

Sermon Notes/Follow-up

June 26, 2011

“For God and the Gospel: Glorifying God Through *Missio Christi* and *Imitatio Christi*”

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The sermon outline:

1. Mission and worship
2. Mission and freedom
3. Mission and glory

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John Stott on the counter-cultural vitality of mission:

We often go to one of two extremes. Either we are so keen to live in the world that we imbibe non-Christian ideas and standards, and become conformed; or we are so keen not to lose our distinctive identity that we withdraw. The best way to avoid these two mistakes is to engage in mission. We are sent into the world as Christ's representatives, so we can neither conform to it (or we cease to represent him) or withdraw from it (or we have no one to represent him to).

A great deal is at stake in how we relate to culture. Think about ancient Israel (since Paul uses the Israelites as an illustration in the first part of chapter 10). They imbibed so much of Egypt, they lived more like Egyptians than God's holy people even after the exodus event. The result? Judgment. Over 600,000 people came out of Egypt in the exodus but only two were permitted to enter the Promised Land. In the same way, Christians who compromise with the culture in core ways will fall under the displeasure of God. Repeatedly, God's people are chastened for “walking in the ways of the other nations.” Rebellion against God is described in terms of conformity to the surrounding culture. In a word, it's worldliness.

But we also have countless examples of faithful covenant people who lived in the midst of godless culture while maintaining godliness. Think about Joseph and Daniel. Consider Jeremiah's instructions in chapter 29 of his prophecy. Clearly, God intends for us to live in the world while resisting worldliness.

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In the first part of the sermon, I talked about our dual identity as Christians. We are both worshippers and missionaries. Sadly, many churches treat these as mutually exclusive categories, as if the church could either have beautiful worship OR seek to save the lost, but not BOTH. I think this is deeply flawed. Our “mission and maturity” slogan at TPC is an attempt to capture both aspects of this identity. Our stated

purpose as a church is: "Aiming at Christ's maturity – Sharing in Christ's mission." This is just basically Eph. 4:11-16 (the maturity part -- growing up into the full stature of Christ) combined with John 20:21 (the mission part -- we have been sent by the Father in Christ and through the Spirit).

While I appreciate much about the contemporary "missional" movement, one glaring flaw is its disconnect between worship and mission. Mission has swallowed up worship; real worship forms are seen as something of a distraction from real mission. Worship is, at best seen as an "experience" that will hopefully lure the seeker in (note the proliferation of "praise and worship teams" whose exclusive role is music; the services are generally lacking other elements of a vintage liturgy, like confession, absolution, and communion). The real father of the modern "missional" movement, Lesslie Newbigin, did not see it that way. Newbigin gave worship its proper and central place. Newbigin knew that mission had to flow out the community's worship. But that balance has been largely lost in our day.

Isaiah 6 is a passage that beautifully holds together worship and mission. Isaiah enters the temple and meets God, high and exalted, on his throne. The prophet immediately falls on his face and confesses his sin. The Lord's burning hot love purifies him with a coal drawn from the altar, the place of the sacrifice. Isaiah takes in a liturgy, as he experiences the majesty and grace of God, and worships accordingly. But then the Lord asks, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" Isaiah immediately volunteers to be the Lord's missionary: "Here I am! Send me!" His mission flows out of worship. Isaiah's response should what every one of us is saying as we get to the benediction/commissioning part of the serve: "Send me Lord! I will be your missionary!"

If the contemporary missional movement tries to do mission without worship as the foundation and source (and goal, we could add) of that mission, it will fall flat on its face. If we do not have reverent and joyful services of worship in which we meet with the exalted Lord in all his grace and majesty (which is the kind of transcendent/immanent encounter the historic liturgies were designed to provide, however imperfectly) then our cry "Send me!" will be weak and hollow. The vapid, thin, anemic, watered down worship forms of most of the modern "missional" oriented churches are simply not robust enough to sustain a mature, missional community over the long haul. It's time for missiologists to begin paying more attention to the Bible's theology of worship; heavy doses of church history (the classical liturgies of the church) would help as well.

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N. T. Wright on this section of 1 Corinthians  
(<http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/18656.htm>):

### III. THE HEART OF PAUL'S RESPONSE: CHRISTOLOGY

With this, we turn to the substantive issue that faced Paul. Should Christians in Corinth eat meat that had been offered to idols? We should be clear how far-reaching the question actually was. Though there is some debate about details, it seems likely that almost all the meat available in a city like Corinth would have been offered at some shrine or other; and idol-temples served not only as butcher's shops but also as restaurants.<sup>6</sup> To avoid idol meat altogether might, then, mean de facto vegetarianism (an option forced on some in any case by economic circumstances). For a Jew, facing this question would pose quite sharply the options we just noted. One major Jewish position regarded pagan worship as idolatry, and insisted that genuine monotheists must not flirt with it. Another major Jewish tradition said that idols were non-existent and irrelevant, and that the one creator god claimed as his own all that idols have usurped. This second way may well have been helped by the kind of speculative Jewish gnosis according to which one's relationship to the one true god elevated one above the problems of the pagan world.<sup>7</sup> The first way could lead to dualism, the second to assimilation. Paul carves out a way which avoids both.

He refuses to discuss the question in terms merely of a practical agenda. He goes (much more readily than some of his commentators) to the substantive issue that lies behind it all, that is, monotheism and idolatry. He does not work with the categories of a post-Reformation agenda, asking whether the "law" is a good thing or a bad thing, debating earnestly about whether "ethics" and "morality" somehow compromise the gospel of free grace. And, despite some recent writers who have suggested that he is simply shooting from the hip, offering haphazard and inconsistent solutions to problems as they come up, I suggest that his solution is actually clear, theologically grounded, and strikingly relevant.<sup>8</sup> He offers the church a redefinition of monotheism and election, both achieved by means of his central Christology; and he shows how this redefinition of fundamental Jewish theology enables the church not merely to survive and maintain its identity vis-a-vis paganism but to take on paganism and, in a sense, beat it at its own game. He offers, in short, an incarnational theology for a church in a pagan environment.

