

# Food Offered to Idols

Diego Silva

**Passage:** “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” (1 Cor 10:31–11:1).

**Introduction:** Amy Carmichael (1867-1951) was an Irish Christian missionary who worked in India for 55 years (1892-1947). She founded the Dohnavur Fellowship,<sup>1</sup> a ministry that helped rescue children, particularly girls, from temple prostitution. She also published 35 books about her experiences in India, including biographies, poems, and reflections on faith.

Carmichael was unique among her contemporaries in that she was sensitive to and respectful of Indian culture and traditions. She avoided Anglicization trends among British missionaries. This was evident in four key areas:

- (1) *Carmichael learned Tamil fluently.* This allowed her to connect more deeply with the local people and understand their culture. She encouraged the use of Tamil in Christian worship services and translated hymns and religious texts into Tamil. This helped to make Christianity more accessible to the people she was trying to reach.
- (2) *Carmichael was intentional about adopting Indian customs.* For example, she wore saris and lived in a simple Indian-style home. This helped her to identify with the local people and avoid appearing as an outsider. She participated in and respected local customs and traditions, even those that were not explicitly Christian. This demonstrated her willingness to learn from and appreciate Indian culture.
- (3) *She addressed social issues* such as child exploitation and caste discrimination. She was genuinely concerned for the well-being of the Indian people.
- (4) *Carmichael was critical of certain aspects of colonial rule,* particularly those that were oppressive or exploitative. She was committed to fairness and justice, criticizing specific policies and practices she deemed unjust or harmful, such as the forced labor system and the exploitation of India’s resources.

Carmichael’s respect for Indian culture and traditions (for which she was opposed by fellow British missionaries) and her critique of the abuse and exploitation of children so prevalent in Indian society (for which many locals opposed her) showed remarkable

---

<sup>1</sup> The Dohnavur Fellowship is a Christian non-profit organization based in Dohnavur, Tamil Nadu, India.

courage. Though not apparent to many of her contemporaries, Carmichael was following Paul's example, who said concerning his missional strategy, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (9:22).

### Body:

- I. The Corinthians wrote to Paul with a question regarding "food offered to idols" (8:1, 4).<sup>2</sup>
  - a. The phrase "food offered to idols" is the translation of one Greek word — *εἰδωλόθυτον* (*eidōlothyton*).<sup>3</sup>
    - i. It appears nine times in the New Testament (Acts 15:29; 21:25; 1 Cor 8:1, 4, 7, 10; 10:19; Rev 2:14, 20).
    - ii. It comes from Hellenistic Judaism and refers to meat sacrificed in pagan temples and shrines.
    - iii. Paul also uses the Greek adjective *ἱερόθυτος* (*hierothytos*, "sacred sacrifice"),<sup>4</sup> which was sometimes used by Greeks to refer to something sacrificed to gods (10:28).<sup>5</sup>
  - b. Offering food to the gods was a common form of religious worship in the major cultures of the ancient world, including among the Greeks and Romans.
    - i. Plato refers to festival meals in which humans find peace in their troubles by fellowshiping in their feasts with gods.<sup>6</sup>
    - ii. Sacrificial meat was sometimes eaten within the temple precinct, at other times the worshiper was allowed to take it home to be eaten.

---

<sup>2</sup> Paul begins this section with the phrase *Περί δὲ* ("now concerning"), which is used six times in 1 Corinthians (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12). The first time (7:1) it is followed by the words *ὧν ἐγράψατε* ("the things of which you wrote to me").

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word *εἰδωλόθυτον* (*eidōlothyton*) is a compound word formed from *εἰδωλον* (*eidolon*), meaning "idol," and *θυσία* (*thysia*), referring to "something sacrificed." Therefore, the literal meaning of *εἰδωλόθυτον* is "idol sacrifice" or "thing sacrificed to an idol."

<sup>4</sup> The word *ἱερόθυτος* is derived from the Greek words *ἱερός* (*hieros*), meaning "sacred" or "holy," and *θύω* (*thyo*), meaning "to sacrifice."

<sup>5</sup> "In the Septuagint, *hieron* is used only for shrines devoted to gods other than Yahweh. In the NT, *hieron* denotes both the temples of other gods and Israel's sanctuary" (Sunhee Kim, "Sacred Space," ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Dennis E. Smith, "Meal Customs: Greco-Roman Sacred Meals," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 654.

