

In terms of its subject matter, chapter 10 is of course closely connected with chapter 8. At the end of that chapter – and throughout chapter 9 – Paul has made it clear that the grand principle on which he acted – and on which, by implication, the Corinthians should act – was that of self-denial. He now returns to deal further with the specific subject he began in chapter 8 – that of eating meats offered to idols. In our chapter, he is to consider three different questions which the Corinthians were no doubt compelled to ask regularly : (1) Whether it was right for the Christian to eat idol-meat if the meal involved direct association with one or more of the various false gods on offer, vv.15-22; (2) Whether it was right for the Christian to eat meat bought at the meat market, when the history of the meat wasn't known, vv.25-26; and (3) Whether it was right for the Christian to accept a dinner invitation from an unbeliever – when, again, the history of the meat being served was by no means clear, vv.27-28.

Let's begin with an overhead which provides an outline of the chapter. O/H

First, Paul provides us with '**Warnings from Israel's history in the wilderness**', 10.1-14.

The opening word of v.1 – 'for', not 'moreover' as in the KJV – directly links this section to the closing verses of chapter 9 – which pictured the Christian life as a race – and ended with the terrifying possibility of disqualification from the prize.

As he had done in vv.7-10 of chapter 9, Paul now proceeds to back up his illustration from contemporary life with clear biblical evidence and support.

The truth was that the Corinthians were far too complacent and self-confident – even to the point of throwing themselves in the way of temptation by partaking of idolatrous feasts. And the main point which Paul wishes to draw from the history of the Exodus generation of Israel is that spiritual privileges *never* guarantee spiritual victory – that great blessings in themselves are no insurance against falling to temptation. There is always the grim possibility that one who begins well may end badly. Just as competing in a race isn't to win the race – so setting out into the wilderness wasn't to enter the land. Indeed, in the case of Israel, *all* started but *almost all* were disqualified before the end. In the race described at the end of chapter 9, all start, all run but only one wins – in the history detailed at the beginning of chapter 10, all started, all were equally favoured but only two reached the finish.

If, at the close of chapter 9, Paul has observed that it is self-control which largely distinguishes the winner of the race from the other runners – he now shows that self-indulgence lay at the root of Israel's failure to reach the promised land.

Israel's blessings, vv.1-4

Paul uses the little adjective 'all' five times in this sub-section to stress that the blessings of the Exodus generation of Israel were common to everyone of them. They *all* enjoyed supernatural direction and protection ('they were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea'), they *all* enjoyed supernatural identification (they 'were all baptized unto (into) Moses'), and they *all* enjoyed supernatural provision (they 'did all eat the same spiritual food, and did all drink the same spiritual drink').

When Paul says 'They were all under the cloud' he uses a tense (the imperfect) which speaks of some continuing action in the past. From the very moment the people left Egypt, they all experienced the guidance of the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. But when he says 'and all passed through the sea', he uses a very different tense (the aorist) – which suggests a completed, finished experience. Israel had been boxed in – with the Reed Sea before them, the wilderness on either side, and the chariots of Pharaoh behind them. But then God acted swiftly and decisively, parted the waters of the Sea and let Israel through.

The children of Israel are the only people of whom I know who were baptised without even getting their feet wet.¹ Indeed, the only people who got wet that day were the Egyptians – and they weren't *baptised* – they were *drowned*, Heb. 11.29. When Paul tells us that they 'were all baptised into Moses' (lit) he uses a form of the verb (the middle voice) which suggests the voluntary nature of the act – that is, they chose to submit to this 'baptism' and in doing so submitted themselves to the leadership and authority of Moses.

And they were all sustained by the same divinely-provided food and drink. In describing both the food and the drink as 'spiritual', Paul isn't denying that it was literal food and drink. It certainly was that. Only literal and physical food could have met their need. As I see it, Paul uses the word 'spiritual' to remind the Corinthians that both the food and the drink were of undoubted supernatural origin.

Paul's statement in v.4 that 'Christ' was the 'spiritual Rock which followed them' raises some interesting questions. Personally, I believe that Paul was giving the word 'rock' a double meaning. There's no doubt that Paul has in mind the fact that the water which God gave Israel to drink had – on at least two occasions – come quite literally from a rock, Exod. 17.1-7; Num. 20.1-13. But, by playing on the word, he switches the meaning from a literal rock to a well-known title of God – *the Rock*'. I note that, by giving the word a capital letter, the translators of the KJV

thought so too. I was interested to discover that this particular title of God occurs five times in Deut. 32 – from which chapter the apostle will cull two of his Old Testament references later in our chapter.² And I suggest that ‘the Rock’ was a particularly appropriate divine title for Israel in the wilderness – conveying, as it does, ideas of stability, permanence, immutability and faithfulness – to stand in marked contrast to Israel’s own fickleness and faithlessness at the time. It was Christ, Paul is saying, who accompanied Israel through the wilderness – and it was therefore ‘Christ’ of course who they ‘tempted’ there, v.9. It was, Paul is saying, Christ who constantly provided them with water to drink – it was Christ who was their true source of refreshment for 40 years. This passage certainly speaks volumes about Paul’s convictions concerning the deity of the Lord Jesus.

I don’t suppose we can altogether rule out that Paul has in mind some kind of *parallel* between Israel’s ‘baptism’ and Christian baptism – and some kind of *parallel* between Israel’s ‘table in the wilderness’ (as the psalmist once described it, Psa. 78.19) and ‘the Lord’s table’, 10.19. If this is so, I suspect that Paul was warning the Corinthians – by means of the way in which these things link the one to the other – that neither their baptism nor their observance of the Lord’s Supper would afford them any magical protection if they dabble with idol worship – any more than the corresponding experiences of Israel had saved *them* from spiritual disaster.