This helps to explain the beginning of the argument (8:1-3). Paul responds to the claim to gnosis by insisting on the primacy of Jewish style allegiance to the one true god, as expressed in the central Jewish prayer, the Shema ("Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God.");

Concerning idol meat, we know that "we all have gnosis." Gnosis puffs you up, but love builds you up. Anyone who claims to "know" something does not yet have the necessary "knowledge"; but anyone who "loves God" is known by God. (vv. 1-3)

Paul is about to quote the Shema explicitly, in v. 4, but he clearly has it in mind already. The question at stake in the discussion of idol meat is, who are the people of God? The Jewish answer is: who says the Shema? Paul begins by affirming this answer, before introducing a striking new dimension:

Concerning meat offered to idols, then, we know that “there is no idol in the world,” and that “there is no god but one” (v. 4).

Monotheism is what matters. But this credal statement by itself hardly addresses the situation on the street in Corinth, so he continues:

Well, though, there may be many so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth- just as there are many “gods” and many “lords”-.. (v. 5).

The pagan pantheon is not irrelevant. It must be confronted. One cannot retreat from paganism, just as one must not assimilate. One must instead worship the true God, the one whom paganism parodies. This, I shall suggest, is in fact the heart of the whole argument. And for Paul this true God is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.

In what is surely one of the most striking Christological formulations ever written in any century, Paul takes an argument which is about monotheism, and takes the Jewish formula which is the most basic expression of Jewish monotheism, and places Jesus at the heart of it. Instead of

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One

we have

But for us:

One God

the father, from whom are all things and we to him

and one Lord

Jesus the Messiah,

through whom are all things and through whom are we. (8:6)

This is all the more striking when we put the Septuagint of Deuteronomy 6:4 beside the Greek of Paul’s formula:

akoue Israel, kyrios ho theos hemon eis estiv

What Paul seems to have done is as follows. He has expanded the formula, in a way quite unprecedented in any other texts known to us, so as to include a gloss on theos and another on Kurios:<sup>9</sup>

all hemin

eis theos ho pater

ex ou ta pavta kai eis autov

kai eis kurios Iesous Christos

di ou ta pavta kai hemeis di autou

Paul, in other words, has glossed “God” with “the Father,” and “Lord” with “Jesus Christ,” adding in each case an explanatory phrase: “God” is the Father, “from whom are all things and we to him,” and the “Lord” is Jesus the Messiah, “through whom are all things and we through him.” There can be no mistake: Paul has placed Jesus within an explicit statement, drawn from the Old Testament’s best known monotheistic text, of the doctrine that Israel’s God is the one and only God, the creator of the world. The Shema was already, at this stage of Judaism, in widespread use as the Jewish daily prayer.<sup>10</sup> Paul has redefined it Christologically, producing what we can only call a sort of Christological monotheism.

#### IV. CHRISTOLOGY, THEREFORE LOVE

It would be easy, though mistaken, to get so excited about Paul’s astonishing Christological innovation that one would miss the point of this Christology within the over-all argument. We have already seen that he is reasserting Jewish style monotheism over against the pagan polytheism of Corinth. But what practical difference does this redefinition make, when it comes to the question of idol meat?

The question, as we saw, was first and foremost an issue of the definition of the community of the people of god. Living as we do in a period of atomized individualism, it is necessary for us to think our way back into the first century, where individual behavior was seen for what more recent sociologists of knowledge have been insisting it really is: one function of communal life.<sup>11</sup> Paul addresses the issue at this level, applying his reformulated monotheism to the question. What does it mean to be the true people of this one god?

It means, clearly, that love and concern for other members of the community is to be placed ahead of all attempts at personal self-realization. In 8:7-13 he

spells this out in terms precisely of the Christ who has become part of the definition of the one god, the Christ who is identical with the Jesus who died on the cross:

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. "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. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 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? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. 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 (vv. 7-13).

The gnosis of which some members of the community are proud, namely, their knowledge of the one true God, must, if it really is the true God they are worshipping, bring them immediately to the realization that this true God, in the person of the Messiah, died to rescue both them and the rest from precisely those evils of which paganism is clearly symptomatic. Though the word *agape* itself does not occur in this passage, that is what it is all about: the love of the true God for his people, and the consequent love that this people must show, not only for him in private religion, but also for him in the persons of the rest of the family. The corporate sense of *Christos* is clearly visible under V.12: sinning against a member of the family is sinning against the Messiah, in whom this family is summed up.<sup>12</sup> And the whole effect is to put into practice the *Shema* itself: there is one God, one Lord, and his people are defined as those who love him, and who love their neighbors as themselves. The allowance for the weak is not a mere *ad hoc* concession. It arises from the heart of Christian theology itself. Hence I Corinthians 13 can be seen as a climax of the whole letter, a full dress exposition of what is needed when facing the pagan world.

## V. CHRISTOLOGY, THEREFORE ABANDONMENT OF RIGHTS

It is at this point that 1 Corinthians 9 makes its proper impact. The sudden change of topic, from a discussion of idol meat to a discussion of Paul's apostleship and its outworking, has inevitably led some scholars to question the integrity of the passage. This has been further compounded by the fact that the advice in chapter 10 on the subject of idol meat does not seem the same as that in chapter 8. But if we follow the line we have begun, we will discover that beneath these apparent discrepancies there is a coherence born of the theology which Paul is in fact expounding, and which usually goes unnoticed.

The reason why Paul suddenly launches into a discussion of his apostleship may have something to do with a defence against those who are marginalizing him and looking to some other leader(s) instead (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 3:1-23). But if this is so it is strictly a subplot to the main theme of the passage. Paul's basic intention is to offer himself as the example of how to approach such issues, where one has a right to do something but deliberately makes no use of that right for the sake of the gospel. He sums this up in 11:1: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." Here again the redefined monotheism of 1 Corinthians 8:6 works its way out into actual practice.

If it were not for 11:1, this conclusion might be resisted. Nowhere in 1 Corinthians 9 does Paul say explicitly that in abandoning his rights he is following the example of the Messiah.<sup>13</sup> But here a parallel passage comes to our aid. In Philippians 2:1-11, we find first (vv. 1-4) a clear exhortation to do exactly what Paul says in our present passage that he is doing himself, namely, to give up one's rights for one another's sake; and that passage is at once buttressed by Philippians 2:5-11, in which Paul describes Jesus the Messiah as the one who did precisely that. Moreover, Philippians 2:5-11 is one of the other two passages in Paul (the third one is Colossians 1:15-20) in which Paul takes explicit Jewish monotheistic texts and themes and puts Jesus at the middle of them.<sup>14</sup> The incarnational Christology of Philippians 2:5-11 thus undergirds explicitly the appeal that Christians should give up their own rights for one another's sake. What we have in 1 Corinthians 8 and 9, I suggest, is the same theme spelt out in one particular way. To the question, should we exercise our God-given liberty and, scorning idols as nonexistent irrelevancies, go ahead and eat meat that has been offered to them? Paul makes three replies:

- 1) First get your monotheism straight; it is true that there is only one God, but this God is now made known in and through Jesus the Messiah, and in loving this God you may find that there are other more pressing duties than showing your contempt for idols by eating their food without caring.
- 2) Then recognize that among these more urgent needs is to care for those who are struggling in the faith, and that this may mean happily forgoing your demonstration of monotheism in terms of eating idol meat in favor of a demonstration of this redefined monotheism in terms of abstaining from idol meat.
- 3) then recognize that in this abstention, too, you are demonstrating that you are the people of this one true God, since in Jesus this God gave up his rights to come and rescue you too.

