

Challenges Christians Face

Flee from Idolatry

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

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October 23, 2011

Flee from Idolatry

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of Christian liberty. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Flee from Idolatry."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 10:14-22:

¹⁴Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. ¹⁸Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? ¹⁹What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹You 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. ²²Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Corinthians 10:14-22)

Introduction

According to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* the definition of *syncretism* is "the attempt to combine different or opposite doctrines and practices, especially in reference to philosophical and religious systems."¹

An example of syncretism in the United States, according to

¹ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1579.

wiki.answers.com is “when we have Easter egg hunts, we are combining a Christian holiday with ancient Greek and Roman pagan traditions.”² Or, another example from my home country in South Africa is when African Traditional Religion is mixed with Christianity. I once heard of a Christian church dedicating its new building with an animal sacrifice in order to appease the spirits.

This is somewhat similar to the situation in the city of Corinth at the time of the apostle Paul. People had come to faith in Jesus Christ in Corinth. Some of them were Jews and some of them were Gentiles.

The Gentile Christians had formerly worshiped at pagan idol-temples prior to their conversion to Christ. They brought their offering to the temple priest. One part was burned on an altar as a sacrifice. A second part was given to the priest, who would either eat it or, more likely, sell it at the meat market. And a third part was eaten by the worshiper, usually in the temple precinct. In fact, one commentator says that the temple precinct “was the basic ‘restaurant’ in antiquity.”³

Review

Now, let’s briefly review how this fits into Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

You may recall that *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* was in fact Paul’s response to a letter he had received from them. Six times in his first letter to the Corinthians Paul said, “Now concerning. . .” (7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; and 16:12). And six times Paul responded to a question or issue raised in the letter that he had received from the Corinthians.

In 1 Corinthians 8:1 Paul said, “Now concerning food offered to idols. . . .” This was the third of six issues. All of chapters 8-10 deal with the issue of food offered to idols. The Corinthian Chris-

² http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_are_two_examples_of_cultural_syncretism_in_the_Americas.

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 361.

tians were engaged in a debate about whether it was okay to eat meat offered to idols. This was an issue on which God had not clearly revealed his will. It was therefore a debatable matter, and the Christians in Corinth were divided over the issue. Some said it was okay to eat meat offered to idols; others said it was not okay.

Paul responded to their question by setting down a foundational principle in 1 Corinthians 8:13: “Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” Paul would never do anything to cause his brother in Christ to stumble. He was willing to limit his Christian freedom in order to love his brother in Christ.

So, in chapter 8 Paul set down the principle that Christians must deny themselves their rights for the sake of the gospel.

In chapter 9 Paul illustrated from his own life a pattern of self-denial for the sake of the gospel.

In chapter 10:1-13 Paul showed from Old Testament examples how an unwillingness to deny themselves their rights for the sake of the gospel disqualified some from effective service.

Now, in chapter 10:14-22 Paul brought to a conclusion the question about food offered to idols. Paul set down a very clear prohibition against idolatry.

Lesson

So, in our lesson today, we learn that Christians are prohibited from practicing idolatry. Let’s learn about this as follows:

1. The Command (10:14)
2. The Argument (10:15-20a)
3. The Conclusion (10:20b-21)
4. The Questions (10:22)

I. The Command (10:14)

First, notice the command.

Paul said in verse 14: **“Therefore, my beloved, flee from**

idolatry.”

The word “**therefore**” indicates that Paul is drawing his response to the Corinthians to a conclusion. He has been addressing the issue of food offered to idols for two and a half chapters. He has set down his position regarding food offered to idols. And now he is about to summarize and make a concluding statement.

He also wanted to be sure that the Corinthians understood his affection for them. So he addressed them as “**my beloved.**” You may recall that the apostle Paul was their former pastor, having planted the church several years earlier. Even though there were many problems at his former church, he still wanted them to know that he loved them as fellow heirs of the kingdom of God.

Then Paul gave his concluding statement on this matter of food offered to idols: “**Flee from idolatry.**” This is in fact a command. The word “**flee**” “signifies that the action should be carried on habitually or continually.”⁴ In other words, Paul was saying, “Keep on fleeing from idolatry!”

Paul was about to tell the Corinthians that they should not eat food offered to idols if they knew that it would cause a brother in Christ to stumble. They should do nothing to cause a brother to stumble. They should be aware of the dangers of **idolatry**.

