

The Corinthians lived in a pagan, idolatrous city where sacrifice and pagan festivals were common. Many Corinthian believers knew that idols and sacrificial meat were nothing but others struggles with their own pagan background. Paul had written to the strong to consider the weak and used his own life and ministry as an example (chs. 8-9). He drew upon the history of Israel to warn the Corinthians that their privileged status as children of God would not protect them from sin nor from punishment. “Therefore” (10:14) challenges the readers to consider carefully the warnings from Israel and not chance falling by proudly thinking that they could stand. God’s way of escape from the temptation of idolatry was to flee.

In OT times idolatry referred to the departure from pure devotion to God through the worship of false gods or through the worship of Jehovah by means of images. Ritual worship included sacrifice & offerings, kissing, bowing, etc. This was the obvious idolatry with which some of the Corinthian believers were toying by going to the pagan temple festivals. They thought themselves strong in their knowledge about the nothingness of idolatry. They believed themselves free to go and enjoy the food. But Paul argues in three steps that they did not have this freedom.

Step 1: Food eaten under conditions that give the meal a religious character associates the participant with the belief system (10:16-18). Two examples should have brought the Corinthians to this conclusion.

1. The Christian “Communion” (10:16-17)
 - a. The Bread and Cup are representative of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf (*cf.* ch. 11). Jesus called the bread His body and the cup His “blood of the covenant” (Matthew 26:26-28).
 - b. Thanking God for Christ’s death by which we have entered into a new covenant with Him and drinking the cup associates us publicly with Jesus Christ as our Savior.
 - c. By taking one loaf of bread and distributing it, we claim that we participate in the same life and are joined to the same community, the one Body of Christ.
2. The sacrifices of Israel (10:18)
 - a. Paul refers to the nation of Israel irrespective of their spiritual condition (i.e., “Israel according to the flesh”). The example does not depend upon what the individual believed but what they practiced.
 - b. Whoever brought a fellowship offering also got to eat part of it (Leviticus 7:11-36). The regulations, which demanded ritual cleanliness and timely eating, showed that the eating was part of the sacrificial process, i.e., the altar, regardless of what personal beliefs were held.

In the context of a pagan ritual meal, eating the food was associating themselves with the pagan belief system. They were participating in the idolatry of the pagans even though they did not believe in the idols.

Step 2: The belief system in pagan idolatry is driven by demonic forces (10:19-20).

1. They should not misunderstand. Neither idol nor sacrificial meat has any inherent significance. The meat remains only meat. The idol remains nothing, merely the wood, stone or metal from which it is made.
2. But behind the idolatrous system are demons. The populace was not intentionally worshiping demons, but deities which did not really exist. But the intent of the populace did not really matter. The idolatrous system was driven by the unseen world of evil which is true of all false religion. The pagan festivals were allied with the forces of evil, with demons, and not with God, and were not neutral. Participation in these meals meant association with demons.

“Enlightened” people struggle with this because, like the Corinthians, they think they know better. They don’t see it, so they don’t believe it exists. Children of God should begin with believing what God says: there is an unseen world and a connection between the seen and the unseen.

Step 3: Idolatry and true worship of God are mutually exclusive (therefore flee) (10:21-22).

1. Paul pictures tables with meals spread out from which one must be chosen. A person cannot sit in two places at once. Will be the table’s host be the Lord or demons?
2. Some Corinthians, puffed up by knowledge and a misplaced sense of strength, were choosing to eat at pagan festivals and thereby participating in demonically inspired worship. Their participation resulted in arousing God’s jealousy, who wants the pure devotion that is rightfully His. Would the Corinthians think that their strength to resist influence at the pagan festivals be sufficient to withstand God?

In the NT idolatry is broadened to include anything that removes God from His rightful place in our lives (*cf.* Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). This idolatry is as real a problem today as it was in Corinth. If husbands and wives can become jealous because of work, hobbies, friends, children, etc., how much more so can God who knows perfectly when our devotion to Him is less than it should be.

Like pagan idolatry, wrong philosophies and ways of thinking can be driven by evil spirits (1Tim 4:1). A few of the “idols” which lead people away from the true worship of God today include affluence, education, entertainment, material security, well-ness. The temples and festivals may not be obvious, but God often would have clear grounds for jealousy. Like the Corinthians we think ourselves strong but really only fool ourselves. Are we trying to arouse the Lord’s jealousy? Pray that God would reveal to us the idols in our lives, the things that would cause Him to be jealous and that He would give us tender hearts to hear and obey.