The cross, therefore, stands clearly underneath this argument. For Paul, the crucifixion of Jesus does not simply have to do with the attaining of individual salvation. It means the remaking of the community of the people of God in a particular fashion, namely, as the community that is given such security in the love of the true God that it is able to forgo all human privileges and rights to which it might otherwise lay claim. What is more, Paul saw clearly that the cross, in achieving this, offers the most fundamental challenge to paganism at every level. This is, I believe, the real subtext of our present passage. Instead of asking "how far can we go?" in apparent assimilation to paganism, Paul shows a different agenda altogether. The monotheism which has been redefined so as to have Jesus, and hence the cross, at its heart, is the monotheism which not only provides a way for its adherents to live within a pagan world with integrity, but which also issues to that pagan world a decisive and devastating challenge (compare 1 Corinthians 2:6-8). Instead of merely pursuing a path of private spirituality within the world, the church is to pursue a path of mission to the world. And the victory which is to be won by that mission is the victory of the cross.

Paganism, at its heart, powerfully reinforced the boundaries of nation, family and tribe, of geography and gender, that crisscrossed the ancient world. It is a striking fact that, apart from within Judaism, we have little or no evidence in the ancient world of what we today call "charity"; there was no sense of obligation to the poor, except to the poor among one's own kin or among those who might be of political usefulness. Though the word "charity" has of course become cold and hard, we might pause to imagine a world from which the very notion had been removed. It would be colder and harder yet. And that is the world that Paul was challenging with the gospel of Jesus. The church is summoned, as the very stuff of its life, not as an added extra when private spirituality has been sorted out, to incarnate that love, that charity, just as the God it professes to worship had done. And in that process the church must watch out for the signs that underneath a professed adherence to monotheism there is not a self-centeredness that must itself be challenged by the cross: "I punish my body and enslave it;" writes Paul, "so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified" 1 Corinthians 9:27. A spirituality that does not contain at least the possibility of such an attitude stands under the warning that, though professing Christianity, it may in fact have embraced some form of paganism.<sup>15</sup> Insisting on one's rights, even insisting on one's rights as a Christian, is a sign that something else other than the true God is being worshipped. The Christology of 1 Corinthians 8:6 thus undergirds the exposition of paradoxical apostleship in 1 Corinthians 9, and prepares the way for the return to the main topic in 1 Corinthians 10.

## VI. CHRISTOLOGY AND THE TRUE FEEDING

Rather than simply sketch out a position which helps Christians to get round the problem of idol meat, Paul now goes boldly on to the attack. He puts at



the center of the picture the true Christian eating and drinking, of which pagan feasting is a mere parody. This is, in fact, his regular critique of paganism. Avoiding pagan life styles by avoiding the raw material in which they deal is dualism; assimilating to those life styles is to abandon allegiance to the one God. The genuine alternative to both ways is to embrace the gospel as the reality of which paganism is the distorted copy. And this means seeing pagan feasting in the light of the eucharist.

I am not aware that 1 Corinthians 10 is normally read in this light, but I suggest that it ought to be. The whole chapter is about religious meals, how they function, and what they imply. Paul begins with the Jewish meals, the “spiritual” feeding in the wilderness (vv.1-13), and moves on to the Christian eucharist (vv. 14-17), in order then to draw out his final, nuanced, response to the problem at hand (vv. 18 – 11:1). In doing this he is, I suggest, following a pattern of argument similar to that which we observed in the foundational passage, 1 Corinthians 8:1-6.

First, he claims the Jewish ground. Just as in chapter 8 he began with the Shema, so in chapter 10 he begins with Passover. Monotheism in chapter 8 is thus balanced by the wilderness feedings in chapter 10 (“our ancestors... all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink” (vv. 1-3).) Faced with paganism, Paul always begins his thought as a loyal Jew. In both cases, the overtones of Passover are not far away. The Shema recalls the god who brought Israel out of Egypt. The desert feedings result from the same great act of liberation. Passover and Exodus likewise come together in the Christian antitype, the eucharist.

Second, he shows that this approach by itself did not save the Jews from assimilation to pagan practices. In the earlier passage, this comes by implication: the Jewish Hellenistic gnosis of which some are so proud will lead them, if they are not careful, into assimilation. In the present passage, in explicit detail, he shows that the earlier feeding of the Jews did not prevent idolatry (v.7), immorality (v.8), treating the Lord as a pagan deity (V.9),<sup>16</sup> and grumbling that their god had not behaved properly towards them (v.10). So, while claiming the Jewish heritage not only for himself but for his erstwhile pagan converts (“our ancestors,” v.1), he sees that one must go further. Judaism by itself is not enough.

Third, he goes on to assert the Christian truth which is, in his view, the fulfillment of the Jewish truth, and which thus claims the high ground that paganism had been trying to occupy. In 1 Corinthians 8, this move consists in his redefinition of the Jewish Shema so that it becomes the answer to pagan polytheism. The religion of “gods many and lords many” is replaced by the one God, the one Lord. In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, this Christology opens up to reveal, in a nutshell, the meaning of the Christian eucharist, containing as

it does echoes of older Jewish liturgies,<sup>17</sup> and offering the decisive alternative to all pagan ritual meals:

The cup of blessing which we bless

is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?

The bread which we break

is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body

for we all partake of the one bread.<sup>18</sup>

The redefinition of monotheism by means of Jesus has given birth to a redefinition of the one people of the true god; and this one people is revealed precisely in their sharing of the meal by which they constitute themselves as such. If there is one God, and one Lord, then those who celebrate and worship this one God and Lord become one people, transcending differences of race, gender, class and geography. This celebration resembles pagan feasts simply in the way that the sun is like a lightbulb: the former is the reality of which the latter is a copy invented by humans.

