



[1 Corinthians 8:1-11 and 10:25-33](#)

Eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols

Name of the author: Paul the Apostle

Date: 50 CE to 60 CE

Place: Ephesus

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Literary genre: Letter

Title of work: The First Letter to the Corinthians

Reference:

8:1-11 and 10:25-33

Commentary:

Paul deals here with the issue of Christians eating meat that has previously been sacrificed to idols. However, similarly to his advice against Christians using civil courts (see [1 Corinthians 6:1-8](#)), where the Christian community's behaviour was at issue rather than the legitimacy of the courts themselves, in this case it is the attitude of believers and their treatment of others which seems to present the greatest problem, rather than the idol meat in and of itself. In the first passage, the problem that the Corinthian Christians have brought to Paul concerns whether or not they risk participating in idolatry if they eat the meat from an animal sacrificed to another god or goddess. Paul's response focuses on the relative importance of knowledge and love, with love and its edifying characteristics elevated above knowledge, which has the potential to "puff up" (?????? – "make one arrogant or proud") (verse 1). Paul explains that in relation to idol meat, 'stronger' Christians should have enough knowledge to understand that because their God is the one true deity, the numerous gods and "lords" (this was one of the epithets for Caesar, and therefore possibly a reference to the imperial cult; see William Orr and James Walther, *1 Corinthians*, p. 233) appealed to in the wider Greco-Roman world are false, and so while sacrifices are made to these false gods, it essentially means nothing because they do not exist (verses 4-6). The problem, however, are those gentile Christian believers who have either recently converted, and/or are "weak." Because these individuals had been accustomed for so long to worshipping idols it is more difficult for them to adapt to the idea that these gods are not real, and that sacrifices to them have in reality been made to nothing. Consequently, when they participate in eating idol meat their "conscience is defiled" because they are not really sure whether they are committing idolatry or not (verse 7). Paul advises that while the type of food and drink one consumes does not really have any bearing on how God will view them (here Paul is also likely understanding Christ as having made Jewish food laws insignificant for salvation) (verse 8), and so if they choose to eat idol meat it essentially makes no difference, his addressees should take care not to lead their weaker brethren astray (verse 9). If a 'weak' Christian sees a 'strong' Christian eat at an idol's temple, for instance, and chooses to do likewise, while the latter understands there to be no issue with such an action, the former will wrestle with their conscience and therefore suffer spiritually because of his or her lack of understanding (verse 10-11).

The second passage advises Christians on what to do if they are invited by non-Christian friends to dinner and suspect that idol meat is on the menu. Once again, Paul stresses the unimportance of this issue in the grand scheme of things, and tells his audience to eat anything that they are served without worrying about it (verse 27). Moreover, they themselves are free to shop at the meat market and purchase anything they like without enquiring as to where it has come from (verse 26). Verses 28-29, which deal with what to do if one's host specifically tells their Christian guest that they are eating idol meat, are less simple to understand on a first reading. What Paul says is that in this case the Christian should abstain from eating the meat because of their host's conscience; essentially, it seems that the issue here is avoiding making one's host feel guilty because their guest has eaten something that might not be in accordance with their beliefs. This, Paul states, is a burden that the Christian should not have to carry when they participate in a meal, so is best avoided (verse 30).

David Horrell argues that the issue of idol meat was probably largely rooted in the fact that differing social classes were present amongst the Christian community in Corinth. (*Social Ethos*, p. 105-109). For instance, as Gerd



Theissen suggests, those of lower social class would be very unlikely to eat meat regularly during their everyday lives, and so for them meat was probably something particularly associated with Greco-Roman religious festivals, and therefore all the more controversial (*Social Setting*, p. 128). Moreover, in relation to the second passage, it was really the wealthy who would be well-acquainted in broad social circles and likely to be invited to dine in a variety of social settings. To refuse such an invitation or make a fuss about what food was being served would risk one losing their position within their social group (see *Social Setting*, p. 130). Theissen understands the 'strong' (i.e. those who understand that idol meat means nothing) to be the more wealthy among the Christian congregation, and the 'weak' to be those of lower social class. It was because the wealthy ate meat relatively frequently at a variety of social gatherings that they became used to eating what had been consecrated, and so saw less of an issue with it. The poorer members of the community, however, were rarely provided with such an opportunity, and so for them it was much more of an issue when they were confronted with it. Contrary to Theissen, Justin Meggitt ("Meat Consumption," p. 138) has argued that archaeological evidence from Rome (which might be applicable elsewhere as well) suggests that the lower classes did in fact make regular use of dining spaces at temple sites and ate meat more frequently than Theissen allows for, and so a class conflict might not be at issue here. However, as David Horrell argues, Paul's advice about dinner invitations seems to suggest otherwise, as it is very unlikely that a slave, for instance, would have the means to invite someone to dine. For Horrell, therefore, the issue has arisen because the wealthier members of the congregation seek to maintain their privilege of enjoying a varied social life, and want to ensure that they can continue to do so without compromising their Christian principles (*Social Ethos*, p. 108-109). The controversy over idol meat discussed here provides a good example of how the growing Christian community sometimes struggled to deal with everyday life in the Roman empire, with certain issues becoming newly pertinent and presenting difficult situations both in terms of conscience, and social relations to non-Christian neighbours.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [conscience](#)
- [idol](#)
- [idol meat](#)



- [idolatry](#)
- [imperial cult](#)
- [knowledge](#)
- [meat-market](#)
- [sacrifice](#)
- [temple](#)

Bibliographical references: William F. Orr , James Arthur Walther, [*1 Corinthians: A New Translation with a Study of the Life of Paul. Notes, and Commentary*](#) (New York: Doubleday, 1976)

David Horrell, [*The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence*](#) (London: A&C Black, 1996)

Gerd Theissen, [*The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*](#) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982)

Justin Meggitt, "[Meat Consumption and Social Conflict in Corinth](#)", *Journal of Theological Studies* 45 (1994) : 137-141

Dale B. Martin, [*The Corinthian Body*](#) (London: Yale University Press, 1995)

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Christians taking each other to civil courts

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