

Corinthians

Lessons 15 – 19

Meat Offered to Idols, Part 1

Introduction

This section spans chapters 8-10. On the surface it seems as if Paul was distracted and wandering off the subject, but a closer examination reveals that these three chapters form a single section. The overarching theme is instruction on Christians' use of meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Three main subtopics can be discerned.

1. *Eating at the idolatrous festivals.* Some of the Corinthians were participating in the pagan festivals held at the pagan temple. After the ritual sacrifices, public meals were served utilizing the meat that had been offered in sacrifice to the pagan deities. Participating in these public meals would be in some ways similar to going to a restaurant, only they were directly connected to the pagan ritual.
2. *Purchasing meat in the marketplace that was previously offered to idols.* The meat that was not consumed in the rituals or in the public feasts made its way to the market place, and some were raising the question of whether Christians were permitted to purchase and eat this meat. Further, what was a believer to do when invited to an unbeliever's home for dinner? Was the origin of the meat in such a setting an issue?
3. *Paul's authority.* Finally, it seems that Paul had eaten meat offered to idols in a private setting, though not at the public festivals. This was being used by some in Corinth, along with other things, to discount his authority to speak on the issue. Accordingly, Paul made what appears to be a departure from the topic of meat in order to deal with his authority.

Ethics

Those who were eating at the temple festival meals were justifying their activity by acknowledging that idols are really no gods at all. Since there is only one true God, the activity was morally neutral. Paul attacked this logic on ethical and spiritual grounds. Those doing so were basing their actions on knowledge, i.e., "we know" there is only one true God. (See 8:4.) Paul refuted knowledge as the basis of Christian ethics, preferring love. Other Corinthians, "the weak," could not so easily come to the same conclusion. For them, to participate in the festival meals was part of the pagan celebration that they used to enjoy, and therefore it was part of worshiping idols. To see another "strong" Christian do so may cause them to stumble in their faith and revert to paganism (8:7-13).

Accordingly, Paul communicated that care for a fellow Christian was much more important than one's rights to certain behaviors. An ethic that is based on knowledge and rights is not a Christian ethic, for that sort of ethic may cause another to stumble away from Christ, even though the behavior of the "strong" is not sinful in itself. Paul, therefore, encourages an ethic based on love. Accordingly, Paul opened up his discussion on the topic in a very interesting way: "Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth" (1 Corinthians 8:1). To avoid ambiguity, Paul clearly laid out the application of his love ethic: "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend" (1 Corinthians 8:13). (By "offend" Paul meant to stumble away from Christ and to return to idolatry.)

Demonic influence

Paul did not leave the matter in the realm of ethics. He wrote that there is a spiritual dimension to idolatry whether people intend for there to be or not. When people offer worship, it is a spiritual encounter. And though they may offer worship to idols of sticks and stone, the spiritual world is ready and willing to accept that worship. Accordingly, Paul warned that the Corinthians were in effect offering worship to demons when they participated in idolatrous feasts, and one cannot both feast with demons and be in fellowship with the Lord. (See 10:20-21; cf. Deuteronomy 32:16-17.) To dabble in idolatry, even if only in the public festivals, would tempt the Lord to jealousy. Paul asks a stunning, rhetorical question, "Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? are we stronger than he?" (1 Corinthians 10:22).

Prohibition

After citing several Old Testament examples of how Israel provoked God to anger, thereby causing their own destruction, Paul warned the Corinthians of the same danger. Though Israel had been baptized in the cloud and the sea (10:1-5), perhaps typical of spirit and water baptism, and though they ate together at their sacrifices (10:18; c.f., Deuteronomy 14:22-27), perhaps typical of the church's eating the Lord's Supper (10:16-21), God still killed them. Their election, past deliverance, and ritual life did not protect them from God's judgement on their sins. Paul, therefore, summarized his thoughts on associating with the idolatrous feasts: "Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry" (1 Corinthians 10:14).