To modern Protestant or rationalist eyes, Paul's description of this celebration could look as though it was sailing close to the wind of assimilation, that is, assimilation to paganism. Just as critics of Paul's incarnational Christology have accused him of selling his Jewish birthright for a mess of pagan or gnostic polytheism,<sup>19</sup> so critics of his eucharistic theology are bound to accuse him of making the eucharist just like a form of paganism. But at this point Protestantism, rationalism and Judaism, if they make this accusation, are standing on dangerously dualistic ground. From Paul's point of view it is paganism that apes the true sacramental worship, not the other way round. The function of this eucharistic passage within the present argument is to say: in the central Christian mystery you become one family through sharing in the blood and body of Christ, so how can you then share in the cup, or the table, of antigods, of nongods, or of demons? Verse 16 is explicitly applied in verse 21:

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

The argument of chapter 10 as a whole, then, pivots on the eucharistic passages just as chapter 8 pivoted on the Christological reformulation. Those who take the redefined monotheism seriously are bound to follow it through by their love for one another. This Christology, and this love, find their ritual

expression in the eucharist; and those who take this redefined community meal seriously are bound to follow it through into a life of holiness, in which attendance at idol temples is abjured.

A note at this point may be in order about Paul's exact view of idols. He has already agreed with the "strong" in Corinth that idols have no existence as such (8:4), and he is clear in the present passage that he is not retracting this earlier point (10:19). But this does not rule out the possibility that malign nonhuman entities not only may exist, but may gain power through pagan ritual and then exercise that power over humans, even over Christians. Paul (or one of his earliest interpreters) dearly believed that Christians take part in an ongoing battle to implement the victory of Jesus over the powers of darkness (Ephesians 6:10-20; Colossians 2:15). To worship in an idol's temple would therefore be to flirt with, or give the appearance of flirting with, the very powers that continue to enslave and distort human existence. These powers ought, instead, to be challenged by the gospel of liberation and healing. Such powers are not to be thought of as rivals to the one God, one Lord. That is the message both of 1 Corinthians 8.4-6 and Colossians 1:15-20. To forget this is to court dualism indeed. But this does not mean that Christians must not take the powers very seriously. Instead of asking as the Corinthians' question implicitly asks, to what extent one is allowed to fraternize with them, one ought to be asking how their remaining power over humans can be broken.

Paul's answer to this question comes in the radical application of the cross to all human and Christian life. Victory over the powers comes, not from human wisdom, from success in human terms, but from the forswearing of all kinds of human power and authority, privilege and status. When Christians in Corinth and elsewhere give up their rights, they are not merely retreating from human possibility out of generous concern for one another. They are striking a blow against the paganism which offers humans a spurious self-worth, an inflated self-identity.<sup>20</sup> They are offering a direct challenge to paganism, based not on their own new-found religious self-assurance but on the revelation of the one god, one lord which they have discovered in the cross. They are doing what (I suggest) all Christian confrontation of paganism must do. Instead of either assimilating or retreating into a dualistic ghetto, the church must seek to build shrines for the true god on ground at present occupied by paganism. Only so can the dehumanizing and distorting power of paganism be broken, and replaced with the healing and restoring love of the creator and redeemer god.

Paul's answer to the Corinthians' problem can therefore be set out as follows:

- 1) What is at stake in the issue of idol meat is the question of monotheism and election, over against paganism.

2) Embracing Jewish-style monotheism is the true challenge to paganism, and this monotheism finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

3) Creational monotheism means that all meat is in principle edible by Christians.

4) The Christological redefinition of monotheism means, however, that for the sake of those with weak consciences one may be under obligation to forgo this right.

5) The redefined monotheism is expressed in the redefined celebratory meal, which is the true alternative to pagan celebrations.

6) This meal must issue in holiness and wholeness.

7) Therefore, though eating meat bought in the market is in principle all right, eating in an idol's temple is not.

Paul has addressed a complex situation with a clear theology. Paganism is to be challenged with a redefined doctrine, and practice, of monotheism and election.

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Paul would oppose any "food legalisms" that makes matters of diet tests and marks of righteousness. There was an interesting article a while back entitled, "Is Food the New Sex?" by Mary Eberstadt. The article makes the point that whereas in times past, our culture had lots of rules about sex and virtually none about diet, today the situation is exactly reversed. We are awash in food fads and food phobias. Dietary regulations are all over the place, telling us we must eat organic, local, farm raised, without pesticides, etc. But when it comes to sexuality, "anything goes." In that sense, our cultural situation is a lot like the Corinthians, who also had "food fights" but seemed to have no conscience at all in matters of sex. Like them, we tend to be legalists about food and antinomians about sex.

Eberstadt's article offers us a hypothetical "Betty," a thirty year-old housewife from the Eisenhower era, and "Jennifer," a thirty year-old single woman from our own time. Betty thinks food is a matter of taste, whereas sex is governed by universal moral norms, while Jennifer thinks exactly the reverse. What's happened to us and why? The article is well worth reading:

<http://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/5542>

Doug Wilson on food issues:

Anyone who has been in the evangelical Christian world for any length of time at all is aware of all the various food fads that come and go. Some of

them have a peculiar Christian twist (“Bible” foods) while others are simply examples of Christians following hard after whatever food fads are current in the unbelieving world. In some respects this is just part of the background noise in American expressions of the faith, as we will see shortly. But in recent years, I have noticed an alarming trend: people who have been taught well and should know better getting caught up in this kind of faddish eating. I began to write about food, and the response I received indicated that the problem was far greater than I had imagined. And so what I want to do here is establish a basic structure of texts from Scripture within which we should be doing our thinking about food (not to mention our cooking and eating). If we are simply considering different menu choices when we go out to eat together, the Pauline principle is plain: mind thine own business. But we are getting to the point where we are talking about imperialistic false doctrines concerning food, not to mention applications of those doctrines in the form of eating disorders. Many Christians have gotten into a pattern where they are wrecking their health, their marriages, and their careers. “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1). And bondage is the word for it.

And so here it is—a primer on biblical eating. The citation of many of these texts may certainly create other questions, which can be addressed later, but for now the point of citing many of them is to see the kind of mindset they exclude. For modern food faddists, almost all these passages present some kind of problem for their agenda, and this means that they must be explained away or simply ignored.

