There are scores of Scriptures directly expressing God's displeasure with idol worship and practices associated with it, including eating of food offered to idols.

God spoke to Moses out of the thick cloud on Mount Sinai, "He who sacrifices to any god, except to the Lord only, he shall be utterly destroyed" (Exodus 22:20). To prevent the sacrifice of animals to demons among the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness, God told them they were to kill at the door of the tabernacle all domestic animals slaughtered for food (Leviticus 17:3-9). "To root out this idolatrous custom [dedicating slain animals to false gods] from among the Israelites, they were commanded to slay every [domestic] animal before the tabernacle, as a sacrificial gift to Jehovah, and to bring the slain-offerings, which they would have slain in the open field, to the priest at the tabernacle, as *shelamim* (praise-offerings and thank-offerings), that he might sprinkle the blood upon the altar, and burn the fat as a sweet-smelling savour for Jehovah (see Lev. 3:2-5)" (*Commentary on the Old Testament*, Keil and Delitzsch, on Leviticus 17:3-7). When Israel entered the land God had promised this law was amended to permit the slaughter of domestic animals for food wherever convenient, but all sacrifices were to be killed at the altar of God where he had placed his name (Deuteronomy 12:20-28). Implicit in these laws is a prohibition against **eating food** sacrificed to idols.

Israel was drawn into idolatry at Mount Peor in part by eating sacrifices to false

gods. "They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods" (Numbers 25:2-3). "They joined themselves also to Baal of Peor, And ate sacrifices made to the dead. Thus they provoked Him to anger with their deeds..." (Psalm 106:28-29). The Scriptures express God's displeasure at this and other examples of partaking of such sacrifices (Exodus 32:4-10; Jeremiah 7:18; Isaiah 66:17; 1 Corinthians 10:5-7; Revelation 2:14-16, 20-22; et al.).

God told the Israelites they were to destroy the places of false worship in the land, along with the altars, pillars, and images of false gods (Exodus 34:13; Deuteronomy 12:1-4). "You shall not worship the Lord your God with such things," said God (Deuteronomy 12:4). They were not to ally themselves with idolaters and were warned about placing themselves in a situation where idolaters would "make sacrifice to their gods, and one of them invites you and you eat of his sacrifice," and hence be drawn into idolatry (Exodus 34:15).

When Daniel was taken captive to Nebuchadnezzar's palace in Babylon he refused to eat the food from the king's table or drink the wine, because, as the *Treasury of Scriptural Knowledge* points out, "even the clean animals that were eaten were first offered as victims to their gods, and part of the wine was poured out as a libation on their altars." (See Daniel 1:8).

Prophetic Warnings

There are numerous prophecies in the Bible declaring God's condemnation of Israel's idolatrous practices and warning of Divine punishment for such. These prophecies are not mere relics of bygone days but apply to our age now. In the days leading up to Christ's second coming one third of mankind are prophesied to be killed by the plagues of the sixth trumpet. "But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk" (Revelation 9:20). So we see clearly that idolatry is a major reason for God's wrath on our modern age.

Often leaders of God's Church in the modern era have pointed out quite appropriately that the prophecies of Ezekiel apply primarily to Israel in the latter days (Ezekiel 2:3; 3:4-5). As various Church of God publications have explained, this includes not just the Jewish nation of Israel, but other nations whose peoples are largely descended from the various tribes of Israel (cf. *The United States and Britain in Prophecy*, Herbert W. Armstrong). And many other prophecies concerning Israel either will be fulfilled exclusively at "that day" or the "last days" (an indefinite period leading up to the end of this age and continuing into the era of the rule of God's kingdom on earth), or have a dual fulfillment, the latter of which pertains to the end of this age. A number of prophecies in Ezekiel condemn Israel's idolatrous practices. Note for example the following in Ezekiel 20.

After relating Israel's history of rejecting his commandments and provoking him with their sacrifices and drink offerings made to idols, God thunders, "Are you **defiling yourselves in the manner of your fathers**, and committing harlotry according to their **abominations**? For when you **offer your gifts** and make your sons pass through the fire, you defile yourselves with all your **idols**, even to this day" (Ezekiel 20:30-31). This prophecy goes on to proclaim that God will deliver Israel from their modern day captivity administered as punishment for such sins, and bring Israel "into the bond of the [new] covenant" (verse 37). And on God's holy mountain "all the house of Israel...shall serve Me" (verse 40). This prophecy can only apply fully to the days leading up to and encompassing the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth.