- iii. In the temples, there were dining rooms where the meals could be eaten. These meals varied from religious to purely social.<sup>7</sup>
  - iv. What was left over from the “god’s table” was also sold in the marketplace.
  - v. For many worshippers of the gods in the Greco-Roman, the sacrificial food took on some sort of sacred quality.
- c. Jews were forbidden to eat food offered to pagan idols.
- i. “In pagan cities with large Jewish populations, Jews normally had their own markets.”<sup>8</sup>
  - ii. A historical note from Jewish literature illustrates why this issue was so critical for Second Temple Jews. “The tyrant Antiochus, sitting in state with his counselors on a certain high place, and with his armed soldiers standing around him, ordered the guards to seize each and every Hebrew and to compel them to eat pork and food sacrificed to idols. If any were not willing to eat defiling food, they were to be broken on the wheel and killed.” (4 Macc 5:1-3).
- d. The question of eating “food offered to idols” was also an issue among the earliest followers of Jesus.
- i. Though it was resolved by leaders in Jerusalem that the way of Gentiles should not be made unnecessarily difficult as they come to faith in Jesus, they were to be instructed, among other things, to “abstain from food polluted by idols” (Acts 15:20).
  - ii. James included abstention “from things polluted by idols” in his list of tests for Gentiles to join God’s people to facilitate association between believing Jews and Gentiles, “especially with regard to table fellowship.”<sup>9</sup>
  - iii. The practice of eating food offered to idols is discouraged in Jesus’ message to the church in Pergamum (Rev 2:14).

---

<sup>7</sup> This was not unlike the Jewish sacrificial meals and festivals that took place “before the Lord” (Deut 12:17-18; 14:26; 16:11).

<sup>8</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Backgrounds Commentary: New Testament* ( ), 476.

<sup>9</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 295.

II. Paul's response ("yes ..., but ...") is nuanced and multi-faceted (8:1-13).<sup>10</sup>

- a. Paul begins by asserting that correct theological "knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (8:1-3).
  - i. This "knowledge" refers to their understanding that: (1) "an idol has no real existence" and (2) "there is no God but one" (8:4).<sup>11</sup>
  - ii. This intellectual knowledge (of the truth of *monotheism*) is not producing good fruit. They have become, as he has previously stated, "puffed up" (4:18-19; 5:2).<sup>12</sup>
  - iii. Later in this letter, Paul will again contrast "knowledge" with "love" (13:2). Love, he points out, "is not arrogant" (13:4).
  - iv. "If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God" (8:2-3). The words τὸν θεόν ("God") and ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ("by him [God]") may not have been in the original, given the fact that it is "absent in the earliest witnesses in Egypt (Clement and P<sup>46</sup>), the home of the best-preserved Greek text..."<sup>13</sup> Thus it could read, "*If anyone loves, he knows.*"
  - v. In other words, "true *gnōsis* consists not in the accumulation of so much data, nor even in the correctness of one's theology, but in the fact that one has learned to live in love toward all."<sup>14</sup>
- b. Paul sees no spiritual threat to the believer who consumes food offered to idols (8:4-8).
  - i.

<sup>10</sup> Paul is addressing multiple questions: (1) Eating foods *offered* in a temple, *sold* in a market, and *consumed* in a private home (the private home could be one's own or the non-believer's, cf 10:27). (2) Eating meat in *pagan temple precincts*. In the temples, there were dining rooms where the meals could be eaten (these meals varied from religious to purely social).

<sup>11</sup> As a Jewish monotheist, Paul agrees with the premise that "an idol has no real existence" and that "there is no God but one."

<sup>12</sup> The Greek verb φυσιώω (*physioō*), used only by Paul and with one exception (cf Col 2:18) exclusively in this letter, "expresses the idea of thinking excessively highly of oneself." The related noun is used only once in a vice list (cf 2 Cor 12:20).

<sup>13</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 407.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

- c. Believers who feel at liberty to eat food offered to idols should be careful, however, not to be a stumbling block to those in the church who have a “weak conscience” (8:9-13).
  - i. Craig Bloomberg explains Paul’s reference to eating in the temple in 8:10 as referring to “social gatherings in the temple precincts that were not overtly religious in nature.”<sup>15</sup>
  - ii. Paul believed that since “an idol has no real existence,” the religious meaning of the meal could vary from person to person and from place to place without the meal itself being significantly affected in form (1 Cor 8:7-8).
  - iii. Their intellectual knowledge that there is one God, rather than building up, leads them to destroy “the brother for whom Christ died” (8:11).
- III. Paul references his example of surrendering his rights (to marry and receive wages) for the sake of the gospel (9:1-27).
  - a.
- IV. Having argued against frequenting meals and festivities in the temples of pagan gods by raising concern for weaker members of the community (8:1-13), and having referenced his example of surrendering rights for the good of others (9:1-27), Paul now contends that the strong who attend these temple meals are also putting themselves in spiritual danger (10:1-22).
  - a. After exhorting the Corinthians to exercise self-control (9:24-27), Paul now references Israel’s example. For their failure to exercise “self-control,” “they were overthrown in the wilderness” (10:1-5).
    - i. Just as God rescued Israel from Egypt, so he saved these Corinthians from paganism and the worship of “mute idols” (12:2).
    - ii. Paul relates Israel’s Red Sea crossing to baptism and their being sustained by manna and water from the rock to the Lord’s Supper (cf 11:20).
    - iii. Paul’s warning is clear: *Israel being “saved” from Egypt was not a guarantee that they would inherit the promised land.*

---

<sup>15</sup> Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 160.

