

At Table in the Idol's Temple?

Local Theology, Idolatry, and Identification in 1 Corinthians 8–10

by Kevin Higgins

Should believers in Jesus remain involved in religious activities and rituals of their religion of birth after coming to faith in Jesus as Lord? The question continues to spark vigorous interaction among missionaries and missiologists who regularly discuss issues in so-called “insider movements.” Drawing especially on Kenneth Bailey’s recent work on 1 Corinthians, I explore below what 1 Corinthians 8–10 may have to teach us regarding this particular question. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of these passages for “insider movements,” or what I prefer to call “movements to Jesus” that remain engaged in the socio-religious dimensions of their birth culture.

Three Scenes

In order to set the context for what follows, I begin with three brief scenes from events in my own ministry.

Scene 1: Local Theology

I was in Kenya recently helping our African leadership as they conducted a one-week training event for potential new missionaries from East Africa. During one standard exercise participants are presented with a list of biblical commands and then asked whether a given command is universal (to be obeyed in the same way, in every place, at every time, in every period of history, by all people) or context-specific (commands that, while conveying a universal principle, may be obeyed differently in different contexts).

One typical, generally easy-to-answer, example is the apostolic command for believers to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5: 26; 1 Pet. 5:14). Christians tend to assume that this (frequent) apostolic command is not to be obeyed literally—witness the fact that no one kissed me when I arrived at the conference. We seem to make such decisions almost automatically, without being aware of the process by which we make them.

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Another example, one that usually promotes lively discussion, concerns church leadership. For example, Paul's greeting to the Philippian church includes a reference to "the bishops and deacons" (Phil. 1:1, KJV). Thus, we can safely conclude that there were plural "bishops" in the church at Philippi. As participants (many of whom were Anglican) discussed this issue, they found that their assumptions about church polity had influenced their reading of Scripture. In particular, it had blinded them to the fact that Paul was addressing multiple bishops in a single congregation. This is strikingly different from the later development in which a sole bishop is now appointed over many congregations.

The point of such an exercise is not primarily to help participants find the "right" answer, but rather to make them sensitive to the fact that we all engage in the process of "local theology"—and that we usually do so without being aware of it, applying and interpreting Scripture in the light of our context and presuppositions. The more we become aware of this reality, the better we can (hopefully) allow Scripture to speak freely, unshackled from our prior assumptions about what it means in a given situation. Whether we admit it or not, "local theologizing" is something in which biblical disciples of Jesus engage all the time.¹

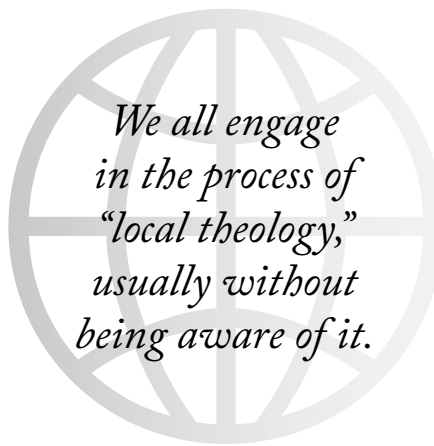
Scene 2: Idolatry

At another training event in Africa, we gathered together key leaders engaged in ministry among Muslims. One session focused on the controversy raging in some circles about the origins and meaning of Allah, the Arabic word for God. Afterward a brother in Christ came up to me and said, "Allah is not a god. Allah is a moon demon and to use that word is idolatry." Although I mentioned that every Arabic translation of the Bible uses "Allah" for the God of the Bible (and has for hundreds of years), and that Arabic-speaking Christians wor-

ship Allah as the God and Father of Jesus Christ, nothing I said could persuade my brother that using this word was not idolatrous. In part, the issue was a linguistic and historical one. At a deeper level, however, it could also be that there were much more fundamental differences between us about what constitutes idolatry.

Scene 3: Identification

Every year I take part in a face-to-face gathering of men and women who hold greatly differing views on issues of contextualization among Muslims, in particular so-called "insider movements." In addition to these annual meetings, the group also discusses various topics via an e-mail forum.



One topic that comes up regularly is that of identity, in particular the extent to which new disciples (in any context) continue to maintain their prior religious identity (or see at least part of their identity as including an understanding of themselves as "Muslim," for example). The discussions focus on different aspects of such a self-description (theological, worldview, practices, social belonging, culture, etc.) and the degree to which continued "identification" with one's social and religious birth community is in keeping with one's new "identification," both as a disciple of Jesus and as a member of what we might call our spiritual "new-birth community." Because our discus-

sion group is made up of missionaries, missiologists, and Muslims who have come to faith in Jesus (both those who continue to refer to themselves as Muslims and those who do not), Scripture is often one of the major sources cited for the opinions we each express or question.

