

Was It Always Idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to Eat εἰδωλόθυστα in an Idol’s Temple? (1 Cor 8–10)¹

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Does Paul teach in 1 Cor 8–10 that it was always idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to eat εἰδωλόθυστα in an idol’s temple? Gordon Fee and other exegetes present three interrelated arguments that the answer is yes: (1) eating εἰδωλόθυστα in an idol’s temple was an inherently religious event; (2) εἰδωλόθυστος means meat sacrificed to idols that one eats in an idol’s temple; and (3) 1 Cor 8 parallels 10:14–22. But the more plausible answer is no: (1) eating εἰδωλόθυστα in an idol’s temple could be a non-idolatrous social event—like eating in a restaurant; (2) εἰδωλόθυστος means meat sacrificed to idols—whether one eats it in an idol’s temple or at home; and (3) 1 Cor 8 differs significantly from 10:14–22.

Key Words: 1 Corinthians 8–10, εἰδωλόθυστος, idolatry

In 1 Cor 8, Paul appears to have a category for a Corinthian Christian eating εἰδωλόθυστα (meat sacrificed to idols) in an idol’s temple without sinning. Verses 9–10 in particular seem to support that it was not always idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to eat εἰδωλόθυστα in an idol’s temple:

But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? (8:9–10)²

But that seems difficult to harmonize with 10:14–22 because there Paul appears to say that eating such food in the temple participates in worshiping demons. Verses 19–21 in particular seem to contradict 8:9–10:

What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. 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. (10:19–21)

Many exegetes have tried to harmonize 1 Cor 8 with 10:14–22 by arguing that the “food offered to idols” in chapter 8 parallels exclusively the meat sold in the marketplace in 10:23–11:1—meat that people ate in their homes. But that does not work because the “food offered to idols” in chapter 8 must at least include what 8:10 explicitly says: “eating in an idol’s temple” (ἐν εἰδωλείῳ κατακείμενον).

That sets up the question this article seeks to answer: *Does Paul teach in 1 Cor 8–10 that it was always idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to eat εἰδωλόθυστα (meat sacrificed to idols) in an idol’s temple?* Exegetes generally answer that question in one of two ways:

1. *Yes.* Starting with Gordon Fee’s articles in 1977 and 1980 and especially his 1987 commentary (which is now in its second edition), it has become increasingly common for exegetes to argue that the answer is yes.³

2. *No.* Some exegetes argue that it was not *always* idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to eat meat sacrificed to idols in an idol’s temple because it depends on the nature of the meal.⁴

Choosing between those two views is difficult,⁵ but I think the more

³ Gordon D. Fee, “2 Corinthians VI.14–VII.1 and Food Offered to Idols,” *NTS* 23 (1977): 140–61; idem, “Εἰδωλόθυστα Once Again: An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8–10,” *Biblica* 61 (1980): 172–97; idem, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 394–541. In the second edition of his commentary, Fee notes that after his two articles and the first edition of his commentary, the relatively novel view he argues for has “not only emerged as the ‘standard’ view (with much ‘tweaking,’ of course), but has done so with very little acknowledgement that another view ever existed” (396n10). The primary position Fee argues against is the traditional view that the “food offered to idols” in chapter 8 parallels the meat sold in the marketplace in 10:23–11:1. See also Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 186–230; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 350–51; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 347–504; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, 3rd ed., Historisch Theologische Auslegung (Wuppertal: Brunnen, 2014), 426–587.

⁴ E.g., see Bruce N. Fisk, “Eating Meat Offered to Idols: Corinthian Behavior and Pauline Response in 1 Corinthians 8–10 (A Response to Gordon Fee),” *TJ* 10 (1989): 49–70; David G. Horrell, “Theological Principle or Christological Praxis? Pauline Ethics in 1 Corinthians 8.1–11.1,” *JSNT* 67 (1997): 83–114; Seyoon Kim, “Imitatio Christi (1 Corinthians 11:1): How Paul Imitates Jesus Christ in Dealing with Idol Food (1 Corinthians 8–10),” *BBR* 13 (2003): 210–17.

⁵ That is why some exegetes avoid it—cf. Andreas Lindemann, *Der Erste*

¹ Thanks to friends who examined a draft of this essay and shared helpful feedback, especially Phil Brown, J. D. Crowley, Craig Keener, and Matt Klem.

² Scripture quotations are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

plausible answer is no. In this article, part 1 presents three interrelated arguments that it was always idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to eat meat sacrificed to idols in an idol's temple. Then, part 2 refutes those three arguments.⁶

1. Three Interrelated Arguments That It Was Always Idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to Eat Meat Sacrificed to Idols in an Idol's Temple

The three main arguments regard the historical-cultural context, a word study, and the literary context.

1.1. Argument from the Historical-Cultural Context: Eating εἰδωλόθυτα in an Idol's Temple Was an Inherently Religious Event

Fee argues that 1 Cor 8–10 speaks “to first-century issues that for the most part are without any twenty-first-century counterparts”—at least in Western cultures.⁷ “That going to the temples is the real issue” in 1 Cor 8–10, argues Fee, “is supported by the fact that the eating of cultic meals was a regular part of worship in antiquity.”⁸ Dennis Smith similarly argues

Korintherbrief, HNT 9/1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 196–97.

⁶ This article builds on two previous ones: Fisk, “Eating Meat Offered to Idols”; E. Coye Still III, “The Meaning and Uses of ΕΙΔΩΛΟΘΥΤΟΝ in First Century Non-Pauline Literature and 1 Cor 8:1–11:1: Toward Resolution of the Debate,” *TJ* 23 (2002): 225–34. Coming nearly thirty years after Fisk’s 1989 article and over fifteen years after Still’s 2002 article, my article does not radically break new ground but attempts to argue more clearly and comprehensively while interacting with recent literature on 1 Corinthians.

⁷ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 81.

⁸ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 397. For further support, Fee cites Wendell Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth: The Pauline Argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10*, SBLDS 68 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 8–64. Cf. Schnabel, *Erster Korintherbrief*, 464: “alle Mahlzeiten innerhalb eines Tempelareals kultischen Charakter hatten und generell „in den Opferrahmen eingebettet“ waren” (emphasis original; Schnabel quotes Hans-Josef Klauck). See also Peter D. Gooch, *Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8–10 in Its Context*, *Studies in Christianity and Judaism* 5 (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993), 31–38, 57–59, 79–87, 152–55; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 348–50. Cheung follows Gooch regarding the historical-cultural context, but he goes a step further than Fee et al., concluding that it was sinful to eat meat sacrificed to idols not only in an idol's temple but *anywhere* if you knew the meat's origin: “Paul regarded the eating of idol food, *with the awareness of their idolatrous*

that participating in a Greco-Roman sacrificial banquet typically blended the sacred and the secular, so “in most cases” eating in the temple had “a religious component.”⁹

Thus, the historical-cultural context, concludes Fee, supports what he contends about 1 Cor 8–10: the main problem Paul addresses is eating meat sacrificed to idols at the cultic meals in the pagan temples. And if eating meat sacrificed to idols in an idol's temple was always an inherently religious event, then for a Christian to participate in that event would be to participate in demonic activity and thus be guilty of idolatry (10:14–22).

