

# Eating Idol Meat in Corinth: Enduring Principles from Paul's Instructions

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## **Introduction**

Are the apostle Paul's instructions about eating meat sacrificed to idols relevant today? As ministers in the modern West, most of us must admit that we have never had to teach in our churches on the ethics of eating meat offered to idols.<sup>1</sup> In the first century, however, this issue divided the troubled young Corinthian church. In fact, the topic caused such a stir that the Christians in Corinth wrote to their founder, the apostle Paul, to seek his guidance on this issue. Sandwiched between Paul's response to the Corinthians' questions on marriage (7:1-40) and the apostle's comments on the role of women in the worship service (11:2-16), we find Paul's extensive discussion on the appropriate Christian response to meat sacrificed to pagan idols (henceforth, "idol meat").<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is to explain this portion of Paul's letter and to highlight the implications of Paul's teaching for modern Christian ministry.

I will begin below by providing a brief introduction to both the cultural context of ancient Corinth and the epistolary context of Paul's remarks on idol meat. After a brief overview of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1, I will list and discuss five theological principles distilled from Paul's discussion.

At the outset, I should also make the disclaimer that this article is not meant to read like a commentary on 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1. I will not be dealing with every

hermeneutical issue in these three chapters, but will focus on the main points and enduring principles from Paul's discussion. Both the format of this journal and space limitations of this article dictate that I take this approach.

## **The Social and Religious Context of Ancient Corinth**

Before we examine Paul's instructions to the Corinthians, we must bridge a great chasm of time and culture in order to understand the issue that he was addressing. Corinth, like other major cities of the ancient Roman Empire, had numerous pagan temples, which usually contained an idol or idols of some sort.<sup>3</sup> These temple complexes were used for a number of ancient pagan religious festivities. A common part of pagan festivities was the sacrificing of animals to the pagan deity, and then the subsequent cooking and consumption of the consecrated meat by the worshippers.<sup>4</sup>

Ancient pagan temples also served a civil and social function that transcended their foundational religious purpose. The pagan temples offered a convenient place for large gatherings—with extensive dining facilities whereby persons could host funerals, weddings, or other social events.<sup>5</sup> The temple complexes were roughly analogous (in their dual functionality) to a modern Masonic Lodge—i.e., as a building that serves as a meeting place for its owners or adherents, but is often used by the broader

community for social activities as well. Social gatherings that met in ancient temple complexes were likely to partake of meat consecrated to a pagan deity, but the gatherings themselves would not usually have been construed as actual religious services.

Another important background element to note is that most meat sold in the ancient meat market had originally been sacrificed to a pagan deity. One can understand the practicality of this custom from the perspective of an ancient pagan butcher, who likely belonged to a guild connected with a pagan temple.<sup>6</sup> A meat dealer could both seek the favor of a deity as well as peddle his wares. Such was the standard practice in most ancient Greco-Roman cities, so that to buy meat in the public market was almost certainly to buy meat that had originally been sacrificed in a pagan temple.

The notable exception to this practice was found among Jews of the ancient Roman Empire. The Jews, both in defense of their monotheism and concern for the cleanliness of their food (in accordance with Old Testament dietary laws), went to great lengths to avoid meat that had been tainted in idolatrous ceremonies.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear from Paul's two letters to the Corinthians that a significant number of Christians in Corinth came from pagan backgrounds (1 Cor 6:9-11; 8:7; 12:2). Most of these new Gentile converts had likely participated in idolatrous pagan ceremonies, as well as joined in numerous social functions in the pagan temples. While the average person in ancient Corinth ate very little meat (the ancient diet was quite meager),<sup>8</sup> the meat that was consumed had usually been sacrificed in a pagan temple.<sup>9</sup>

As the pagan Corinthians came to faith in Christ and broke with their idolatrous past, a number of important ethical deci-

sions had to be made. Though it was obviously wrong to worship a false god, was it wrong to attend a social or civil function in the pagan temples? If your neighbor was getting married, was there anything wrong with attending the ceremony in the pagan temple and then eating the hors d'oeuvres (that just happen to have been sacrificed to an idol). Or, on a related matter, was it wrong to buy meat from a butcher who first slaughtered the meat in the precincts of a pagan temple? What if you personally had no problem with eating idol meat, but the practice offended a Christian brother or tempted him to engage in activity that he regarded as forbidden?<sup>10</sup> It was questions such as these that stirred the Corinthians to write the apostle Paul and seek his guidance.

### **The Epistolary Context**

First Corinthians appears to be the second letter that Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth (1 Cor 5:9). The first letter has been lost, and both 1 Corinthians and the "lost letter" were preceded by the founding visit of the apostle (1 Cor 3:6; 4:15; 9:1-2; 2 Cor 3:2, 3; cf. Acts 18:1-18). The letter of 1 Corinthians was apparently elicited by both reports of the troubles in Corinth that Paul had heard from people of "Chloe's household" (1 Cor 1:11) and the letter the Corinthians had written to Paul to ask about certain issues: marriage, spiritual gifts, the collection, and—the issue we are examining in this article—idol meat.<sup>11</sup>

Because Paul's comments on idol meat are a direct response to one of the Corinthians' questions, it is easy to mark off his response as a discernable unit in the text. While other parts of the Corinthian correspondence deepen our understanding of Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1, we will largely deal with this portion of text

as a self-contained unit.

Before looking in detail at this text, we should observe that 1 Corinthians is an “occasional letter.” While this point is somewhat obvious, it is important to note. Paul responded and wrote to a particular “occasion.” His letter was “occasioned” by the situation in Corinth. In no way, however, is the enduring value of the text diminished simply because Paul is responding to a particular situation in the first century that no longer exists.

The Christian canon has sometimes been denigrated by outsiders because of the occasional nature of many documents that it contains. Such a criticism of Christian Scripture fails to recognize the wisdom of God in revealing his truth through the personality and situations of particular persons. Sometimes, the particularity and personable nature of divine revelation add an intensity and vividness to the teaching that cannot be mirrored by abstract ethical or theological injunctions.<sup>12</sup> Of course, in the New Testament, we read not only of particular situations through specific authors, but we read words of truth inspired by God. As God’s word, the letters of Paul cut to the heart, dividing even soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and judge the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts (Heb 4:12).

