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## Religion in the Public Square

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### 4. Eating Food Sacrificed to Idols in the Early Church

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#### Abstract

Many scholars argue that in 1 Corinthians 8–10, Paul directs the members of the *ekklesia* in Corinth to avoid idol food only for the sake of the “weak” members who see eating it as idolatry. Beginning my analysis of Paul’s argument not with 1 Corinthians 8, but with 1 Corinthians 10, in which there are no slogans and there is thus less confusion regarding which lines represent Paul’s own position, I argue that Paul is opposed to the eating of idol food any time it is identified as such because he sees this act as communion with demons. Paul begins his argument by instructing the “knowledgeable” to avoid idol food for the sake of the “weak” as a means of persuasion, which not only will promote unity in the *ekklesia* but also will convince the “knowledgeable” to adopt the practice that Paul prefers.

**Keywords:** 1 Corinthians 8–10, Paul, New Testament, idolatry, idol food, persuasion, unity, knowledge, love

## Introduction

For Jews of the late Second Temple Period as well as for the earliest followers of Jesus, religion in the public square was commonplace in the form of the ritual practices by which those in the Roman Empire sought to honor and propitiate their gods in temples, their associated dining rooms, and private homes.<sup>1</sup> When Paul writes to the *ekklesia*<sup>2</sup> in Corinth, he is concerned *not* with whether the members of the Corinthian *ekklesia* are able to or should engage in their own religious practices in public (such an idea probably does not cross his mind), *but rather* with whether the members of the Corinthian *ekklesia* may engage in the religious practices that are taking place in the public square—the offering of sacrifices to various gods, since “. . . all public and private meals included formal cultic customs to varying degrees” (Fotopoulos 2003, 14). Paul argues that the faith and rituals of those in the Corinthian *ekklesia* require that they intentionally separate themselves from the Roman religious practices taking place in the public square.

## Content of 1 Corinthians 8–10

In 1 Corinthians 8–10, Paul addresses the eating of food sacrificed to idols, which he introduces with, “Now concerning τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων” (8:1)<sup>3</sup> – a compound word from εἶδωλον, meaning “idol,” and θύω, meaning “to sacrifice.” Certainly, animals would have been offered to the gods, but so also would wine, oil, and grains (Gooch 1993, 22). Before turning to my argument, I briefly summarize the sections of Paul’s argument.

Chapter 8 indicates that there are two groups in the Corinthian *ekklesia*.<sup>4</sup> One group knows that there is only one God, idols do not exist, and thus the eating of food sacrificed to idols is not idolatry. Though scholarship on 1 Corinthians 8–10 usually refers to this first group as the “strong,” Paul never refers to the group with this title, nor does he describe the members of this group as “strong” in 1 Corinthians 8–10.<sup>5</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer observes that the weak “stand in contrast to those who ‘possess knowledge’ (8:1b, 7, 10)” (2008, 333). Therefore, I refer to them as the “knowledgeable,” which I will put in scare quotes to signify that though they think of themselves as knowledgeable, Paul does not. By using this terminology, I follow Timothy A. Brookins, who argues that the contrast between the “knowledgeable” and the “weak” reflects Stoic thought: “‘Knowledge’ and ‘weakness’ figure prominently in Stoic ideas

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<sup>1</sup> A key source for the place of the gods in Roman Corinth is the account of Pausanias, who visited Corinth in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. For a brief summary of his account, see Grant 2001, 63–66; for the account in full, see Murphy-O’Connor 2002, 5–39. For a fuller discussion of the place of the gods in Roman Corinth, see Fotopoulos 2003, 49–178.

<sup>2</sup> Paul refers to the group of followers of Jesus in any locale as the ἐκκλησία, which means “assembly” and is generally translated as “church” in New Testament texts. The assembly of which Paul speaks is not yet distinct from Judaism and has not yet developed into the Christian church of later centuries. As a reminder of this reality, I use the term *ekklesia*.

<sup>3</sup> All translations of the Bible are from the NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have argued that Paul invented the “weak” group for the sake of his argument (e.g., Gooch 1993, 61–72). This argument has had little traction.

<sup>5</sup> The only occurrence of ἰσχυρός in 1 Corinthians 8–10 is in 10:22, in which Paul asks, “Are we stronger than [God]?” to which the answer is assumed to be “no.”

on moral judgment. The Stoics believed that ignorance (ἀγνοία) and consequent poor judgment resulted from ‘weakness’ (ἀσθένεια) in the soul” (2014, 166).

A second group in the Corinthian *ekklesia* sees the eating of food sacrificed to idols as idolatry, and thus is troubled by the behavior of the first group. Paul refers to this second group as the “weak,” a designation likely given to them by the “knowledgeable.” I will also put “weak” in scare quotes to signal Paul’s assessment that the “knowledgeable” Corinthians have misjudged both knowledge and weakness.

In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul argues that when the “knowledgeable” eat idol food in an idol’s temple, they lead the “weak” to do the same, but the “weak” believe that they are committing idolatry. For this reason, Paul tells the “knowledgeable” that they should avoid eating idol food for the sake of the “weak.” That is, Paul encourages the “knowledgeable” to voluntarily refrain from eating food offered to idols for the benefit of others in the *ekklesia*.

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul gives himself as an example of voluntarily forfeiting one’s own right for the benefit of others. Paul shows that he, as an apostle, has the right to be paid for his work as an apostle (9:1–14). However, he has voluntarily given up this right because he believes that doing so will aid his proclamation of the gospel (9:15–27).<sup>6</sup>

In 1 Corinthians 10:1–14, Paul provides the Corinthians with the negative example of the Israelites in the wilderness. Though they were chosen by God, some of them became “idolators” (10:7) and were “struck down” (10:5). Based on this experience of the Israelites, Paul concludes that those in the Corinthian *ekklesia* should “flee from the worship of idols (εἰδωλολατρίας)” (10:14). In 10:15–22, Paul says that idols are demons (δαίμονια), and those who are in communion (κοινωνία) with Christ in the Lord’s Supper cannot also be in communion with demons.