1 Corinthians 8–10 and Potential Contributions for Local Theology, Idolatry, and Identification

About two years ago, a lot of discussion took place between members of the e-mail forum about the relevance of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 8–10 to the question of "identity" (in particular, whether it supports the idea that a believer in Jesus could take part in some of the traditions and rituals of the religious community of his birth). In this case, the group's specific concern was whether a Muslim who has come to trust and believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior could still pray at the mosque or participate in other Islamic practices. Could (or should) such a disciple continue some level of identification with the religion of his birth? If so, to what extent?

After an initial period of intense discussion, the forum moved to other topics. Then, after several months the identity question resurfaced. Both times this topic has come to the fore, I have read the various posts and wanted very much to engage in the discussion. But each time I began to write something, I found myself hesitating, primarily because I did not want to simply jump to conclusions about the text and what I thought it might be saying. So, over the past two to three years since the first series of e-mails about this section of 1 Corinthians, I have taken up a more focused study of this epistle. My study has taken three primary forms.

In 2011, I was privileged to take part in a week-long study of 1 Corinthians

with a group of colleagues. We used the (inductive) manuscript study method and worked through the text as a group. I had my Greek text open throughout the week for reference. The mutual learning and insights of that week have provided some of the foundations for my conclusions in this paper.

In late 2012, I resumed thinking about the postings about 1 Corinthians written by members of the e-mail forum referred to above. Those discussions and questions have stimulated my own thinking and have also shaped my approach to this paper. I found some of my assumptions challenged, and realized I needed to examine Paul's thinking in 1 Corinthians 8–10 in even more depth. That led to a study of what scholars have said about this passage, specifically the recent commentaries by Kenneth Bailey and Gordon Fee.² Bailey's commentary proved particularly helpful to my thinking, especially his insights into Paul's central purpose in writing as reflected in the structure of his letter.

The Place of 1 Corinthians 8–10 in the Context of the Whole Letter

Some New Testament scholars have raised questions about the composition of these two letters to the church at Corinth. Specifically, some have speculated that the two canonical letters may in fact be pieced together from several other letters, a task that might have been undertaken either by Paul or by a later editor.

Kugelman, in his *Introduction to I Corinthians* (1968: 254ff), and Ruef, in his short commentary on the same book (1972:70), both articulate well some of the various expressions of this view. Although Ruef disagrees with the view that the material has been inserted, he does see 1 Corinthians 9 as a digression in Paul's thinking, and not as part of his main argument.

Most of the scholarship on 1 Corinthians has depended upon thematic assessments of the material to ascertain the flow of Paul's thinking. And the results

How are Corinthian followers of Jesus to live their lives as believers in the context of the religious and social life of their community?

have led to a wide variety of proposed outlines for the structure of his thought in the letters. I would suggest that this lack of consensus about Paul's discourse and flow of logic also contributes to the tendency to assume that multiple letters have been pieced together.

It is here that Bailey's work diverges from that of earlier commentators and where his approach suggests an important insight. Bailey argues that, far from being like fabric stitched together from previously disconnected pieces, Paul's letter to the Corinthians is very much the result of an intentional and detailed design. He finds this not only in the overall structure of the letter but also carefully woven into the smaller units as well.

As fascinating as a detailed exploration of all these points might be, they are beyond the scope of this article. Instead I will focus on the central premise of Bailey's discussion of the overall structure of the letter, for it provides a crucial and strategic insight into chapters 8 through 10 of 1 Corinthians as they relate to Paul's thinking.

In most Western-based discourse, we are familiar with a linear flow of logic. Arguments begin from one point and then build step-by-step to a conclusion that comes as a climax at the end of an essay, sermon, article, or other form of communication. It is this assumption of linear logic that seems to undergird the commentaries of modern scholars as they search for Paul's argument in his first letter to Corinth.

However, Bailey argues that Paul's thinking and the flow of his logic in 1 Corinthians is built upon what he refers to as a "ring structure" (2011: 50ff.). In a ring structure, the climax (the central and most important point or theme) does not come at the end, but in the

center of the written or oral discourse. Other themes are built before and after that central theme in something like mirror images of one another.³

Bailey's full commentary (2011: 33ff) includes both a detailed description of this ring structure in 1 Corinthians and a rich collection of background material and examples that demonstrate how common this literary structure actually was. I will be content here to merely give an overview of the most pertinent aspects of his outline of the letter.