### **An Overview of Paul’s Argument in 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1**

Before focusing on the key principles that Paul is teaching in his discussion of idol meat, it is important to get an overview of the apostle’s entire argument. After briefly tracing Paul’s argument through 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1, we will return to discuss five salient principles from the text and how they should be applied in our modern context.<sup>13</sup>

Paul begins in 8:1 by abruptly noting the next question of the Corinthians that he intends to address,<sup>14</sup> “Now about food sacrificed to idols...”<sup>15</sup> Through a reading of the following text, it quickly becomes apparent that certain “strong”<sup>16</sup> or “knowledgeable” members of the Corinthian community are eating meat sacrificed to idols (8:1-9) and attending “non-religious” banquets that gather in pagan temples (8:10-11). “Weak” members of the community, however, view such activities as having religious significance and are being incited to partake in such meals themselves. From the weak members’ viewpoint, when they “give in” and partake of questionable food, they engage in idolatrous syncretism. Thus, the weak are being led to sin against their own consciences by participating in what they consider idolatry, and if they persist, will be “destroyed” (*apollutai*; 1 Cor 8:11-13).

While Paul agrees with the strong Corinthians’ assessment of meat sacrificed to idols in theory (i.e., it has no ultimate spiritual significance), he argues that the principle of self-denial for the good of the other takes priority. Paul avers, “Therefore, if food causes my brother to fall, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause my brother to fall” (1 Cor 8:13, my translation).<sup>17</sup> Just as Paul gives up his right to receive financial support or to take along a believing wife so that no stumbling block will be put in the way of his evangelistic ministry (1 Cor 9:1-27), the strong Corinthians should give up their right to eat meat sacrificed to idols, if that action proves spiritually harmful to their weak brothers.

In chapter 10, Paul shifts from discussing the principle of self-denial to denouncing idolatry as unfaithfulness. Paul cites examples from the Old Testament as to how God deals with the unfaithful. Indeed,

the Lord's destruction of the Israelites, even after he had rescued them from Egypt, stands as a warning against presumption and unfaithfulness (10:1-13). An example of similar presumption in Paul's own day would be partaking in an idolatrous religious ceremony (10:14-22).<sup>18</sup> Even in cases where idolatry is not involved (e.g., eating meat from the market or eating idol meat at a non-believer's home), if another's conscience is in danger, one should refrain from eating (10:23-30).<sup>19</sup>

### Principles and Modern Significance

We will now discuss five enduring principles from Paul's idol meat instructions. Under each principle listed below, I will first offer textual evidence that these principles are in fact a proper summary of Paul's thought. Second, I will offer some suggestions about how these standards might be applied in a modern ministry context.

#### *Doctrine of God*

First, Paul's responses to pragmatic ethical questions flow directly out of his understanding of God's person and nature. Paul's letter, while occasional, is not composed of unreflective or *ad hominem* responses to the situation at Corinth. Paul's theological reflection is coherent and draws from the rich well of Old Testament Scripture, as well as additional revelation given by the risen Christ and Holy Spirit.

It is noteworthy that Paul begins his response to the idol meat issue with an allusion to the *Shema*.<sup>20</sup> The *Shema*, a prayerful confession from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, was recited as a daily Jewish prayer by devout Jews at the time of Paul.<sup>21</sup> The well-known text reads: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the

LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut 6:4-5).

In 1 Corinthians 8:3-6, Paul writes:

But the man who *loves God* is known by God. So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (my emphasis).

N. T. Wright has persuasively argued that here Paul is adapting the classic Jewish affirmation of monotheism and infusing it with Christo-centric vocabulary.<sup>22</sup> Paul identifies the "God" mentioned in Deuteronomy as "God, the Father," while the "Lord" of Deuteronomy is identified with our "one Lord, Jesus Christ." The finer, more precise delimitations of systematic Trinitarian theology would have to await the synthesis of numerous biblical texts. Yet, here in 1 Corinthians 8:6, Paul presents a monotheistic affirmation that includes both the Father and the Son as fully divine. This passage, among other Scriptural affirmations of both the deity and distinctiveness of Father, Son, and Spirit, provided the raw material out of which an orthodox Trinitarian confession was later wrought. Such subsequent Trinitarian controversy, however, was not the issue facing Paul in first-century Corinth. Paul's monotheistic confession of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ provides a basis for evaluating idols and meat consecrated to them.

Paul is intent on asserting that there really is only one God—a God known pre-

eminently in the revelation of himself as the loving Father who sent his only Son to be crucified for the sins of humanity. How, then, do the ethical principles that Paul enjoins flow out of this monotheistic affirmation? First, because there is only one God, the idols are really nothing so Paul can agree with the objective truth of the “strong” or “knowledgeable” Christians. The apostle states quite plainly, “We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one” (1 Cor 8:4). While certain people may actually think of idols or idol meat as having some inherent spiritual power, Paul says that such a perception is based on incorrect thinking (8:7). In fact, the truth of the matter is that “food [i.e., even meat sacrificed to idols] does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do” (8:8).

Yet, Paul does not simply leave us with a statement that agrees with the objective truth of the “strong” Christians. To do so would be to neglect the latter half of his Christ-centered reading of the *Shema*. The God we worship is one—but he is one who has shown himself pre-eminently in the sacrificial giving of his Son. It is this self-sacrificial love that Christians are to express in the church. The “strong” or more knowledgeable Christians must be willing to sacrifice “permitted” behavior in exchange for the spiritual superintendence of their “weak” brothers. As L. T. Johnson succinctly says, “Willingly giving up a position of strength for one of weakness is the pattern of exchange that becomes shorthand for the gospel of the crucified Messiah (see 1:17-25), a pattern Paul himself exemplifies (8:13).”<sup>23</sup>

Paul’s ethical instruction is a natural extension of his understanding of the person of God. Likewise, ethical teaching

of our churches today should be based on careful biblical reflection. This task is more urgent than ever as the church faces both a myriad of ethical dilemmas and internal confusion over the nature of God and authority of Scripture.