1.2. Argument from a Word Study: εἰδωλόθυτος Means Meat Sacrificed to Idols That One Eats in an Idol's Temple

Paul signals a new section in his letter with the words Περὶ δὲ τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων (1 Cor 8:1a), which the ESV translates, “Now concerning food offered to idols.” The NIV translates, “Now about food sacrificed to idols.” The CEB translates, “Now concerning meat that has been sacrificed to a false god.” Every major modern English translation says something similar.

The topic of “idol food,” argues Fee, “is probably related to the earlier warning (5:10–11) against associating with ‘idolaters.’ If so, then eating ‘food sacrificed to idols’ refers to a specific form of idolatry against which Paul apparently had already spoken in his previous letter.”¹⁰ That “specific form of idolatry,” argues Fee, is eating meat sacrificed to idols *in an idol's temple*: “*eidolothytia* does not refer primarily to marketplace food, but to their (some of them at least) participating in the cultic meals in the precincts of the pagan temples, and thereby eating food that had been sacrificed to

origins, as a sinful act rather than a matter indifferent” (Alex T. Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth: Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy*, JSNTSup 176 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999], 7 [emphasis original]). Cheung argues, “There is no evidence, and no reason to believe, that Paul himself perceived the eating of meals in idol temples as anything but idolatry” (95). Cf. William Mitchell Ramsay, *Historical Commentary on the Epistles to the Corinthians* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1901), 431: “The feast must necessarily have had the form of a ceremony connected with the worship of the deity to whom the locality was consecrated. On this there can be no question. A feast in such a locality could not be a purely secular and non-religious function.”

⁹ Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 74.

¹⁰ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 394.

idols.”¹¹ What decisively proves that, for Fee, is that Paul uses the word εἰδωλόθυτον in 1 Cor 10:19: “The tie in this verse between ‘idol food’ and ‘idol’ at the meal in the pagan temples, which at the same time returns to the argument of 8:4, is sure evidence that εἰδωλόθυτα throughout chap. 8 refers to the temple meals, not to marketplace food.”¹²

Witherington likewise concludes that εἰδωλόθυτος “meant meat sacrificed to and eaten in the presence of an idol, or in the temple precincts.”¹³ In other words, the issue is not only *what* you eat but *where* you eat it.¹⁴

1.3. Argument from the Literary Context: 1 Cor 8 Parallels 10:14–22

Fee is convinced that 1 Cor 8 and 10:14–22 address the same basic issue:

Some have asserted that if there were no “weak” brother or sister to see the action of those “with knowledge,” then the latter might participate in the cultic meals as they wished. But Paul’s ensuing argument (10:1–22) quite disallows such an interpretation. Thus the two sections (8:7–13; 10:1–22) indicate that going to the temples is wrong in two ways: it is not acting in love (8:7–13), and it involves fellowship with demons (10:19–22).¹⁵

That view raises at least two questions:

¹¹ Ibid., 396. See also Fee, “Εἰδωλόθυτα Once Again,” 181–87; Derek Newton, *Deity and Diet: The Dilemma of Sacrificial Food at Corinth*, JSNTSup 169 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 267.

¹² Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 520n585.

¹³ Ben Witherington III, “Not So Idle Thoughts about *Eidolothuton*,” *TynBul* 44 (1993): 237–54. Cf. Panayotis Coutsoumpos, “Paul’s Teaching of the Lord’s Supper: A Socio-Historical Study of the Pauline Account of the Last Supper and Its Graeco-Roman Background” (Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, 1996), 161–62; Randy Leedy, “To Eat or Not to Eat: The Issue Concluded (1 Corinthians 10),” *Biblical Viewpoint* 32.1 (1998): 38–40.

¹⁴ Ben Witherington III, “Why Not Idol Meat? Is It What You Eat or Where You Eat It?,” *BRev* 10.3 (1994): 38–43, 54–55.

¹⁵ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 417–18. See also Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 81. Cf. Richard Liong-Seng Phua, *Idolatry and Authority: A Study of 1 Corinthians 8.1–11.1 in the Light of the Jewish Diaspora*, LNTS 299 (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 127; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 388; Rohinton Keki Mody, *Empty and Evil: The Worship of Other Faiths in 1 Corinthians 8–10 and Today*, Latimer Studies 71 (London: Latimer Trust, 2010), 55; Michael Li-Tak Shen, *Canaan to Corinth: Paul’s Doctrine of God and the Issue of Food Offered to Idols in 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1*, StBibLit 83 (New York: Lang, 2010), 146–47, 160–62; Andrew Wilson, *The Warning-Assurance Relationship in 1 Corinthians*, WUNT 2/452 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 76–82.

1. What about what Paul says in 8:9–10? “But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?” It seems like what Paul writes here is *not* parallel to 10:14–22. Fee acknowledges,

The chief objection to this reconstruction lies in the tension some see between this passage [8:1–13], where Paul appeals to love, and 10:14–22, where he forbids such behavior outright. How can he begin in this way if in fact he intends finally to forbid it altogether? It should be noted, however, that because of 8:10 this is a problem for all interpreters. The answer lies with Paul’s understanding of the relationship between the indicative and the imperative (see on 5:6–8). Paul seldom begins with an imperative. As in 6:12–20, 1:10–4:21; 12:1–14:40, he begins by correcting serious theological misunderstandings and then gives the imperative.¹⁶

Fee thinks “this right” of eating in an idol’s temple refers to a *so-called* right based on faulty “knowledge.”¹⁷ By writing ἡ ἐξουσία ὑμῶν αὐτή (“this right of yours,” emphasis added), Paul is “strongly suggesting that ἐξουσία was another Corinthian catchword.”¹⁸ The “right” is parallel to Corinthians arguing in 6:12–20 that they had the “right” to commit *πορνεία*.¹⁹ In 8:10, Paul argues “from the perspective of the weak, who were being abused by this falsely ‘constructive’ action.”²⁰ Before prohibiting eating in an idol’s temple in chapter 10, in chapter 8 Paul first addresses the Corinthian Christians’ hearts:

¹⁶ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 399n24.