God delivered a similar prophecy to Israel through Ezekiel, saying, "For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your **idols**. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them" (36:24-27). This prophecy also plainly awaits a future fulfillment.

In another prophecy pertaining to Israel in the latter days God spoke through Jeremiah, "And the Lord said, 'Because they have forsaken My law which I set before them, and have not obeyed My voice, nor walked according to it, but they have walked according to the dictates of their own hearts and after the **Baals**, which their fathers taught them,' therefore thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Behold, I will feed them, this people, with wormwood, and give them water of gall to drink. I will scatter them also among the Gentiles, whom neither they nor their fathers have known. And I will send a sword after them until I have consumed them'" (Jeremiah 9:13-16). Proclaiming punishment upon Israel in a prophecy for the latter days God said, "And first I will repay double for their iniquity and their sin, because they have defiled My land: they have filled My inheritance with the **carcasses of their detestable and abominable idols**" (Jeremiah 16:18).

In a prophecy for the "latter days" (verse 2) and concerning events relating to the "day of the Lord" (verse 12) Isaiah wrote of the "house of Jacob" (Israel): "For You have forsaken Your people, the house of Jacob. Because they are filled with eastern ways; They are soothsayers like the Philistines, And they are pleased with the children of foreigners.... Their land is also **full of idols**; They worship the work of their own hands, That which their own fingers have made." Isaiah goes on to warn, "The loftiness of man shall be bowed down, And the haughtiness of men shall be brought low; The Lord alone will be exalted in that day, But the **idols He shall utterly abolish**. They shall go into the holes of the rocks, And into the caves of the earth, From the terror of the Lord And the glory of His majesty, When He arises to shake the earth mightily. In that day a man will cast away his **idols**

of silver And his **idols** of gold, Which they made, each for himself to worship, To the moles and bats, To go into the clefts of the rocks, And into the crags of the rugged rocks, From the terror of the Lord And the glory of His majesty, When He arises to shake the earth mightily. Sever yourselves from such a man, Whose breath is in his nostrils; For of what account is he?" (Isaiah 2:5-8, 17-22).

In another prophecy manifestly applying to the latter days, Isaiah wrote, "'Those who sanctify themselves and purify themselves, To go to the gardens After an idol in the midst, Eating swine's flesh and the abomination and the mouse, Shall be consumed together,' says the Lord" (Isaiah 66:17). The context implies that "abomination" in this instance refers to an idol sacrifice (cf. Isaiah 65:3-4, 11).

This is but a sampling of prophecies warning that idolatry, and the sacrificing of food to idols, are among the leading sins of modern Israel. There are many ways in which idolatry is practiced today in the lands of Israel, but surely some of the most prevalent are in the religious customs of the syncretized false religion that perpetuates many idolatrous superstitions and practices under the name of Christ. They pray to their crucifixes and statues of "Mary" or various "saints." They have festivals patterned after pagan religious calendars and customs to honor their false Trinity god, also formed after the image of pagan deities (cf. [Origins of the Trinity](#)). They carry crosses and idol statues as amulets and charms, and include in their worship all sorts of blasphemy and superstition.

This is exactly how ancient Israel and Judah often worshiped their idols, blending their worship with God's name and traditions (see Exodus 32:1-5; 1 Kings 12:27-28; Zephaniah 1:4-5). It's the same syncretistic Babylonian system practiced by the peoples brought into Israel after the Israelites had been carried captive by Assyria. It's described in 2 Kings: "They feared the Lord, yet served their own gods —according to the rituals of the nations from among whom they were carried away. To this day they continue practicing the former rituals; they do not fear the Lord, nor do they follow their statutes or their ordinances, or the law and commandment which the Lord had commanded the children of Jacob, whom He named Israel.... So these nations feared the Lord, yet served their carved images; also their children and their children's children have continued doing as their fathers did, even to this day" (2 Kings 17:33-34, 41).