Many of the ethical challenges that the church is facing are without *explicit* precedent in the Scriptures (or with only limited precedent). Christians must respond cogently to a host of medical procedures (cloning, euthanasia, fetal tissue research, abortion, genetic therapies, etc.), gender and sexual issues, and to questions of international politics, economic disparity, and religious pluralism. As the church considers these issues, it is essential that we hold fast to the Scriptural truth of who God is. If we lose our theological moorings, our ethical practice will also drift away. This relation between theology and ethics is one reason that the present debate over the nature of God’s foreknowledge and sovereignty is so important. If the fundamental principle of God’s omniscience and omnipotence is lost, moral confusion is sure to ensue.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Inconsequential Matters***

Second, Paul’s ethical understanding included not only the category of “right” and “wrong” but also that of “adiaphora” or “inconsequentials.” Paul certainly thought many human actions and thoughts could be bifurcated into the two basic categories of morally wrong or morally right. To love one’s neighbor was right and good (Rom 12:9-21), while to commit adultery, engage in homosexual behavior, or become drunk were morally wrong (Rom 1:18-32; Eph 5:18).<sup>25</sup>

For Paul, however, there was a third ethical category in addition to “right” and “wrong”—the category of *adiaphora* or

inconsequential matters. For example, Paul considered Jewish cleanliness or ceremonial concerns to be in the realm of *adiaphora* now that the Coming Age had dawned. Circumcision was neither bad nor good—unless one was depending on it for salvation, and then it worked rather as a curse (Gal 5:2). Nevertheless, the activity or state of circumcision itself was in the category of *adiaphora*—the morally inconsequential. In 1 Corinthians 7:19, Paul remarks, “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.” The apostle elaborates on this theological perspective in Galatians 5:2-6,

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Likewise, Paul saw dietary concerns as a matter of moral *adiaphora*. If one wished to continue eating kosher meat because of his Jewish cultural heritage, this was of little concern to Paul. But, if the brother eating such meat felt that somehow his justification before God was based on his abstinence or consumption of certain foods, he was being led astray. And, if one gave up kosher practices and then reverted to them because of concern for the approval of others (or the temptation to be justified by one’s works in the eyes of others), then one was self-condemned (Gal 2:11-21).

Paul faced an ethical conundrum in idol meat that was further complicated by the complex cultural and social context explained at the outset of this article. While it was possible to have a social or civil function in a temple complex, the dining experience in ancient temples was sometimes described as “dining at the table of [name of the deity].”<sup>26</sup> Such close association with idolatry was flirting with spiritual disaster. Understanding this fine line between dining “socially” at a temple and eating “at the table” of a pagan deity is likely why Paul initially makes no comment on the moral appropriateness of a “strong” Christian eating at a temple complex (1 Cor 8:10), and then later speaks of the danger of sharing in the “cup” or “table” of demons (1 Cor 10:21). Not only for the sake of the non-believer, but also because it is flirting with demonic idolatry, Christians should stay out of the temple precincts—even for non-religious functions. Paul at least does not explicitly mention again the possibility of an acceptable meal in a pagan temple after the hypothetical example given in 8:10.<sup>27</sup> At the end of his argument, Paul seems to allow for only two permitted expressions of eating idol meat—(1) buying idol meat in the market for personal consumption without inquiring as to whether it was sacrificed to an idol, and (2) eating idol meat at the home of a pagan friend or neighbor, when a “weak” Christian would not be present so as to be offended.

Eating idol meat in the two manners allowed by Paul above was considered in the realm of moral inconsequential. It was on the same moral level for Paul as selecting the color of the cloak that he wore. Nevertheless, the conscience of the “weak” Christians made this issue much more significant than the hue of one’s garment.

Rather than excoriating the immature Christian to grow up and see the objective truth that this matter was in the realm of *adiaphora*, Paul viewed their overly sensitive consciences as the most important matter to preserve. If a “strong” Christian’s eating of idol meat might somehow incite his “weak” brother to do something that he considers morally wrong, then both the “strong” and “weak” Christian have sinned. (And, hypothetically, *neither* would have sinned if the “strong” brother had restrained his freedom out of concern for the “weak.”)

Giving clear moral instruction while allowing for a genuine category of moral *adiaphora* is challenging. There is a human tendency to exclude and judge others, and thus only have categories of “right” and “wrong.” The early post-apostolic church faced this human proclivity. *The Didache* (a first-century Christian instruction manual) declares that eating idol meat is a matter that is morally wrong *in all instances*.<sup>28</sup> The text reads, “Now concerning food, bear what you are able, but in any case keep strictly away from meat sacrificed to idols, for it involves the worship of dead gods.”<sup>29</sup> The nuanced ethical landscape of the apostle Paul was flattened by his successors.

While many persons wrongly categorize others’ “inconsequential” behavior as immoral, there is an opposite (and equally virulent) human tendency to justify or excuse one’s sinful behavior. Thus, as fallen humans, we must also beware of our inclination to include our own immoral behavior in the realm of “inconsequential.”

Modern Christians can easily acknowledge that the color of socks or hose that we chose to wear today is a matter of moral *adiaphora*. Modern Christians must also recognize that some matters we have held

in the category of objectively “right” or “wrong” may really be “inconsequential.” By making this admission, we are not joining the ranks of post-modern relativists. Relativists think all moral decisions are relative—that there is no absolute right or wrong. Biblical Christians acknowledge three moral categories: right, wrong, and *adiaphora*. We should have biblical warrant before we begin denouncing certain behaviors as evil or wrong—especially in the realm of Christian cultural expression.

An example will help illustrate this point. I recently had a conversation with a very devout Christian man who was fully convinced that the beat of a musical drum was evil and aroused sinful passions in those who heard it. I also recently returned from Africa, where the only instrument in some worship services was a drum. I do not find a biblical warrant for considering the beat of a drum Satanic. It seems to me that styles of musical expression are culturally conditioned and are in the realm of *adiaphora*. Nevertheless, it is possible for certain cultures to have negative and sinful associations with styles of music—and in that case, even though the music itself is morally neutral, the “strong” Christians who recognize that fact should willingly forego using that style of music out of concern for the “weak” Christians who associate it with immoral or sinful expressions.