¹⁷ Ibid., 425–27. Cf. John Fotopoulos, *Food Offered to Idols in Roman Corinth: A Social-Rhetorical Reconsideration of 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1*, WUNT 2/151 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 218: “Paul employs the word ἐξουσία ironically in order to show the negative consequences of its use by the Strong.” See also Paul Douglas Gardner, *The Gifts of God and the Authentication of a Christian: An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 8–11:1* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 55–56; Joop F. M. Smit, “The Rhetorical Disposition of First Corinthians 8:7–9:27,” *CBQ* 59 (1997): 482–83; Schnabel, *Erster Korintherbrief*, 464–65.

¹⁸ Timothy A. Brookins and Bruce W. Longenecker, *1 Corinthians 1–9: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 200.

¹⁹ Fee, “Εἰδωλόθυτα Once Again,” 186–87.

²⁰ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 486. Cf. Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Carter, 1860), 148.

Although Paul will eventually, and in very strong terms, forbid the Corinthian believers' going to the temples, his first concern is with the thoroughly misguided ethical basis of their argument. The problem is primarily attitudinal. They think Christian conduct is predicated on *gnōsis* ("knowledge") and that knowledge gives them *exousia* ("rights/freedom") to act as they wish in this matter.²¹

Paul waits to explicitly prohibit eating in an idol's temple until chapter 10, argues Fee, because he is responding to a letter the Corinthians wrote him, and "he works his way through their argument point by point."²²

2. How does chapter 9 fit into what Paul argues? The traditional view is that Paul explains how he exercises his rights to illustrate what it looks like to give up one's genuine rights (not one's so-called rights) for the sake of the gospel. Fee rejects that view and argues that in chapter 9 Paul is responding to a Corinthian letter that questioned whether he had the authority as an apostle to forbid them from eating in an idol's temple.²³

2. Three Interrelated Arguments That It Was Not Always Idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to Eat Meat Sacrificed to Idols in an Idol's Temple

This section responds to and refutes the three main arguments in part 1.

²¹ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 401.

²² *Ibid.*, 431; cf. 511. Newton similarly argues that Paul does not explicitly forbid eating in the temple in 1 Cor 8 because Paul begins by subtly building an argument and does not strike hard until 10:14–22 (Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 24). Cf. Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament Handbook to the Epistles to the Corinthians*, ed. William P. Dickson, trans. D. Douglas Bannerman, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1879), 1:246; Archibald T. Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 2nd ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1914), 171; Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles*, CRINT 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 196; Gregory W. Dawes, "The Danger of Idolatry: First Corinthians 8:7–13," *CBQ* 58 (1996): 91–98; Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 154–57; Randy Leedy, *Love Not the World: Winning the War against Worldliness*, Biblical Discernment for Difficult Issues (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 2012), 97.

²³ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 434–35.

2.1. Argument from the Historical-Cultural Context: Eating εἰδωλόθυτα in an Idol's Temple Could Be a Non-Idolatrous Social Event—Like Eating in a Restaurant

People today who are most culturally familiar with Western cities like New York or Los Angeles or Toronto might have a hard time imagining how different the Corinth of Paul's day was. Religion and politics were virtually inseparable in Greco-Roman cities in the first century, and the hub of religious rituals was the temple. "Visitors to Corinth's central market area in Paul's day would find themselves surrounded by temples: to Hermes, Poseidon, Heracles, Apollo, the Pantheon, Tyche, the imperial cult, and others."²⁴ People did not gather regularly at temples for worship services like many Christians today regularly gather at church buildings. The temple itself housed the image of its god, and when people sacrificed animals, they typically did it outside in front of the temple.²⁵

After sacrificing animals to their idols, pagans would save some of the meat either (1) to eat on the temple grounds or (2) to sell to vendors who would then sell it in the meat market. The issue we are most concerned with in this article is the nature of the meals when people would eat the sacrificial meat *in the temple*.

2.1.1. Eating in Greco-Roman Temples

People in the ancient Greco-Roman world ate in an idol's temple for a variety of reasons.²⁶ On one end of the spectrum was participating in explicitly religious pagan ceremonies that Paul calls demonic (1 Cor 10:14–22). But on the other end of the spectrum was simply eating meat like one might eat in a restaurant today (8:10). Meat was a treat that was not a staple part of most people's diets,²⁷ and people often ate meat in the temple for nonreligious business meetings or on special occasions for

²⁴ Moyer V. Hubbard, "Greek Religion," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 111.

²⁵ Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, trans. Brian McNeil (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 23–24; Hubbard, "Greek Religion," 111.

²⁶ Fisk, "Eating Meat Offered to Idols," 62–63. Cf. Joel R. White, "Meals in Pagan Temples and Apostolic Finances: How Effective Is Paul's Argument in 1 Corinthians 9:1–23 in the Context of 1 Corinthians 8–10?" *BBR* 23 (2013): 538–39; Dieter Zeller, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, KEK 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 282.

²⁷ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 189–90.

nonreligious social gatherings such as celebrating a person's birthday:

How meals at temples were understood by the ancients is especially indicated by references found in the collection of invitations to the *kliné* of Sarapis. These invitations are part of a larger corpus of papyrus fragments from Egypt, all of which date from the first to the fourth centuries C.E.

Some of the meals indicated in these invitations are secular in nature yet take place in a sanctuary. For example, a marriage feast takes place “in the temple of Sabazios” and a birthday feast takes place “in the Sarapeion [sanctuary of Sarapis].” . . .

[T]he religious nature of the meal is not defined by its location, for a sacrificial meal can take place in either a temple or a private home, and a secular celebration can take place in a temple.²⁸

“In the ancient world,” explains N. T. Wright, “the temples normally *were* the restaurants.”²⁹ Archeologists have discovered that attached to some Corinthian temples were rooms for dining, which private dinner parties could use for banquets.³⁰ Wendell Willis presents three views on what meals in the temple generally signified: (1) *Sacramental view*: “The worshippers consumed their deity who was contained (really or symbolically) in the sacrificial meat.” (2) *Communal view*: Those eating a meal consciously worshipped the deity by sharing the meal with that deity. (3) *Social view*: Those eating a meal ate “before the deity,” but the focus was not on worshipping the deity but instead “on the social relationship among the worshippers.”³¹ Willis concludes that the social view is correct:

There is a good deal of evidence from the late Hellenistic and Imperial periods for the social interpretation of cult meals in the Greco-Roman world. This evidence indicates that the general importance of table fellowship in civic, fraternal, occupational and religious associations was *the social conviviality and good cheer*. . . . Sacrifices and common meals were normative features of Hellenistic

²⁸ Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 76–77 (emphasis added).

²⁹ N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2004), 98 (emphasis original). Cf. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 126n14.

