

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
1 Corinthians

V. 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1
Idol Meat: To eat or not to eat?

A very large portion of Paul's first letter to Corinth, chapters 8-10, focuses on an issue that seems a bit quaint to modern ears, the question of whether followers of Jesus could eat meat, "sacrificed to idols," i.e., meat derived from animals butchered as part of a sacrifice to a traditional deity. The problem arose in part because of the commitment to "one God" that Paul's community had made in becoming followers of Jesus. Some members thought that the implications of such a basic commitment needed to be followed with rigorous consistency throughout daily life. Others apparently thought that what Paul had taught them rendered obsolete old religious practices and concerns. The two different positions within the community had apparently produced discord and threatened group solidarity.

In these three chapters Paul tries to be sensitive to the concerns of both sides of the divide, affirming fundamental values that each side held while asking them to subordinate those values to a greater good, their relationship with one another.

Paul begins by reminding his addressees of what they had learned, from himself and other apostles, the enlightened doctrine, grounded in centuries of prophetic proclamation (see, e.g., Isaiah 44:9-20), that "no idols in the world really exists" (v. 4). Rejection of idolatry was in turn grounded in the confession of "one God" (v. 6), another hallmark of traditional Jewish faith (see Deuteronomy 6:4, the "Shema," or confessional prayer that still stands at the heart of Jewish worship). Paul's form of Messianic Judaism has expanded that confession of one God with a reference to Jesus, the "one Lord, ... through whom are all things and through whom we exist." Paul's insistence on faith in Christ as part of faith in God will ground his final appeal to his discordant congregation.

After affirming the principle that he had probably taught them, Paul reminds his readers, echoing the themes of the first chapters, that their insight

needs to be balanced with humility and concern for the tender conscience of their fellow believers (8:7-13). When people acting pridefully on their theological convictions offend their brothers and sisters, they offend Christ himself (v. 12).

In what appears to be a digression (chap. 9), Paul again puts himself forward as an example of the kind of basic orientation that he wants his congregation to display. He has authority and rights in abundance, the right to be supported in his work like other apostles, the right to have a wife working with him (9:3-5), but he has forgone such “rights” for the sake of his people. He even suggests that his work is like that of priests in the Temple of Jerusalem (9:13-15), working in effect, in the new Temple of the community (cf. 3:16-17), but unlike the priests, he does not receive a tax from the worshippers! Paul concludes the chapter with some of his most stirring rhetoric, affirming his subjection to the imperative of the Gospel and the service of his community (9:19-27).

After his digression Paul returns to the concrete case of eating meat sacrificed to idols, now affirming the other position in the debate, that it is indeed a good thing to avoid involvement in any worship of idols. To make his point, Paul engages in a little “midrash,” or creative appropriation of Scripture, likening his congregation to ancient Israel at the time of the Exodus. Despite their participation in a kind of “baptism” and “spiritual meal” (10:1-2), some of them fell from divine favor through idolatry and sexual immorality (10:6-11). Don’t go there, says Paul, but remember what we do in our sacred meal: we share in the body and blood of Christ and that must form us (10:14-17). That action is not compatible with worship of what is not God (10:20-23).

Paul concludes with practical advice, focused once again, on the conscience of one’s fellow believer (10:23-11:1). Meat from sacrificial animals is morally indifferent; doing something that will scandalize a fellow believer is not. Live within that tension, imitating Paul who imitates Christ.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What do you think of Paul’s strategy, clearly at work in these chapters, to be “all things to all people”?

2. Are there examples today of behaviors that some members of your congregation find unacceptable that others find to be morally indifferent? Do debates over such issues cause tension in your community? Does Paul offer any help in dealing with them?

3. What do you make of Paul's appeal to the Old Testament (chap. 10)? Does his "midrash" provide a model of how we should read the text?

4. Does Paul's use of Christian worship practice have any contemporary force? Can we derive norms for our general behavior from what we experience "in church"?

For further study:

Gregory W. Dawes, "The Danger of Idolatry: First Corinthians 8:7–13," *CBQ* 58 (1996) 82–98

Jerry L. Sumney, "The Place of 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 in Paul's Argument," *JBL* 119 (2000) 329-333

Wendell Willis, "1 Corinthians 8-10: A Retrospective after 25 Years," *Restoration Quarterly* 49 (2007) 103-12 or
<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=3&hid=3&sid=55f3fb40-624f-40fb-8e8b-32bc32597dec%40sessionmgr2>