At this point, in reading a draft of my article, a pastor-friend of mine raised a number of significant questions. I quote from his email below:

I agree with the underlying principle [of the strong giving up permitted freedoms for the sake of the weak]. I believe it is biblical. Yet I find that in practice it is sometimes difficult to discern how this principle should be lived out in the church. Would you actually say that if a Christian with the convictions of the man in

your illustration joins a church in which drums are used in worship, then the church should stop using drums? What should a pastor do if many in his church want to use praise songs in worship, but there is one who claims that he can't worship using such songs "because they are not reverent enough?" What do we say to the Christian brother or sister who would say that men should come to church in ties, because not to do so is to not give God the proper respect. I suppose the crux of my problem is that the weak can end up being legalistic tyrants who become intent on forcing others to live according to their view of right and wrong.<sup>30</sup>

A number of things can be said in response to these relevant questions. First, if we are going to find *strict* parallels with the situation in Corinth, we need to discuss a behavior (1) which is in itself morally inconsequential, (2) which some persons view as morally wrong, and (3) which by some persons engaging in this behavior, others will be tempted to "join in" and do something they consider wrong. When it comes to current issues of Christian cultural expression in America, these three conditions are rarely met. More often, there is a group of Christians that disapproves or dislikes another group's activity, but they are not themselves being *tempted* to do something they consider wrong. If there is a temptation they face, it is one of seeing the speck of sawdust in their brother's eye, while neglecting the plank in their own. In this case, Jesus' instructions to remove the plank first so that they will see more clearly their brother's speck seem appropriate (Matt 7:3-5). (In other words, the so-called "weak" Christians are not struggling with sin and a "weak" conscience. In reality, their problem is a condemning spirit.)

Second, let me address my friend's

hypothetical scenario—what if the anti-drum Christian came to my church and insisted that we shut down the praise band? First, I would graciously acknowledge to the man that he may be right about the drums and ask him to explain fully his position and the evidence for it. If I remained unconvinced, I would ask the man, "You say that drums lead to Satanic temptation. What, in fact, are you being tempted to do when you hear the drums?" If he said, "Well, when I hear the drums, I feel an almost irresistible urge to tear off my clothes and start assaulting people with hymn books," I would agree to cancel the drums for the service.<sup>31</sup> If, however, his objection really boiled down to a matter of aesthetic taste, or even an imagined temptation that others would experience, I would not see a biblical warrant for allowing his personal preference to dictate the worship style of the church. I might also point out to this man, that Christians are not to put hindrances in the way of the gospel for non-believers (1 Cor 9:12). And, while using only the organ may appeal musically to some people, for others, the antiquated style of music would put an unnecessary cultural barrier in the way of hearing the gospel.

Let there be no mistake, however. There are serious situations when Christian cultural expression can result in temptation to sin. The comments of C. S. Lewis are helpful here. In *The Screwtape Letters*, the demon Screwtape reminds us how hell delights in Christian confusion over the moral category of *adiaphora*. Screwtape writes to his nephew, Wormwood:

We have quite removed from men's minds what that pestilent fellow Paul used to teach about food and other unessentials—namely, that the human without scruples should always give in to the human with



scruples. You would think they could not fail to see the application. You would expect to find the “low” churchman genuflecting and crossing himself lest the weak conscience of his “high” brother should be moved to irreverence, and the “high” one refraining from these exercises lest he should betray his “low” brother into idolatry. And so it would have been but for our ceaseless labor. Without that, the variety of usage within the Church of England might have become a positive hotbed of charity and humility.<sup>32</sup>

As ministers, we must constantly return to the Bible to evaluate the issues we are debating. We must be alert to the fact that our sophistication in stating our views is not an adequate substitute for biblical evidence. Roland Frye’s comments (originally made with reference to Gospel Criticism) seem apropos here: “The barbarian blindly asserts the primacy of his own temporal or cultural provincialism in judging and understanding and interpreting all that occurs, and the learned barbarian does precisely the same thing, but adds footnotes.”<sup>33</sup>

Individual Christians and churches must ask themselves, “Do we understand the category of ethical *adiaphora* and how these matters relate to Christian living and expression?” Are we blinded as to the ultimate inconsequence of certain matters we hold dear? If the Lord delays his return, what will a future generation of Christians see as our distortions of biblical teaching? May God be gracious to us by giving us the strength and wisdom to see and correct those shortcomings in our own day.

### *Sinning against One’s Conscience*

Third, Paul believed that although certain actions could be classified as moral *adiaphora*, for persons who viewed such actions as wrong, they were, in fact, sin.

Alongside Paul’s assertion of the category of *adiaphora*, it is equally important to note that Paul believed that a person could commit a sin by engaging in morally neutral behavior if, in fact, he believed that that particular morally-neutral behavior was wrong. Paul clearly says that “an idol is nothing at all in the world” (8:4) and that “food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse off if we do not eat [idol meat], and no better if we do [eat idol meat]” (8:8). Yet, for those “weak” Christians who think that eating meat sacrificed to idols in some way “taints” them spiritually or is an expression of pagan religious devotion, it would be wrong for them to eat idol meat. To do so would be to “defile their conscience” (8:7), to encounter a “stumbling block” (8:9), to be “emboldened” to eat something that they should not (8:10), to be “destroyed” by the “strong” Christians’ knowledge (8:11), to have their conscience wounded (8:12), and to fall into sin (8:13).

One should note that all of these dire spiritual consequences that Paul presents are brought about *not* by doing anything that is ultimately morally wrong, but by willingly engaging in activity that one *thinks* is wrong.<sup>34</sup> Lest there be any confusion on this matter—Paul is *not* providing a basis for moral relativism. The apostle is not encouraging people to define morality by their predilections. Every action or thought can be classified *ultimately* in three realms—right, wrong, or *adiaphora*.<sup>35</sup> Yet, even if an action is in the realm of *adiaphora*, if a person thinks that action wrong and still does it, then that person is sinning against what he or she believes to be the revealed will of God.