³⁰ Wendell Willis, “1 Corinthians 8–10: A Retrospective after Twenty-Five Years,” *ResQ* 49 (2007): 107: “Corinth is one of the best excavated cities in Greece,” and archeologists have excavated “a number of dining rooms adjacent or attached to temples.” According to Willis in 2007 (107n26), the source “with the most extensive recent archaeological survey” is Fotopoulos, *Food Offered to Idols*.

³¹ Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth*, 18–20 (emphasis added).

cults and associations. Since these meals were characteristic expressions of Greek public life, it is altogether understandable that the Corinthian Christians would desire to be involved in them, at least to the degree they considered permissible. [Note 234: Ex-pagan Christians in Corinth would have had many social obligations from family or business (marriages, funerals, puberty rites) which would have involved sacrificial meals, normally in or near the temple grounds. Participation would be an expected part of family and social duty.] Since *they probably did not see such meals as religiously significant*, their enlightened Christian monotheism would have been sufficient to overcome any qualms about eating—except among some members “weak in conscience.” The social character of cult meals would also have emboldened the Corinthians to ask defensively of their founder-apostle reasons why they must abstain from such normal functions of life.³²

Willis later qualified that these social meals generally had a “religious” component, but that “religious” component was not explicit idol-worship but “social enjoyment.”³³ Such meals did not necessarily always begin with

³² *Ibid.*, 47, 63. Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 32 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 332, 346–47; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 118–19. Newton, whose conclusions generally line up with Fee, concedes, “The association of the ‘god’s portion’ with the priest or other sacrificial officials certainly opens up the very real possibility that the majority of the food—that eaten by the worshippers/others present—may not have been considered sacrificial in nature. This would support the hypothesis that 1 Corinthians 8 dealt with the issue of temple *eating*, whereas 1 Cor. 10.1–22 tackled the problem of actual sacrificial acts accompanied by eating. . . . Those who reclined in *eidoleia* thus represented a very wide spectrum, both in their reasons for being there and in their conception of the significance of their eating. . . . Meals were multi-functional and as such, each person could major on a specific ingredient, justifying their participation on that basis. The nature of the sacrifice will be considered particularly in the context of 1 Cor. 10.14–22, but ambiguity clearly was likely regarding whether, or to what extent, the consumed food actually was sacrificial in nature. Add to that the ambiguity regarding the nature of the recipient of the offering (human or divine?) and the consequent activity of participants (worship or merely honouring?), and we will see once again, that the nature and significance of the act of ‘reclining at table’ in 8.10 was by no means a clear-cut issue; its significance very much lay in the eye of each beholder and participant of the meal” (Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 198–99, 299, 304 [emphasis original]).

³³ In a 2007 essay that Willis wrote twenty-five years after he finished his

a formal demonic ceremony of sacrifice and prayer. (The actual animal sacrifice took place outside at the altar in front of the temple.) Meals in the temple could be merely social. Thus, Conzelmann says that Paul “does not forbid the visiting of temple restaurants, which could be visits of a purely social kind.”³⁴ One could eat εἰδωλόθυτα in an idolatrous way in the temple or in a person’s home, and one could eat εἰδωλόθυτα in a non-idolatrous way in the temple or in a person’s home. Eating εἰδωλόθυτα in an idol’s temple for a social meal was not always idolatrous. It is kind of like how American currency says, “IN GOD WE TRUST,” yet using such currency is not always an inherently religious event but usually a secular one. Another example is getting married in a church’s building—though many do that for religious reasons, others it for merely traditional or aesthetic reasons and not for religious ones.

Both Fee and Witherington concede that eating in a temple could be like eating in a restaurant:

The meals [in pagan temples] were also *intensely social occasions* for the participants. For the most part, the Gentiles who had become believers in Corinth had probably attended such meals all their lives; indeed *such meals served as the basic “restaurants” in antiquity, and every kind of occasion was celebrated in this fashion.*³⁵

Ph.D. dissertation on 1 Cor 8–10, he reflects on how scholars have interpreted 1 Cor 8–10 in the last quarter-century, and he defends and qualifies himself on this point because, he explains, “The place where my work has been most often, and most loudly, criticized is in regard to my interpretation of the meaning of sacrificial meals in pagan religions. It is obvious that I did not express myself carefully. Using a heuristic approach, I presented schematically three understandings of pagan religious meals: sacramental, fellowship, and social. I criticized the first two strongly and opted for the last one. In doing so, I seem to have left the impression that I did not think these meals were ‘religious’ but ‘merely’ social. I could not at all support such a view; clearly the meals were ‘religious.’ There is strong evidence that these cults (and their worshippers) would not have accepted—even understood—a contrast between ‘religious’ and ‘social.’ *But the question really should be, what does ‘religious’ mean in the first-century pagan world?* Their gods gave, as one of their great gifts, *occasions for conviviality and enjoyment* as an essential aspect of sacrifice. *This social enjoyment was a positive part of religious sacrifice*” (Willis, “1 Corinthians 8–10,” 108–9 [emphasis added]). Willis kindly read a draft of this article and confirmed that I am not misrepresenting him.

³⁴ Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. George W. MacRae, trans. James W. Leitch, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 148.

³⁵ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 397 (emphasis added). Fee thinks Willis’s *Idol Meat in Corinth* “has probably pushed the evidence too far in one direction,

Several temples in Corinth had dining rooms where feasts were held on many occasions, including birthdays. *Temples were the restaurants of antiquity.* There is archaeological evidence at the Askleion in Corinth of a dining room with couches along the four walls and a table and brazier in the center.³⁶

Fotopoulos, who suggests that the Temple of Asklepios may be what Paul has in mind in 1 Cor 8:1–11:1,³⁷ explains, “It may have been possible to rent such temple dining rooms for private use *not directly related to the cult.* The beautiful accommodations of the temple and its lavish dining facilities, its location at the outskirts of the city, and abundant greenery would have made it an attractive place to dine.”³⁸ Murphy-O’Connor explains,

It is entirely probable that the wealthier members of Paul’s flock had been wont to repair to the Asclepion *for recreation. It was probably the closest the city had to a country club with facilities for dining and swimming.* It would have been natural to continue going there after conversion, because even though the converts no longer believed in the healing god, they still would have seen the value of the site.³⁹

Corinthian Christians were young in the Christian faith and were largely Gentile converts with pagan backgrounds. “Could they meet over lunch with business associates or fellow members of their trade guild, or

nullifying the religious aspect altogether” (397n19).

³⁶ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 188 (emphasis added).

³⁷ As does Schnabel, *Erster Korintherbrief*, 463.

³⁸ Fotopoulos, *Food Offered to Idols*, 176 (emphasis added). See also Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 4 vols., EKKNT 7 (Zürich: Benziger, 1991–2001), 2:263n300.