Whether this is so or not, it seems clear to me that Paul chose the instances of Israel’s *failures* very carefully indeed – and with an eye to the particular issues currently facing the Christians of Corinth. I regard it as no coincidence that each of Israel’s falls resulted from temptations very similar to those now surrounding the Corinthian church. I will note the relevance of each episode as we go through.

And so, *Israel’s sins, vv.5-10*

If in vv.1-4, Paul lists *five* of Israel’s *initial* blessings, in vv. 6-10 he lists *five* of their *subsequent* failures and sins. It all went wrong because, although God met their needs – they didn’t meet His requirements – not by a long chalk.

Paul introduces this second sub-section with the statement, ‘But with many (‘the majority’, lit) of them God was not well pleased’, v.5. But even the correct translation ‘the majority’ is a vast – and deliberate – *understatement*. The fact is that, when Israel were numbered in the second year after they came out of Egypt, there were well over 600,000 men aged 20 and upwards, Num. 2.32 – this apart from the priests and Levites, Num. 3-4. And of these 600,000, only two men made it through to the land of Canaan, Num. 26.63-65. And that’s not a good success rate in anyone’s book!

Indeed, if we assume that the number of women roughly matched the number of men, we can safely estimate a population of around 1.2 million aged 20 and older. As far as I know, the Bible makes no direct comment about what happened to the women of Israel during Israel’s wanderings but it may well be that not one of the women who, when they came out of Egypt, were aged 20 and above reached the end of the wilderness. In which case the survival rate was only two out of over 1.2 million! And what happened to all the others? Oh, Paul says, the rest were ‘overthrown in the wilderness’ – the word translated ‘overthrown’ being that from which we get our word ‘catastrophe’.³ And it was certainly a catastrophe for them! Hundreds of thousands of corpses – once fed full with supernatural nourishment – littered the wilderness like so many leaves.

Paul draws his evidence from five case studies. Ignoring their chronological sequence, he rushes us from Num. 11, through Exod. 32, Num. 25, and Num. 21, to end up in Num. 16. Without pretending to understand it, we will follow Paul’s order :

V.6. ‘These things were our examples’ – our patterns – literally ‘types of us’. Note in passing how, both here and in v.11, Paul includes himself among those who need to pay heed to the lessons being taught. I hardly need to say it but ‘If Paul needed the lessons ...’.

‘They also lusted’ – ‘they also craved – they also longed with great longing’. This particular word occurs in the Septuagint in connection with only one wilderness episode – that recorded in Num. 11 – where the word is found several times. I quote, ‘The mixed multitude who were among them *lusted* : and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish, which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic ... he called the name of that place Kibroth-hattaavah (graves of *lust*), because there they buried the people who had *lusted*’, Num.11. 4-5, 34.

I pause only to observe that Israel retained an appetite for the kind of food they had enjoyed before they were redeemed – for the kind of food which they had once left behind – and for which they had no need. Perhaps – just perhaps, O Corinthians, a hint that eating idol food is by no means essential – the very point which Paul had made back in 8.8.

V.7. A straight lift from Exod. 32.7. Note the direct connection which Paul makes between (i) idolatry and (ii) eating and drinking. But it’s likely that the Israelites indulged themselves without restraint in more ways than one – that the ‘play’ mentioned wasn’t as innocent as it sounds – that they weren’t playing Monopoly or ‘ring around the rosey’

– but that they were engaged in licentious acts of immoral sexual behaviour. Idolatry linked with eating – and worse ... are you listening, O Corinthians?

V.8. Then, Mr Corinthian, you might like to note that Israel's great sin at Baal-Peor, recorded in Num. 25, forges an even stronger link between idolatry and immoral behaviour – and – again – eating! I quote, 'The people began to *commit fornic-ation* with the daughters of Moab. And they (the daughters of Moab – adopting the 'counsel of Balaam', Num. 31.16) called the people *to the sacrifices of their gods*: and the people did *eat*, and *bowed down to their gods*', Num. 25.1-2. Idol sacrifices, idol worship and eating ... do you see the connection, O Corinthians?⁴

V.9. They 'tempted' – they tried the Lord's patience. We are now in Num. 21, where 'the people spoke against God, and against Moses, Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is *no food* ... and our soul loathes this worthless bread', v.5. Oh, they had food enough for their needs, of course, but they fancied something different. As Psa. 78.18 puts it, 'they tempted God in their heart by asking food to meet their desire' – not their need. And the result was the fiery serpents! Again, as in Num. 11, the specific cause of Israel's grumbling was the menu. Still tuned in, O Corinthians?

V.10. And 'some of them murmured' – which they did on many occasions – but in particular at the time of the occasion of the rebellion of Korah – when, as a result of their murmuring, God was angry and sent a plague which destroyed 14,700 of them, Num. 16.41-50. But what, we may wonder, has this to say to the Corinthian situation? This time there's no mention either of idolatry or the food which one should or should not eat. Yes, true enough – but given the challenge which some at Corinth were already posing to Paul's authority and apostleship, is it not relevant that Num. 16 was the occasion when the authority of God's accredited servants (Moses and Aaron) was challenged and set aside by others – with disastrous consequences. Hopefully, O Corinthians, you won't miss the point.

Conclusion 1 : Don't ignore, v.11

'All these things happened' – better 'these things came to be'. It's not that these things just 'happened' to Israel by chance – they weren't random historical events – first they were allowed by God 'for ensamples' – or 'types'. And then they were recorded by God, Paul says, to provide instruction to *us* – to flash red lights of warning in our faces which we ignore at our peril.

By using the expression 'the ends of the world' – literally 'the ends of the ages', it's possible that Paul intends to stress that – whereas Israel's experiences at the Exodus and in the wilderness are to be found in a relatively early chapter of God's great plan and purpose for men – we – the church – live in an 'age' when the events of the last chapter have already begun to unfold.

