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

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Does Paul teach in 1 Cor 8–10 that it was always idolatrous for Corinthian Christians to eat εἰδωλόθυτα in an idol’s temple? Gordon 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.

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

In 1 Cor 8, Paul appears to have a category for a Corinthian Christian eating εἰδωλόθυτα (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 εἰδωλόθυτα 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)

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 εἰδωλόθυτα (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.

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.

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

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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.

3 Gordon D. Fee, “2 Corinthians VI.14–VII.1 and Food Offered to Idols,” NTS 23 (1977): 140–61; idem, “Εἰδωλόθυτα: 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).


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

6 This article builds on two previous ones: Fisk, “Eating Meat Offered to Idols”; E. Coye Still III, “The Meaning and Uses of ΕΙ∆ΩΛΟΘΥΤΟΝ in First Century Non-Pauline Literature and 1 Cor 8:1–11:1: Toward Resolution of the Debate,” J 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 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.”


10 Fee, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 394.

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 εἰδωλόθυτων (1 Cor 8:1a), which the ESV translates, “Now concerning meat 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. “εἰδωλόθυτα 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
idols.” 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 εἰδωλόθυτος 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, “Εἰδωλόθυτον 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.

16 Fee, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 399n24.
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.
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 Corinthians’ 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, and people often ate meat in the temple for nonreligious business meetings or on special occasions for...
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 klinē 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].”

The 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.

“In the ancient world,” explains N. T. Wright, “the temples normally were the restaurants.” Archeologists have discovered that attached to some Corinthian temples were rooms for dining, which private dinner parties could use for banquets. 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 worshiping the deity but instead “on the social relationship among the worshippers.” 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

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

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28 Smith, From Symposion to Eucharist, 76–77 (emphasis added).
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).
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 eidoles 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, Duty 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.’

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, 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,” SBTJ 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 flouting with demonic idolatry, Christians should stay out of the temple precincts—even for non-religious functions” (63).

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 Asklepion 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 Asklepieion 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...
attend a reception in a temple for a relative’s wedding? Can they eat in a temple on special civic occasions?

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.”

That does not mean, however, that Corinthian Christians should regularly eat 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 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. 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, 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

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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), 209–86. 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 Greco-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.


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).”

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:

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 εξουσία (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–


48 BDAG 280.


52 BDAG 280.
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).

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).

2.3. Argument from the Literary Context: 1 Cor 8 Differs Significantly from 10:14–22

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 wants 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.” Fee acknowledges that problem as “the chief objection” to his view.

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 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 ἔξουσία 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 ἐπὶ τῇ ἐπὶ τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ ἐξουσία ἐξουσία ἐξουσία 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 ἔξουσία to commit πορνεία. Instead he immediately and directly refutes them.

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 ἔξουσία 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.
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.


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 ἔξοδος of the strong to eat εἰδωλόθυτος, even in a temple, in ch. 8, if he intended to prohibit that very 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 ἔξοδος to eat εἰδωλόθυτος. Paul nowhere questions this ἔξοδος or the principles upon which it is based, but what he does do is to maintain that Christian conduct involves a Christlike 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,” E-Sword 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.”

Roberts helpfully summarizes Christian decision-making in 1 Cor 8–10 in a flowchart (see Fig. 1):

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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 ἐιδωλόθυτα 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.