The outer "rings" are the brief introductions and conclusions of the letter (2011: 55 and 478). The next-to-outer ring opens with the Crucified Lord, but closes with the Risen Lord (pages 65ff and 419ff.). After that, the next ring "in" has to do with the living out of community life as men and women (1 Corinthians chapters 5–7 and 11–14; Bailey, pp. 153ff. and 293ff.).

A chart of this ring structure—with Bailey's chapter and verse breaks for 1 Corinthians—looks like the one on the next page.

I have highlighted what is at the center of these rings, which in ring structure is the most important point for the author. The center, according to Bailey, is the section dealing with what he calls Christian and Pagan. This is the section I am considering in this article: chapters 8–10 (2011: 227ff.).

These chapters deal with critical matters for the Corinthian followers of Jesus. Specifically, how are they to live their lives as believers in the context of the religious and social life of their community—a community in which they had lived prior to their faith in the gospel, and in which they still live after coming to faith, but now of course as believers.

Figure 1. Kenneth Bailey's "Ring" Description

Theme	Verses		
1. Greeting/Prayer	1:1–9		
2. The Gospel: the Cross ⁴	1:10–4:16		
3. Men/Women (in humanity)	4:17–7:40		
4. Christian and Pagan		8:1–11:1	
5. Men/Women (in the Community)			11:2–14:40
6. The Gospel: the Resurrection			15:1–58
7. Concluding Notes			16:1ff.

I will focus on three (previously stated) aspects found in these three chapters: local theology, idolatry, and identification.

1 Corinthians 8–10 and Local Theology

Paul takes up issues in the letter to the Corinthians that are not new issues for the church of his day. In particular, he gives considerable space to questions of sexuality and food offered to idols, both of which were specifically mentioned in another letter, the letter written by the elders in Jerusalem as mentioned in Acts 15.

And yet Paul does not merely cite the Acts 15 letter, or the decision of the Jerusalem Council, as he addresses the topic in Corinth. I believe he applies the principles underlying the Acts 15 decision in a way that differs from what the letter actually instructed Gentiles to do. In other words, Paul is engaging in local theologizing. For this reason, this study of 1 Corinthians 8–10 may serve to help us to do the same in other contexts.

1 Corinthians 8–10 and Idolatry

The major issue that Paul takes up in chapters 8–10 is the question of food offered to idols (and the closely related issue of idolatry itself). By paying close attention to what is—or is not—said about idolatry, we will be able to more clearly address the question of what does—and does not—constitute idolatry in other situations today (including,

but by no means limited to, questions arising in connection with movements to Jesus in Muslim contexts.)

1 Corinthians 8–10 and Identification

By “identification” I am referring to the degree to which believers in Jesus continue to identify with their cultural, social, and religious birth communities. Some have referred to this using the word “contextualization,” but I see that word as being more related to issues faced by “outsiders,” people who have come from elsewhere to live faithfully for Christ and to share his Gospel in a new cultural context.

Identification may not be a perfect word, but I have elected to use it for two reasons. First, Bailey actually uses the term in his commentary. Second, it has a link to the concept of identity, which, in my mind, provides a helpful balance to some of the focus of the discussions about how disciples can and should live in the context of their birth communities. Many of these discussions have focused more on issues of what I would call “belief” (doctrine, worldview, etc.) or “behavior” (specific actions, etc.). Identification speaks to the question of “belonging” (to whom do I belong and of what am I a part?). Paul certainly addresses matters of belief and behavior, and not just belonging, in this letter to the Corinthians. However, the fact that what I would call “identification issues”

are close to his mind is seen in the structure of his thinking.

I have already described Bailey's argument, namely that 1 Corinthians 8–10 comprise the center of the letter's rings and, as such, reveal the central theme of his discourse. Within that centerpiece, there is a further sub-structure, a smaller ring within a ring: chapter 9 (which is the center of chapters 8–10).⁵ I now turn to a more detailed treatment of each of these three topics.

“Local Theology” in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

My thesis in this section is that Paul's discussion of food offered to idols in his letter to the Corinthians is a great example of “Local Theology.” Theology becomes local when someone applies a previously revealed principle to a new context in such a way that the application of the principle differs from how it was originally applied. Although the principle is the same, the actions or behaviors that characterize how one is to obey the principle may be different in the specifics in another context. This is local theologizing, at least in the somewhat limited way I am using it in this article.⁶

Though it is increasingly popular to speak of local theology and local theologizing, it might be more controversial in conservative theological circles to suggest that we see such a process within the Scriptures. I am convinced that such a view of the inspired Scriptures in no way compromises a high view of inspiration and inerrancy. I am also convinced that such a view will enable us to find fresh insight into how to address new theological, ethical, and practical questions that arise in the life of the Body of Christ as it continues to emerge in new, previously unreached, cultures and peoples.