Conclusion 2 : Don't presume, v.12

Now comes the punch-line! This, Paul says, is the one central lesson which these events teach – 'Wherefore (so that) let him who is thinking that he stands take heed lest he falls'. Don't fool yourselves, Paul is saying – none of us can afford to be complacent – the experiences of ancient Israel shout too loud and clear a warning. Only two out of 1.2 *million* actually finished their course! We *must* learn from their mistakes. Ah, but will we? One German philosopher of the nineteenth century wrote, 'What experience and history teach is this – that nations and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted upon any lessons they might have drawn from it'.⁵ Clearly, Paul is hopeful that the Corinthians will do better!

If in chapter 8, Paul taught them that a believer's attitude to *idol meat* should be determined by his concern for his brother – because his brother is 'weak' – in this chapter, he teaches them that a believer's attitude to *idolatry itself* should be determined by his concern for himself – because *he* is considerably weaker than he thinks – and idolatry is far more dangerous than he has ever imagined. It's necessary, he is saying, for you, Mr Corinthian, to avoid idolatry not only for the sake of others but for your own sake too. For it's not only that the 'weak' brother may be caused to 'stumble', but the supposedly strong brother is in real danger of falling as well.

I have to say that, having been a Christian for a little over 40 years, I find it salutary in the extreme that the incident mentioned in v.8 is found in Numbers 25 – at the end of Israel's 40 years of wanderings – when the people who fell had already surmounted many obstacles, had already overcome many temptations, and had so far come through unscathed. They were on what would have been their last lap – but they never finished it!

The Lord wants us to know – and never forget – that we are most vulnerable when we least realise it.

Conclusion 3 : Don't despair, v.13

But, if in vv. 1-12 we are admonished by *Israel's failures*, in v.13 we are encouraged by *God's faithfulness*.

The temptations in view in this verse are obviously temptations to sin and failure. We are specifically told that these are temptations which God 'allows' – not trials and testings which He sends. These are temptations from which He

makes a way out for us – not trials and testings which He leads us through. We have good authority for saying that God Himself never tempts anyone like this, James 1.13 – that temptations to sin stem either from within or from our arch foe – the devil – the ‘tempter’, as Paul described him, 1 Thess. 3.5.

But *everyone* of these temptations, Paul says, is ‘common to man’. Rest assured, no temptation is unique to us – and, for that reason – apart from anything else – we have no excuse for our failure and sin – because others have grappled with exactly the same temptations and have overcome them. And how did they do that, do you suppose? By availing themselves of the provision – the ‘way of escape’ – which God is pledged to make always available. For Paul vouches for the fact that the faithful God⁶ will never permit any of His people to be tempted beyond what he or she is able to handle. I recently read something on similar lines which really made me sit up and think – the statement was made – ‘The very gates of hell cannot make us stumble unless we *choose* to remove ourselves from (God’s) protection and power’.⁷ So when we fail and when we fall, it certainly isn’t because God’s provision isn’t great enough – or because He doesn’t make sufficient of that provision available to us.

Paul assures us that no-one needs to despair in the face of the very fiercest enemy attack. We can all take heart today – knowing that when our faithful God allows one of us His children to pass through the fire and furnace of temptation, in the words of Warren Wiersbe, He ‘keeps His hand on the thermostat and His eye on the thermometer’!⁸

But, Paul, do I therefore have no responsibility as far as the ‘way of escape’ is concerned? Oh yes indeed - and very often, as was once the case with godly young Joseph, Gen. 39.12, the ‘way of escape’ is literally a clear road and two good legs!

Conclusion 4 : Don’t dabble, v.14

‘Flee idolatry’. Interestingly, Paul uses a somewhat stronger word for ‘flee’ here than he did in 6.18 in the context of fornication – the word here meaning to ‘flee far’. And when we stir in the fact that Paul uses the present tense, we get the result – ‘Flee far, and keep on fleeing far’. Give idolatry the widest possible berth, Paul is saying, shun it completely.

But as I see it, v.14 isn’t only the conclusion of the opening section of the chapter – it forms the bridge between the first section and vv.15-22. Because in vv.15-22 Paul reinforces the conclusion reached in v.14 – showing that any contact with idolatry is not only *downright dangerous* for the Christian – it is *altogether irreconcilable* with Christianity. The Christian not only *should* avoid it – he *must* avoid it.

Fellowship – with whom or with what?, 10.15-22

The ‘wise’, v.15

‘I speak’, he says, ‘as to wise – to sensible, prudent – men’ – a different word to that translated ‘wise in chapters 1 and 2. I don’t believe – particularly following his term of endearment, ‘my beloved’, in v.14 – that Paul is being sarcastic. The Corinthians gloried in their knowledge – but, Paul wants to know, were they practically wise as well? If they were, they would readily understand his next point – that all those who take part in a religious meal have fellowship with the one – whether divine or demonic – who stands, so to speak, behind the meal.

Taken together, the two words translated ‘communion’, ‘fellowship’ and ‘partakers’ occur six times in vv.16-21.⁹ These words differ little – if at all – in meaning. Both mean ‘to participate’, ‘to share with somebody in something’. Paul speaks of three very different fellowships in this passage: (1) the believer’s fellowship with the body and blood of Christ, (2) the Israelite’s fellowship with the Jewish altar, and (3) the Gentile’s fellowship with demons. Through the bread and the cup of the Lord’s supper – Christians have fellowship with what these symbolize – the body and blood of Christ – and with the One who stands behind the whole supper – namely, the Lord Jesus, vv.16-17. Through partaking of the peace offerings – part of which have been offered on the altar of burnt offering, the children of Israel have fellowship both with the altar and with the One who stands behind it – namely, the God of Israel. And through the idol image and the sacrifices offered to it, pagans have fellowship with the demons which stand behind the whole system of idol worship. Just then as the supper links the Christian to Christ – and just as the peace offering links the Israelite to the Jewish altar – so too the idol-feast links the pagan to demons.