Paul’s ethical teaching extends naturally to issues beyond idol meat. Most readers of this journal likely agree with the abstract ethical discussion above, but when one

starts offering particular modern examples, then disagreement begins to grow. Even though the examples I choose will cause disagreement, in the interest of clarity, I cannot fail to offer modern examples of behavior that are analogous to the “idol meat” controversies.

What, then, is a modern example of a behavior that is *ultimately* morally inconsequential, but if someone engages in that behavior while thinking it wrong, he could be described as engaging in sin? An example of such behavior is dancing. While all Christians would acknowledge that sinful examples of dancing abound, one could also put forward examples of wholesome dancing (for example, a ballroom-style waltz). I personally do not think that there is anything sinful about a husband dancing the Viennese Waltz with his wife. Yet, if certain Christians (possibly because of their pre-Christian past) associate all forms of dancing with sin and lust, then it would be inconsiderate of me to organize a Viennese Waltz and encourage the “weak” Christians to come. If such “weak” Christians were to come to my Waltz, while still privately considering dancing as a forbidden or sinful behavior, then they would be sinning against their consciences by participating in the dance. I also would be sinning against Christ by not placing the weak Christians’ consciences as more important than my freedom.

### ***Concern for the Weak***

Fourth, Paul displayed an amazing concern for the “weak” Christian brotherhood. The apostle expected such concern from all “strong” or “knowledgeable” Christians. On a theoretical level, Paul agreed completely with the “knowledgeable” or “strong” Christians in Corinth. Idols were nothing but inanimate objects, and foods

offered to idols did not taint the Christians who consumed them (8:4, 8). Yet, as we noted above, if the “weak” Christians viewed the consumption of idol meat as sin, it was in fact sin for them.

In the Corinthian situation, it would have been disastrous for a “strong” Christian to do anything to encourage a “weak” Christian to act contrary to his or her conscience—albeit an overly sensitive conscience. Paul, in fact, says that if eating meat of any type caused another Christian to sin, he would abandon completely the eating of meat (8:13). Paul enjoins a similar concern from the “strong” Christian brothers. They are to “imitate” him in his self-sacrificial behavior and the putting of others’ spiritual good above one’s own freedom (11:1).

I doubt if there are many Christians in modern America who could honestly say, “If eating meat causes my Christian brother to sin, I will gladly become a vegetarian for the rest of my life.” Our society is one that values individualism. We do what we want as long as we do not consider it “harmful” to others. We are the ones who define what “harmful” is, and so long as *we* do not consider our behavior harmful to others, we feel complete freedom to act as we want. Combined with this destructive individualism, conservative Christians (myself included) have so often been in battles for what is “right” that we only have categories in our minds for “right” and “wrong.” We hardly know what to do with an action that is “permissible” but should not be done out of gracious concern for another. Modern Christians need to demonstrate a willingness to give up permitted things when other believers’ spiritual health is at stake. Spiritual growth should always take priority over our personal comfort. Paul’s letter forces us to ask our-

selves, “Are we as zealous as Paul to keep other Christians from sin? Are we willing to give up our freedom or comfort for another’s spiritual good?”

In the Gospels, Jesus delivers a similar teaching:

But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell (Matt 18:6-9).

Both Jesus and Paul taught that persons should go to extremes to avoid personal sin or tempting others to sin. Sin is an egregious affront to God. The modern church has too often lost sight of this fact.

So, what modern example might illustrate a self-sacrificial concern for the weaker Christian in the Pauline pattern? Allow me, if you will, to comment on bathing suits. Teaching about modesty is relatively rare in our individualistic culture, but if what Paul and Jesus taught is true, then we should be concerned not only about the inherent “rightness” or “wrongness” of a behavior, but how it affects another’s spiritual life.

Let’s consider this hypothetical case—a teenage girl from an Amish background goes on a retreat with a Southern Baptist youth group. This Amish girl considers the “normal” bathing suit that the other girls

are wearing as immodestly revealing. Nevertheless, the other girls on the trip not only continue to wear such suits but even offer to go buy one for the Amish girl at the local store. (They feel sorry for this “prudish” young lady.) The Amish girl must admit that she feels frumpy in her own suit, so she eventually submits to the other girls’ seemingly generous offer. In the end, the Amish girl wears a swimsuit that she considers immodest and sins against her own conscience.

What approach should the Southern Baptist girls have taken? It seems to me that the biblical approach would have been to “cover up” more, so as to safeguard the “weak” conscience of the Amish girl. Thus, the Southern Baptist girls could have worn nylon shorts and T-shirts over their bathing suits. One might protest, “But their tan would be uneven!” or “Actually, their bathing suits were acceptably modest by the modern cultural consensus.” In response I ask, what is more important—tan lines or the conscience of another Christian?

When I lived in Asia as a missionary, I enjoyed hiking through a mountainous area that was considered sacred by local Buddhists. Let’s say hypothetically that a Buddhist convert considered those beautiful mountains as tainted with sin. In his mind, for a person to enjoy hiking along mountains carved with the images of Buddha was idolatrous, and for me to continue hiking there was to tempt him to engage in an activity that he associated with idolatry. If such were the case, the instructions of the apostle Paul leave me no choice—I must hike somewhere else, or not at all. To paraphrase his words, “If hiking in the mountains causes my brother to sin, I will never hike in the mountains again.” I fear that such behavior sounds so radically self-denying to us because we know so little of

genuinely sacrificial love.

While Paul firmly believed in the perseverance of the saints (Rom 8:29-39), he did not take a lackadaisical attitude to “once saved, always saved.” Paul believed that Christians would be rewarded and punished for their temporal obedience and disobedience (1 Cor 3:12-15). Even more so, Paul saw the warnings, exhortations, and prayers of Christians as the means whereby God preserves his holy ones.<sup>36</sup> Just as Paul combated a loveless triumphalism in the Corinthian church, we also need to combat an American individualism that shows little concern for the consciences or spiritual states of our fellow Christians.