When Jerusalem fell under the onslaught of Nebuchadnezzar's armies, many Jews fled to Egypt, where they were settled in colonies extending as far as Elephantine. Sometime possibly before, but more likely after, a temple was built there by the Jews, and some of the details of its worship are preserved in papyri unearthed at Elephantine. H.H. Rowley, writing about some of what is revealed in the letters, characterizes the worship among the Jews at Elephantine during the period (from about 525-400 B.C.) in the following way: "The worship does not seem to have been very pure, since other deities appear to have been worshiped alongside Yahu [a variation of Yahweh], and the subscription list shows the apportionment of the gifts to Yahu, to Ishum-bethel and to Anath-bethel. In other texts we find

references also to Anath-yahu and Herem-bethel. Anath was an old Canaanite goddess, whose name survives in the name of Jeremiah's home town, Anathoth, and Anath-yahu may have been a goddess worshiped beside Yahweh. With this we may compare the references to the Queen of Heaven in the book of Jeremiah (vii.18, xlv.17)" (*Documents from Old Testament Times*, p. 257). Thus the Jews in Elephantine continued there the same syncretized idolatrous worship that God denounced through Jeremiah and other prophets. Such practices continue among the peoples of Israel to this day.

Jewish Teachings

Meanwhile, under the leadership of men like Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, the Jews carried captive to the Babylonian Empire - some of whose descendants eventually resettled in Judah - reformed their practices and came to abhor idolatry. Although over the centuries between the Babylonian (Chaldean) and Persian Empires to the time of Christ their religion became corrupted by human improvised tradition (Mark 7:1-13), most Jews at the time of Christ continued to execrate overt idolatry.

Not only were Jews forbidden by scribal teachings from eating food sacrificed to idols, they were not to enter the home of a Gentile, as it was likely to be defiled by idols or things dedicated to them. Nor were Jews to eat with Gentiles, or have any unnecessary contact with them (Acts 10:28; Galatians 2:12; Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 1.92). All Gentile wine was forbidden, partly out of suspicion that it may have been dedicated to an idol (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 1.92; *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1949 ed., vol. 16, "Jews and Judaism - Food and Health Laws," p. 123). As in many other matters, the Pharisees' tradition went to extremes unintended by God in the giving of his law. Yet their views regarding the subject at hand can perhaps be somewhat better understood in light of the fact that food consumed by Gentiles at an ordinary meal in their homes might very well have been offered to an idol, and their wine was almost always dedicated to a god before it was consumed.

Gentile Customs

An understanding of prevailing Gentile society and customs at the time of the apostles can help set the background for a clear understanding of New Testament teachings concerning the eating of food offered to idols. As we have seen, the Scriptures clearly forbade the worshiping of idols, sacrificing to them, or eating of idol sacrifices upon invitation. But it was not always easy to distinguish between food that had been sacrificed to idols and food that had not.

Religion permeated both private and public life in the Greek culture. "...religion played a major part in... [the life of Greece] everywhere, and each government protected the official cult as vital to social order and political stability" (Will Durant, *The Life of Greece*, p. 192). The duties and privileges of citizenship were

bound up with religion. "The center and summit of the city was the shrine of the city god; participation in the worship of the god was the sign, the privilege, and the requisite of citizenship" (*The Life of Greece*, p. 175). Official cults were administered by the governments, so that "in Greece church and state were one" (*The Life of Greece*, p. 192).

Each city had its own special god. But idol statues and altars abounded for a plethora of other gods as well. Athens, the center of Greek culture, for example, had temples and statues to each of the important Greek trinity of Zeus, Apollo and Athene, who together "represent the embodiment of all divine authority" (*The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature and Art.*, p. 80, see also p. 43). But in addition, innumerable other gods were honored there as well, so that when Paul came into the city he beheld it "full of idols" (Acts 17:16, American Standard Version). This was literally true, as a visitor entering Athens would immediately find himself surrounded by "temples, statues, and altars... on every side" (Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 273). In Athens - as at other Greek cities - in the agora, the marketplace and center of business and civic life, "...every public place and building was likewise a sanctuary. The Record-House was a temple of the Mother of the Gods. The Council-House held statues of Apollo and Jupiter, with an altar of Vesta. The Theatre at the base of the Acropolis ...was consecrated to Bacchus" (*The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, pp. 274-275). And so on, and so on.

Not only did each city have its own special god or gods, but so did each clan, tribe, and every craft, profession and art have its own chosen divinity. The Greeks worshiped not only the well known gods of mythology, but made into a god "every object or force of earth or sky, every blessing and every terror, every quality [such as fame, modesty, persuasion and pity] — even the vices — of mankind..." (*The Life of Greece*, p. 176). So pervasive was the devotion to polytheism, aided by the independence of Greek city-states, that the Jews and early Christians in their midst must have found it an enormous challenge to the practice of their monotheistic religion. As non-citizens Jews would not have been expected — nor allowed — to participate in the official religion.¹ But Jewish and Christian doctrine, which regarded the Gentile gods as "nothing" and an "abomination" (see Isaiah 41:24; 44:19; 1 Corinthians 8:4; 1 Peter 4:3), could be regarded as blasphemy towards the gods (cf. Acts 19:26-27). "...any man might have his own creed provided that he did not openly deny or blaspheme the city's gods" (*The Life of Greece*, p. 192). For Greek citizens converting to either Judaism or Christianity there would have been serious hurdles to deal with.