First, *the fellowship of Christ, vv.16-17*

In these verses, Paul speaks of two bodies of Christ – His own, actual, physical body in v.16 – and His body which is the church in v.17. Here then we encounter another example of Paul’s using a word with a double-meaning – which we have already met with the word ‘Rock’ in v.4, and which we will meet again with the word ‘head’ in the beginning of the next chapter. Both bodies are symbolized in the bread of the supper. On the one hand, the bread focuses on the finished work of Christ – accomplished once for all in His physical body. On the other hand, it focuses on the unity of His body the church through which He, the Head, is largely accomplishing His unfinished work today.

The title 'the cup of (the) blessing' has nothing properly to do with the fact that our 'blessings' come to us on account of the blood which the contents of the cup symbolises. The words follow a Hebrew construction meaning 'the cup over which a blessing is pronounced'. This was the title given to the third of the cups of the Jewish Passover ceremony – being the cup for which Jesus gave thanks at the end of the Passover supper. For us to bless and partake of the cup is for us symbolically to partake of what the cup represents. Our drinking of the cup symbolises our participation by faith in benefits of the blood which the Lord Jesus shed for the forgiveness of sins.

I suggest that the cup is mentioned before the bread on this occasion – not so much because of the role played by a cup in the idol feasts – which comes to the fore in v.21 – nor because it is the blood of Christ which provides the basis of all our blessings – but because Paul wants to enlarge on the significance and symbolic meaning of the bread – which he does at the end of v.16 and in v.17 – and this could more easily be done if the bread is mentioned last.

The main thrust of Paul's argument in this section is concerned with the fellowship which the Christian has with the Lord Jesus Himself – and which is irreconcilable with having fellowship with demons – but he can't resist making a passing reference in v.17 to a second implication of the one bread of which Christians partake – literally, 'Because it is one bread, we the many are one body – for we all partake of one bread'. That is, contrary to the KJV, we aren't said to be one bread – we are said to be one body because we all partake of the one bread. And so, when Christians share the one bread – when they each break off a fragment of the one bread – they express both their fellowship with Christ personally on the ground of His body given in death – and their fellowship and oneness with all other members of the body of Christ, the church.

In summary, when you and I partake of the bread each Lord's day, we identify ourselves symbolically with that which the bread represents – our Lord's body – both His actual body, given in death, v.16, and His body, the church, v.17.

The fellowship of the Jewish altar, v.18

Of Israel, Paul says, 'Are not those who eat the sacrifices partakers of the altar'. That is, they share in the benefits of what happens on the altar and enter into fellowship both with the altar and with Him whose altar it is. I am not aware of any instance where the Septuagint actually uses either of the words translated in our chapter 'communion', 'fellowship' and 'partaker' in connection either with the altar of burnt offering or with any of the sacrifices offered on it. But the reference to 'eating' of the sacrifices points unmistakably to the peace offering of Leviticus 3, 7 and 19 – labeled 'the Fellowship Offering' in some modern translations (although titled 'the Thank Offering' in others). Yes, Paul speaks here in terms of 'sacrifices' and not of 'offerings' – but each of Leviticus 3, 7 and 19 speak throughout of 'the sacrifice of peace offerings'. Of these sacrifices, the Lord received His share first – being the blood (for consecration) and the fat (the best, the choice part) – two portions (the breast and right shoulder) went to the priests – and the remainder was returned to the offerer – to provide a communal meal for him and his family and friends – which was eaten 'before the Lord'.¹⁰

At that 'peace offering' meal the offerer and his guests enjoyed fellowship not only with one another – in that they participated together in the common meal – but with the Lord God Himself. In effect they had the opportunity of close communion with Him, knowing that all was well (ie 'peaceful') between Him and them, and sharing in His appreciation and acceptance of the offering which had been presented and consecrated to Him.¹¹

The fellowship of demons, vv.19-20

'What do I imply then?', Paul asks. In effect, 'am I contradicting myself'. In the verses before, Paul has argued that the fellowship which is established between the worshippers and the object of their worship by means of what they eat and drink is very real. Does this mean then – in spite of all that he had said in chapter 8 – that he did in fact attribute a real and genuine existence to those gods who supposedly presided at the heathen feasts and banquets? Certainly not! And to guard against any possible misunderstanding, he makes it clear that neither the idol itself – nor the food offered to the idol – is anything – points established earlier back in chapter 8 (vv.4, 8).

But, v.20, the fact that the heathen deities have no existence doesn't mean that idolatry is therefore harmless. Far from it – because idolatry provides the channel for occult powers to engage and connect with men. It isn't that the demons live in the statues – but they do, so to speak, stand behind all forms of idol worship and exploit to the full men's readiness to worship the idols. That is, the lifeless images – and the non-existent gods they represent – mask a bona fide connection between the idol and the demonic power behind the idol.¹²

The pagan ritual of eating a meal in honour of the idol functioned, Paul is saying, as a very real 'communion service'. And for the Christian to sit at the idol 'table' was – whether he meant to do so or not – for him to acknowledge and share in the idol worship – and in so doing to have fellowship with very real malign spirits – a fact which some of the Corinthians hadn't grasped.

As an aside, it is alarming to find so much New Age material on the internet - material explicitly devoted to pagan ritual in 2004 as a channel of intercourse with the powers of darkness and even with the overlord of the empire of evil himself.

I suggest that, given the situation at Corinth, the Old Testament quote which Paul makes in v.20 was particularly apt. It seems likely from vv.4-6 of chapter 8 that those who championed the liberty to eat idol-meats in any situation based their argument – at least in part - on the ‘Shema’ of Deut. 6.4 – ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord’. Here Paul draws his arrow from the very same quiver – and quotes himself from Deuteronomy – this time from Deut. 32.17 – to prove that Christians couldn’t sit at an idol’s table! In other words, ‘Your *knowledge*, Mr Corinthian, takes as its starting point the teaching of Deut. 6 – then let your *wisdom* take into account the teaching of chapter 32 also’.