In the final verses of his argument concerning food sacrificed to idols, 10:23–11:1, Paul addresses the possibility of eating food of unknown provenance, such that one would not automatically know whether it had been sacrificed to an idol. Paul concludes with the theme he introduced in chapter 8, that the Corinthians “give no offense” (10:32) to anyone by their actions. The flow of Paul’s argument is summarized below:

Section	Content
8:1–13	The “knowledgeable” think that they have the right to eat idol food, but Paul instructs them to refrain from eating idol food for the sake of the “weak.”
9:1–27	Paul gives himself as an example of forfeiting a right for the good of others.
10:1–14	Paul gives the Israelites in the wilderness as an example of the danger of idolatry.

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<sup>6</sup> In the past, many scholars saw chapter 9 as a defense of Paul’s apostleship and thus as a digression from the argument of 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 (Thiselton 2006, 136). On the unity of 1 Corinthians 8–10, see Thiselton 2000, 610–12.

- 10:14–22 Paul commands the Corinthians to “flee from the worship of idols” (10:14) because they cannot be in communion both with the Lord and with demons.
- 10:23–11:1 Paul addresses the possibility of eating food of unknown provenance outside of the setting of a temple and its dining rooms.

### Contribution to the Conversation

While most New Testament scholars agree that Paul wants the “knowledgeable” to avoid eating idol food for the sake of the “weak,” there is considerable disagreement over whether Paul thinks it is permissible to eat idol food at all. That is, some scholars lean toward the idea that Paul agrees in principle with the position of the “knowledgeable,” but Paul persuades them not to eat idol food for the sake of the “weak,” who see it as idolatry (e.g., Conzelmann 1975; Mitchell 1993; Fitzmyer 2008; Bailey 2011). Other scholars, by contrast, lean toward the idea that Paul believes that eating idol food is idolatry and thus always to be avoided (e.g., Fee 1987; Witherington 1993, 1994; Cheung 1999; Keener 2005).<sup>7</sup>

Part of the difficulty of determining Paul’s position in 1 Corinthians 8–10 is that Paul quotes several “slogans” of the “knowledgeable,” but since there are no quotation marks in ancient Greek manuscripts, readers must use context to identify these slogans. While most scholars agree on many of the slogans, other passages are less clear such that some scholars claim Paul is giving his own opinion while other scholars say that Paul is quoting the “knowledgeable.”

I will argue that Paul believes that idols are demons, that the act of consuming what has been offered to these demons is idolatry because it brings one into communion with these demons, and that those in the *ekklesia* should, therefore, avoid eating any food that they know has been offered to an idol. When Paul instructs the “knowledgeable” to avoid eating idol food for the sake of the “weak,” he is not admitting that the consumption of idol food is permissible, but he is using a particular means of persuasion to convince the “knowledgeable” to adopt the course of action he prefers.

### 1 Corinthians 1–4: Introducing Major Themes

At the beginning of 1 Corinthians, Paul introduces major themes that will guide his response to each of the topics addressed later in the letter: unity, fellowship, wisdom/foolishness, and strength/weakness.<sup>8</sup> As early as his address in 1 Corinthians 1:2,

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<sup>7</sup> Given the diversity of belief and practice in both early Judaism and early Christianity, both positions are plausible. In the book of Daniel, written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE but set in Babylon during the Exile (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE), the pious Daniel and his friends refuse to eat the royal rations of meat and wine provided for those from Judah who are being educated to work in the court. They insist on being given only vegetables and water, indicating that they are avoiding any food that would have been sacrificed to the Babylonian gods (1:8–16). First Timothy, written in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, encourages the drinking of a little wine (5:23) and denigrates those Christians who avoid certain foods (4:1–5), almost certainly referring to those who refuse to eat food that has been offered to idols. The *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, composed later in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century praises such Christians. In that narrative, Paul and his companions partake of only bread, vegetables, and water.

<sup>8</sup> In the middle of the last century, it was common for scholars to argue that 1 Corinthians was not originally one letter but was a compilation of more than one Pauline letter to the church at Corinth. Since Margaret Mitchell’s

Paul alludes to the theme of unity. Paul describes the *ekklesia* in Corinth as “those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1:2). The *ekklesia* in Corinth does not stand on its own, but its members are sanctified and called “*together with* all those who . . . call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup> The members of the Corinthian *ekklesia* are to understand themselves as part of a much larger body. Paul’s traditional thanksgiving (1:4–9) concludes with an affirmation that those in the Corinthian *ekklesia* “were called into the fellowship (κοινωνία) of [God’s] Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:9). Those in the *ekklesia* are in κοινωνία with both their Lord and all who call on their Lord, a point that will play a significant role in Paul’s argument in chapter 10.

Paul begins the body of his letter with an appeal for unity: “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1:10). The primary problem in the Corinthian *ekklesia* is that there are divisions. After identifying these divisions, Paul immediately contrasts wisdom and strength with foolishness and weakness. Paul claims that Christ sent him to proclaim the gospel “not with eloquent wisdom (σοφία λόγου)” (1:17). “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1:18). The wisdom of the world does not lead to knowledge of God: “the world did not know God through wisdom” (1:21) but rather through the foolishness of the cross. Not only is “God’s foolishness wiser than human wisdom” (1:25), but “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1:27). The message of the cross is a message of foolishness and weakness in the eyes of the world, but this is the way through which God has chosen to work.