We should also point out that Paul was not content to leave other Christians in a state of immature discipleship or incomplete understanding.<sup>37</sup> Weak Christians should be strengthened and ignorant Christians should be informed. This growth in spiritual maturity and understanding takes time, however. In the meantime, the delicate consciences of young Christians take priority over mature Christians’ freedoms.

### *Edification of the Church*

Fifth, Paul had a driving passion to “build up” the church. He enjoined this priority upon all Christians. Paul begins his discussion of idol meat by noting that the Corinthians’ emphasis on knowledge has led to a sinful pride, while the correct emphasis on Christian love should, rather, lead to “building up” (8:1). What, in fact, did Paul mean by “building up”?

The Greek verb translated into English as “build up” is *oikodomeō*. It occurs six times in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 8:1, 10; 10:23; 14:4 [2x], 17). The word is used to refer to both the maturation of current members of the congregation (8:1

and the inclusion of new converts (14:4 [dual use]). In reference to the verb *oikodomeō* (and its cognates) in 1 Corinthians 14, Otto Michel aptly remarks, “The term edification [*oikodomeō*] comprises two aspects, on the one side inner strengthening in might and knowledge, and on the other outer winning and convincing.”<sup>38</sup> This dual meaning of “building up” fits naturally with Paul’s discussion of idol meat and his explanation of self-sacrificial behavior. While Paul’s *primary* reference in 1 Corinthians is to current members of the congregation who are being tempted to sin by eating idol meat, his teaching has clear implications beyond this situation. In fact, the examples Paul lists from his own apostolic ministry make clear that Paul wishes for the Corinthians to practice behavioral restraint not only within their community, but in evangelistic relationships with outsiders. The Corinthians are to “imitate” Paul in his salvifically-oriented sacrificial behavior.<sup>39</sup>

Paul says that his personal ethical behavior in the realm of *adiaphora* is constrained by his concern for the spiritual good of all persons—both believers and non-believers. He is completely flexible in the realm of moral inconsequential. To the Jews, he becomes like a Jew (9:20). To the Gentiles, he becomes like a Gentile (9:21). To the weak, he becomes weak (9:22). Why? Paul explains, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (9:22). Paul aimed to both preserve present believers and to bring others to initial salvation. His driving passion was the maturation and expansion of God’s elect community—the building up of the church. In its own dealings, the church should be constrained by the same concerns, said Paul (11:1). Later in the same letter, the apostle restates the

same principle, “All things must be done for building up” (1 Cor 14:26).

In an expression related to his salvifically-oriented commands, Paul notes that his behavior is constrained by his concern “not to put an obstacle in the way of the gospel” (9:12).<sup>40</sup> Several important elements of Pauline theology are present in this compact expression.

First, the dissemination of the gospel was a top priority for Paul. In fact, this concern was one of the main factors affecting his behavior in the realm of *adiaphora*. Second, when Paul speaks of the gospel’s progress, he often chooses not to highlight himself or the role of other messengers, but the gospel itself (e.g., 1 Cor 14:36; Col 1:5-6; 3:16-17; 1 Thess 1:5-8; 2:13-16; 2 Thess 3:1; 2 Tim 2:8-9). Paul’s reticence to cite human agents when speaking of the gospel’s advance places emphasis on God and his word. Third, underlying the theology of Paul’s statements here in 1 Corinthians 9:12 and elsewhere is an understanding of “God’s word” (i.e., the “gospel”) as a dynamic and effective entity (Rom 1:16; 1 Cor 1:17-25). In other words, the gospel is not simply a verbal summary of what God has done to save humanity in Christ; the gospel actually “does something”; it accomplishes God’s will in saving lost humanity. There is ample Old Testament precedent for understanding God’s word as a powerful entity that actually effects, or brings about, God’s will.<sup>41</sup> This dynamic understanding of the gospel is likely one of the main reasons that we do not find more explicit imperatives to evangelize in Paul’s letters.<sup>42</sup> When the dynamic gospel came to dwell in one of Paul’s congregations, its further spread was guaranteed by the very nature of what the gospel was.

As we look at our modern churches, we need to ask ourselves if they are character-

ized by a concern to “build up” the church—to preserve and mature current believers, as well as include new converts. Paul envisioned all churches in which the dynamic gospel dwelt as inevitably being “caught up” with that word and becoming God’s agents of its further spread. Are our churches characterized by this spontaneous evangelistic expression?

## Conclusion

Upon first glance, it is not immediately obvious how Paul’s instructions on idol meat apply to the church today. Yet, through a careful consideration of the apostle’s teaching, we noted five significant principles for Christian behavior and belief. Briefly, these principles can be rephrased accordingly:

(1) Ethical reflection must be rooted in theological truth.

(2) From a biblical perspective, there are three moral categories—right, wrong, and inconsequential (or *adiaphora*).

(3) Even if a behavior is not objectively morally wrong, if a person thinks it is wrong and then commits that behavior, he sins.

(4) A Christian should show sacrificial love in protecting other Christians from temptation and sin—even when those other Christians are somehow “weak” or “immature” in their moral judgment.

(5) A Christian’s behavior should not be governed simply by the ultimate categories of “right” and “wrong.” In the realm of *adiaphora*, a Christian’s behavior must be shaped by a dual concern for (a) other Christians’ spiritual health and (b) for the conversion of non-believers.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For missionaries or non-Western Chris-

tians, the issue might be quite different.

<sup>2</sup>Some scholars have raised the question as to whether Paul is referring to all kinds of food consecrated to idols or simply to consecrated meat (e.g., Peter D. Gooch, *Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8-10 in Its Context* [Studies in Christianity and Judaism 5; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993] 53-59). Both Paul's remarks in the broader context (1 Cor 8:13) and the semantic range of *eidōlothuton* support understanding Paul's discussion as referring primarily, if not solely, to idol meat. So Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [New International Greek Testament Commentary 7; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000] 617). About the term *eidōlothuton*, BDAG reports, "It refers to sacrificial meat, part of which was burned on the altar as the deities' portion (cp. Orig., C. Cels. 8, 30, 1: *to eidōlothuton thuetai daimoniois*), part was eaten at a solemn meal in the temple, and part was sold in the market (so Artem. 5, 2) for home use" (BDAG 280).