Although the setting may seem foreign, modern Christians have much to glean from these passages. "What most Western Christians need to learn is that the demonic is not as remote as some of them would wish to believe" (Gordon Fee).

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Meat Offered to Idols, Part 2

Paul's Authority

In chapter 9 Paul seems to leave the topic of meat offered to idols to address the issue of his authority as an apostle. At first it seems to be a disconnected topic, but it is not. The Corinthians were challenging Paul's authority, and some were saying he could not effectively address this issue. It seems that the judgement they passed on him included criticism for him eating meat from the marketplace in private homes.

There is not a more direct reference to his challenged authority than is found in 9:1-2: "Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are not ye my work in the Lord? {2} If I be not an apostle unto others, yet doubtless I am to you: for the seal of mine apostleship are ye in the Lord."

Paul defended his right to be supported by the church. The right to be supported by the church validated Paul's apostleship, for a true apostle should be supported by his converts, and a man's work should take care of him, "For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn" (9:9; 4-14). However, Paul chose not to accept the support of the church for the betterment of the church, which was his usual practice. (See 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9; 1 Corinthians 4:12; Acts 18:1-4). However, the Corinthians' responsibility to support Paul and his right to refuse that support were two different matters. They evidently claimed that since Paul supported himself, they did not need to support him, and since they did not support him, he was not their apostle.

This issue seems to be rooted in their comparison of Paul to other teachers of philosophy. "Philosophers and wandering missionaries in the Greco-Roman world were 'supported' by four means: fees, patronage, begging, and working. Each of these had both proponents and detractors, who viewed rival forms as not worthy of philosophy" (Gordon Fee). In essence, Paul's practice was contrary to their expectations as they compared him to the philosophers. Evidently the Corinthians looked down on Paul's secular work (2 Corinthians 11:7). This comparison with the philosophers was part of their quest for wisdom that Paul dealt with earlier in the epistle.

The Corinthians criticized Paul on several issues, trying to discredit him (9:3; 10:29-30). They criticized his choice to marry or not to marry (9:5), and more pertinent to the issue at hand, they seem to have criticized Paul for eating things that were not acceptable by their standards, or they were trying to discredit Paul's teaching on going to the festivals by pointing out that he had eaten meat offered to idols.

On nonmoral matters, Paul tried to identify with those he reached (9:19-22; cf. Acts 16:1-3; Acts 21:23). Evidently this included eating meat offered to idols in private homes of those who were "strong" and refraining from the same in the homes of the "weak."

Purchasing meat in the marketplace (10:23-11:1)

Paul just forbade eating food at the temple that had been sacrificed to idols. But food bought in the marketplace was another issue altogether. Two situations are envisioned: food purchased at the market intended to be eaten in one's own home (25-26) and invitations to meals hosted at a neighbor's home (27-29).

Before giving final instructions, Paul returns to the Corinthians' previous argument about their freedom in Christ, and he again offers a Christian response based in love. In all these things, the overriding principle of Christian behavior is his advice, "Let no man seek his own, but every man another's wealth" (1 Corinthians 10:23-24; cf. Romans 15:1-3; Philippians 2:4).

That being said, Paul advised that whatever a Christian purchases in the marketplace to be consumed in private is sanctified for this purpose because "the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof" (10:26). Accordingly, the Christian should not ask questions about the origin of the meat, but rather, eat with thanksgiving to the Lord. Likewise, when eating at an unbeliever's house, a Christian should eat what is set before him without investigating the source of the food. However, if the host announces that the food has been offered to idols, the Christian should refrain from eating. For the host to make such a proclamation indicates that the host is placing ritual significance on the origin of the meat, i.e., the host would not mention the fact of the meat's origin unless it were purchased *because* of its origin which would indicate that the host had ritual intentions for the consumption of the meat (27-29).

Paul concludes this section by lifting up his own example in such matters (11:1). Evidently he had eaten such meat in such situations, which was partially the cause for the Corinthians' attack on his authority.