Conclusion, v.21

Paul points – not so much to the *incompatibility* of the Lord’s supper and idolatrous feasts – nor even to the *inconsistency* of someone partaking of both – but to the moral and spiritual *impossibility* of partaking of both – in words reminiscent of the no-nonsense saying of the Lord Jesus, ‘No man can serve two masters ... you *cannot* serve God and mammon’, Matt. 6.24.

Paul speaks of the ‘cup’ and of the ‘table’ of demons. Cups played an important part at any idol meal – with cups of wine being shared among the worshippers after a few drops had first been poured out as a libation (drink-offering) in honour of the host-deity. In the fierce persecution orchestrated by the Roman emperor Decius some 200 years later, apostates from the Christian faith were required to sign certificates which declared, ‘I have poured out a libation and have partaken of the offerings’. And we may detect yet another echo from Deut. 32 – for v.38 of that chapter speaks of the false and foreign gods who ate the fat of the sacrifices and who drank the wine of the drink offering made by Israel.

For the expression ‘table of’, you might remember the quotes on the **OH1** from chapter 8. We saw that – whether in the temple precinct or in your own dining room – the meal (the ‘table’, that is) was seen as a natural sequel to the idol sacrifice and involved the fiction that the god was the true host – the fiction that he had provided the food and presided over the ‘table’. To eat at ‘the table’ of the idol therefore involved someone in fellowship both with idolaters and with their supposed god.

Isaiah pictures the scene well for us in 65.11, ‘But you who forsake the Lord, who forget My holy mountain – who set a *table* for Fortune (or Luck – from which Gad the son of Zilpah got his name) – and fill *cups* of mixed wine for Destiny (or Fate)’ – two pagan gods of the day.

Meals of this kind were thought to unite men and the gods in actual table fellowship. The gods were regarded not only as having provided the sacrificial meal but as sharing the meal along with their human companions at the ‘table’. It was for this reason that, on special occasions, images of the gods were placed in a reclining position on couches with food before them, as if they really were partaking of the things which had been offered in sacrifice.¹³

I suggest that the expression ‘the table of the Lord’ doesn’t refer to any literal table – but rather stands for the bread and the cup which would be placed on a table – and which, according to vv.16-17, express the fellowship we enjoy with the Lord Jesus through His body and blood given in sacrifice for us.¹⁴

When speaking of the meat offered to idols, Paul has made it abundantly clear that the meat in and of itself has no significance, v.19. Communion and fellowship with demons only takes place when the food is eaten in an atmosphere of idol worship. That is, a mechanical and thoughtless participation in the physical substance – even when this is done properly in accordance with all the rules – does not create fellowship. And the same holds true of the bread and cup of the Lord’s supper. And one obvious and very practical implication of this for us is that Paul expects the Christian to look beyond the emblems to that which they represent and symbolize – a point to which he will return with force in the second half of the next chapter.

For now, Paul hammers home the point that loyalty to Christ excludes all other loyalties – that allegiance to Christ excludes all other allegiances – that fellowship with Christ excludes all other fellowships – and the fellowship of demons in particular.

The ‘strong’, v.22

‘Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy?’ is yet another apposite quote from Deut. 32 – from vv.16, 21 this time. I say ‘apposite’ because, in their context, Moses’ words relate to idolatrous practices among God’s people. It is just possible that Paul means, ‘In having fellowship with demons, do the self-styled ‘strong’ among you imagine that they are ‘stronger’ than the Lord?’

Christian liberty, 10.23-11.1

In a nutshell, because all forms of idolatry are both dangerous and irreconcilable with Christianity, they must be given a very wide berth. Well, fine - but there were two questions on the subject of idol meats which still await answers – and which the Corinthians probably posed in their letter to Paul. The first was, whether it was right to purchase and eat idol meat which was offered for sale indiscriminately with other meat in the market¹⁵. And the second was whether it was right for the Christian to accept an invitation to a meal from an unbeliever, knowing that it was at least possible that they would be tucking into idol meat together.

Seeking the profit of others, vv.23-24

This final section, 10. 23-11.1 starts and closes on much the same note – that of seeking the benefit of others. Both at the beginning and the end, Paul highlights the importance of ‘seeking’ (the word of both v. 24 and v. 33) the salvation and advantage of others (the word ‘expedient’ – profitable, beneficial – of v.23 being more or less the same as the word ‘profit’ in v.33). Clearly the apostle attached enormous importance to the good and advantage of others.

Freedom to buy in the market, vv.25-26

Paul distinguishes very plainly between idol meat which was eaten in situations which were patently idolatrous from meat which *may* have been offered to an idol, but which wasn’t known to be such – whether purchased in the ‘shambles’ – the meat-market¹⁶, or served up as part of a meal provided by a neighbour. Paul is clear – the Christian didn’t need to worry himself about either of these last two situations. No evil would come of eating such meat. Even if it *had* once come from an animal offered in sacrifice, it wasn’t being eaten at an idol feast and it wasn’t being eaten in recognition of an idol. There was, therefore, no danger of fellowship with demons.

The over-scrupulous among the Corinthians wanted to know where the meat had been before it reached the market. Paul says that its hoofmarks didn’t matter in the slightest – in the final analysis the food came from God who owns and provides all. They were deeply exercised about the *immediate* origins and associations of the joint of meat – but – given its *ultimate* origin – they needn’t be – for God was its maker and no amount of offering to idols would – or could – contaminate or infect it. If God created it, then in itself it is good – and can be eaten without any qualms – because as the apostle later assured Timothy, ‘Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God [for God has pronounced all foods clean] and prayer’, 1 Tim. 4.4-5.