The Corinthians who received this letter from Paul in the 50s CE knew that some among them claimed to have knowledge, which they believed distinguished them from the uninformed “weak” in the community. Modern readers do not have that advantage of first-hand knowledge, but Paul’s contrasts between wisdom and foolishness, strength and weakness here signal that these will be important themes in the letter. Those in Paul’s audience who think of themselves as knowledgeable and strong will be challenged to reconsider the value of their knowledge.

Brookins has argued that Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians 1–4 includes key terminology of the Stoics. In addition to speaking of “the wise man (ὁ σοφός)” (1:19, 20, 27; 3:19, 20), Paul also uses language from the Stoic paradoxes (2014, 159–61). Paul says that the “knowledgeable” “have become rich . . . have become kings” (4:8) and are “prudent (φρόνιμοι) . . . strong (ἰσχυροί) . . . held in honor (ἔνδοξοι)” (4:10; following Brookins’ 2014, 161 translation). Brookins concludes that, in 1 Corinthians 1–4, Paul is “trying to cast” some in

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influential work *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, most scholars are convinced by the integrity of the letter. Wendell Willis summarizes the shift in scholarship on the unity of 1 Corinthians as a whole, and especially of 1 Corinthians 8–10 (2007, 103–5).

<sup>9</sup> Bailey argues that Paul is addressing the letter to the *ekklesia* in Corinth *and* to all the saints everywhere (2011, 23). If that were Paul’s intention, we would likely find *καί*.

Corinth as those who think of themselves as “Stoic wise men” (2014, 163). This Stoic terminology is significant in 1 Corinthians 8–10 as well.

### 1 Corinthians 10:1–22

The Corinthians who received Paul’s letter would have known which lines were quotations of the “knowledgeable” among them, so they would not have confused their position with Paul’s. Modern readers, who do not have this luxury, are at risk of confusing the words of the “knowledgeable” with Paul’s position. Turning to 1 Corinthians 8–10, I begin with 1 Corinthians 10:1–22 because this section contains no slogans. There is no debate among scholars over whether Paul is expressing his own position or the position of the “knowledgeable” in these verses. I believe that the lack of slogans in this section means that these verses give the clearest articulation of Paul’s position, which can then be used to guide the interpretation of 8:1–13, which contains slogans.

Bailey has convincingly argued that in 1 Corinthians Paul adopts rhetorical styles of Israel’s prophets, including the use of ring composition, in which main points are emphasized not only by being placed first or last, but also by being placed in the middle (2011, esp. 21–53). My analysis of Paul’s structure is inspired by his insight. In order to emphasize the parallels in the rings, I have included italicized subheadings in brackets and underlined key ideas.

#### *Structure of 1 Corinthians 10:1–22*

*[Do Not Be Un-Knowledgeable of Israel’s History]*

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup>and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup>and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup>and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

*[Dangers of Straying]*

<sup>5</sup>Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

*[Israel’s History as an Example]*

<sup>6</sup>Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.

*[Four Lessons from Israel’s Mistakes]*

*[1]* <sup>7</sup>Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.”

*[2]* <sup>8</sup>We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.

*[3]* <sup>9</sup>We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.

*[4]* <sup>10</sup>And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

*[Israel’s History as an Example]*

<sup>11</sup>These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.

[Dangers of Straying]

<sup>12</sup>So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. <sup>13</sup>No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

[Hinge (Conclusion of 10:1–13 and Thesis of 10:15–22): Lesson from Israel's History]

<sup>14</sup>Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.

[Invitation to Draw the Correct Conclusion]

<sup>15</sup>I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.

[Three Situations: Ritual and Communion]

[1. The Ritual of the Ekklesia]

<sup>16</sup>The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? <sup>17</sup>Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

[2. The Ritual of the Jerusalem Temple]

<sup>18</sup>Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar?

[3. The Ritual of the Ethnē]

<sup>19</sup>What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? <sup>20</sup>No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons.

[Conclusion]

<sup>21</sup>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.

[Warning from Israel's History]

<sup>22</sup>Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

In 10:1–13, Paul presents the experiences of the Israelites in the wilderness, whom Paul describes as “our ancestors” (10:1), as “examples (τύποι)” (10:6) for the members of the Corinthian *ekklesia*. What happened to these “ancestors” (10:1) in the wilderness was that “God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down” (10:5).

It appeared that the ancestors’ status with God was secure. They “all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (10:2). They “all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink” (10:3–4). Paul retells the history of Israel through the lens of the church’s practice of baptism and eucharist, linking the experience of ancient Israel to the experience of the Corinthian *ekklesia*. Though their status with God appeared secure, “God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness” (10:5).

Paul claims that the events of Israel’s history “occurred as examples (τύποι) for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did” (10:6). Paul identifies four lessons to be learned from the wilderness generation; these four lessons are grouped into two pairs: 10:7–8 and 10:9–10.

The first lesson is a warning against idolatry by means of a reference to the account of the golden calf in Exodus 32, with a quotation of Exodus 32:6b. Almost immediately after agreeing to the covenant with God — “Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do”

(Exod 19:8) — the Israelites turn aside to worship a god of their own making. Their idolatry involves eating and drinking, and it leads to immorality. The Greek term translated “play” in the NRSV of 1 Corinthians 10:7 is *παίζειν*, which is a quotation of LXX Exodus 32:6. The Hebrew term in that verse is *shq* (meaning “laugh,” “play,” or “make sport”). Both the Hebrew and Greek terms have “erotic implications” (Bailey 2011, 270).