Man was created as an eating creature. “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat” (Gen. 2:16). Not only was Adam invited to eat from any tree but one, but he was invited to eat freely. There was also the implication that various grains were available for food (Gen. 1:11–12). And it was good.

It is not surprising that since eating is so important to man’s identity as God’s image bearer, God set the test before us in the form of food. “And when the woman saw that the tree [was] good for food, and that it [was] pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make [one] wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat” (Gen. 3:6). It is striking that the three elements that made the forbidden fruit alluring are found in the apostle John’s rejection of worldliness: “For all that [is] in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 Jn. 2:16). We were created to eat all the food in the world, and we fell by eating the one thing in the world that was withheld from us.

After we fell into sin, and violence grew great on the earth, God determined to judge all humanity in a great flood. In the aftermath of that flood, God explicitly added meat to the list of man’s available choices for dinner.

“And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you

shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth [upon] the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered. Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things” (Gen. 9:1-3).

In this passage, God is reiterating the cultural mandate, and that mandate was at this point expanded with regard to our choices for food. The Lord explicitly says that anything that moves is available for food—fowl, beast, or fish. They are all put on the same level as the green herb that had previously been given to mankind. It is interesting that though there was a distinction between clean and unclean animals as far as sacrifices were concerned, there did not appear to be any dietary restrictions. Noah knew the difference between clean and unclean animals before the flood (Gen. 7:2), and permission to eat meat of any kind did not come until after the flood. When that permission to eat came, no restrictions were placed on it. If it swims, walks, or flies, you may eat it. God’s approach to the question of fruit, herbs, and meat can only be described as liberal.

When the children of Israel were promised the land of Canaan as an inheritance, the same open-handedness on the part of God can be readily seen. Numerous times the land is described as one dripping with goodness, or, as the famous phrase has it, flowing with milk and honey. “Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people Israel, and the land which thou hast given us, as thou swarest unto our fathers, a land that floweth with milk and honey” (Dt. 26:15). It is worth remembering that honey was really sweet and that the milk had fat in it. This was not a low-fat operation. God promised His people good things. “He that is of a proud heart stirreth up strife: but he that putteth his trust in the LORD shall be made fat” (Prov. 28:25).

The same imagery comes out in the promise that God offers concerning the times of the New Covenant. “And in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined” (Is. 25:6). God did not use foul things (feces, roadkill, etc.) in order to picture for us the loveliness of our salvation, and the greatness of forgiveness. If we start thinking and speaking about such foods as though they were foul, we are one step removed from slandering the gospel. “And the priest shall burn them upon the altar: it is the food of the offering made by fire for a sweet savour: all the fat is the LORD’s” (Lev. 3:16).

The fact that God placed dietary restrictions on the Jews under the Mosaic code has been misunderstood by many. This had the same function that other parts of the holiness code did—to teach the people the importance of antithesis, the difference between this and that, between sacred and profane. This was not because of any inherent problems in the proscribed foods, but rather because the people needed training in bringing every aspect of their lives under the authority of God’s spoken word. And once the building was built, it was appropriate for the scaffolding to come down. Once the lesson was learned and the Messiah came, we were restored to the conditions that

applied to Noah. All foods are open to us. All things are clean. This is taught to us in multiple places in the New Testament.

“Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man” (Matt. 15:11).

“Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh” (Col. 2:20–23).

“Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man’s servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand” (Rom. 14:1–4). For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children” (Matt. 11:18–19).

“For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 14:17).

“And he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance, And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice [spake] unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, [that] call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven” (Acts 10:10–16).

Sometimes stringing a group of passages together has the desired effect, and sometimes it does not. In case it did not, allow me to summarize the standards of the New Covenant on this important subject. A Christian cannot be defiled by what he eats, which means . . . we ought not to worry about defilement when we eat. The Christian is prohibited from acting like he is subject to worldly ordinances, among such we must include “do not taste.” Humanistic posturing has the appearance of wisdom, but it is of no value in the process of subduing the lusts of the body. Food phobias are a lust of the body. A weaker Christian limits himself to vegetables only, and stronger Christians ought not to hassle him over it. But if stronger Christians are not supposed to give weaker Christians a difficult time over their eating frailties, how much more must we refuse to allow the weaker Christians to dictate terms to everyone else? The apostle is clear—no fighting over food. It is appropriate to fight over whether or not we will allow fighting over the food,

because that is the place where the apostle draws the line. The kingdom allows for saints on the ascetic end, like John the Baptist, and it allows for saints who go to banquets, like the Lord. The kingdom of God is not about food and drink. The apostle Peter was given a vision of all the unclean animals, and he was shown that they represented the inclusion of the Gentiles into the commonwealth of Israel. And what God was declaring clean in that vision (the Gentiles) was not represented by animals that remained as unclean as ever. When the first Gentile was lawfully baptized into the Church, BLTs and clam chowder became acceptable.

Now someone may want to object that all these passages were addressing the issue of the foods prohibited in the Mosaic code, and therefore have nothing to do with our modern issues of genetically modified organisms (GMOs or Frankenfoods), factory farming, or putting MSG into the food to make it taste like something. This is a point that I not only grant, but want to insist on—because it actually makes the issue even more clear. If the arrival of the Christ was sufficient to set aside the prohibitions of certain foods that were explicitly prohibited by divine revelation, then how much more does the gospel exclude prohibitions that cannot be found in Scripture anywhere? Of course, if someone wants to abstain from certain foods for reasons other than trying to achieve personal holiness, that is absolutely fine. James Jordan put it this way: “It is not a serious matter for a physician to advise abstaining from foods for medical reasons, based on human wisdom. It is, however a very serious thing when men advocate abstaining from foods for religious reasons” (James Jordan, *Pig Out?*, p. 8).

Going on a diet because your doctor doesn't want you to have a heart attack tomorrow seems prudent and reasonable. That's just good stewardship. If, when you walk up the stairs at your house, you have to sit down halfway up to take a breather, you might want to consider refraining from having second helpings for a while. It is crucial that we keep this distinction in mind. “The key to health is obedience and faith, not mechanical observance of health techniques. Valuable as exercise, good diet, and the like may be, they are not delineated in God's revealed law” (James Jordan, *Pig Out?* p. 58).