1 Corinthians, read in the light of Acts 15, is not the only text to which we might look in order to explore how an ongoing process takes place—a process that reflects upon and applies the Acts

15 letter in the life of the growing movement to Jesus in the New Testament. Though 1 Corinthians only addresses sexuality and food and idols, Acts 15 also “settled” the issue of the Gentiles and circumcision.

And yet clearly the issues continued to be controversial, as we see in Galatians⁷ (circumcision and table fellowship), Romans (circumcision and table fellowship), Colossians (circumcision, food rules), and Revelation 2:14 (specifically food offered to idols).

I will focus on Corinth and Acts 15 here, but that brief list helps us see that believers in different contexts continued to wrestle with the issues that had arisen early in the movement described in Acts. I find quite interesting several facets in Paul’s approach to the issue of food and idols, especially when I read 1 Corinthians with Acts 15 in the background:

1. Paul never mentions the letter itself, and makes no mention of the Council and its decision. Thus he does not appear to be content with merely citing an authority and thereby settling the matter. Instead, it seems that he is applying a principle in a new context.
2. Paul makes no reference to strangled meat and blood.
3. Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 8–10 are not the same as the Council’s instructions in Acts 15. Whereas the Council said not to eat food offered to idols, Paul gives criteria for times when it is allowed, and why. 1 Corinthians 8:8–9 and 10:14ff summarize the two criteria. Food offered to idols may be eaten if:
 - a. the conscience of another brother or sister in Christ is not harmed, and,
 - b. there is no idolatry.

When Bailey discusses this difference between Paul and the Acts 15 Council he rightly observes that the elders in Jerusalem could not have foreseen the context of, nor the situation faced by, the

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church in Corinth (2011: 233). Kugelman describes that situation as one in which all meat sold in the market was leftover from one sacrifice or another, a context vastly different from the one in Jerusalem (1968: 266). Fee compares the overwhelmingly Gentile population and the twenty-six different sacred sites in the city of Corinth with the one Jewish synagogue (1987: 3). These references are powerful evidence of the pagan context in Corinth that the Jerusalem Council did not apparently have in view.

Conclusions Regarding Corinthians and Local Theologizing

In light of the above, I conclude the following:

1. Paul’s argumentation in 1 Corinthians 8–10 is an example of local theologizing.
2. As such, Paul gives a different specific command relative to food offered to idols. Rather than repeat the blanket command not to eat such food (as found in Acts 15), he argues instead that, generally speaking, it is perfectly fine to eat such meat (8:1–6), and instead addresses situations in which it would not be permissible.
3. Paul is specifically concerned about both charity and idolatry. Thus, eating food offered to idols is forbidden if a) it breaks the law of charity by wounding the conscience of another brother (8:7–13) or b) it involves idolatry (10:14–22).

This may be Paul’s attempt to apply what he saw as the principles underlying the Acts 15 decision, or what he saw as the intention of the elders in Jerusalem. Regardless, it is clear that Paul has reinterpreted that command to fit a new context—an example of local theologizing. The fact that we find

it in Scripture itself should lead us to study in greater depth how the biblical material engages in this process, and thus to develop a biblically based model or process for local theologizing in our own ministries.

“Idolatry” in Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Paul, in his words to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 8–10, describes three contexts in which eating meat offered to idols took place. So far we have referred to two of those settings and the counsel Paul gave:

1. Concerning meat purchased in the market: “Eat anything sold in the market and do not ask questions” (10:25). This seems to be Paul’s fundamental position, based on his opening argument on the issue of food offered to idols in 8:1ff.
2. Concerning food served in someone else’s home *if* someone with a sensitive conscience points out the fact that the meat has been offered to idols: “Do not eat it” (for the sake of the other’s conscience; 10:27ff.). This seems to be Paul’s fundamental reason to *limit* the freedom of the believer to eat anything, even food offered to idols—the principle of *charity*.

The third context Paul addresses concerning the eating of meat offered to idols is a setting in which the believer is actually sitting at table in an idol’s temple (8:10). According to Fee, Paul’s concern in this case is not that there are believers in an idol’s temple, nor that believers are eating there. His concern is that other believers with weaker consciences might see this taking place and be pressured by “stronger” believers to try eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, leaving “weaker” believers feeling guilty

and with a wounded conscience. Fee suggests that these weaker believers struggle because they are still “accustomed” to equating an idol with a god, the spiritual being symbolically represented by the idol (see 1 Corinthians 8:7; Fee 1987: 14).