The first lesson leads explicitly to the second: “We must not indulge in sexual immorality” (10:8). Paul refers to Number 25:1–9. While still in the wilderness, “the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods” (Num 25:1b–2). As in the first lesson, idolatry is linked to both eating and sexual immorality. According to Numbers 25, the result for the Israelites is that “the LORD’s anger was kindled against Israel” (25:3), igniting a plague that results in the death of “twenty-four thousand” (25:9).<sup>10</sup> Aaron’s grandson Phinehas impales an Israelite man and the Midianite woman he brought into his family; this zealous act is presented as bringing an end to the deadly plague and staying God’s hand. God says to Moses, “Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal among them on my behalf that in my *jealousy* I did not consume the Israelites” (Num 25:11). Paul warns against “provoking the Lord to jealousy” in 1 Corinthians 10:22.

In the third lesson, “we must not put Christ to the test” (10:9), Paul mentions destruction by serpents, suggesting that he refers to Numbers 21, in which the Israelites complain to God and Moses about living in the wilderness with no food and water, and “the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died” (21:6). However, the language of putting God to the test comes from Deuteronomy 6:16: “Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him as Massah,” and Exodus 17:1–7, in which the Israelites ask for water, and Moses replies, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” (17:2b). The Israelites continue to complain, and Moses “called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD, saying, ‘Is the LORD among us or not?’” (17:7). Regardless of whether Paul intends Numbers 21 or Exodus 17 as the referent, testing the Lord is explicitly linked to complaining, which connects the third lesson to the fourth lesson: “do not complain as some of them did” (10:10).

In the first and second lessons, Paul links eating, sexual immorality, and idolatry. In the third and fourth lessons, Paul links testing and complaining to destruction. Paul has already explicitly addressed the issue of sexual immorality at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 5:1–8, “and of a kind that is not found even among pagans” (5:1). Perhaps Paul believes that the Corinthians’ pushing of the boundaries of what is acceptable for those “in Christ” is putting God to the test and complaining. Paul recounts these incidents from Israel’s history because “These things happened to them to serve as an example (*τυπικῶς*), and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come” (10:11). The “knowledgeable” in Corinth likely see themselves as secure, just as the Israelites did, but based on the experiences of the Israelites

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<sup>10</sup> Commentators note that Paul says 23,000 instead of 24,000. Keener suggests that Paul might be conflating the 24,000 from Numbers 25 with the 3,000 killed by the Levites in Exodus 32:28, “which might allow him to allude obliquely to both texts” (2005, 87).



in the wilderness, Paul instructs them to “flee from the worship of idols (ειδωλολατρία)” (10:14).

Paul then invites his audience to judge his teaching: “I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say” (10:15). Paul’s argument in 10:16–21 is based on the link between ritual practice and communion. The term *κοινωνία* and related Greek terms appear four times in these six verses. Paul begins with the shared, communal experience of the Lord’s Supper. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing (*κοινωνία*) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing (*κοινωνία*) in the body of Christ?” (10:16). Through their ritual actions, the members of the *ekklesia* share in the blood and body of Christ. Recall that in Paul’s thanksgiving (1:4–9), he reminded the Corinthian *ekklesia* that they “were called into the fellowship (*κοινωνία*) of [God’s] Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:9). Additionally, in their ritual, they are brought together into one body: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (10:17). Drinking of the cup and eating of the bread bring the members of the *ekklesia* into communion with Christ and with one another. As Keener observes, “The ‘sharing’ (*κοινωνία*) ‘in Christ’s body’ plays on the two senses of his body: his physical body given on the cross as a sacrifice (11:23–24; cf. 5:7) and his body the church (10:17; 12:12; cf. *Did.* 9.4)” (2005, 87–88).

Paul then turns to a second link between ritual practice and communion, in the temple in Jerusalem: “Consider the people of Israel (literally, Israel according to the flesh); are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar?” (10:18). The word translated “partners” here is *κοινωνοί*, indicating those in communion. Ritual actions have meaning. Those who eat what is sacrificed to the God of Israel are brought into communion with the God of Israel.

Paul now applies this same principle to the eating of food sacrificed to idols. He writes, “What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?” (10:19). He continues, “No, I imply that what pagans<sup>11</sup> sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons (*δαιμονίαις*) and not to God” (10:20). For Paul, idols are not real gods, but they are *δαιμόνια*—demons or evil spirits. Keener notes that “Paul and most early Christians (Athenagoras *Leg.* 26; Tertullian *Apol.* 23.4; cf. *Did.* 6.3) shared the typical Jewish view that the beings worshiped by pagans were demons (in the LXX, see Deut 32:17; Ps 95[ET 96]:5; 105[106]:37; Is 65:3)” (2005, 88).

The members of the Corinthian *ekklesia* cannot eat the sacrifices of the pagan altars because doing so would make them “partners with demons (*κοινωνοὺς τῶν δαιμονίων*)” (10:20). Paul concludes, “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” (10:21). To do so would be to “provok[e] the Lord to jealousy” (10:22), the danger of which Paul alluded to in his second lesson.

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<sup>11</sup> The Greek term translated “pagans” in the NRSV of 10:20 is *ἔθνη*, which literally means “nations” and, from Paul’s Jewish perspective, refers to all the nations except Israel. The members of the Corinthian *ekklesia* are not of Jewish descent and are therefore “the nations.” However, Paul implies in 10:20 that they are no longer to associate themselves with “the nations” and their rituals. In 12:2, Paul writes, “You know that when you were *ἔθνη*, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.” For Paul, those in the Corinthian *ekklesia*, even though they are not of Jewish descent, are no longer part of “the nations.”