But if the menu is wide open, and it certainly is, then that means that tofu and yogurt and all their cousins are also options for us. That is absolutely right. There is no more defilement in “eating healthy” than there is in stopping by McDonald's. The only defilement possible is a defilement that comes out of the heart, and not what goes into the mouth. However, this does create a caution for those who are heavy into “eating healthy.” To say that one food over against another puts you closer to God is false religion, and that does defile. But it doesn't defile by means of what is on your spoon. It defiles because of the words on the page in that guru health magic mango book that you have been reading. So if you are zealous for “healthy” food, the chances are good that you are more affected by this false teaching than you know. Americans have a long tradition of thinking that we can deal with sin by means of false sacraments.



“Fringe groups in American Christianity have for almost two centuries advocated dietary and hygienic practices designed to curb sin, and this is part of the milieu in which the current discussion must take place. It seems reasonable to many Americans to assume that God intended to teach Israel about diet, because diet and health are part of the popular civil religion of America today, and because dietetic theology has been a strong current in American Christianity in the past. In the nineteenth century there were prominent liberal and sectarian theologians who believed that the sinfulness of man could be curbed through diet and hygiene. John Harvey Kellogg, a Seventh-Day Adventist, invented corn flakes as a meatless breakfast food designed to reduce the sexual drive. Control of ‘bestial sexual impulses’ was linked in the popular imagination, both sectarian and liberal, with a bland diet devoid of alcohol, coffee, tea, tobacco, condiments, and largely devoid of meat. Assumption of this diet would reduce what is today called libido, and this reduction of the ‘animal’ in man would be passed on to one’s children, who would grow up with less ‘original sin.’ Salvation through diet passed into the popular imagination through the writings of liberals like Horace Bushnell, sectarians like Kellogg and Charles Finney, and cultists like Mary Baker Eddy. As a result there is a pervasive orientation toward dietetic theology in American Christianity that colors our discussion of the Sinaitic dietary laws” (James Jordan, *Pig Out?* pp. 55–56)

And from a footnote on the same pages, less original sin “was the purpose of Graham flour, developed by Sylvester Graham, and still with us in Graham Crackers. The Graham diet was used at Charles Finney’s Oberlin College to protect students against ‘vile affections.’ The Bill Gothard Institute is strongly influenced by Finney’s writings, and it is possible that the dietary aspect of their program can be traced partially to Finney’s mediation of the Graham viewpoint.” Finney, to his credit, later in his life saw the snare that the Graham approach represented. Unfortunately, a lot of modern Christians have not.

There is much more to say about all of this, and there are many tangents and questions that might be pursued with profit. But at the foundation, at the root of all the problems, we should be able to detect a false doctrine of God. Ours is a lost generation, in the grip of a deep father hunger. Because we have not had healthy relationships with our human fathers, God, we naturally assume, is parsimonious. He is tight-fisted with His abundance. We slander Him in our hearts. If it tastes like gravel, it must be from God, so the thinking goes, and restaurants tout their “death by chocolate” concoctions as “decadent” or “sinful.” Something is desperately wrong here. God—not the devil—was the inventor of pleasure, sex, goodness, fermentation, and satisfaction. He was the designer of all our nerve endings and our taste buds and over a million tastes, and He gave man the ingenuity to be able to figure out how to combine all those tastes in ways that would create a trillion more. Where could we have possibly gotten the idea that He was stingy? An enemy has done this. There, then, is the role of the amateur: to look the world back to grace. There, too, is the necessity of his work: His tribe must be in short supply; his job has

gone begging. The world looks as if it has been left in the custody of a pack of trolls. Indeed, the whole distinction between art and trash, between food and garbage, depends on the presence or absence of the loving eye (Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb*, p. 4).

Wilson again:

The faithful Christian looks around the table, sees who is sitting with him, and he loves them. The fellowship and thanksgiving sanctify whatever is on the table -- and pretty much anything can be on the table. If we can get it down, there is not much that gratitude can't sanctify (1 Tim. 4:4).

The mentality of unbelief approaches the problem in quite a different fashion. This mentality wants to focus on the nature of the food, and provided *that* is copacetic, then the people around the table are thereby approved. Which sanctifies which? The gold the altar or the altar the gold? Having established the principle, *i.e.* that the altar does the sanctifying, we have to ask, in matters of table fellowship, whether the altar is on the platters or in the chairs.

The criteria for approved food can cover a vast range. There are denominational differences within this broad outlook -- there are factions that support "like mom used to make," high end restaurant food, food eaten by manners snobs, food applauded by organic foodies, social justice food, my ethnic food as over against your ethnic food, food that doesn't provoke my phantom allergies, food that has not been contaminated by microwave cooties, and more. You name it, we can supply the necessary food coloring that will help us divide the body of Christ. We draw divisions on the table, and the necessary result is divisions between those in the chairs. But Jesus hates the latter a whole lot worse than He *might* hate the former.

Now here is your test -- and this is one of the first lessons the New Testament church was required to master, long before Nicea or Chalcedon. When the Gentiles showed up in the church, some of them continued to eat their bacon. What is more important to you? The presence or absence of bacon, or the presence or absence of Demetrius?

Imagine you have been invited to dinner somewhere, and suppose you just can't get past the fact that your hosts are, apparently without malice, serving up carcinogens covered in gravy. Well, Jesus said that we had to take up our cross in order to follow Him. Your obligation is to die for your brother. At least in this case your obligation is covered in hot gravy.

Uptight food scruples, as they commonly operate in the church today, are an insult to justification by faith alone, the principal glory of which is table fellowship (Gal. 2:14-16). Pastors should be far more jealous on the point than they are. But confronting food divisions within a congregation takes courage, and we think the apostle Paul used all of that kind of courage up.

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Randy Compton

Wednesday, March 30, 2011 8:16 am

Love this post both for the humor and the real (and growing) problem it addresses.

My family has invited people over for dinner; they then provide my wife a long list of things they can't or won't eat. In fact we once had one couple insist on bringing all their own food, including a dessert my kids still remember with a shudder. This sin-and-flavor-free cake found its way into our family lexicon; we now refer to bad desserts of all types as "(last name withheld) cake."

What should believers do when we want to have table fellowship with people who insist on only having on the table what they want there? I understand the legitimacy of wanting not to get sick from real food allergies, but often the allergies seem "trendy." "Gluten free" seems like the big current trend.

What my family has done thus far is go along with people's food demands in a weak-brother/ strong-brother sort of way, but this seems unsatisfactory. Is there a wise, loving approach that does not just ignore the issue in the interest of fellowship? (Or from fear of starting a food fight? 😊).

RachelB - Amen

Wednesday, March 30, 2011 9:13 am

Would love to hear an answer to Randy Compton's question!