<sup>3</sup>Archaeologist John R. McRay reports that "pagan sanctuaries abounded in Corinth." McRay notes the presence of worship sites for the imperial cult, Asclepius, Athena, Aphrodite, Demeter, Persephone, and other deities (John R. McRay, "Corinth," in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000] 228). See also J. Murphy O'Connor, "The Corinth that Saint Paul Saw," *Biblical Archaeologist* 48 (1984) 147-159; idem, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Good News Studies 6; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983); idem, "Corinth," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1:1134-

1139; Robert L. Scranton, *Monuments in the Lower Agora and North of the Archaic Temple*, vol. 1, part 3 of *Corinth: Results of Excavations Conducted by The American School of Classical Studies at Athens* (Princeton, NJ: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1951); Carl W. Blegen, "Excavations at the Summit" in *Acrocorinth: Excavations in 1926*, ed. C. Blegen et al., vol. 3, part 1 of *Corinth: Results of Excavations Conducted by The American School of Classical Studies at Athens* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930) 3-28.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Lucian *The Double Indictment* 10 (LCL 130:103).

<sup>5</sup>See Gooch, 1-46; Wendell Lee Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth: The Pauline Argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985) 63, n. 234; Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) 36-42; Franz Poland, *Geschichte des griechischen Vereinswesens* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1909) 503-513. Gordon Fee thinks the issue throughout 1 Corinthians 8:1-10:22 is "the eating of sacrificial food at the cultic meals in the pagan temples," but such a reading does not seem to account for Paul's accommodating statements in chapter 8 (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 359-360).

<sup>6</sup>D. A. Carson writes, "It appears that most meat was butchered in connection with a temple guild and sold just outside the temple doors" (D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Baker; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993] 123). N. T. Wright asserts, "...it remains likely that the bulk of meat avail-

able had been offered in idol-worship, and that in a city like Corinth pagan temples served as the equivalent of modern restaurants" (N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991] 126, n. 14).

<sup>7</sup>Tacitus *Histories* 5.5 (LCL 249:183); Josephus *Against Apion* 2.258 (LCL 186:397). See Gooch, 131-133.

<sup>8</sup>H. D. F. Kitto reports that the average diet consisted of "Barley-meal, olives, a little wine, fish as a relish, and meat only on high holidays.... As Zimmern has said, the usual Attic dinner consisted of two courses, the first a kind of porridge, and the second, a kind of porridge" (H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* [London: Penguin, 1951] 33, as cited in C. K. Barrett, "Things Sacrificed to Idols," *New Testament Studies* 11 [1964-65] 145).

<sup>9</sup>See Pliny *Letters* 10.96, where Pliny notes that "[the] flesh of sacrificial victims is on sale everywhere" (LCL 59:291).

<sup>10</sup>Jewish Christians no longer bound by Old Testament food laws faced not only the dilemma over whether to eat idol meat, but what to do with all previously unclean foods.

<sup>11</sup>This letter from the Corinthians was apparently brought to Paul by Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (1 Cor 16:17).

<sup>12</sup>An anecdotal example will possibly help illustrate this point. A few months ago, I read some letters that my grandfather wrote to my grandmother in the 1940s. In these letters, he displayed a tenderness and concern towards my grandmother that

inspired me to treat my wife with greater tenderness. I think that no abstract ethical injunction would have had the same motivational quality.

<sup>13</sup>L. T. Johnson writes, "The Corinthians first faced the problems that have proved to be perennial for all Christian communities: how to live in holiness and freedom within the very real structures of a given social world. They met these issues in culturally conditioned cases: Could they eat meat offered to idols? Could their women wear veils while prophesying? Those ancient cultural dilemmas, however, provide structural analogies to situations faced by churches in every generation. In this correspondence, we discover the difficulty of defining an identity within a pluralistic context. Rather than the specific conclusions offered by Paul, it is his way of thinking about these issues and the principles he invokes that remain of contemporary interest" (Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986] 272).

<sup>14</sup>The language in the following three paragraphs is dependent on my article in *JETS* and is used by permission. See Robert L. Plummer, "Imitation of Paul and the Church's Missionary Role in 1 Corinthians," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (2001) 219-235.

<sup>15</sup>Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>16</sup>Though Paul does not use the term "strong" in 1 Corinthians, we will adopt this designation for the believers who favored eating idol meat (cf.

Rom 15:1).

<sup>17</sup>The term "brothers" for Paul obviously includes both male and female members of the congregation, and for ease of expression, I will use the term in this way as well.

<sup>18</sup>See Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 177; John C. Brunt, "Rejected, Ignored, or Misunderstood? The Fate of Paul's Approach to the Problem of Food Offered to Idols in Early Christianity," *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985) 114.

<sup>19</sup>Note the argument's structure: (A) idol meat issue, (B) apostolic paradigm and Old Testament example, (A1) idol meat issue. Hopper claims that Paul employs epideictic discourse in 1 Corinthians, whereby he introduces an issue, digresses, and then returns to the main issue (Mark Edward Hopper, "The Pauline Concept of Imitation," [Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1983] 128). This ABA pattern of argumentation has been noted by others (e.g., Fee, 16; John J. Collins, "Chiasmus, the 'ABA' Pattern, and the Text of Paul," in *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus 1961* (Analecta biblica 17-18; 2 vols.; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1963) 2:575-583).

<sup>20</sup>I am indebted to Dr. Peter Gentry for stimulating my thinking on this passage.

<sup>21</sup>*m. Ber.* 1-3.

<sup>22</sup>Wright, 120-136. Wright argues, "Paul has redefined [the *Shema*] christologically, producing what we can only call a sort of christological monotheism" (129).

<sup>23</sup>Johnson, 282.