Fee makes the case that both types of believers are actually present in the temple during the meal. This is why the “weak” can see the “strong.” However the difference is that the “weak” believers, although present in the temple location, do not feel they can eat the meat that has been offered because they are accustomed to the connection between the idol, the spiritual being, and the ritual in which the food has been offered. The “strong” believers have come to “know” that the idol is in fact nothing, and thus feel free not only to be present at the meal, but also to eat the sacrificed meat. (For Fee’s very helpful exegesis of this passage, see his book *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, published in 1987: 386–387).

Paul’s counsel, however, is not that they should all cease eating or attending because such actions are inherently wrong. Instead, Paul is directing the “strong” to be concerned for the weak and to not pressure them. In other words, Paul appeals to the principle of charity.

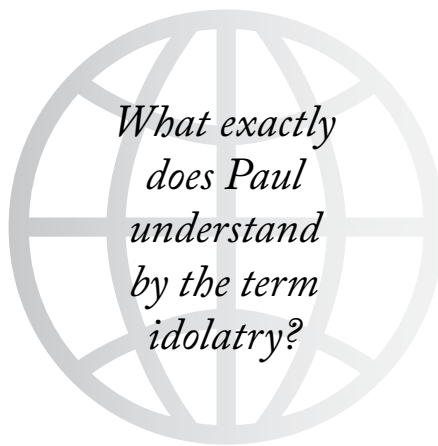
More needs to be said. What does this begin to suggest about idolatry?

First, Paul is very clearly and adamantly opposed to idolatry. His argument in chapter 10:1–22 is very clear. What is offered to idols by the Gentiles is offered to demons, and Paul wants no involvement with demons on the part of the believers.

The fact that he links this to the worship of demons, and to Israel’s history of unfaithfulness in the wilderness, points to just how serious this issue is for Paul. Idolatry is not simply a theological or even a faith issue; it actually opens up the believer to demonic realities.

And yet, 1 Corinthians 8:10 shows us a believer sitting at table in an idol temple eating what was offered there (eating what had been offered to demons according to 1 Corinthians 10:20). Paul’s counsel is not based on the fact that this is idolatry, but on the fact that it wounds another believer’s conscience. The same is true for eating such food in a home. Paul’s main argument, again, is that the believer is free to eat anything at all, even food that had been offered to idols (demons).

Before moving on, it is worth asking what Paul is referring to by mentioning that a believer might be sitting at table in an idol’s temple. And here the commentators do not agree.



Kugelman sees the act of sitting in the temple as an abomination, an instance of idolatry in and of itself as the group meals held in temples after sacrifices were closely connected to idol worship (1968: 266). He assumes Paul’s reference to be sarcastic, that Paul does not seriously assume that a believer would be sitting in the temple to eat (1968: 269).

I agree with Kugelman that the meals in the temple were connected in some way to the ceremony during which the meat was offered to an idol. Bailey describes the scene as similar to a restaurant being run by the temple (2011: 230), and Fee has a similar description

referring to the location as a temple dining hall (1987: 386).

Because Bailey does not address any possible connection to idolatry (it is not a central point in his commentary), I hesitate to say too much about his viewpoint on the matter. Fee does address this issue and clearly states that the meals served in the temple dining halls were cultic meals (1987: 386). Thus the believers Paul is addressing were attending a cultic meal, a religious event connected in some way to the worship of another god in that god’s temple.

That said, there is one point in Kugelman’s argument that I do not find convincing, namely his view that Paul is merely sarcastically depicting a hypothetical situation. It would perhaps be best to read Paul’s words as a straightforward description of a situation similar to the ones he’d already mentioned (eating such meat at home or in the market). If Paul refers to believers eating in the temple, it seems obvious that some of the Corinthian believers were buying meat in the market, being offered sacrificed meat in homes, *and* eating food offered to idols in the temple itself (also see Fee 1987: 385).

This raises the following question: What exactly does Paul understand by the term “idolatry”? While he never actually defines the term, we can gain a picture by piecing together several of his comments in 1 Corinthians 8–10.

First, Paul clearly does not see the mere act of eating meat offered to idols as inherently idolatrous, otherwise he would have condemned it; after all, like all devout Jews, Paul abhorred idolatry. Whether believers purchase meat offered to idols in the market, or have it served to them in another person’s home, Paul’s only guideline is that they follow the way of charity, so as not to offend the conscience of a weaker brother or sister.

Second, Paul not only allows believers to eat food offered to idols, he permits it in the temple itself. Note, however, that

although such meals were intimately connected to the actual sacrifices, the setting for which Paul expresses permission is clearly not the actual ritual of sacrifice itself, but rather the meal following the sacrifice. This leads to another point.