Idolatry can be defined as “the worship of something created as opposed to the worship of the Creator himself.”⁵ Idolatry is the foremost sin of human beings. That is why the first two of the Ten Commandments deal with idolatry. The first commandment says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). And the second commandment says, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fa-

⁴ Ronald Trail, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Corinthians 10-16*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 30.

⁵ *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Ronald F. Youngblood, F. F. Bruce, R. K. Harrison and Thomas Nelson Publishers (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1995).

thers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (20:4-6).

But, as John MacArthur says, “Idolatry includes much more than bowing down or burning incense to a physical image. Idolatry is having any false god—any object, idea, philosophy, habit, occupation, sport, or whatever that has one’s primary concern and loyalty or that to any degree decreases one’s trust in and loyalty to the Lord.”⁶

The apostle Paul did not want the Corinthians to worship anyone or anything else other than the true God. He did not want any kind of syncretism or **idolatry**.

This is a constant struggle for us today. During the Reformation, John Calvin exclaimed that human beings are by nature idol factories.⁷ That is to say that we are very good at manufacturing someone or something other than the true God to worship.

And so, we too should hear and obey Paul’s command: **“Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.”**

II. The Argument (10:15-20a)

Second, let’s look at the argument that Paul developed.

Paul knew the believers at Corinth, and so he was able to write to them in verse 15: **“I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.”**

Even though he had given them a command, he wanted them to examine the reasons behind his command. So, he invited them to judge for themselves what he had to say.

A. The Lord’s Supper (10:16-17)

First, look at the argument regarding the Lord’s Supper.

Paul asked two questions in verse 16 about the Lord’s Sup-

⁶ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 232-33.

⁷ *Tabletalk Magazine: June 1999* (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, Inc., 1999), 6.

per: **“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”**

These questions emphasize that drinking from the cup in the Lord’s Supper is **a participation in the blood of Christ** and eating the bread in the Lord’s Supper is **a participation in the body of Christ**. The word **“participation”** can also mean “communion” (see *NKJV*) or “fellowship.”⁸ And so Paul meant that when Christians celebrate the Lord’s Supper they are actually communing and fellowshiping with Christ.

Further, Paul continued in verse 17, **“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”** Paul was now stressing that our fellowship is not only with Christ but also with one another. So there is a double fellowship: with Christ *and* also with one another.

Paul wanted Christians to understand that because we are united in fellowship with Christ and with one another we therefore participate in the Lord’s Supper.

B. The Jewish Sacrifices (10:18)

Paul then added a second argument regarding the Jewish sacrifices.

He said in verse 18: **“Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?”**

Paul was referring to the Old Testament **people of Israel** who brought offerings to be sacrificed to God. Some of the offering was sacrificed to God **in the altar**, some of it was eaten by the priests, and some of it was eaten by the person who brought the offering. Isn’t that interesting how similar it was to what happened at the temples at Corinth in Paul’s day?

Paul was again stressing that **the people of Israel** who brought those offerings and ate them were fellowshiping with

⁸ James Strong, S.T.D., LL.D., vol. 1, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 42.

God and with one another. That was the point of the offering.

It is entirely likely that Paul was thinking specifically of the Passover meal when he used this argument. In the next chapter Paul addressed the matter of celebrating the Lord's Supper more fully. The Lord's Supper is the New Testament sacrament that replaced the Old Testament sacrament of the Passover meal. Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that **the people of Israel** in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament had a covenant meal. In the Old Testament it was the Passover meal and in the New Testament it is the Lord's Supper. In both meals there was participation, fellowship, or communion with God and also with fellow believers.

The meal was highly symbolic of the spiritual unity that existed between God and his people, and also of the unity that exists between fellow believers.

C. The Pagan Sacrifices (10:19-20)

And then, third, look at the argument regarding the pagan sacrifices.

Paul asked in verse 19: **“What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?”** The reason Paul asked the question is because some in Corinth were saying that eating food offered to idols was nothing. They denied that the idol had any real power.

So, what was Paul's response to his own question? He said in verse 20a: **“No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.”** Paul's point is that something supernatural was involved in offering food to idols. As he said, **“What pagans sacrifice they offer to demons.”** Paul understood that pagan religions are false and that pagan gods are vastly inferior to the true **God**. Nevertheless, in the **food offered to idols** there was participation, fellowship, or communion with demons and also with fellow idol worshipers.

