

1Cor 8-10 deal with a problem which may seem extremely remote to us, but was intensely real to the Christians at Corinth and demanded a solution. It was the problem of whether or not to eat meat which had been offered to idols. Before we begin to study these chapters in detail, it will be well to state the problem and the broad lines of the solutions which Paul offers in the various cases in which it impinged upon life.

Sacrifice to the gods was an integral part of ancient life. It might be of two kinds, private or public. In neither case was the whole animal consumed upon the altar. Often all that was burned was a mere token part as small as some of the hairs cut from the forehead.

In private sacrifice the animal, so to speak, was divided into three parts. First, a token part was burned on the altar. Second, the priests received as their rightful portion the ribs, the ham and the left side of the face. Third, the worshipper himself received the rest of the meat. With the meat he gave a banquet. This was specially the case at times like weddings. Sometimes these feasts were in the house of the host; sometimes they were even in the temple of the god to whom the sacrifice had been made. We have, for instance, a papyrus invitation to dinner which runs like this: "Antonius, son of Ptolemaeus, invites you to dine with him at the table of our Lord Serapis." Serapis was the god to whom he had sacrificed.

The problem which confronted the Christian was, "Could he take part in such a feast? Could he possibly take upon his lips meat that had been offered to an idol?" If he could not, then obviously he was going to cut himself off almost entirely from social occasions.

In public sacrifice, that is sacrifice offered by the state, and such sacrifices were common, after the requisite symbolic amount of the meat had been burned and after the priests had received their share, the rest of the meat fell to the magistrates and others. What they did not need, they sold to the shops and the markets; and therefore, even when meat was bought in the shops, it might well have been already offered to some idol. A man never knew when he might be eating meat that had formed part of a sacrifice to an idol.

What complicated matters still further was that this age believed strongly and fearfully in demons and devils. The air was full of them and they were always lurking to gain an entry into a man, and, if they did, they would injure his body and unhinge his mind. One of the special ways in which these spirits gained entry was through food; they settled on the food as a man ate and so got inside him. One of the ways of avoiding that was to dedicate the meat to some good god whose presence in the meat put up a barrier against the evil spirit. For that reason, nearly all animals were dedicated to a god before being slaughtered; and, if that was not done, as a defence meat was blessed in the name of a god before it was eaten.

It therefore followed that a man could hardly eat meat at all which was not in some way connected with a heathen god. Could the Christian eat it? That was the problem; and, clearly, although to us it may be a matter of merely antiquarian interest, the fact remains

that, to the Christian in Corinth or any other Greek city, it was one which pervaded all life, and which had to be settled one way or another.

Paul's advice falls into different sections.

(i) In 1Cor 8 he lays down the principle that, however safe the strong and enlightened Christian may feel from the infection of heathen idols and even if he believes that an idol is the symbol of something which does not exist at all, he must do nothing which will hurt or bewilder a brother whose conscience is neither so enlightened nor so strong as his.

(ii) In 1Cor 9 he deals with those who invoke the principle of Christian freedom. He points out that there are many things that he is free to do which he abstains from doing for the sake of the Church. He is well aware of Christian freedom, but equally aware of Christian responsibility.

(iii) In 1Cor 10:1-13 he deals with those who declare that their Christian knowledge and privileged position make them quite safe from any infection. He cites the example of the Israelites who had all the privileges of God's Chosen People and who yet fell into sin.

(iv) In 1Cor 10:14-22 he uses the argument that any man who has sat at the table of the Lord cannot sit at the table of a heathen god, even if that god be nothing. There is something essentially wrong in taking meat offered to a false god upon lips that have eaten the body and blood of Christ.

(v) In 1Cor 10:23-26 he advises against overfussiness. A man can buy what is offered in the shops and ask no questions.

(vi) In 1Cor 10:27-28 he deals with the problem of what to do in a private house. In a private house the Christian will eat what is put before him and ask no questions; but if he is deliberately informed that the meat set before him was part of a heathen sacrifice, that is a challenge to his Christian position and he will refuse to eat it.

(vii) Finally in 1Cor 10:29-33 to 1Cor 11:1 Paul lays down the principle that the conduct of the Christian must be so far above reproach that it gives no possible offence either to Jew or non-Jew. He is better to sacrifice his rights than to allow these rights to become an offence.

Now we can proceed to deal with these chapters in detail. —Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT)