



1 Corinthians - Chapter Eight

IV. 1 Corinthians 7:1-11:1 - Three Issues from a Corinthian Letter (continues)

Summary of Chapter Eight

This chapter sees the start of a longer argument about regulations surrounding the eating of food and the effects that can have on the community of faith. Paul starts by warning of the potential pitfalls of eating food sacrificed to the pagan gods.

IV.c 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1 - Sensitivity towards those of fragile faith

Because pagan temples offered parts of animals in sacrifice to the gods, they also often functioned as butcher shops and banqueting halls. Sometimes meals for trade guilds, clubs and private dinner parties were held in a temple dining room. Often meat from a temple was sold to the public in the marketplace.

This section of 1 Corinthians gives clear guidance about the use of such food. Paul first urges the Corinthians not to eat in pagan temples because it might lead to the destruction of a weaker brother or sister (Chapter 8). He then offers himself as an example of giving up something one is convinced is a right for the spiritual edification of others (Chapter 9).

He urges the Corinthians not to eat in pagan temples because doing so is idolatry (10:1-22). Finally, he says that eating meat purchased in the marketplace, which may have come from a pagan temple, is not wrong unless it hinders the advancement of the Gospel (10:23-11:1).

IV.c.i 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 - Food offered to idols

The Corinthians were in possession of confused knowledge, for the Gospel message had been corrupted by their philosophy and the Imperial Cult. Hence, they found themselves participating in consuming food sacrificed to idols. Paul reminds them that such gods were non-existent for there is only one God and Lord.

The problem was caused by those who understood that such practices were harmless to themselves for they knew God and could not be harmed by influences that did not exist. However, Paul demonstrates that their actions could be damaging to those who did not possess the same level of understanding.

¹ Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

1 Corinthians 8:1

Now concerning indicates Paul is still responding to the letter the Corinthians had written to him, requesting clarification of several issues. Refer to 7:1 and 7:25.

Food sacrificed to idols. In Greek, this phrase is one word, *eidōlothytos*, literally ‘something offered to an idol’. Paul is talking about food, however, because he uses the word for food, Greek *brōsis*, in v.4. Since only part of an animal was used in sacrifices to pagan gods, much of the animal could still be eaten. Paul speaks later in this chapter of eating such food in a banqueting hall attached to a temple and therefore in an explicitly religious setting (v.10).

Paul’s teaching is consistent with the findings of the Jerusalem Council and their proclamation made a few years earlier: <<Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood>> (Acts 15:19-20).

Pre-Pauline evidence of such temple banquets at Corinth is found at the Sanctuary of Asklepios and at the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore, and such feasting likely continued during Paul’s day.

‘All of us possess knowledge’. The quotation marks have been supplied to indicate that this statement probably originated with the Corinthians and that Paul is responding to it. What the Corinthians ‘know’ is explained in v.4.

Knowledge puffs up. Once again, Corinthian arrogance, particularly among the leaders and those of influence in the church, was seen as a problem as discussed in chapters 3-4. However, Paul views knowledge based on the Gospel as a good thing: <<*I myself feel confident about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another*>> (Romans 15:14).

Love builds up. Those who have the true knowledge of God understand that their relationship with him is built not on their understanding but the mutual love they all share with him through Jesus as the Christ. King David wrote: <<*But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God for ever and ever*>> (Psalm 52:8). Paul explores this topic more fully in Chapter 13.

² Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; ³ but anyone who loves God is known by him.

1 Corinthians 8:2-3

Anyone who claims to know something refers to those who have become conceited and arrogant with their misunderstanding of what they have taken from the philosophy from that time, mixed with the Gospel teaching they had also received, believing it made them into special people by having the necessary knowledge.

Anyone who loves God is known by him. God knows those who belong to him: <<For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb>> (Psalm 139:13), <<Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations>> (Jeremiah 1:5), <<I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me>> (John 10:14), <<For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known>> (1 Corinthians 13:12), <<Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?>> (Galatians 4:9), and: <<But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his', and, 'Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness'>> (2 Timothy 2:19), and there is a close bond between belonging to God and sharing love for God and neighbour: <<You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord>> (Leviticus 19:18), <<I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another>> (John 13:34-35), <<We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another>> (1 John 3:16), and: <<Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen>> (1 John 4:20).