III. The Conclusion (10:20b-21)

Third, notice the conclusion.

Paul stated his conclusion in verse 20b: **“I do not want you to be participants with demons.”**

Paul wanted his readers to understand that any offering is a participation, a fellowship, a communion with the one to whom the offering is presented. That is why Christians should have absolutely nothing to do with demons at all.

He said to believers in verse 21: **“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.”**

Richard Pratt notes that “it is inappropriate for Christians to **drink the cup of the Lord** and also **the cup of demons**. Drinking the cup of demons is a sharing of fellowship with evil supernatural beings, and somehow effects a mysterious spiritual union with them, just as sexual intercourse between a man and a prostitute brings about a similar union. Demons have no power over Christians even when Christians eat in idols’ temples, but such union with demons corrupts the sanctity of the believer’s relationship with Christ just as fornication with prostitutes does.”⁹

IV. The Questions (10:22)

Finally, Paul made this clear by asking two questions.

Paul asked first in verse 22a: **“Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy?”**

We usually think of **jealousy** as a bad characteristic, and it can be. But **jealousy** is also a good characteristic, depending upon the situation. One way to understand whether jealousy is good or bad is to think of it in terms of a legitimate or illegitimate rival.

For example, some of you may remember the story leading up to the 1994 Winter Olympics in which figure skater Tonya

⁹ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 168.

Harding's ex-husband and friend organized to have her figure skater opponent Nancy Kerrigan clubbed on her right knee. That was designed to keep Nancy Kerrigan out of the Winter Olympics. Apparently, Harding was jealous of Kerrigan, and that kind of jealousy is wrong. The reason it is wrong is because Kerrigan was a legitimate rival in the sport of figure skating.

On the other hand, suppose you discovered that your spouse was vying for the affections of someone else. You would be right to be jealous in that instance because the other person is an illegitimate rival for the affections of your spouse.

In the same way, God has a holy jealousy for his bride, the Church. He has a holy jealousy when his people's affections shift from himself to anything else. That is why God said in Deuteronomy 32:21 that the people of Israel "have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols."

The apostle John gave a severe warning about what happens to idolaters. He said in Revelation 21:8: "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, *idolaters*, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

Idolatry is offensive to God and it provokes a holy jealousy from him.

Paul's second question in verse 22b is obviously rhetorical: "**Are we stronger than he?**" Does the idolater think that he is more powerful than God? God will not allow idolatry to go unpunished.

Even Christians will not escape God's severe discipline if they persist in worshiping any sort of idol. Apparently, the Corinthians who had persisted in eating food offered to idols paid with their health and even with their lives, as Paul pointed out later in his discussion on the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:30.

Conclusion

So, how does this text apply to us?

Commentator Gordon D. Fee says, “The argument has now come full circle. For modern readers it may seem terribly convoluted; but it probably was not at all so for its first readers, for whom this was a response to their letter. The issue has been singular. They were arguing for the right to attend pagan feasts and were trying to ‘build up’ others by having them attend as well. Paul says No.”¹⁰

They were not willing to deny themselves their rights for the sake of the gospel. They were unloving. Furthermore, their action was completely incompatible with their life in Christ as it is celebrated at the Lord’s Supper.

Fee goes on to say that “converts in Third World settings, of course, often have an immediacy with [food offered to idols] that many others do not, as they struggle over the religious intent of meals of various kinds, sometimes even in their ancestral homes, where the meal is eaten in honor of the ‘god.’ . . . What Paul is finally forbidding is any kind of relationship with the demonic. How that translates into modern Western cultures may be moot; probably what most Western Christians need to learn is that the demonic is not as remote as some of them would wish to believe.”¹¹

May I suggest one area for you to consider as a possible application? In just over a week Halloween will be celebrated. If Halloween has anything whatsoever to do with the demonic, as I believe it does, should Christians then participate in it?

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 474.

¹¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 474-75.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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Challenges Christians Face

PRAAYER:

O God, help us to flee from idolatry! Help us to keep on fleeing from idolatry! We struggle with idolatry in so many different areas of our lives. We want to worship you and you alone.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and worship and serve the only true God who is faithful.