Freedom to attend meals with unbelievers and to eat anything put before them, v.27

As we have seen, some Corinthians were so liberated in their thinking that they felt free to eat idol-meat in any setting – including that of a pagan religious ceremony. But others went to the opposite extreme and were so sensitive on the matter that, as we have just seen, they wouldn’t eat anything without first knowing its entire history. Every meal must have been like an inquisition – with the host being grilled (sorry about that!) about the origin of the meat being served.

But, as far as an invitation to dine from a non-Christian was concerned, Paul’s answer was ‘By all means go if you wish, and as far as what is set before you is concerned, “Don’t ask!” – don’t raise any question on the ground of your conscience – whatever the meat’s previous history – it hasn’t been polluted – by idols, gods or demons! There’s no need for you to hire a private detective before you accept a dinner invitation!

I note that v.27 doesn’t actually say that the meal was to be held in the unbeliever’s own home. I guess that, in theory at least, it could have taken place in one of many eating places – although I assume not in a club-room or restaurant annexed to the temple – because then it would have been obvious to all that the meal would include idol food – and would make absolute nonsense of Paul telling the believer to ‘ask no question for conscience sake’ and of Paul imagining somebody pointing out ‘This is sacrificed to deity!’

I suspect that this is the very principle on which Paul worked himself. I just can’t see ‘the apostle to the gentiles’ refusing to accept invitations to meals from the very people he was sent to reach – although before his conversion to Christ, the Jewish food laws would certainly have required him to give such meals a miss.

To me, the clear implication of what Paul said in vv.9-11 of chapter 5 is that he regarded the believer as having perfect liberty to eat with a non-Christian idolater – ‘I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with fornicators. (I like the New English Bible rendering, ‘...have nothing to do with loose livers’ – the mind boggles!); not at all meaning with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous and robbers, or with *idolaters*; since you would then need to go out of the world. But rather I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an *idolater* ... not even to eat with such a one’. Paul’s intention then was not to isolate the believer from the pagans around but to separate him from those who professed to be Christians but who lived like pagans.

‘But what if ...?’, vv.28-30

Personally, I regard vv.28-30 as covering both of the situations described in vv.25-27 – that is, both meat purchased in the butchers and meat forming part of a meal provided by a non-Christian.

As a generalisation, the believer is free to eat whatever meat is available. But there is, Paul adds, one notable exception. If somebody present volunteers the information that either (i) the joint of meat the Christian has bought – or is about to buy – in the market – or (ii) the main dish on the unbeliever's table has previously been offered to an idol – then the Christian *must* refrain from eating it. Clearly, the man who has spoken up is making an issue about the meat's previous history because it is important to him – and probably because he thinks it should be important to the Christian who will otherwise eat it. The fact that it affects *his* 'conscience', v.29a, points to the man being a fellow-Christian – who is himself most scrupulous about idol food, and, who knowing somehow the circumstances in regard to this particular meat, feels it necessary to warn his brother – interestingly using the word to describe the meat which a pagan would use – 'that which is consecrated or sacrificed to deity' – not the deliberately insulting term normally used by Jews and Christians – 'food offered to an idol' – which is used by Paul in chapter 8 and in v.19 of our chapter.

I don't pretend that vv.29b-30 are easy to understand in their context. There's no doubt that the questions Paul poses might be read as contradicting everything he has been saying since the beginning of chapter 8. That is, they could be taken as suggesting that a Christian's 'liberty' (his freedom) to eat idol food should not be criticised by somebody else's over-sensitive conscience – and that nobody should speak evil of a man who eats something for which he has given God thanks – even if this something had once been offered to an idol. But, given everything which Paul *has* been saying up to this point, this can't be right.

For what it is worth, I read Paul's words as providing an additional reason why a Christian should abstain from eating if the weak brother present points out that the meat in question is idol meat. I understand Paul's two questions as showing that to eat meat sacrificed to idols in such a circumstance is altogether wrong.¹⁷

The man who would otherwise have felt at liberty to eat should abstain, Paul says – not only because he might otherwise become a cause of stumbling to his brother – but because of the aggravation and provocation he is going to cause by bringing upon himself the condemnation of his brother – who, with his sensitive conscience, genuinely looks on the man about to eat as doing something seriously wrong. What is there to gain, Paul wants to know – what possible good can come – by the stronger brother doing something which he doesn't need to do – but which will cause his brother to censure him? How utterly incongruous that a man should deliberately rouse his brother to revile him (to 'blaspheme' him, literally) – on account of that very thing for which he expresses words of thanks to God! Why, the apostle wants to know, *should* we insist on exercising our freedom in such a way as to give unnecessary offence?

'Why should we selfishly exhibit our liberty to eat meat when we know that this will lead our brother to misunderstand entirely what we are doing and therefore to condemn us for condoning idolatry. Frankly, it would be outrageous for us to needlessly upset and provoke our brother'.

General guiding principles, vv.31-32

And so to the bottom line – Paul makes it clear that his main concern lies – not with a man's external behavior but with the underlying attitude of his heart – and states in two short verses the basic principles which should guide every Christian in every situation.

The one principle, stated in v.31, governs our actions in terms of our relationship to God. The other principle, stated in v.32, governs our actions in terms of our relationship to men.

The one looks on the positive side and requires that glory should be brought to God in all things. The other looks on the negative side and requires that offence¹⁸ should be caused to no-one in anything.

Seeking the profit of others, 10.33-11.1 – as in vv.23-24

Paul closes the section by switching from the second person plural – e.g. 'whatsoever *you* do' – to the first person singular – 'even as *I*'. And because he is able to refer to his practice – 'even as I please all men' – as well as to his principle, he can sign off by instructing them 'be imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ', 11.1. What a wonderful note on which to end – by turning their minds – and ours – to the One who – supremely – did all for the glory of God, John 17.4, caused no needless 'offence', Matt. 17.27, and 'pleased not Himself', Rom. 15.3 – all the way through looking not on His own things but on the things of others, Phil. 2.4. 'Let this mind be in you', Paul would say to us.