From 10:1–22, then, it appears that Paul believes that those in the *ekklesia*, who participate in the eucharist, may not also participate in the meals of idols, likely referring primarily to the eating of food offered to idols in temples or their associated dining rooms, given the ritual settings in 10:16–21.

### 1 Corinthians 8:1–13

Having determined Paul’s position on eating idol food at the table of demons from 10:1–22, we now turn to 8:1–13 to determine in which lines Paul is quoting the “knowledgeable” in Corinth and in which he gives his own position. There is substantial agreement among scholars on several of the slogans of the “knowledgeable” in chapter 8:<sup>12</sup>

- “all of us possess knowledge” (8:1)
- “no idol in the world really exists” (8:4)
- “there is no God but one” (8:4)
- “Food will not bring us close to God” (8:8)

One thing that these slogans have in common is that each is immediately *refined* or *corrected* by Paul (Keener 2005, 73). That is, Paul moves carefully. He does not bluntly tell the Corinthian sloganeers that they are wrong, but he gently reshapes their claims, influenced by themes of wisdom and foolishness, which Paul introduced in chapters 1–4, as well by the theme of love, which Paul will explicate more fully in chapter 13.

As indicated above, there are no quotation marks in ancient Greek manuscripts. Modern translations generally include quotation marks to signal the four above slogans to the reader. In the following paragraphs, I will suggest that the quotations of the slogans of the “knowledgeable” in Corinth are more extensive, as illustrated here in my analysis of the structure of 1 Corinthians 8:1–13.<sup>13</sup>

#### Structure of 1 Corinthians 8

[Announcement of Topic]

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols:

[Quotation of Corinthian Slogan: Broadest]

“we know that all of us possess knowledge.”

[Paul’s Correction of Corinthian Slogan]

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.<sup>2</sup> Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge;<sup>3</sup> but anyone who loves God is known by him.

[Return to Topic]

<sup>4</sup>Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols,

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<sup>12</sup> Brookins finds that while 8:1 and 8:4 are unanimously supported by scholars writing in the past sixty years, there is some disagreement regarding 8:8. However, a larger percentage of scholars in the past sixty years see 8:8 as a Corinthian slogan than did scholars prior to 1965 (2005, 92).

<sup>13</sup> I continue to follow the NRSV, but I have changed the placement of the quotation marks that signal the slogans of the “knowledgeable.”

*[Quotation of Corinthian Slogan: More Specific]*

“we know that no idol in the world really exists and that there is no God but one.”

*[Paul’s Correction of Corinthian Slogan]*

<sup>5</sup>Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—<sup>6</sup>yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

*[Paul’s Further Correction of Corinthian Slogans in 8:1 and 8:4 AND Result of So-Called Knowledge]*

It is not everyone, however, who has this<sup>14</sup> knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

*[Quotation of Corinthian Slogan: Most Specific]*

<sup>8</sup>“Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.”

*[Main Point of Chapter 8: Love for the Other]*

<sup>9</sup>But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

*[Paul’s Correction of Corinthian Slogan in 8:8]*

<sup>10</sup>For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols?

*[Result of So-Called Knowledge]*

<sup>11</sup>So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. <sup>12</sup>But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

*[Encouragement to Imitate Paul]*

<sup>13</sup>Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

After Paul announces the topic—“Now concerning food sacrificed to idols (εἰδωλοθύτων)” —he begins by quoting a slogan of the “knowledgeable”: “we know that all of us possess knowledge (γινῶσιν)” (8:1). Scholars and modern translators tend to exclude “we know that” from the quotation. Thiselton argues that οἶδαμεν ὅτι (“we know that”) is best understood as “we are fully aware that (as you say),” such that the phrase “becomes stance-neutral,” and “Paul adopts a common starting point . . . [and] stands with the projected ‘world’ of the addressees” (Thiselton 2000, 621). However, it makes little sense to attribute “we know that” to Paul, since he will explicitly contradict the claim that “all of us possess knowledge” in 8:7: “It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge” (Willis 1985, 67–70; Brookins 2014, 167). It is the “knowledgeable” who “know that all of us possess knowledge” (8:1).

Paul immediately corrects this slogan by contrasting knowledge with love: “Knowledge (γινῶσις) puffs up, but love (ἀγάπη) builds up” (8:1). The Greek verb translated “puffs up” is φουσιῶ. Thiselton illustrates the “illusory self-importance” that Paul attributes to the

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<sup>14</sup> The term “this” must refer not to what Paul just said in verse 6, but rather to the quote of the Corinthians back in verse 4.

“knowledgeable” with this term: “Knowledge ‘puffs up,’ or inflates, like pumping mere air into bellows or, in modern times, a balloon” (Thiselton 2006, 126–27). Paul denigrated human wisdom (σοφία) in chapters 1–4.<sup>15</sup> “The world did not know God though wisdom” (1:21). In Jesus’s crucifixion, God worked not through what humans see as wisdom and strength, but through what humans see as foolishness and weakness. The “knowledgeable” have exalted their knowledge, but Paul argues that love is more valuable than knowledge for building up the *ekklesia*. In 8:10, Paul will indicate that their so-called knowledge actually risks tearing down the *ekklesia*. That any spiritual gift—even proper knowledge—without love is useless will be clarified in 1 Corinthians 13: “if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge (γνώσιν), and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love (ἀγάπην), I am nothing” (13:2). Even the “secret and hidden” wisdom of God, of which Paul speaks with those who are mature in faith (1:6–7), unlike these “knowledgeable” who are still “infants in Christ” (3:1), is nothing without love.