Despite the obstacles, the testimony of Scripture is that the work of the gospel made good progress in Gentile areas, despite hostility and persecution from both Jewish and Gentile religious and political leaders. The New Testament recounts a not untypical incident where the lives of Paul and his companions were placed in jeopardy on the charge: "Moreover you see and hear that not only at Ephesus. but throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away many

people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands" (Acts 19:26). But the more serious and lasting damage to the true faith was that as the influence of the original apostles waned Christianity was soon corrupted through the adoption of the forms, beliefs and practices of heathenism. Will Durant observes that polytheism lives on, "...in Mediterranean Christianity, it is not God who is worshiped, so much as the saints; it is polytheism that sheds over the simple life the inspiring poetry of consolatory myth..." (*The Life of Greece*, p. 176).

Sacrifice and food and drink offerings were fundamental to the worship of the pagan idols. "...every family had its own god; to him the divine fire burned unextinguished at the hearth, and to him offerings of food and wine were made before every meal. This holy communion, or sharing of food with the god, was the basic and primary act of religion in the home" (*The Life of Greece*, p. 175). Sacrifices were an important part of public worship, too. "Sacrifices, among the ancients, formed the chief part of every religious act" (*The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature and Art*, p. 551). Pagan temples were centers of social life and most had either or both indoor and outdoor banquet facilities (Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, pp. 35-42).

Usually in Greece the sacrificial victims were bulls, sheep or pigs, but also sometimes, even as late as the second century A.D., humans (*The Life of Greece*, pp. 193-195). Except for sacrifices to the gods of the lower world, only a small portion was burned. "The remainder, after removing the god's portion, as it was called, for the priests engaged in the sacrifice, was either roasted at once for the sacrificial banquet and so consumed, or taken home. Festal sacrifices at the public expense were often combined with a public meal" (*The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature and Art*, p. 553). Of that given to the priests, the excess was commonly sold in a public meat market (*Paganism in the Roman Empire*, p. 41; *Matthew Henry Commentary*; and A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, at 1 Corinthians 10:25). Sacrifices included wine, which "was poured upon the sacrifice, and then into the cups of the worshipers, who drank, so to speak, with the gods" (*The Life of Greece*, p. 195).

Public feasts in honor of the gods were an important part of religious and social life. Religious festivals were so frequent that, "The calendar at Athens was essentially a religious calendar, and many months were named from their religious festivals" (*The Life of Greece*, p. 199). Aristophanes commented, "'At every moment of the year we see religious feasts and garlanded victims' of sacrifice" (cited in *The Life of Greece*, p. 199). *Thiasoi*, trade and social groups, selected a patron god, and organized processions, sacrifices and banquets in his honor. "...this idea of divine communion in a common religious meal formed the binding tie" (*The Life of Greece*, p. 195; see also *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature and Art*, p. 634).

In the homes we've already noted that meals were commonly preceded by an offering to an idol. The afternoon meal was often followed by a drinking bout of

mixed wine preceded by libations to various gods (*The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature and Art*, p. 384). Meat, when it was eaten, may have included that brought home from some public sacrifice. At banquets during the drinking portion, at which wives were usually excluded, sometimes prostitutes appeared to offer music, dancing and sexual favors (*The Life of Greece*, p. 310).

Because the faithful among them refused to participate in this pagan religion centered social life, "...Jews and Christians, holding themselves aloof from anything the gods touched, suffered under the reputation of misanthropy!" (*Paganism in the Roman Empire*, p. 40). "For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles - when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you" (1 Peter 4:3).

New Testament Teaching

Jewish Pharisaic Rabbis had disagreed among themselves whether adult male proselytes should be required to be circumcised to be fully accepted as citizens of the commonwealth of Israel. By the time of Christ they had adopted the affirmative view (Edersheim, 2.746). However, among the Western diaspora ("Hellenists," or "Hellenistic Jews"), Gentiles were accepted into the assembly as proselytes without circumcision. "...Hellenistic Jews... renounced circumcision [as necessary for the acceptance of proselytes] but not the immersion that washed away the impurity of heathenism" (*New Shaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. ix, "Proselytes." p. 280-281).