Third, for Paul, the second major limit or boundary that a believer is not to cross is actual communion with a demon (the first is wounding a brother's conscience by not exercising charity). Paul takes up this concern in chapter 10 where the altar or table of the demon is compared to the table of Lord. We might say that the bottom line then is "no worship of, or attempt to commune with, or pray to, an idol, or rather, the demon behind the idol."

This seems to suggest a definition of idolatry:

seeking (by intention and action on the part of a believer in Jesus) to commune with, placate, worship, and obey a spiritual being or entity other than God.

While I am sure this can and should be further refined, I suggest that this accurately summarizes Paul's thinking in 1 Corinthians.⁸

Paul's position on this topic is admittedly complex. I believe that he is trying to help the Corinthians see that mere participation in an act or ceremony doesn't tell the whole story when it comes to idolatry. For some, a given act may not be idolatrous at all; for others, past connections and experiences may, through their participation, pull them into a spiritual experience with a spiritual being other than God. This, I believe, is the force of Paul's argument in chapters 8 to 10 and his primary concern. Rather than being pressured to act contrary to their consciences, the first type of believer (the "stronger" believers) should protect and help the second type (the "weaker" believers).

Conclusions Concerning "Idolatry" in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians
To summarize, Paul has two concerns relative to food offered to idols: 1) be-

Mere participation in an act or ceremony doesn't tell the whole story when it comes to idolatry.

lievers must be careful to exhibit charity or love; and 2) they must avoid—indeed, flee—idolatry. If idolatry is understood to be the intentional act of seeking to connect with a spiritual being other than God, and yet Paul allows believers to eat at the table in the temple, then Paul is extending a pretty wide circle of grace to those believers who might be seen sitting at table in the temple in such a setting.

Paul clearly seems to assume that there are believers eating at the table in the idol's temple. He also seems to assume that their intention is not idolatrous, that they are not seeking to commune with demons. However, his urgent warnings about idolatry in the same chapter indicate that this situation represents a fine line and that he is, in fact, very concerned about the ever-present danger of falling back into demon worship.

"Identification" in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

In many discussions among missionaries and missiologists, 1 Corinthians 9 is referenced as a key text that addresses the degree to which missionaries or believers can embrace and accept various aspects of culture as they seek to make the gospel message known. Certain verses in this chapter are cited in connection with "contextualization." As I understand it, contextualization primarily addresses issues for outsiders to a given culture, especially how they do (or do not) adapt their life and communication to fit that culture. Sometimes these same verses are used in connection with what some would call "identification," which I am using in this article to refer to how "insiders" in a given culture might (or might not) retain various aspects of their birth culture as they live as disciples under the Lordship of Jesus and the authority of Scripture.⁹

As in the foregoing discussion about idolatry, so here Paul expresses both affirmations and limitations. An affirmation is his statement that he has become "all things to all people." A limitation is the statement that he lives "under the law of Christ."

Paul places a high value on what I am calling contextualization and identification,¹⁰ although naturally he does not use these terms. Regardless of the vocabulary we use, their importance is indeed central to his thinking. While he expresses a limitation on the degree to which he might seek to "be all things," it is still something he pursues and holds up as a model.

For some readers, the flow of Paul's thinking might seem difficult to follow. I myself used to read 1 Corinthians in such a way that chapter 9 seemed to be an odd insertion between chapters 8 and 10, especially because those two chapters seem to be very much on a common topic: food offered to idols/idolatry.

And then comes chapter 9 and suddenly Paul is discussing his rights, his way of earning a living, and his heart to be all things to all people so that, by all possible means, he might win some. Is chapter 9 an aside or the central point of Paul's argument?

At the beginning of this article, I discussed the place of these three chapters in the flow of the letter as a whole. Using Bailey's arguments about ring structures, I contended that chapters 8–10 form the focal point of the letter. Indeed, these chapters are at the heart of the other rings, and as such are the most important chapters. If Bailey is right about the importance of the ring structure, the real point Paul wants to make will be found here.

And right in the center of these three chapters (framed by another ring inside

the rings) is chapter 9. The whole book is a series of rings, and the two rings closest to chapter 9, on either side, are the discussions of idols and idolatry and food offered to idols found in chapters 8 and 10. But the ring inside those rings is the most crucial point Paul wants to make.

Conclusions Concerning "Identification" in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

Just as I summarized Paul's points regarding idolatry above, I will do so here regarding what I have called identification. Because Paul addresses this topic inside the rings dealing with idols and idolatry, I will summarize the points about identification with reference to idols and idolatry as well.