⁴ Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'no idol in the world really exists', and that 'there is no God but one.'

⁵ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as in fact there are many gods and many lords – ⁶ yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

1 Corinthians 8:4-6

Paul agrees with what the Corinthians know, that idols do not represent real gods and lords: <<He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God>> (2 Thessalonians 2:4).

There is no God but one, and since he is the creator of the animals that pagan priests offer to nonexistent gods, no problem should be attached to the
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consumption of the meat itself. This is a theme that Paul will return to: <<**What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons**>> (1 Corinthians 10:19-20), <<**Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, for 'the earth and its fullness are the Lord's'**>> (1 Corinthians 10:25-26), <<**one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all**>> (Ephesians 4:5-6), and: <<**For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human**>> (1 Timothy 2:5).

There is no God but one was at the heart of the Jewish belief system and believers would repeat the following Scripture twice every day: <<**Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might**>> (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). This verse is called the *Shema* from the Hebrew word for 'hear'. In this statement there is a clear vision of God, the father who is both the creator and the redeemer of all things, through one Lord, Jesus Christ. King David held to this view and penned it in his own words: <<**For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God**>> (Psalm 86:10), so too the prophet: <<**Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?**>> (Malachi 2:10).

So-called gods in heaven or on earth. The traditional gods of Rome and Greece were believed to be in heaven manipulating the people, even using them as pawns in a game of life. The Roman Imperial cult was a good example of a god on earth, for that was how some of the Emperors portrayed themselves.

Paul will later distinguish between eating at a temple dinner, which, as a religious event, is idolatry, and eating meat bought in the marketplace. So far in this passage he is concerned only with the food itself, not the setting in which it is eaten.

In the cultural setting of 1st Century Corinth, the temple was a social centre for corporate gatherings for all types of functions. They housed banquets for imperial cult worship, and celebratory meals using the food that had been offered to their gods. Whole families would join in. Even so, the offerings were often so extensive that all the food was not consumed, so much of it was then sold in the local markets. Jews who did not have access to a kosher butcher would often not eat meat at all because they could not be sure of its origin or if it had been part of a sacrificial offering.

⁷ It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

1 Corinthians 8:7

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. The pagans of Paul's day feared what the gods might do to those who neglected to worship them. Some of
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the Christians in Corinth probably found it a constant struggle to place their trust solely in Christ instead of trying to placate the gods they used to worship.

Some have become so accustomed to idols until now. The church in Corinth was a relatively young one and many of them had been brought up with the pagan culture. They would still be able to associate with the ways of such systems and could easily become confused between the right way and their old way.

Their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Those who have not accepted the message of the Gospel that all foods, if accepted with appropriate thanksgiving, were now acceptable to Christians: <<*I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean*>> (Romans 14:14), and if they believed that what they were eating was truly food offered to an idol, then for that person it was a sin to indulge in such meals.

⁸ ‘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 Corinthians 8:8

Food will not bring us close to God. Those who had the supposedly superior ‘knowledge’ (v.1 and v.4), that permitted them to participate in dinners held at pagan temples may have thought that this knowledge gave them special standing with God. Paul demonstrates this is not the case: <<*For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*>> (Romans 14:17).

No worse off, no better off. Paul is saying that the issue does not make any real difference in terms of establishing a relationship with God. That is a matter of the heart and the faith that one places in God, not the food they eat or abstain from.

⁹ But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling-block to the weak.

1 Corinthians 8:9

This liberty of yours. Paul is speaking from the Corinthians’ perspective. He will later deny that anyone in the Corinthian church has the right to eat meals in pagan temples. To do this was to practice idolatry and so to open oneself to the influence of demons, as discussed in Chapter 10. Even if they had the right to eat in temples they should refrain from using this right out of concern for the spiritual well-being of the person whose conscience is weak. Paul had warned against abuse of freedom in one of his earlier letters: <<*For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another*>> (Galatians 5:13).