Paul further corrects the slogan of the “knowledgeable” by saying that “Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge (literally, does not know as it is necessary to know)” (8:2). By claiming to have knowledge that allows them to eat food sacrificed to idols, the “knowledgeable” show their lack of right knowledge, for they do not know the importance of love for others in the community and of the unity of the *ekklesia*.

The “knowledge” that the “knowledgeable” claim to possess is summarized in 8:4: “we know that no idol in the world really exists and that there is no God but one.” As with the slogan in 8:1, so also in 8:4, scholars and translators tend to attribute the phrase “we know that” to Paul rather than to the “knowledgeable.” And as in 8:1, this makes little sense given that Paul is about to qualify and correct the claim that “no idol in the world really exists and . . . there is no God but one” (8:4). Though this slogan appears to be consistent with the monotheistic teachings of the early church, Paul knows that this slogan has led the “knowledgeable” to eat food sacrificed to idols “in the temple of an idol” (8:10), and this has led others in the *ekklesia* “to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols” (8:10). As we saw in 10:1–22, Paul agrees that idols are not gods, but he does not conclude therefore that they have no power. Rather, Paul sees the idols as demons whom pagans worship. As 1 Corinthians 8:10 indicates, some in the *ekklesia* believe the eating of idol food to be idolatry; these idols certainly have power over them.

Having quoted the slogan of the “knowledgeable” in 8:4, Paul corrects them. He says, “Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (8:5–6). Verse 6 sounds like a creedal formula, which the Corinthians may have previously learned from Paul.<sup>16</sup> For those in the *ekklesia*, there is one God, but this does not deny the reality of the “many gods and many lords” whom other peoples worship, whom some in the *ekklesia* continue to regard as idols, and whom Paul identifies as demons in 10:20.

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<sup>15</sup> Paul uses the term σοφία in chapters 1–4 and the term γνώσις after that (Brookins 2014, 163).

<sup>16</sup> Brookins (2014, 180) identifies parallels between verse 6 and Marcus Aurelius’s *Med.* 4.23.

In 1 Corinthians 8:7, Paul corrects both the slogan in 8:1 and the slogan in 8:4 (Thiselton 2006, 129; Fitzmyer 2008, 344). The “knowledgeable” claim that *all* know that idols do not exist. Paul responds, “It is *not everyone*, however, who has *this knowledge*. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled” (8:7). Paul identifies multiple problems with the behavior of the “knowledgeable.” First, they have decided that they alone “count” (Thiselton 2006, 129–30, 134). In making a claim about “all,” they have counted only themselves and not *all* in the *ekklēsia*. Second, by the exercise of their so-called “knowledge,” the “knowledgeable” have endangered others within the *ekklēsia*. They have thought of their own rights rather than of others’ needs.

With the Corinthian slogan in 8:8, Paul moves to the heart of the topic that he announced in 8:1: “Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” (8:8).<sup>17</sup> The “knowledgeable” have categorized food as an indifferent (from the Greek ἀδιάφορα), meaning neither commanded nor forbidden, having no inherent moral value or weight. The concept of indifferents is significant in Stoic thought (Brookins 2014, 173). Paul again corrects the slogan of the “knowledgeable.” They claim that eating has no effect on one’s standing with God; Paul argues that their eating affects others in the community. The “knowledgeable” have thought of their own rights; Paul turns their focus to others. Paul counters that the “liberty (ἐξουσία)” (8:9) of the “knowledgeable” has become a stumbling block to the so-called “weak,” and these “weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed” (8:11). Note that Paul’s response in 8:9 is at the center of the ring that extends from 8:7 to 8:11; it is the focus.

In 8:10, Paul plays on the word “building.”<sup>18</sup> In 8:1, Paul contrasted knowledge that “puffs up” with love that “builds up (οικοδομεῖ).” In 8:10, Paul says that those with “weak” consciences might be “built up (οικοδομηθήσεται)” to eat idol food.<sup>19</sup> The so-called knowledge of the “knowledgeable” has not built up the community but has “built” the “weak” into idolatry. This sin against their brothers and sisters in Christ is a “sin against Christ” (8:12).

#### Corinthian Slogans

“we know that all of us possess knowledge” (8:1).

“we know that no idol in the world really exists and that there is no God but one” (8:4).

#### Paul’s Corrections

“Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him” (8:1b–3).

“Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and

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<sup>17</sup> There is debate over the extent of the slogan in v. 8. Thiselton writes, “It is more difficult to decide whether the quotation continues to the end of v. 8.” (2006, 132). Brookins identifies all of 8:8 as a slogan (2014, 179). I suggest that all first-person verbs in chapter 8 are part of slogans.

<sup>18</sup> In 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul described the Corinthian church as “God’s building (οικοδομή).”

<sup>19</sup> It literally says, “his conscience, being weak, be built up”—where the subject is “conscience” in the singular.

“we know that all of us possess knowledge” (8:1) and “we know that no idol in the world really exists and that there is no God but one” (8:4).

“Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” (8:8).

#### *Position of the “Knowledgeable”*

We have correct knowledge.

We know that there is only one God.

We know that idols do not exist.

Eating idol food does not matter.

Those without this knowledge are “weak.”

one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (8:5–6).

“It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled” (8:7).

“But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols?” (8:9–10).

#### *Position of Paul*

Your knowledge is foolishness to God (chap. 1).

It leads the “weak” back to idolatry.

You are “infants in Christ” (3:1), not advanced.

Knowledge without love is useless, even harmful (chap. 13).

Paul concludes chapter 8 with an invitation to imitate him: “Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall” (8:13). Paul says that, for the benefit of others in the community, he would go so far as to avoid not only meat that was or may have been sacrificed to an idol, but *all* meat in order that he would never create a stumbling block for someone else’s faith. The “knowledgeable” are encouraged to voluntarily give up their perceived “liberty (ἐξουσία)” (8:9) to eat idol food for the sake of others in the *ekklesia* and for the unity of the *ekklesia*.