The Push Towards Identification

Charity drives Paul. Indeed, the concern for charity in chapters 8 and 10 sets the stage for Paul's principle (or core value) related to identification. Concerning food offered to idols, charity dictates that a believer set aside his freedom (to eat) in order to safeguard the conscience of a brother or sister. So also, in a parallel fashion, Paul gives up his freedom in chapter 9 by releasing his right (for support, for a wife to accompany him, etc.) in order to make the gospel freely accessible. He voluntarily sets aside his own birth-culture lifestyle—even his ingrained sense of what is clean and unclean—in order to make the gospel accessible to Gentiles. At the same time, he is willing to keep the commands of the Torah—commands he does not ask Gentiles to keep—in order to make the gospel accessible to Jews.

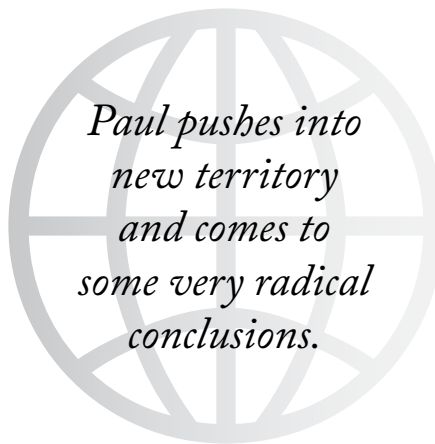
The Limits to Identification

Paul does not specifically address idolatry again in Chapter 9, but makes a very similar point when he refers to living under "the law of Christ." When we set that phrase "law of Christ" in the context of the whole letter to the Corinthians, we find a deeper understanding of what that means: the

voluntary giving up of our freedoms and rights because we're constrained by charity. We see this in chapters 1–4 (unity), chapters 5–7 (sexual purity) and chapters 8–10 (freedom from idols). And then we see it in an even more personal way in chapter 9 when Paul talks about giving up his rights to a wife, to a Jewish lifestyle, etc., in order to reach more people.

Implications for Movements to Jesus That Remain Within

This discussion of 1 Corinthians is not simply intended to be an academic exercise. I began this article by saying



that I want to suggest implications for real ministry. I will mention three implications, each having to do with the main headings of this paper: local theology, idolatry, and identification.

Implications: Local Theology

By comparing the concerns of 1 Corinthians to those addressed by the Acts 15 Council, I believe we can see examples of local theology in the Scriptures themselves. Acts 15 wrestled with issues of how to accept the new Gentile believers into what had been previously a church of Jewish believers (living a Jewish lifestyle) and whose main concern was the question of circumcision. These Jewish believers had to examine the Torah, in which circumcision is clearly required for any male wanting to become part of the people

of Israel. They had to compare that with the prophetic tradition. Note in this connection that James cites at least two prophets in his summary statements, from which he concludes that God had a plan for making a people for Himself *from among the Gentiles*; indeed, it is the prophetic tradition that leads the Council to conclude that Gentiles do not have to become part of the people of Israel, that they do not have to convert to Judaism.

Paul is a major proponent of the Council's decision, as we see in the later verses of Acts 15. However, when he begins to help the Corinthians to address their questions about food offered to idols, the Council's few words on the subject ("refrain from it") are clearly not sufficient to solve every question that might arise in different circumstances. Based on the principles of the gospel, Paul pushes into new territory and comes to some very radical conclusions: a believer can eat the meat bought in the market (or the meat set before him or her while at another person's home, or the meat offered to an idol while actually sitting in an idol's temple) so long as that believer guards his or her heart and also respects the (perhaps weaker) consciences of other brothers and sisters in Christ; all this to the end that none of them, the "stronger" believer included, fall back into idolatry.

This conclusion is quite different from what the Council had decided; it is a conclusion hammered out in a new setting, while based on the same principles.

Movements to Christ (especially those remaining within cultures very different from the settings that have led to time-honored and deeply cherished Christian traditions in other parts of the world) need space to work out new solutions when unforeseen questions arise. These solutions must be rooted in the same principles we see in both Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians, principles that involve both sifting and comparing Scripture, and applying the gospel.

Implications: Idolatry

One recurring point of contention in the debate about whether (or to what extent) a disciple can remain within his birth religion is the question of participation in religious ceremonies, rituals and worship.

My understanding of Paul's thinking in 1 Corinthians has led me to suggest that what Paul forbids is the intentional and active attempt to commune (or connect) with a spiritual being other than God. If this is correct, this analysis suggests a way to frame the question for contemporary settings.

Rather than simply asking whether certain actions or rituals or places are inherently idolatrous (e.g., "Can a believer regularly go to the mosque or a Hindu temple?"), it might be more important to ask what activities, rituals, ceremonies, or rites result in the believer, as a participant, actually seeking to commune with another spiritual being other than the One True God. If I am reading Paul correctly, the issue of idolatry needs to be framed in terms of the believer's intention in the matter.