Valerie (Kyriosity)

Wednesday, March 30, 2011 10:17 am

Randy and Rachel, this video from Nancy Wilson addresses the issue, too:  
<http://www.canonwired.com/ask-nancy/guests-allergies/>

And a general question in response to the post and Randy's story: How do things work in reverse? What is more important to us? The presence or absence of (last name withheld) cake, or the presence or absence of the (last name withheld) family? Do we decide just to never have the food neurotics over for dinner again, or do we bear with them, or are there other factors we need to take into account?

Douglas Wilson

Wednesday, March 30, 2011 11:20 am

Valerie, it is the difference between the response of 1 Cor. 8:13 and the response of Col. 2:16. You bend for the weaker brother, you are rigid with the imperialist. But I need to write more on this.

RachelB

Wednesday, March 30, 2011 5:31 pm

Thanks, Valerie. I definitely remember Mrs. Wilson's response because I was the one who asked the question 😊 -just curious if there were any additional thoughts since then. Thank you for reposting the link anyway.

Looking forward to you fleshing out the verses below, Pastor Wilson.

Randy Compton

Wednesday, March 30, 2011 11:21 am

Thanks for the link--good stuff. I think that the advice in the video is pretty much what we are doing because we believe generally (in answer to your question Valerie) that the fellowship is more important. I guess what I am looking for is a way to talk with people about their allergies and food phobias that does not cause a break in fellowship.

I have tried asking folks questions like "When did you find out you were allergic?" "How sort of tests did the doctor run?" Things of that sort. Generally if the allergy is real people have good answers that are based in objective fact. For example, we have good friends with children who have genuine, send-you-to-the-hospital peanut allergies. It's a pleasure to help them avoid the trip in the ambulance.

Other acquaintances are self-diagnosing, though, with the help of countless internet sites, and they seem unwilling to entertain the possibility that they may be mistaken; they tend to resent my questions as a form of doubt.

I find that the practical outworkings of the problem, to be honest, is that we tend (selfishly) not to want to invite people we think are over-sensitive. There are obvious differences between having folks over to whom you can say "Hey we're throwing part of a dead cow on the grill to see what happens--wanna join us and find out?" and those to whom you want to say "OK, let's get together and eat broiled veggies (check, no frying; check no breading, check, no salt, and no, by all means, no gluten, no pork, no beef,) washed down with purified water, followed by a sugarless, soggy dessert. Looking forward to spending time together, brother."

I want fellowship to be enjoyable, but I concede, as the original post says, that at times it may be cross bearing. But wow--eating and drinking good stuff is such a great fellowship grease (so to speak)--and spending time trying to smile and show yourself not put out by eating bad stuff is so difficult--especially difficult not to feel resentful that you have to do it, or not to feel proud if you succeed!

Valerie (Kyriosity)

Wednesday, March 30, 2011 12:32 pm

Doug -- Thanks. That was a good summary of the "other factors" I had in mind. When you write more, could you address the difference between how

the church leaders should respond and how Polly Pewwarmer should respond?

Randy -- Cow carcass sounds great to me. What time's dinner? Somebody asked me today if I'd be interested in an editing job with a company that publishes vegetarian cookbooks. I responded that it would be rather hypocritical, as I am the sort of person who would get a craving for venison while watching *Bambi*. 😊

TBush - Depends

Thursday, March 31, 2011 4:15 am

It depends a lot on the attitude of the 'foodie'. When I'm attempting to lose the winter "extra" I usually go no-carb for a temporary period of time- it works for me, and is in conjunction with regular hard work and running. So when the invitation to a meal occurs, I won't make a fuss about anything- no way- I simply eat what I can, cheat a little, and 'just say no' to the gooey fudge.

It's those folks who go out of their way to announce what they're about- whatever the food issue is- who become irritating and seem very self-absorbed. It's as if their identity is wrapped up in what they don't consume. Maybe we can modify the old saying from "you are what you eat" into "you're not what you don't eat"?

Bonus- going low carb means LOTS of delicious carcinogens...

Natalie - re:

Thursday, March 31, 2011 11:20 am

**Randy Compton wrote:**

I find that the practical outworkings of the problem, to be honest, is that we tend (selfishly) not to want to invite people we think are over-sensitive. There are obvious differences between having folks over to whom you can say "Hey we're throwing part of a dead cow on the grill to see what happens- wanna join us and find out?" and those to whom you want to say "OK, let's get together and eat broiled veggies (check, no frying; check no breading, check, no salt, and no, by all means, no gluten, no pork, no beef,)washed down with purified water, followed by a sugarless, soggy dessert. Looking forward to spending time together, brother."

I want fellowship to be enjoyable, but I concede, as the original post says,

Perhaps for some people it's better to simply change the way you interact with them? For the omnivores you can have your bbq, and for the picky eaters perhaps you invite them over for an evening of boardgames. Depending on the pickiness of the eaters you could offer snacks (popcorn, fresh berries, sliced fruit and cheeses, nuts, etc) as feasible. These people must eat something other than brown rice and lentils.

Personally I'm more concerned about people who eat bad tasting food than people who don't eat certain things. My in-laws eat low carb, but my MIL makes some of the best grilled chicken I've ever eaten. It's not hard to throw a pot roast together knowing they won't eat the potatoes, and I know they'll appreciate it because they appreciate good food. It's the people who bring gluten free carob brownies you have to be careful with! Carob /= Chocolate!

DHammer - Fads / Facts

Thursday, March 31, 2011 8:00 pm

Gluten sensitivity takes a regular beating at this blog and of course there are plenty of folks who jump on this bandwagon as a fad. On the other hand, blood serum taken and stored from the 1950s when compared to current serum has shown about a doubling in the frequency of antigluten antibodies. Celiac disease which was only talked about on rare occasions in the classroom when I was in med school in the '80s is now a diagnosis that I find on a frequent basis. These diagnoses are made with small bowel biopsies and antibody markers and not just trips to the internet.

Bottom line, this disease has plenty of faddish hangers-on, but is also appears to be the real thing.

Valerie (Kyriosity)

Friday, April 01, 2011 4:18 am

I don't think anybody's beating real gluten sensitivity around here, just the preponderance of self-diagnosed cases.

Jane Dunsworth

Friday, April 01, 2011 7:56 am

With my first pregnancy, before I decided that a little (and I do mean a little) caffeine wouldn't kill a baby I tried carob covered raisins instead of chocolate covered in an attempt to quell a chocolate craving.