While circumcision was not required of Gentile converts in the West, "no concessions were made in monotheistic faith or in moral requirements, but solely in liturgical [ritual] matters" (*ibid.*, p. 281). The Sadducees, too, held that only future male children of converts must be circumcised, since no other day than the eighth after birth is specifically commanded in Scripture. Part of the *Gerim Halakhah* (binding rules of tradition relating to Gentile proselytes) concerned five specific conditions prerequisite to *entering into* full citizenship among the Jews. These five conditions, all based on an application of Scriptures from the Pentateuch, were circumcision (Exodus 12:48), and abstention from the following: idol sacrifices, blood, food (meat) not bled properly, and sexual immorality (Leviticus 17:7, 10, 12-13; 18:1-26).

As Gentile converts began to come into the Church in the Apostolic era, a controversy arose regarding the question of circumcision. The decision of the Church - based on Old Testament Scripture (e.g., Exodus 12:19; 20:10; 23:12; Deuteronomy 16:9, 13-14; Isaiah 11:10; 42:1, 6-7; 56:1-8, 60:3; 66:23; Jeremiah 4:4; Zechariah 14:16; cf. Acts 13:47; 15:14-21), the teachings of Jesus (e.g., Matthew 28:19-20; John 4:21-23), and the fact that the Holy Spirit had been given to uncircumcised Gentiles (Acts 15:7-8) - was that circumcision of adult male

converts was not necessary, but in order to be accepted into the congregation converts must "*abstain from things polluted by idols...*," along with the other things listed above (Acts 15:20; cf. verse 29; 21:25).

It has been alleged by some that Paul later unilaterally and arbitrarily abrogated the prohibition against eating meat offered to idols. The basis for this assertion is certain verses - especially in 1 Corinthians 8 - taken out of context and used in a misleading way. The fact is that Paul **nowhere** states approval of the deliberate eating of food that one **knows** has been sacrificed to idols. Indeed, as we shall see, he emphatically states that this should **not** be done, in conformity with the instructions of God's word and the decision of the apostles recorded in Acts 15.

The idea that Paul is teaching something to the contrary is garnered largely from a phrase lifted out of 1 Corinthians 8:10. "If anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple..." So it's argued that eating idol sacrifices, even in an idol's temple, is okay, because after all, we all know that an idol is nothing (verse 4). This actually was the argument being put forward by some in the Corinthian church. Anyone with scruples about this is "weak," it's supposed.

Then the argument is easily extended to the conclusion that virtually any practice associated with idolatry can be done in good conscience, and so it doesn't make any difference whether foods, buildings, holidays or other practices are connected with idolatry. It's all a matter of indifference as far as God is concerned. Some Gnostics used this line of argument, as attested by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*. They used images of pagan deities in their worship (I.XXIII.4), and had no scruples about eating idol sacrifices, "maintaining that God does not greatly regard such matters" (I.VI.3; I.XXIV.5; I.XXVIII.2). They readily took part in the celebration of heathen festivals (I.VI.3). The position of modern mainstream Christianity is essentially that taught and practiced by such Gnostics, though many would not admit it.

However, none of this is what Paul taught, and is not what the Bible teaches anywhere. To understand correctly what Paul taught one must view 1 Corinthians 8 within its direct context, which extends through chapter 10, and also consider the context of the entire Bible.

It's important to realize that Paul was responding to questions and arguments put forward in a letter to him from the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 7:1; 8:1). One of the subjects discussed was meat offered to idols. In the discussion, as A.T. Robertson points out, "Aspects of the matter come forward not touched on in the Jerusalem Conference" (*Word Pictures in the New Testament* at 8:1). "Things offered to idols" (*eidolothuton*), "...meant the portion of the flesh left over after the heathen sacrifices" (*ibid.*). Commonly, it was (1) eaten sacrificially, (2) taken home for private meals, or (3) sold at the public market. In chapters eight through ten of 1 Corinthians, Paul deals with how such meat should be treated in these situations.