I have argued that Paul's position on this sort of question would be more complex than a mere yes or no. For Paul, the answer will be different for different believers, depending upon the individual believer's conscience. What is the same for all believers, according to Paul, is their responsibility to respect the consciences of others, never pressuring fellow believers to act in ways contrary to their convictions.

Implications: Identification

What seems clear (to me, at least) is that Paul has placed at the very heart of his letter a powerful and passionate description of his own motivations in ministry. He desires to do everything he can to make the gospel accessible. He seeks to remove barriers in order to maximize the free flow of the gospel. Whether this involves letting go of his own rights, preferences, or (I can well imagine) his social and cultural com-

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fort zone, Paul does all these things that the gospel might spread.

While limits to that freedom indeed exist, our discussion of 1 Corinthians suggests that such limits are surprisingly few. Further, we've seen how Paul applies the principles behind the few restrictions mentioned in Acts 15 (idolatry and sexual sin) to a new situation in Corinth. In my opinion, he modifies the restrictions related to meat sacrificed to idols by adding (or making explicit) a further limit to a believer's freedom: the impact of that freedom on the conscience of another. The issue of how to do local theology responsibly and well is an important one. The issue of idolatry and/or worship is also critical, and Paul has strong words to say about it.

But the ring structure of 1 Corinthians highlights that "the heart of the heart" of Paul's teaching in this letter is his passion to see the gospel spread and every possible barrier and unnecessary fetter removed. The fact that Paul requires such a small number of necessary things may be shocking to some of us who have been taught that the gospel we proclaim must be guarded by turning it into a gospel that says we are saved by Jesus *plus* [fill in the blank].

The gospel must indeed be guarded. But we guard it best when we add the least to it, thus allowing the gospel to be the gospel. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ I use the term "local theologizing" here for convenience. The process has been called "self-theologizing," "biblical theology in culture," etc. See discussions of the process of developing local theologies in Shaw and Van Engen (2003), Reed (Principle Papers, www.bild.org), Schrieter (1985), Cook, et. al. (2010).

² Bailey, Kenneth E., 2011, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Stud-*

ies in 1 Corinthians, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. Fee, Gordon, D., 1987. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

³ Bailey states that what he calls ring structure is another way of talking about "chiasm," a regularly discussed feature in biblical studies (2011: 528). He does not explain why he elects to coin a new term, though I would posit that readers unfamiliar with these matters might find Bailey's term the one easier to understand without a dictionary.

⁴ I have slightly modified the outline from Bailey's original vocabulary.

⁵ This is not only true in terms of the chapter numbers, which were of course not added by Paul himself and thus could mislead an interpreter. An analysis of the sentences and words in the letter, and a comparison of amounts of material prior to and following chapter 9 both lead to the same conclusion: that chapter 9 forms the center inside the center and as such is Paul's main thrust in the whole letter.

⁶ I am not using "local theology" in this article to refer to the related process by which communities of believers develop theological concepts and "frameworks" by applying scripture to the questions that arise in and from their culture (with appropriate input from the global and historical church and the local theologizing done by believers through the course of history and in other contemporary contexts as well). That is a valid process as well, and I believe scripture also provides examples of it, but it is not what I see happening in 1 Corinthians and so I do not take it up here.

⁷ Fee argues that Galatians follows both 1 and 2 Corinthians, though he does not address the relationship of either to the date of Acts 15 (1987: xi).

⁸ I would suggest that further discussion of my tentative definition should include descriptions of angelic encounters in the scriptures which involve conversation between a person of faith and a spiritual being other than God, something I think implies at some level the act of "communing." Missiologists from more catholic backgrounds (Roman, Orthodox, high church Anglican) may want to add reflections on how this discussion impacts or is impacted by their various conceptions of the communion of saints as well.

⁹ I use the term "insider" to refer simply to a person born in a culture. Unlike some in the "insider movement" debate, I am not using "insider" to refer to a witness for the gospel who comes from outside the culture.

¹⁰ I use both terms when referring to Paul. As a Jew called to the Gentiles he could be aptly described as an outsider, and thus he would be engaging in what some modern missiologists see as contextualization. And yet, as a Jew who also ministered to Jews he would be clearly an insider, and the term identification would be more applicable. In my mind this is further complicated by the fact that Paul is also very much a Hellenistic insider, at least to a certain degree (not in every aspect of the Hellenistic worldview certainly), and thus even in his communication with and life among the Gentiles, identification might be just as appropriate a term as contextualization. If nothing else, these considerations should cause us all to hold such categories very loosely.

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