Become a stumbling-block to the weak. There are many examples of issues and actions that had become stumbling-blocks to God’s people, and various warnings appear in the Scriptures. With regard to food, Paul also writes: <<*Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a*

stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another>> (Romans 14:13), and: <<*Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat*>> (Romans 14:20). Paul makes it clear that his teaching is not intended to trip up the weak: <<*We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry*>> (2 Corinthians 6:3).

The human conscience is like a compass. When it is functioning correctly it can keep people heading in the right direction. However, if like a compass caught in a magnetic field, it gives a false reading then it can lead people astray. Sometimes the conscience seems to have difficulty in detecting the difference between what is culturally the norm and acceptable, and the truth of what is right and wrong in the sight of God.

Paul realised that he could not just reset the consciences of the church in Corinth. It would take time for them to cast off all their old ways. However, he was also all too aware of their need to keep a clear conscience before God.

¹⁰ For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.

1 Corinthians 8:10-11

For if others see you, who possess knowledge. Paul's concern is that others in the church may see a brother or sister eating in a temple without realising that person is not engaging in temple worship. Failing to realise this, they would be in danger of returning to pagan traditions.

Eating in the temple of an idol. As noted in the introduction to this section, the food served in pagan temples was from an animal whose body parts had been offered in sacrifice to their gods. Although Paul has stated that such meat has no real significance, since such gods do not exist, there can be some real damage caused to those of weaker faith and therefore Paul encourages believers to remove themselves from such practices.

For whom Christ died. Those with a strong conscience who knew they could not be tainted by eating sacrificial food may have looked down on their brothers and sisters of weaker conscience. However, Paul reminded them that Jesus had died for everyone. Therefore, all believers have an inherent responsibility to ensure they do nothing deliberately that may cause problems for others in the church.

Be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols. The weakness of the conscience of some in the church could lead them to misunderstand those of a stronger conscience and therefore eat the sacrificed food in the way they had received it before they had accepted the Gospel.

Paul elsewhere uses destroyed, Greek *apollymi*, to mean eternal destruction: <<*All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law*>> (Romans

2:12), <<For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God>> (1 Corinthians 1:18), <<Then those also who have died in Christ have perished>> (1 Corinthians 15:18), <<For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing>> (2 Corinthians 2:15), <<And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing>> (2 Corinthians 4:3), and: <<The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved>> (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10), and some interpreters take Paul's use of the term here in the same sense. Others see this as a reference to the moral harm done to the weaker brother: <<*their conscience, being weak, is defiled*>> (v.7).

¹² But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

1 Corinthians 8:12-13

You sin against Christ. The warning is stark. When a believer does something they know may cause another believer, i.e. members of your family, to fall, then they are not only damaging their brothers and sisters, they are actually causing harm to their own Lord and Saviour. Jesus, too, had warned against such sin: <<*If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea*>> (Mark 9:42), and: <<*But Jesus called for them and said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs'*>> (Luke 18:16). This he saw as direct action against himself: <<*And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me"*>> (Matthew 25:40).

I will never eat meat. Although Paul is using a specific example of how he intended to avoid harming those of weaker conscience, it is clear that there were many other things that he would not do that might cause one of them to fall.

It should be understood that Paul is not talking about offending those in some churches who have accumulated a set of non-Gospel rules that they live their lives by and then expect other freer Christians to live a more restricted life as they choose to do. Paul's concern was for those who had been recently tainted by the temple worship system that had been deeply embedded in a person's lifestyle. When they came to Christ, the Corinthians should have left that life behind. Some, however, might still have been in a place where the old way of life could draw them in again and they might do just that if they saw other church members, who were not drawn by the idolatry but were participating in the social aspects of their culture. This, Paul says, is what the strong believer should refrain from for the sake of the weak.