- iv. The fact that the Corinthians have been “called” (1:2) is no guarantee that they will not be seduced by idolatry and thus fall short of the prize (10:12).
- v. As Paul said concerning himself, the fact that he has preached to others in no way guarantees that he is immune to being disqualified (9:27).
- b. Paul insists that the Corinthians should take warning from Israel’s story (**10:6-11**).
  - i. “Do not be idolaters as some of them were...” Paul referenced the golden calf incident (10:7b; cf Ex 32:6).
  - ii. “We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did...” Here Paul alluded to the worship of Baal at Peor (Num 25:1-9). Some Israelites at Shittim were “invited...to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.” The Israelites did what the Corinthians claimed the “right” to do. Sexual immorality has been a major concern for Paul (5:1–13; 6:12–20; 7:2–5).
  - iii. “We must not put Christ to the test as some of them did...” Here Paul alludes to Israel’s complaining against Moses and God (Num 21:4-9). The Psalmist appealed to the same story, “They tested God in their heart by *demanding the food they craved*” (Ps 78:8).
  - iv. “We must not ... grumble, as some of them did...” Perhaps Paul is thinking of their criticisms of him when he references Israel’s complaints against Moses (Num 14:2-4).
- c. Those who think they “stand” (**10:12**) do so based on a sacramental view of baptism and participation in the Lord’s Supper (10:1-4).
  - i. “...the ‘strong’ Christians among them maintained that participation in these rituals guaranteed them immunity from spiritual danger so that they could freely partake in idol feasts.”<sup>16</sup>
  - ii. Liberation from their former reverence for “mute idols” (12:2) has led to an unhealthy confidence among certain believers.
  - iii. They have concluded that their presence in an idol’s temple does not pose a threat to their spiritual well-being.

---

<sup>16</sup> Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 195. See also Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 159.

- iv.
- d. Paul references three meals (**10:16-20**)...
  - i. The Lord's Supper (10:16–17). Participation in the Lord's Supper creates not only *koinōnia* with Christ but also unity within the community of believers.
  - ii. Jewish meals in conjunction with sacrifice (10:18); Not only do the priests eat the sacrificial meat (9:13; Lev. 7:6), but also all the people participate in eating the sacrifices (Deut 14:22-26).
  - iii. Meals at the table of a pagan god (10:19–21).
- e. Though idols are nothing, since there is only one God, and since food is morally neutral, Paul will later have to state that there is something real behind idols—"demons" (**10:20-21**). Thus, eating in temples dedicated to the so-called gods is anything but harmless.
  - i. For Paul, though idols and temples have no power, they are the habitation of demons.
  - ii. While in Athens, Paul's "spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). The Greek word εἰδωλον (*eidōlon*, "idol") was not used in the Greek world to denote the "image of a deity."<sup>17</sup> In Numbers 25:2, certain Israelites sacrificed to the "gods" (אֱלֹהִים, *ēlōhîm*) of the Moabites. In the Septuagint, the word אֱלֹהִים (*ēlōhîm*) is translated as εἰδῶλοις (*eidōlois*).
  - iii. Paul treats idols as objects that have no power (1 Cor 8:4; 12:2).
  - iv. "At this point, he no longer has in mind the question of the admissibility of eating or buying this meat. Instead he has in mind an invitation to a pagan cultic meal. In this case he gives a strict No, as the issue is now an invitation to a fellowship meal given specifically in the name of a pagan deity."<sup>18</sup>
- V. Paul concludes by affirming that actual food offered to idols in and of itself is harmless, unless it becomes a stumbling block to others (**10:23-33—11:1**).

<sup>17</sup> Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990–), 387. See also Douglas Mangum, "Idolatry," ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990–), 387–388.

- a.
- b.

**Conclusion:** Certain believers in Corinth argued that *frequenting cultic meals at idol temples is harmless*. They base this on the fact their belief in one God (monotheism) rules out any genuine reality to idols (8:4-6). They also understand that food does not defile (8:8). These believers "saw such participation in the meals as merely a matter of their eating with friends, not of worshipping what did not exist."<sup>19</sup> "Since idols are nonentities, and since food is a matter of indifference to God, it matters not neither *what* we eat nor where we eat it."<sup>20</sup>

Paul's answer is: "Yes..., but...." Your attitude is not right. Your actions spring from knowledge, not from love. Your actions are hurtful to others. Furthermore, you misunderstand the demonic presence behind the "idols." Even though no real "god" is involved, frequenting the temple exposed them to the influence of demons. Therefore, Paul says: Frequenting the temples is a NO, but, purchasing food in the market which previously had been offered to idols in the temple is a YES.

Paul cautions the Corinthians not to think too highly of their own abilities. He appeals to them to think outside of their own interests. He also reminds them that though some things may be permissible, not everything is edifying.

---

<sup>19</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 398.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.