³⁹ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, 3rd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 190 (emphasis added). Cf. Robert L. Plummer, “Eating Idol Meat in Corinth: Enduring Principles from Paul’s Instructions,” *SBJT* 6.3 (2002): 58–59: “The temple complexes were roughly analogous (in their dual functionality) to a modern Masonic Lodge—i.e., as a building that serves as a meeting place for its owners or adherents, but is often used by the broader community for social activities as well. Social gatherings that met in ancient temple complexes were likely to partake of meat consecrated to a pagan deity, but the gatherings themselves would not usually have been construed as actual religious services.” Plummer, however, goes on to argue that in 1 Cor 10 Paul circles back to the issue of eating in an idol’s temple in 8:10; thus, “Not only for the sake of the non-believer, but also because it is flirting with demonic idolatry, Christians should stay out of the temple precincts—even for non-religious functions” (63).

attend a reception in a temple for a relative's wedding?"⁴⁰ Could they eat in a temple on special civic occasions?⁴¹

It seems that it was possible for Corinthian Christians to eat meat sacrificed to idols in an idol's temple without participating in a demonic religious ceremony because some meals in the temple did not include a demonic religious ceremony. "Paul's intent was not to declare all temple meal attendance off limits; the *nature* of the meal, not its *location*, was the issue."⁴²

That does not mean, however, that Corinthian Christians should regularly eat εἰδωλόθυτα in an idol's temple (8:10). Paul argues in chapter 8 that they should be willing to give up that right for the sake of fellow Christians (see §2.3).

2.1.2. Four Analogies

It seems impossible to find exact parallels between the situation in 1 Cor 8–10 and my own context in America, but I can think of at least four analogies that illustrate the main idea (though, of course, the analogies break down). The key in each analogy is that the activity is not always idolatrous.

1. *Eating in an Asian restaurant that sets food before idols.* Asian restaurants

⁴⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 476.

⁴¹ In Corinth an annual festival occurred in the forecourt of the imperial cult temple. See Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 269–86. Winter argues that this annual festival that celebrated the Isthmian Games began *after* Paul left Corinth. It was the most prestigious event of the year, and the social elite were expected to attend. Winter postulates, "The dining rights to which Paul refers were connected with entertainment at the Isthmian Games" (281). In an earlier book, Winter similarly argues that the "right" in 1 Cor 8:9 "was a civic privilege which entitled Corinthian citizens to dine on 'civic' occasions in a temple." Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens*, First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 166. See also Bruce W. Winter, "The Enigma of Imperial Cultic Activities and Paul in Corinth," in *Graeco-Roman Culture and the New Testament: Studies Commemorating the Centennial of the Pontifical Biblical Institute*, ed. David E. Aune and Frederick E. Brenk, NovTSup 143 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 71.

⁴² Fisk, "Eating Meat Offered to Idols," 69. Cf. Bruce N. Fisk, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation Bible Studies (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 50; Richard E. Oster Jr., "Use, Misuse and Neglect of Archaeological Evidence in Some Modern Works on 1 Corinthians (1Cor 7,1–5; 8,10; 11,2–16; 12,14–26)," *ZNW* 83 (1992): 65–67.

all over the world commonly set a plate of food before an idol (like a Buddha statue) that those eating in the restaurant can see. Many restaurant workers do that as a matter of a superstitious tradition, hoping that it will help prosper their business. Does that mean it is always idolatrous for a Christian to eat in such a restaurant? No. It may be unwise, and a Christian should not do it if it would harm a fellow Christian. (By harm a fellow Christian, I mean cause them to sin against their conscience and possibly apostatize.)⁴³ But there is a way to eat in such a restaurant without participating in idolatry.

2. *Shopping at a store that displays an idol.* In shops all over the world, shop workers display idols for the same reason that restaurant workers set food before an idol (see the previous analogy). Does that mean it is always idolatrous for a Christian to shop in such a store? No. It may be unwise, and a Christian should not do it if it would harm a fellow Christian. But there is a way to shop at such a store without participating in idolatry.

3. *Eating in a casino's restaurant.* If gambling in a casino is a sinful activity Christians should not participate in,⁴⁴ then is it always inherently sinful for a Christian to eat in a casino's restaurant? No. There is a significant difference between those two activities. Eating food in a casino's restaurant could be merely a social activity that Christians can enjoy (e.g., if it involves delicious food that is unusually affordable). It may be unwise to eat in a casino's restaurant, and a Christian should not eat in a casino's restaurant if it would harm a fellow Christian. But eating in a casino's restaurant is not always inherently sinful.

4. *Watching an appropriate movie in a movie theater that also shows movies that feature pornography or the occult.* Some people go to movie theaters explicitly to indulge in pornography or dabble in the occult. Is it always inherently sinful for a Christian to go to those same theaters to watch a relatively

⁴³ Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 109: "The concern here [in Rom 14:13–15] is not merely that your freedom may irritate, annoy, or offend your weaker brother or sister. If a brother or sister simply doesn't like your freedoms, that is their problem. But if your practice of freedom leads your brother or sister to sin against their conscience, then it becomes your problem. Christ gave up his life for that brother or sister; are you unwilling to give up your freedom if that would help your fellow believer avoid sinning against conscience? That's what this passage is talking about when it refers to putting 'a stumbling block or hindrance' (Rom. 14:13) in another's way. We shouldn't bring spiritual harm to others (see also vv. 20–21)."

⁴⁴ Cf. Vern S. Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 263–81.

innocent film like *Bambi*? No. It may be unwise, and a Christian should not do it if it would harm a fellow Christian. But there is a significant difference between watching a movie that features pornography and watching *Bambi*.

Again, those four analogies are not perfect. But they parallel to some degree that it was not always idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to eat εἰδωλόθυτα in an idol's temple.⁴⁵

2.2. Argument from a Word Study: εἰδωλόθυτος Means Meat Sacrificed to Idols—Whether One Eats It in an Idol's Temple or at Home

After examining the 357 occurrences of εἰδωλόθυτος in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*,⁴⁶ I agree with how Fisk and Still critique Fee for arguing

⁴⁵ Another possible analogy is listening to rock music, which Randy Leedy argues is inherently idolatrous. Cf. Leedy, "To Eat or Not to Eat," 48: "Behind rock music, for example, as well as behind sensual or violent movies and videos, lies a demonic power that is clearly manifest both in these things themselves and in the fruit of these things in people's lives. The passage before us [i.e., 1 Cor 8–10] cannot be used to justify such music and entertainment under the claim of Christian liberty; on the contrary, the passage clearly prohibits Christian participation in demonic activities, and it does so in the strongest possible terms. The force of Witherington's word study, and the exegesis proceeding from it comes home here with great force. The passage from 8:1 to 10:22 does not call for tolerance with respect to meats offered to idols; it calls for absolute abstinence from participation in demonic worship. And if Paul was so forceful in prohibiting participation in demonic activities outside the church (i.e., at the temples), there is no doubt about what he would say regarding such influence being brought into the church, as is being done so prominently today in the form of Contemporary Christian Music." See also Leedy, *Love Not the World*, 122–24. Leedy's argument is a syllogism: (a) *Major premise*: Christians should not be part of demonic activities. (b) *Minor premise*: Rock music is connected with demonic activity. (c) *Conclusion*: Christians should not listen to rock music. That conclusion is valid only if the minor premise is true. But is rock music *always* connected with demonic activity? I think rock music does not inherently communicate sinful sensuality and rebellion in all times and all cultures. (See Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*, 75–76. Cf. Plummer, "Eating Idol Meat," 64–66.) It may be unwise in some contexts to listen to rock music, and a Christian should not do it if it would harm a fellow Christian. But it is not always inherently sinful for a Christian to listen to rock music.