In chapter 9, Paul gives himself as an extended example of relinquishing one’s right for the benefit of others. In Paul’s case, he has given up the right to be paid for his work as an apostle in order that he might “win” (9:19, 20, 21, 22) as many as possible for the gospel and “save” (9:22) them.<sup>20</sup> In summary, in chapters 8 and 9, Paul argues that the “knowledgeable” in Corinth should voluntarily give up their right to eat food sacrificed to idols for the sake of the “weak” in Corinth and for the unity of the Corinthian *ekklesia*.

If we had these two chapters without chapter 10, then we could conclude that Paul wants the “knowledgeable” to avoid eating food sacrificed to idols *only* for the sake of the weak. However, we have already seen in chapter 10 that Paul (1) does not want the Corinthians to “become idolaters” (10:7); (2) instructs them, his “dear friends,” to “flee from the worship of idols” (10:14); and (3) says that “what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons” (10:19) and the Corinthians “cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons” and “cannot

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<sup>20</sup> The language of “winning” in this chapter seems to correlate with Paul’s athletic metaphors; he speaks of training and denying himself like an athlete competing for a prize.

partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (10:21), all of which does not make sense if Paul thinks that eating food sacrificed to idols is an indifferent.

I suggest that Paul’s primary aim is to change the *practice* of the “knowledgeable” without immediately alienating them. In chapter 8, he (1) gently challenges and refines their “slogans,” (2) rebukes them for their “knowledge” that has led to the destruction of others in the *ekklesia*, and (3) urges them to avoid idol food for the sake of the other. Similarly, Keener argues that, “Whereas Paul offers a theological critique of known idol food in 10:1–22, which harshly rejects it (at least when still on the sacred grounds of the temple, but probably anywhere that it will be explicitly associated with idolatry in observers’ minds), he frames this argument with a social critique, based on his recurrent emphasis on love (8:1, 3; 13:1–14:1; 16:14), in 8:1–13 and 10:23–33” (2005, 73). This does not mean that concern for the other is the *only* reason Paul thinks the “knowledgeable” should avoid idol food. Rather, this is one reason to avoid idol food, and an argument to which the “knowledgeable” are likely to be receptive.

Additionally, Paul’s primary goal in this letter is to urge unity within the Corinthian *ekklesia*; such a goal would hardly be fostered by declaring that the “weak” are correct and the “knowledgeable” are wrong! Rather, by beginning his discussion of idol meat with an appeal to love the other, Paul keeps his focus on the unity of the Corinthian congregation.

Familiarity with Paul’s language in chapter 8 allows us to return to 10:1–22 and see additional details of Paul’s argument. In 10:1, Paul writes, “I do not want you to be unaware (ἀγνοεῖν).” The verb ἀγνοεῖν contains the same root as γνῶσις, but begins with a negating α, and literally means “to be unknowing.” The “knowledgeable” have prided themselves on their γνῶσις; Paul warns them of the risks of ἀγνοεῖν. In order that the “knowledgeable” not be “unknowing,” Paul recounts the experiences of their ancestors. Paul speaks of what happened to *all* of them: “our ancestors were all (πάντες) under the cloud . . . all (πάντες) passed through the sea . . . all (πάντες) were baptized into Moses . . . all (πάντες) ate the same spiritual food . . . all (πάντες) drank the same spiritual drink” (10:1–4). The “knowledgeable” claimed that “all (πάντες) of us possess knowledge” (8:1). Paul essentially says, “You think you know what is true of *all* of you. Let me tell you what was actually true of *all* the Israelites.” Further, in the center of 10:1–22, Paul writes, “Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols” (10:14). The Greek term translated “dear” is ἀγαπητοί (beloved), which recalls the contrast between knowledge and love in 8:1. In chapter 8, Paul encouraged the “knowledgeable” to act out of love for others. In 10:14, Paul tells the “knowledgeable” that his advice for them comes from an attitude of love. In the next verse, Paul writes, “I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say” (10:15). The Greek term translated “to sensible people” is φρόνιμοις, which means wise or prudent and is a key term in Stoic thought (Brookins 2014, 161). Back in 4:10, Paul wrote, “We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise (φρόνιμοι) in Christ.” The “knowledgeable” who think of themselves as wise are given the chance to demonstrate their wisdom by judging wisely.

### 1 Corinthians 10:23–33

Finally, we turn to the last section of Paul’s discussion of idol food, 10:23–11:1. Whereas in 8:1–13 and 10:1–22 Paul addressed eating idol food in a ritual setting (8:10; 10:16–21), in this final section, Paul addresses eating food of unknown provenance purchased at the market or served to one as a guest.

Structure of 10:23–11:1

[*Corinthian Slogan*]

<sup>23</sup>“All things are lawful,”

[*Paul’s Correction*]

but not all things are beneficial.

[*Corinthian Slogan*]

“All things are lawful,”

[*Paul’s Correction*]

but not all things build up.

[*Main Point: Concern for the Other*]

<sup>24</sup>Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.

[*Instructions for New Scenario 1: Purchasing Meat from the Market*]

<sup>25</sup>Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience, <sup>26</sup>for “the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s.”

[*Instructions for New Scenario 2: An Invitation from an Unbeliever*]

<sup>27</sup>If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

[*Main Point: Concern for the Other*]

<sup>28</sup>But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— <sup>29</sup>I mean the other’s conscience, not your own.