- <sup>24</sup>This link between theology and morality can be seen clearly in Paul's letter to the Galatians where the apostle not only contends for the gospel (Gal 1:1-5:12) but corrects the moral confusion that has resulted from the church's abandonment of the truth (5:13-6:10).
- <sup>25</sup>Also, the apostle recognized that even in the midst of doing the morally correct thing, fallen humans are always influenced by the sinful nature inherited from Adam (Rom 7:7-25).
- <sup>26</sup>A second-century (A.D.) invitation found in the Oxyrhynchus papyri reads: "Chaeremon requests your company at dinner at the table of the lord Sarapis (*deipnēsai eis kleinēn tou kuriou Sarapidos*) in the Sarapeum [temple of Sarapis] tomorrow..." (*P. Oxy.* 110). For almost identical invitations, see *P. Oxy.* 523, 1484, 1755, 2791, 4339, 4540. Also see these papyri cited by Thiselton: *Papyrus Osloensis* 157, *Papyrus Yale* 85, *Papyrus Fouad* 76, and *Papyrus Colon* 2555 (Thiselton, 619).
- <sup>27</sup>The conditional clause in 1 Corinthians 8:10 (*ean gar tis idē se ton echonta gnōsin en eidōleiō katakeimemon*) is a third class condition, which presents the event in the protasis as an action for hypothetical consideration. For a discussion of third class conditional sentences, see Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Biblical Languages: Greek Series, vol. 2; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) 261-263; James L. Boyer, "Third (and Fourth) Class Conditions," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1982) 163-175.
- <sup>28</sup>This view is espoused by a number of early Christian writers, e.g., Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 34 (ANF 1:212) and Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 1.6.3 (ANF 1:324). Clement of Alexandria notes that one is permitted to consume idol meat bought in the market place (*Stromata* 4.15) [ANF 2:426-427].
- <sup>29</sup>*Didache* 6:3. This English translation is by Michael W. Holmes, ed. and rev., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 257. The Greek reads, "peri de tēs brōseōs ho dunasai bastason apo de tou eidōlothutou lian proseche latreia gar estin theōn nekrōn."
- <sup>30</sup>Van Ingram, in a private email I received, June 26, 2002.
- <sup>31</sup>Especially in some non-Western cultures, the association of certain music with pagan practices may lead the church to avoid using styles of music that would result in temptation for church members.
- <sup>32</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, rev. paperback ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1982) 75.
- <sup>33</sup>Roland Mushat Frye, "A Literary Perspective for the Criticism of the Gospels," in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, vol. 2, Perspective Series 2, ed. Donald G. Miller and Dikran Y. Hadidian (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971) 199.
- <sup>34</sup>Paul may also be thinking of the hardening of one's conscience that would eventually result in behavior that is objectively morally wrong, but that the wounded conscience will no longer be able to detect. Carson writes, "Paul judges it dangerous for Christians to defy their consciences, because if they get in the habit of ignoring the voice of conscience, they may ignore that voice even when the conscience is well informed and is warning them off something that is positively evil" (123).
- <sup>35</sup>Moral relativism only retains one ultimate category — *adiaphora*. Accordingly, everything is ultimately morally inconsequential and is only given ethical significance by individuals or communities.
- <sup>36</sup>See Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).
- <sup>37</sup>See Carson, 123.
- <sup>38</sup>Michel, "oikodomeō" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 5:142.
- <sup>39</sup>I have written extensively elsewhere on the evangelistic implications of Paul's commands to imitate him in 1 Corinthians. See Plummer, "Imitation of Paul and the Church's Missionary Role in 1 Corinthians" and "The Church's Missionary Nature: The Apostle Paul and His Churches" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001).
- <sup>40</sup>My translation.
- <sup>41</sup>E.g., see Gen 15:1, 4; Exod 9:20-21; Num 3:16, 51; 11:23; 15:31; 24:13; 36:5; Deut 5:5; 9:5; 18:22; 34:5; Josh 8:27; Isa 55:10-11; Jer 20:7-9; 23:29. Cranfield writes, "Paul's thought of the message as being effective power (cf. 1 Cor 1.18) is to be understood in the light of such OT passages concerning the divine word as Gen 1.3, 6, etc.; Ps 147.15; Isa 40.8b; 55.10f; Jer 23.29 (cf. also Wisd 18.14-16)" (C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical*



*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975] 1:87-88). McKenzie writes, "The word of Yahweh may be called sacramental in the sense that it effects what it signifies. When Yahweh posits the word-thing, nothing can prevent its emergence" (John L. McKenzie, "The Word of God in the Old Testament," *Theological Studies* 21 [1960] 196). Also see Oskar Grether, *Name und Wort Gottes im Alten Testament*, (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 64; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1934) esp. 59-185; Becker, "Gospel..." "euangelion," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 2:108-109; Frank Ritche Ames, "dbr," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 1:913-914; W. H. Schmidt, "dbr," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 3:111-125; Anthony C. Thiselton, "The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings," *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974) 283-299; Kevin Vanhoozer, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today," in *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture*, ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 143-181.

<sup>42</sup>See my forthcoming *Westminster Theological Journal* article, "A Theological Basis for the Church's Mis-

sion in Paul." Other scholars who have noted the theological importance of the dynamic gospel for understanding what motivated the church to engage in mission (in Paul's thought), include: Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 11 (Leicester: Apollos; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 192-193; Peter T. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995) 96-97, 113-114; 127-128, 138; idem, "Thanksgiving and the Gospel in Paul," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1974-75) 153-155; J. Ware, "The Thessalonians as a Missionary Congregation: 1 Thessalonians 1, 5-8," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 83 (1992) 128; J. Lambrecht, "A Call to Witness by All: Evangelisation in 1 Thessalonians," in *Teologie in Konteks*, ed. J. H. Roberts et al. (Johannesburg: Orion, 1991) 324-325; cf. John Howard Schütz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority*, *Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series* 26 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 51-53; Morna D. Hooker, "A Partner in the Gospel: Paul's Understanding of His Ministry," in *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters: Essays in Honor of Victor Paul Furnish*, ed. Eugene H. Lovering, Jr. and Jerry L. Sumney (Abingdon: Nashville, 1996) 88-89; Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying in and Falling Away* (Tübingen: Mohr; Louis-

ville: Westminster, 1990) 247-254; Einar Molland, *Das Paulinische Euangelion: Das Wort und die Sache* (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1934) 53-54.