¹ 'He turned the sea into dry land: they went through the flood on foot', Psa. 66.6.

² Historically, the book of Deuteronomy follows immediately after the period covered by 1 Cor. 10.1-11. Paul makes several interesting quotations from – or allusions to – Deuteronomy 32 in the chapter as a whole :

1 Cor. 10.4 speaks of 'the Rock' – which is a divine title, occurring no less than five times in Deut. 32 – viz in vv. 4, 15, 18, 30 and 31. No other section of the Old Testament boasts so many references to the title in such a small space.

1 Cor. 10.15 refers to 'wise men' – a possible allusion to the words of Deut. 32.29 – 'O that they were wise'. Paul uses the same word as in the Septuagint of Deut. 32.29.

1 Cor. 10.20 is a direct quotation from Deut. 32.17 – and follows very closely the wording of the Septuagint.

1 Cor. 10.21 refers to the 'cup' and 'table' associated with idolatry – and may provide a parallel to Deut. 32.37-38 – 'Where are their gods ...which did eat the fat of their sacrifices, and drank the wine of their drink offerings'.

1 Cor. 10.22 asks, 'Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy?' – that is, in having fellowship with 'demons' – for, as Paul had earlier pointed out, the idol itself is nothing – it is not a god, v.19. It is quite possible therefore that Paul is alluding to Deut. 32.21 – 'They have moved me to jealousy, with that which is not God' – indeed, it is noticeable that Paul uses the very word meaning 'to provoke to jealousy' which appears in the Septuagint of Deut. 32.21.

Perhaps the apostle was reading through – or studying – Deuteronomy 32 when he dictated 1 Corinthians 10.

³ The expression translated 'overthrown in the wilderness' matches the very words of the Septuagint of Num. 14.16.

⁴ It is well known that Num. 25.9 quotes the number who fell at Baal-Peor as 24,000 – and not 23,000 as quoted by Paul. The most likely reconciliation lies in Paul's words 'in one day' – a phrase which doesn't feature in Num. 25. I take it that, although the vast majority of the 24,000 who died in the plague, Num. 25.9, did so on a single day, some 1,000 died on a different day.

I note that, before the destructive plague broke out, God commanded the judges of Israel to 'hang all the heads (the leaders) of the people' who had condoned and encouraged the worship of Baal-Peor, v.4, and that Jewish tradition ascribed 1,000 deaths to the action of the judges described in Num. 25.5 (Donald Guthrie, *The New Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 1064). The explanation does not lie here, however, because Num. 25.9 explicitly says that 24,000 'died in the plague'.

⁵ G.W.F Hegel. Compare, 'Those who forget history are bound to repeat it', George Santayana.

⁶ Compare 1 Cor. 1.9.

⁷ A fax from Larry Libby, quoted on page 29 of 'Finishing Strong' by Steve Farrar, Multnomah Publishers. Compare the apostle Peter's assertion, 'His divine power [Wow!] has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness', 2 Pet. 1.3.

⁸ Warren W. Wiersbe on page 16 of 'Be Encouraged', Scripture Press.

⁹ The one occurs twice in v.16 and once each in vv.18 and 20. The other occurs once each in vv.17,21. In this passage, they appear to be entirely synonymous.

¹⁰ Lev. 3.1-17; 7.11-34; 19.5-8; Deut. 12.5-7.

¹¹ See Richard E. Averbeck's articles in W. A. VanGemeren's 'Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis'; Volume 4, pages 135-142, 1000-1001 and 1004.

¹² Deut. 29.17; 32.17-21; Psa. 106.36-37; Lev. 17.7; Rev. 9.20.

¹³ See footnote 11 to chapter 8.

¹⁴ Interestingly, the burnt offering altar of Israel is also described as 'the table of the Lord', Mal. 1.7,12 – being the same expression in the Septuagint as that in 1 Cor. 10.21; cf. 'My table', Ezek. 44.16. In that Paul has referred to this altar only three verses before (v.18), it was clearly open to him to draw attention here to the three 'tables' of fellowship (Christian, Jewish and pagan) – and not just the two (Christian and pagan). But, equally clearly, this did not fit into his line of argument.

¹⁵ At Pompeii, for example, not all meat sold in the 'Macellum' (meat-market) was sacrificial meat.

¹⁶ 'In the agora [at Corinth] ... shops lined the sides. In one of these shops a stone block was found which originally was a doorstep; it bears an inscription reading "Lucius, the butcher". This may indicate the section of shops which was the Corinthian meat market mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10.25 ...', Biblical Archeology, G. Ernest Wright, Duckworth.

¹⁷ The main alternative interpretations seem to be : (i) Paul provides a balance to what he has been saying before and now contends for the principle of liberty. That is, he would be saying something along the lines, 'Although (out of love and consideration for my brother) I may choose to let his conscience affect my action, this doesn't mean that his conscience can govern and control my actions. For the sake of others I may refuse to avail myself of my liberty to eat – but this doesn't mean that it ceases to be my liberty. (ii) Paul voices an objection which could well be lodged by those whose consciences permitted them to eat idol meats – 'But why should my liberty be curtailed on account of someone else's scruples?' (iii) Paul concludes his study of the subject by quoting back at the Corinthians two of the 'loaded' questions which had formed part of their letter to him – 'You asked why your liberty should be judged by the conscience of another brother. Well, I have explained why'.