Many commentators recognize that in the statement, "We know that we all have knowledge," Paul is making reference to an argument put forth by some of the Corinthians (cf. Conybeare and Howson, *Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 396 n.; *Word Pictures in the New Testament*; *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, et al.). They felt their superior knowledge – to wit, that idols are nothing – gave them liberty to eat food sacrificed to them with impunity.

Indeed, Paul confirms, we do know that idols are nothing (verse 4). This is taught throughout Scripture. One of the Hebrew words used in the Old Testament in its plural form for idols no less than 17 times is *`eliyl*, which means nought (nothingness), from the root *`alal*, to be nothing (*Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, cf. Leviticus 19:4, et al.). Of idols Isaiah wrote, "Indeed you are nothing" (41:24).

Paul then goes on to show the Corinthians that their inference from the fact that idols are "nothing" is wrong. First, not all have come to the same level of conviction regarding the efficacy of idols (verse 7). Many among them may regard the idol at some level of consciousness as a real god. "For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols?" (verse 10). Note that the verb *eido* (see) is here in the subjunctive mood, a conditional, or "what if" statement. In no way is the statement giving permission for such a thing to be done. In fact, *exactly the opposite!* Paul will make the point that it should *not* be done, for several reasons! "Condition of third class, a possible case. Paul draws the picture of the enlightened brother exercising his 'liberty' by eating in the idol's temple. **Later he will discuss the peril to the man's own soul in this phase of the matter (10:14-22)**, but here he considers only the effect of such conduct on the unenlightened or weak brother. **This bravado at a sacrificial banquet is in itself idolatrous as Paul will show"** (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*).

Paul is saying here, assuming for the moment you do have the liberty you think you have, it's still wrong to sit at a sacrificial meal to an idol, because of how it might influence other people. But, as also expounded correctly in *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, he will go on to explain why it would be wrong under any circumstance to do so. "He cautions them against abusing their **liberty, the liberty they thought they had in this matter. For that they mistook this matter, and had no allowance to sit at meat in the idol's temple, seems plain from ch. 10:20, etc.** But the apostle argues here that, even upon the supposition that they had such power, they must be cautious how they use it; it might be a stumbling-block to the weak (v. 9), it might occasion their falling into idolatrous actions, perhaps their falling off from Christianity and revolting again to heathenism" (*Matthew Henry's Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible*).

In chapter 10 Paul develops the subject further by showing that the things that happened to ancient Israel were for our admonition (1 Corinthians 10:1-11). He specifically warns, "And **do not become idolaters** as were some of them. As it is written, 'The people **sat down to eat and drink**, and rose up to play'" (verse 7).

Then he warns, "Let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall" (verse 12). "... flee from idolatry," he commands. He tells them that **those who eat of the sacrifices are partakers of the altar**. And that to partake of things sacrificed to demons is to have fellowship with demons (verses 20-21). To those who are so strong in their own eyes he says, "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; **you cannot partake of the Lord's table and the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?" (verses 21 -22).**

Paul thus **confirms the prohibition against eating things sacrificed to idols** as far as partaking of idolatrous banquets is concerned. He then goes on to discuss the public meat market. "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake" (verse 24). The nature of the meat is not changed because it was offered to an idol (assuming it was bled properly). If some of it is then taken and sold along with other meat in a market it is no less good for food. It is the **conscious knowledge** that the meat is dedicated to an idol that makes the difference. Where such knowledge is lacking, there is no prohibition against eating it. The same principle applies if one is invited to a private meal. The meat may be eaten without scruple unless someone says, "This was offered to idols" (verses 27-30). In that case, Paul says, **"do not eat it,"** again considering how your actions may affect other people.

We've already reviewed the condemnation pronounced on idolatrous activities from a number of Scriptures. Paul explained to the Corinthians how the prohibition against eating things sacrificed to idols applies in varying circumstances. He changed nothing. Further evidence of this is supplied in the book of Revelation, written decades after Paul died. In that book Jesus Christ condemns teaching to eat things sacrificed to idols (Revelation 2:14, 20).

The lessons for us are clear. We must avoid entangling ourselves in idolatrous activities. Idolatrous banquets such as Christmas dinners or similar affairs, labeled as such, are to be eschewed. In all our activities we should avert any suggestion that we are willing to participate in idolatry. Rather, we must flee it. Whatever we do ought to be done to glorify God, and encourage others to do so (1 Corinthians 10:31-33). As John wrote, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

1. *Metics* — freemen of foreign descent — formed the professional and artisan class in Greece, but they were not eligible for citizenship, and were excluded from the religious organization.

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