⁴⁶ TLG is a massive digital library of Greek literature (see <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/>). I searched it for all references to εἰδωλόθυτος in September 2016. The word first appears in the first century AD with nine occurrences in the NT and two outside it: Sib. Or. 2:96 and 4 Macc. 5:2.

that εἰδωλόθυτος means meat sacrificed to idols that one eats in an idol's temple:⁴⁷

1. The lexical data both in the NT (9 times—Acts 15:29; 21:25; 1 Cor 8:1, 4, 7, 10; 10:19; Rev 2:14, 20) and outside the NT confirm that BDAG correctly defines εἰδωλόθυτος as "someth. offered to a cultic image/idol. . . . It refers to sacrificial meat, part of which was burned on the altar as the deities' portion . . . , part was eaten at a solemn meal in the temple, and part was sold in the market . . . for home use."⁴⁸ The word εἰδωλόθυτος does not mean meat sacrificed to idols that one eats in an idol's temple. It simply means meat sacrificed to idols—whether one eats it in an idol's temple or at home. *Where* you eat it is not essential for defining the word.⁴⁹ That is why Thiselton translates εἰδωλόθυτος as "meat associated with offerings to pagan deities."⁵⁰

2. Fee commits an exegetical fallacy by conflating what the word *refers to* in a particular context (i.e., in 1 Cor 10:19) with what the word *means* in other contexts (i.e., in 1 Cor 8:1, 4, 7, 10).

3. In 1 Cor 8–10, "Paul condemns not idol meat but idolatry."⁵¹ In chapter 8, eating εἰδωλόθυτος is morally neutral, but in 10:19 it is idolatrous *because eating it in that context is participating in idolatry*. Two words in chapter 10 explicitly refer to idolatry: εἰδωλολάτρης in 10:7 ("image-worshiper/idolater") and εἰδωλολατρία in 10:14 ("image-worship, idolatry").⁵²

Consequently, I agree with Still and Fisk:

Paul's use of the term ἐξουσία (1 Cor 8:9) appears to be an affirmation of an authentic right possessed by the knowers. If this is so, then whatever is happening in the temple in 1 Cor 8:10 is not inherently sinful (as is the cult meal participation of 1 Cor 10:14—

⁴⁷ Fisk, "Eating Meat Offered to Idols," 55–59, 63–64; Still, "The Meaning and Uses of ΕΙΔΩΛΟΘΥΤΟΝ," 225–34.

⁴⁸ BDAG 280.

⁴⁹ On Acts 15:29; 21:25; Rev 2:14, 20, see Fisk, "Eating Meat Offered to Idols," 56–57; Still, "The Meaning and Uses of ΕΙΔΩΛΟΘΥΤΟΝ," 227–31. The letter in Acts 15 and 21 sets forth guidelines that allow both Jewish and Gentile Christians to fellowship together when they eat, and Rev 2 condemns participating in idolatry.

⁵⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 617–20. Cf. Murphy-O'Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians*, 115–16; Shen, *Canaan to Corinth*, 110–11.

⁵¹ Fisk, "Eating Meat Offered to Idols," 63. Cf. Horrell, "Theological Principle," 100–101.

⁵² BDAG 280.

22), but becomes sinful when it results in the destruction of a brother. Hence, Paul's argument assumes two tiers of temple meals: 1) those not inherently idolatrous and objectively defiling (1 Cor 8:10); and, 2) those inherently idolatrous and objectively defiling (1 Cor 10:20–21).⁵³

Many temple activities were indeed theologically and morally “neutral,” but others were blatantly idolatrous. Apparently, some in the Corinthian church were inclined to go, or had already gone, beyond attendance at harmless social events to share in temple meals which included actual worship of pagan deities. . . . Paul's urgent warning is that, by participating in a meal alongside pagans who are engaged in idol worship, Christians become guilty of idolatry by association; in fact, they become sharers in demon worship (10:20).⁵⁴

2.3. Argument from the Literary Context: 1 Cor 8 Differs Significantly from 10:14–22⁵⁵

Fee's view does not work if 1 Cor 8 differs significantly from 10:14–22. There are at least four issues to address here:

1. Fee argues that 1 Cor 8 and 10:14–22 are parallel. He thinks Paul waits to forbid the Corinthians from eating in an idol's temple until chapter 10 because he is responding point by point to their letter and because he typically addresses the indicative before the imperative. But, Fisk asks, “Was Paul really more concerned with the selfishness of chap. 8 than with the idolatry of chap. 10? The problem will not go away.”⁵⁶ Fee acknowledges that problem as “the chief objection” to his view.⁵⁷

2. Fee claims that the “right” in 8:9 is a *so-called* right—that is, some Corinthians *claimed* they had that right but in 10:14–22 Paul explains why

⁵³ Still, “The Meaning and Uses of ΕΙΔΩΛΟΘΥΤΟΝ,” 233.

⁵⁴ Fisk, “Eating Meat Offered to Idols,” 63–64.

⁵⁵ To survey how eleven NT scholars propose we should read 1 Cor 8:1–11:1, see E. Coye Still III, “The Rationale behind the Pauline Instructions on Food Offered to Idols: A Study of the Relationship between 1 Corinthians 4:6–21 and 8:1–11:1” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000), 55–94. What Still himself proposes is similar to Fisk's view and against Fee's view, but he argues that Paul attempts to persuade the Corinthians to completely give up ever exercising their genuine right to eat meat sacrificed to idols in an idol's temple (94–126; also E. Coye Still III, “Paul's Aim regarding ΕΙΔΩΛΟΘΥΤΑ: A New Proposal for Interpreting 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1,” *NovT* 44 [2002]: 333–43).

⁵⁶ Fisk, “Eating Meat Offered to Idols,” 54.