In my view, each of these interpretations utterly fail to account for the conjunction 'for' which comes at the beginning of v. 29b. With alternative (i), the questions would need to be introduced by some such expression as 'But on the other hand ...'. With alternative (ii), the questions would need to be introduced by a 'But ...'. And we would be left with no answer to the questions – vv.31-32 certainly don't attempt to answer them, commencing as these verses do with a 'therefore'. With alternative (iii), the questions would need to be introduced by some such expression as, 'So now you see why ...'. As far as I know, the only interpretation which does proper justice to the conjunction 'for' is that set out in the main text – in that it understands the apostle to be backing up what he has just said about not eating for the sake of the other man's conscience – hence the 'for'. 'Because otherwise', he is arguing, 'I only cause unnecessary offence by insisting on my cherished liberty to eat'.

¹⁸ The word translated 'offence' – is different to that used both in 1.23 and 8.13. In these other references, the word means 'to snare or to trap'. The word here, similar to that translated 'stumbling-block' in 8.9, means 'to strike one's foot against an obstacle, to stumble'. Although this particular word *can* be used figuratively with the wider sense 'to cause displeasure and irritation, to lead someone to take exception to something', in the context of 1 Cor. 10.32 its meaning is probably restricted to 'doing something which either shakes somebody's existing faith or keeps somebody back from faith' – note Paul's reference in v.33 to people being 'saved'. In the case of the 'Jews' or the 'Gentiles' (better 'Greeks') of v.32, a Christian's actions can be the means of holding unbelievers back from Christ. In the case of 'the church of God', a Christian's actions can be the means of causing other believers to stumble.

1 CORINTHIANS 10.1-11.1

1. Warnings from Israel's history in the wilderness, 10.1-14

(i) Israel's blessings, vv.1-4

(ii) Israel's sins, vv.5-10

(iii) Conclusions :

- Don't ignore, v.11
- Don't presume, v.12
- Don't despair, v.13
- Don't dabble, v.14

2. Fellowship – with whom or with what?, 10.15-22

(i) The 'wise', v.15

(ii) The fellowship of Christ, vv.16-17

(iii) The fellowship of the Jewish altar, v.18

(iv) The fellowship of demons, vv.19-20

(v) Conclusion, v.21

(vi) The 'strong', v.22

3. Christian liberty, 10.23-11.1

(i) Seeking the profit of others, vv.23-24

(ii) Freedom to buy in the market, vv.25-26

(iii) Freedom to eat at an unbeliever's meal, v.27

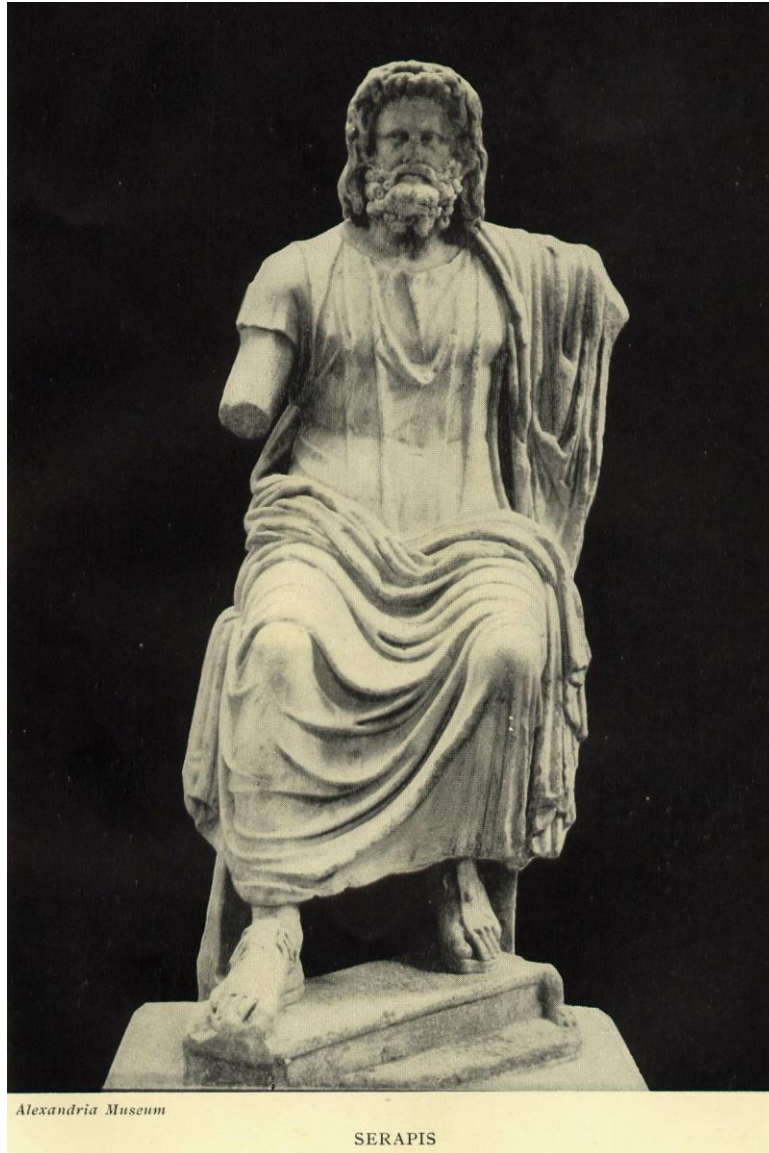
(iv) 'But what if ...?', vv.28-30

(v) General guiding principles, vv.31-32

(vi) Seeking the profit of others, 10.33-11.1

Two examples of ancient invitations to meals

‘Chairemon invites you to a meal at the table [*literally ‘couch’ or ‘sofa’*] of the lord Serapis *in the temple of Serapis*, tomorrow the 15th from 9 o’clock onwards’.



‘Antonius, son of Ptolemais, invites you to dine with him at the table [*literally ‘couch’ or ‘sofa’*] of the lord Serapis *in the (house) of Claudius Serapion* at 9 o’clock [3pm] on the 16th’.

Oxyrhynchus Papyri Nos. 110 and 523. Second century A.D.