I stuffed practically the whole bag down in one sitting before I realized I couldn't stop eating them simply because I kept unconsciously hoping the next one actually would taste like chocolate. As Douglas Adams might say, carob is almost, but not quite, entirely unlike chocolate.

And Peter Leithart, developing a theology of food, in the essay "Eat What Is Set Before You"

([http://www.credenda.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=162:eat-what-is-set-before-you&catid=111:food&Itemid=122](http://www.credenda.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=162:eat-what-is-set-before-you&catid=111:food&Itemid=122)):

Food is hugely important in the Bible. Adam's first sin was a violation of a food law, Israel worshiped at a table, the altar, we have a meal at the center of our worship and life, and we're looking ahead to the marriage supper of the lamb. What to eat or not eat was an important issue in the Old Testament. Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 describe and list animals, birds, and fish that could and could not be eaten. Food rules became especially important during and after the Maccabean Revolt, when some Jews were martyred for refusing to eat unclean food.

By the time of the first century A.D., many Jews were consumed (!) with the issue of food, so much so that Jacob Neusner has called Pharisaism primarily a table fellowship movement. Eating unclean foods defiled; eating with unwashed hands defiled; eating untithed food defiled; eating with Gentiles, and even eating with less-than-pure Jews defiled. Pharisees wanted to avoid defilement, and that meant paying a lot of attention to food.

It's not surprising that Jesus' meal habits and teaching on food, and especially the freedom of the apostles in eating with Gentiles, caused a ruckus in the first century. Jesus was not challenging some marginal issue when, as Mark says, he said that defilement comes from the heart not through the mouth, and when he declared all foods clean (Mark 7:1-23). Peter was acting like a typical Jew when he first objected to the Lord's command to "kill and eat" (Acts 10-11), and was, unfortunately, still acting as a Jew when he refused to sit down with Gentiles (Galatians 2).

Over against the Pharisaical obsession with purity of food and table fellowship, Paul insisted that foods do not commend us to God or distance us from Him (1 Corinthians 8:8), and in Christ believers are as free from rules of food and drink as they are from rules concerning new moons and Sabbaths (Colossians 2:16). The Old Covenant, Hebrews tells us, gave regulations concerning food and drink, regulations for the flesh until the time of reformation that Jesus brings (Hebrews 9:10).

This doesn't mean that food becomes less important in the New Covenant. We still are under "food laws," but the shape and *telos* of those food laws have been transformed. We are required to eat Christ's flesh and drink His blood if we want to have life (John 6). Our table companions still matter, and they matter a lot. But instead of Pharisaical exclusion, Jesus commands a generous expansion of hospitality. We are to invite the impure and outcasts to our tables, strangers (Matthew 25:38) and those who cannot pay us back with reciprocal hospitality (Luke 7:9-15).

Does it matter *what* we eat? Paul addresses that question too. In 1 Corinthians, he addresses the question of meat sacrificed to idols. Priests in ancient pagan temples, like the priests in the temple in Jerusalem, slaughtered animals and burned portions on altars in sacrifice. Some of the meat, however, was left over and offered for sale in the meat market. In a city like Corinth, in fact, most of the available meat had come from animals that had been offered to idols, and in the Corinthians church there were some former idolaters who were hesitant to eat this meat. Accustomed to

worshiping idols, they worried that eating meat from a sacrifice would defile them. And Paul agrees: If one eats thinking he will be defiled, his conscience actually *is* defiled (1 Corinthians 8:7).

Paul knows better, and so do many of the Corinthians. He knows that there is only one God, and one Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 8:5-6). He knows that idols are nothing (v. 4). Because of this knowledge, his conscience is strong. One commentator says that for Paul conscience is a kind of scanner that sets off a warning bell or blinking lights when a person comes close to doing something he considers immoral. Someone with a lot of knowledge has a “strong” conscience; he knows that there are no idols, and that all things come from God, and so his scope of action is quite wide. Few things set off the warning bell, because “all things are lawful” (1 Corinthians 10:23). Other Christians – who are fully brothers and children of God for whom Christ died (1 Corinthians 8:6, 11) – do not have this knowledge. They fear that idols might exist, and so their freedom to act is more limited. Bells and whistles go off every time they pass a shrine or a meat market.

Knowledge varies, but knowledge is not what matters here. Paul begins 1 Corinthians 8 by contrasting love and knowledge. He knows that the two are not absolutely opposed, but they are opposed when it comes to food. In this area, and in many others no doubt, Paul says that knowledge is radically subordinated to love. A person with much knowledge, and a strong conscience, ought not act on that knowledge. Rather, he should follow Paul’s apostolic example and act out of concern for his brother. If eating meat encourages a less knowledgeable brother to violate his conscience, then Paul will refuse to eat meat. He’d rather use his freedom in Christ to become a vegetarian than to harm a brother for whom Christ died, and so “sin against Christ” Himself (1 Corinthians 8:11-12).

A few chapters later, Paul returns to this question. While he exhorts the Corinthians not to participate in idolatrous worship, he says that eating meat from the meat market is lawful. “Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience’ sake” (10:25), he says, and adds that even when Christians eat at the home of an unbeliever they should “eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience’ sake” (10:27). Again, however, the rule of love molds the expression of this freedom. If eating sacrificial meat is offensive to a brother, Paul says, don’t eat, for the sake of *his* conscience (10:28-29). In short, “let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor” (10:24).

There are many other important questions concerning food, but the New Testament lays out a clear set of basics. We are to share our food with the hungry (Isaiah 58; Matthew 25). We are to manifest Christ’s own hospitality at our tables. What we eat does not make us either impure or holy (1 Corinthians 8:8). We are to eat what is set before us, giving thanks to God, the one who is the Lord of the earth and all it contains. Whatever else we think about and do with food, whatever other habits we cultivate and whatever decisions we make, all have to be consistent with and extensions of these apostolic directives.



Paul's answer to the question, "Can we eat meat offered to idols?" is complex and nuanced. Paul answers, "Yes and no...it depends." Could the Corinthian Christians eat meat sold in the marketplace? Yes. Could they eat meat in the home of an unbeliever? Yes....unless the pagan host made declared the meat to idol meat, in which case the Christian was to abstain, not for the sake of his own conscience, but so as not to muddy the conscience of his host. Could they eat idol feasts in the pagan temple services? No, because the context makes the meal communion with demons.