⁵⁷ Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 399n24.

they do not actually have that right. But Paul could have written “so-called right”—just as he says “so-called gods” (λεγόμενοι θεοί) in 8:5. And all six times that Paul uses ἐξουσία in what immediately follows it refers to a genuine right—not a so-called right (9:4, 5, 6, 12 [2x], 18).

Further, some exegetes argue that ἡ ἐξουσία ὑμῶν αὐτῆ (“this right of yours,” [emphasis added]) in 8:9 means that it was a *so-called* right—not a right Paul acknowledged as genuine. But that reads too much into the grammar. Paul parallels that construction (minus the demonstrative pronoun) in 9:18, and there no one questions that Paul thinks it is a genuine right: εἰς τὸ μὴ καταχρησασθαι τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ μου ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ (“so as not to make full use of *my right* in the gospel,” [emphasis added]).

3. Fee claims that the “right” in 8:9 is parallel to the Corinthians arguing in 6:12–20 that they had the “right” to commit πορνεία. But in that passage Paul does not say they have the ἐξουσία to commit πορνεία. Instead he immediately and directly refutes them.⁵⁸

4. In chapter 8 the issue is not idolatry (as it is in 10:14–22) because eating idol meat in chapter 8 is objectively neutral:

In stark contrast to the warnings in 10:1–22 about lapsing into idolatry (10:7, 14, 20–22), chap. 8 implies that some Christians can eat idol meat with no transgression. . . . Paul does not deny outright that they possess a degree of freedom. Would Paul employ the term ἐξουσία without qualification in the context of blatant idolatry? . . . We have here [in 8:10] a practice that is familiar enough to Paul and his audience that he can refer to it in passing, without explanatory comment. . . . To see objective idolatry in chap. 8 is to miss Paul's point. In fact, it is precisely because eating εἰδωλόθυτος is morally neutral that many enlightened Corinthian Christians will eat without fear of sinning. Paul's concern is that when they eat in the presence of the weak, harmless actions readily *become* harmful.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ See Andrew David Naselli, “Is Every Sin outside the Body except Immoral Sex? Weighing Whether 1 Cor 6:18b Is Paul's Statement or a Corinthian Slogan,” *JBL* 136.4 (2017): 969–87.

⁵⁹ Fisk, “Eating Meat Offered to Idols,” 59–61. D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God's Word*, vol. 1, 4 vols. (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), entry for September 3: “The issue [in 1 Cor 8] concerns something that is not *intrinsically* wrong. One could not imagine the apostle suggesting that some Christians think adultery is all right, while others have qualms about it, and the former should perhaps forgo their freedom so as not to offend the latter. In such a case, there is *never* any excuse for the action; the action is prohibited. So Paul's principles here apply only to actions that are *in themselves*

If chapter 8 is about idolatry, then it is about *subjective* idolatry, while chapter 10 is about *objective* idolatry:

In chapters 8–10 Paul seems to wrestle with two kinds of idolatry: *subjective* and *objective*. By “subjective idolatry” we mean an occasion when a person consciously participates in an activity that they consider idolatrous. Whether or not others judge it to be so may be beside the point. By “objective idolatry” we have in mind people who do not consider themselves idolaters (they do not believe in idols or other gods) who participate in an activity that they consider innocent but which in fact is idolatrous.⁶⁰

In chapter 8 Paul addresses the issue with reference to disputable matters, but in 10:14–22 he addresses the issue with reference to worshipping idols. Christians may disagree on disputable matters but not about worshipping idols.⁶¹ The key difference is the nature of the meals: If Corinthian Christians partook of εἰδωλόθυτα in an idol's temple *in the same way* that they partook of the Lord's Supper (10:16–17), then that would always be idolatrous (10:18–22).

In 1 Cor 8:1–11:1, Paul argues that there is much more at stake than enjoying your rights, which include eating meat sacrificed to idols in an idol's temple (8:1–13).⁶² He illustrates how he has given up his rights for

morally indifferent” (emphasis original). Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 160 (following Fisk): “Given his explicit reference to eating in the temple in 8:10, in the context of that which is in principle acceptable for believers, it seems clear that he also has in mind those social gatherings in the temple precincts that were not overtly religious in nature.” Cf. Samuel E. Horn, “A Biblical Theology of Christian Liberty: An Analysis of the Major Pauline Passages in Galatians, Colossians, 1 Corinthians, and Romans” (Ph.D. diss., Bob Jones University, 1995), 109–11; Kim, “Imitatio Christi,” 211; Stephen Richard Turley, “Revealing Rituals: Washings and Meals in Galatians and 1 Corinthians” (Ph.D. diss., Durham University, 2013), 187–91.

⁶⁰ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 369.

⁶¹ See D. A. Carson, “On Disputable Matters,” *Them* 40 (2015): 383–88; Naiselli and Crowley, *Conscience* (especially the chapter on Rom 14 [84–117] and “Appendix A: Similarities between Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8–10” [143]).

⁶² Horrell, “Theological Principle,” 99: “The implication in ch. 8 seems clearly to be that eating εἰδωλόθυτος is *not* idolatrous or sinful *per se*, but only if it causes problems for the weak who eat it as of an idol. In 8.10 there is no hint that their presence in a temple is of itself unacceptable, or idolatrous. . . . It is surely difficult to see why Paul should apparently leave unquestioned the ἐξουσία of the strong to eat εἰδωλόθυτος, even in a temple, in ch. 8, if he intended to prohibit that very

the sake of the gospel (9:1–23),⁶³ and he exhorts the Corinthians to flee from idolatry and not presume that they are unable to fall (9:24–10:22). The way to approach the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols is to strategically do all to God's glory by seeking your neighbor's good (10:23–11:1). So Paul prohibits the Corinthian Christians from eating meat sacrificed to idols in three contexts, and he allows it in two:

(1) *Yes*. You have the right to eat meat sacrificed to idols in an idol's temple when it is not part of the pagan religious ritual (ch. 8).

(2) *No*. Give up your right to eat meat sacrificed to idols in an idol's temple if that would harm a fellow Christian (ch. 8).⁶⁴

(3) *No*. Do not eat meat sacrificed to idols in an idol's temple as part of the pagan religious ritual because to do so would be to participate in demonic worship (10:14–22).

(4) *Yes*. You have the right to eat meat sacrificed to idols that you can buy in the meat market and eat in your home or the homes of your neighbors (10:25–27).

(5) *No*. Give up your right to eat meat sacrificed to idols in another person's home if a person informs you that the meat was sacrificed to idols and thus implies that they think you as a Christian would object to eating the meat because that would be participating in idol-worship (10:28–30).

activity in ch. 10.” Cf. J. J. Lias, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, CGTSC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), 98; C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, BNTC 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1968), 196; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 148–49; W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians,” in *Romans–Galatians*, EBC 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 240; William F. Orr and James Arthur Walther, *1 Corinthians: A New Translation, Introduction, with a Study of the Life of Paul, Notes, and Commentary*, AB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 235; Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 332, 346–47.