[*Anticipated Objection / Slogan from the “Strong”*]

For why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else’s conscience? <sup>30</sup>If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks?

[*Paul’s Response: Do All for God’s Glory (through Concern for the Other – next verse)*]

<sup>31</sup>So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.

[*Main Point: Concern for the Other*]

<sup>32</sup>Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, <sup>33</sup>just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved.

Paul begins by quoting a Corinthian slogan: “All things are lawful” (10:23). As before, Paul immediately corrects the slogan: “but not all things are beneficial.” He repeats the slogan, “All things are lawful,” and again corrects it: “but not all things build up (οικοδομεῖ)” (10:23). Here Paul returns to his language of 8:1: “Knowledge puffs up, but love *builds* up.” The focus remains on the unity and good of the whole *ekklesia*: “Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other” (10:24).

Paul introduces two specific situations in which a person might encounter food sacrificed to idols. The previous discussion in 8:1–13 and 10:1–22 assumed that idol food was eaten “in the temple of an idol” (8:10). Here, Paul addresses other locales: meat sold in the market (10:25) and served in a private home (10:27). In the first case, it is likely that most food—and especially meat—sold in the market had been sacrificed. However, as long as a person does



not know that the food has been sacrificed to an idol, it is permissible to eat it. Paul does not require that a believer go to unreasonable lengths to track the meat's provenance. Whether it is permissible to eat the meat depends on what one knows about it. Similarly, in the second case, it is likely that food presented in a social setting had been sacrificed. Paul allows the eating of the food so long as it is not specified as idol food, but, once it is, then eating it is no longer permitted. Paul says that this is out of consideration for the one who identified the food. Likely the one identifying the food as having been sacrificed would be another member of the Corinthian church, likely one of the "weak." That is, the "knowledgeable" can correctly exercise their "freedom" in the case of food of unknown provenance (Fotopoulos 2003, 236–37). They are not required to cease all social and business contacts with those who are not part of the *ekklesia*. However, once food is identified as idol food, eating it is no longer permitted. This takes into account the concern with the conscience of the "weak" from chapter 8 as well as the prohibition of idolatry in 10:14–22.

The next two verses may be the most difficult in 1 Corinthians 8–10. In 10:29b–30, Paul writes: "For why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks?" Scholars disagree about whether these phrases (1) are Paul's anticipation of how the "knowledgeable" might misunderstand what he has just said or (2) are Paul's own position.

I find the former position most convincing. If Paul spends all of chapter 9 explaining why he has given up a right he has for the sake of others and in chapter 8 encourages the "knowledgeable" in Corinth to give up their perceived freedom to eat idol food for the sake of the "weak," it would be confounding for Paul then to take the opposite position and say "why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else's conscience?" Along these lines, John Fotopoulos suggests that verses 29b–30 are "dialogical objections . . . posed as the Corinthian Strong's false conclusions in response to Paul's instructions in 10:27–29a;" that is, Paul "anticipate[s] the objections that the Strong might make to his restrictions of their liberty" (2003, 246). Along the same lines, Thiselton says 10:29b "is probably *rhetorical*, reflecting 'deliberation' in the manner of deliberative rhetoric . . . The question thus expresses the hypothetical or actual view that Paul has shown to be untenable for the reasons cited in the context" (2006, 165). In 10:29b–30, Paul does not speak for himself but raises a possible response to his teaching in 10:27–29a. However, the question raised in 10:29b–30 has already been answered in the preceding chapters, and so, Paul responds succinctly: "do everything for the glory of God" (10:31); "Give no offense" (10:32)<sup>21</sup> to anyone; and seek not your "own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved" (10:33). Just as Paul, as described in chapter 9, relinquishes his right to be paid as an apostle so that some may be saved, so too the Corinthians are to relinquish their right so that others may be saved. That is, Paul's response to the anticipated objection of the "knowledgeable" in 10:29b–30 is, think not of your own liberty, but of "the church of God" (10:32).

## Conclusion

In summary, Paul believes that those who are partners in the table of the Lord cannot also be partners in the tables of idols, whom he understands to be demons. The eating of food

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<sup>21</sup> This language of "offense" is common in political discourse encouraging unity (Mitchell 1993, 128–30).

sacrificed to an idol in the obviously cultic setting of a temple or its associated dining rooms is permissible under no circumstances. The eating of food of unknown provenance is permissible – either that purchased from the market or served in a friend’s home; however, if the food is identified as idol food, then it is not to be eaten.

Paul’s position on eating idol food must be distinguished from how he persuades the “knowledgeable” at Corinth to avoid eating idol food. Adhering to the goal of his letter—to urge unity within the Corinthian congregation—Paul exhorts the “knowledgeable” to refrain from eating idol food for the sake of the “weak.” He challenges the “knowledgeable” to think about their so-called knowledge not in the abstract but in terms of its effect on others within their own community. If their “knowledge” is a stumbling block for others, then it must be tempered with love that builds up the “weak” and builds up the *ekklesia* as a whole.

Paul argues that the beliefs and ritual practices of those in the Corinthian *ekklesia* determine how they are to behave in the public square. Those who drink the cup of the Lord and partake of the table of the Lord cannot also participate in the meals of the Roman gods, whom Paul identifies as demons. Uniting oneself with Christ in ritual meal and likewise uniting oneself to the body of Christ that is the *ekklesia* have consequences. The one who is united with Christ can no longer participate in the Roman religious practices occurring in the public square, including the eating of idol meat in temples, their associated dining rooms, or anywhere else the food is identified as having been sacrificed to an idol. Though the Corinthian *ekklesia* does not engage in its own rituals in the public square, those rituals preclude the possibility of engaging in the Roman rituals that do occur in the public square.

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