⁶³ Horrell, “Theological Principle,” 94–95: “The argument of chs. 8 and 9 may therefore be summarized: Paul cites and accepts the theological principles which the strong use to justify their ἐξουσία to eat εἰδωλόθυτος. Paul nowhere questions this ἐξουσία or the principles upon which it is based, but what he does do is to maintain that Christian conduct involves a Christ-like self-giving for others, a self-enslavement, a setting aside of one's own rights for the sake of the gospel.” Cf. D. A. Carson, “The Cross and the World Christian (1 Corinthians 9:19–27),” in *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 115–37.

⁶⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, “Gods Made with Hands: The New Testament and the Problem of Idolatry,” *ExAud* 15 (1999): 55: “What may start out as an innocent attendance at some event held in the public rooms attached to some pagan temple can in the end prove injurious to Christians whose grasp on their faith is yet tender enough to be damaged by reminders of their former religious devotion.”

The logic of chapters 8–10 presupposes that what 8:10 refers to is a genuine right that the Corinthian Christians possessed. Paul exhorts them to give up that right if it would harm a fellow Christian. What Paul teaches about the conscience in this passage does not make sense if eating εἰδωλόθυτα in an idol's temple (8:10) is not actually an activity the Corinthian Christians could ever do without sinning.

3. Conclusion

So does Paul teach in 1 Cor 8–10 that it was always idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to eat εἰδωλόθυτα in an idol's temple?

Fee and other exegetes present three interrelated arguments that the answer is yes: (1) eating εἰδωλόθυτα in an idol's temple was an inherently religious event; (2) εἰδωλόθυτος means meat sacrificed to idols that one eats in an idol's temple; and (3) 1 Cor 8 parallels 10:14–22.

But the more plausible answer is no: (1) eating εἰδωλόθυτα in an idol's temple could be a non-idolatrous social event—like eating in a restaurant; (2) εἰδωλόθυτος means meat sacrificed to idols—whether one eats it in an idol's temple or at home; and (3) 1 Cor 8 differs significantly from 10:14–22.

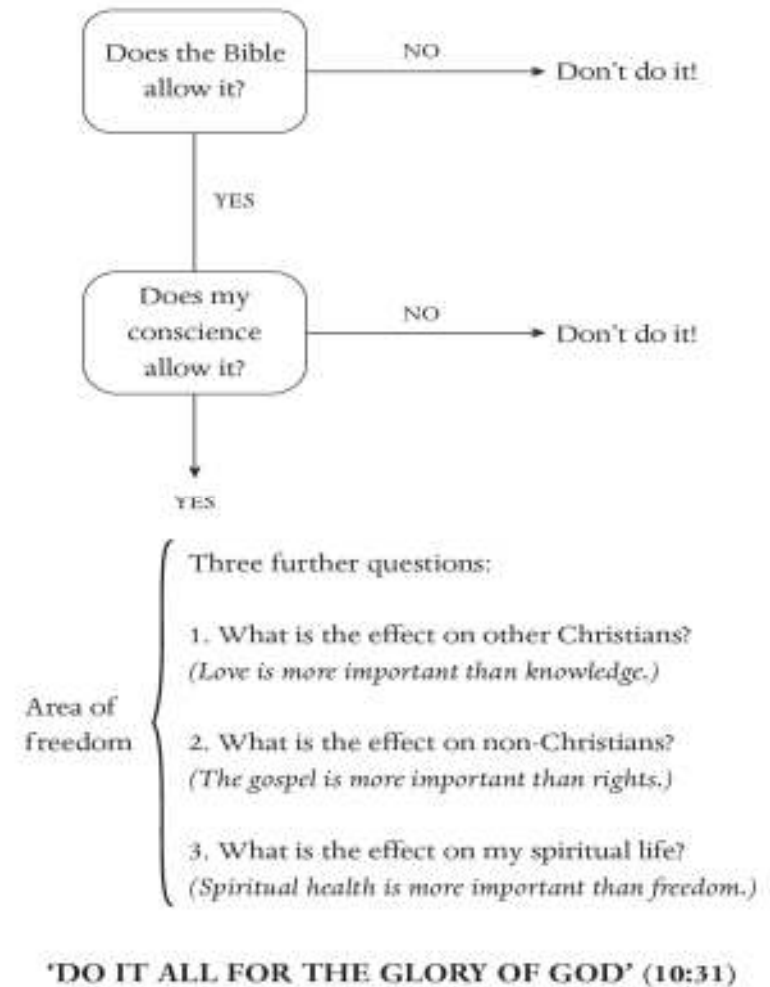
Three qualifications:

1. I am not a hundred percent certain I am correct—more like 80 percent sure. This is a complicated issue that depends largely on the historical-cultural context. What would falsify my thesis is evidence that all meals in the temple began with a formal demonic ceremony. I am not aware of such evidence.

2. My thesis does not imply that Corinthian Christians *should* eat meat sacrificed to idols in an idol's temple. Just because Christians are free to do something does not mean that they *should* do it. There are other factors to consider. Christians must not insist on exercising their rights at all times. Vaughan Roberts comments, “Paul may agree with the libertarians’ theology [in 1 Cor 8], but he certainly disagrees with their selfish application of it. . . . Our theological understanding may rightly tell us that we are free to take a particular course of action, but that does not necessarily mean we should follow it.”⁶⁵ Roberts helpfully summarizes Christian decision-making in 1 Cor 8–10 in a flowchart (see Fig. 1):

⁶⁵ Vaughan Roberts, *Authentic Church: True Spirituality in a Culture of Counterfeits* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 111–12.

Figure 1. Vaughan Roberts’s Flowchart on Christian Decision-Making in 1 Cor 8–10⁶⁶



3. What motivated me to study this issue in the first place was not primarily the historical-cultural context but the literary context. I cannot harmonize 1 Cor 8:9–10 with 10:14–22 unless what Paul describes in 8:9–10 is actually a disputable matter and not always idolatry. It is important to calibrate your conscience correctly regarding disputable matters so that

⁶⁶ Ibid., 133. Used with permission.

you are free to flex (i.e., give up your rights) for the sake of the gospel. You cannot flex on an issue (such as eating εἰδωλόθυτα in an idol's temple) if your conscience condemns you about it. Although it may be simpler to prohibit an activity as inherently sinful and therefore off limits, it is not a virtue to say that genuine rights are not really genuine rights.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ On calibrating your conscience and flexing for the sake of the gospel, see chapters 4 and 6 in Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*, 55–83, 118–40.