

Paul on idolatry

Finding fruitful fellowship

Nancy R. Heisey

When Paul received his calling as apostle to the nations/Gentiles, he heard it with ears trained by centuries of Jewish reflection on the gods of the nations. By the first century of the Common Era, Jews had a long history of commenting in their scriptures on their encounters with the theologies of their neighbors. Their pagan neighbors knew Jews as people who remained aloof from much of the public life of their cities and regions.¹ Jews were viewed as misanthropic, because they would not eat with Gentiles or marry them, they carried out strange practices such as circumcision and Sabbath observance, and they resisted participation in public civic events, which almost always had to do with interactions with the deities of their cities and regions. All these behaviors were in some degree the “social embodiment of

The Gospels, focused on a story based in a Jewish context, reflect little about idolatry. In contrast, Paul, whose ministry was among Gentiles, addresses idolatry as a critical matter.

anti-idolatry.”² Jewish reflection in many of the earlier texts had discussed the “gods of the nations,” but an emerging understanding added that “the gods of the peoples are *idols*” (Ps. 96:5).³ Prophetic voices from the exile echoed the psalmist’s words: “The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands” (Ps. 135:15).⁴

It was the encounter of Jews with the nations that sharpened discussion about and polemic against idolatry. It is striking that the Gospels, focused primarily on a story based in a Jewish context, reflect little about idolatry.⁵ In contrast, Paul, nearly all of whose ministry was exercised in settings where Gentiles made up the majority, addresses idolatry as a critical matter. In one of his earliest letters, he comments on the response he hoped for and others observed in the Gentiles who received his message: “For the people of [Macedonia and Achaia] report about us what kind

of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9).

Yet Paul’s letters are not full of direct references to idolatry. Fewer than twenty uses of the root word *idol* and words formed from it are found in them.⁶ Three direct references to idolatry are in Paul’s nine “vice lists,” places where his letters specify the problems from which his hearers need to be liberated.⁷ Galatians, an early letter, locates idolatry in a long list that also includes sins such as licentiousness, strife, jealousy, anger, and drunkenness (5:19–21). The other two texts parallel each other, and they identify idolatry as a descriptor of the vice of greed. In Colossians, we hear: “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)” (3:5). Ephesians makes this claim more personal, referring to “one who is greedy (that is, an idolater)” (5:5).

Idolatry: The result of failing to recognize and honor God

Before reflecting on why Paul might link greed and idolatry, we must consider two other places in his letters where Paul deals at some length with what idolatry is and why it must be rejected. In Romans, one of his later letters, a text that includes a vice list without the *idol* root in it (1:29–31), Paul gives his most thorough portrayal of the fundamental human crisis—the failure to recognize and honor God, which leads to idolatry.⁸ Paul remains clear about the Jewish understanding that God cannot be directly seen or known; his “eternal power and divine nature” are “invisible.” Yet Paul insists with his ancestors that God has revealed Godself in creation (1:20).⁹ Humans should have been able to see God by looking around them, and were to have responded by giving honor to God. Instead, “they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles” (1:23).

The order of Paul’s argument in this key passage is important. First, humans knew God but did not honor God (1:21); second, “their senseless minds were darkened” (1:21); and third, they became idolatrous. “Perverted relationships and chaos in the social order result from rejecting God. . . . People become like what they worship.”¹⁰ The extensive description of behavior that follows reflects Paul’s perception of the Roman imperial context in

which his Mediterranean mission was being carried out. Although he had not yet visited Caesar's capital, he knew, as did many, about the exploitative, abusive, and lewd behaviors of the Roman elite.¹¹

Yet, shocked as a good Jew would be by Gentile perversions, Paul does not see the problem of idolatry as limited to them. In Romans 2, when his diatribe turns to his compatriot Jews, he pointedly suggests that overt Jewish abhorrence of idolatry hides equally reprehensible behavior (2:22). Indeed, in the development of his argument in chapter 1, he already hints at Israel's own

In Romans, one of his later letters, Paul gives his most thorough portrayal of the fundamental human crisis—the failure to recognize and honor God, which leads to idolatry.

past idolatrous lapses. His description of the idolatry's inception—"they exchanged the glory"—echoes Jeremiah's complaint that Judah had "changed their glory for something that does not profit" (Jer. 2:11). The language of exchange of glory also recalls the Psalms, whose retelling of Israel's story includes the episode of the golden calf (Ps. 106:20).¹² Further, underlining the "all" language pervading the Roman letter,¹³ Paul ties the sinfulness of all human societies to the first

human being, Adam (as he was known through the biblical creation accounts). The charge that humans "worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25) offers an ironic twist from the ancient claim that God created *adam* in God's image (Gen 1:27). Still further, the charge that humans exchanged the truthfulness of God for a lie (Rom. 1:25) recalls the action of Adam and Eve in taking the serpent's word rather than God's about what would result from eating from the forbidden tree (Gen. 2:17, 3:4–6).¹⁴

Anti-idolatry: Honoring God's community at the table

By the time Paul laid out this theological groundwork in his letter to the Romans, he had decades of missionary experience in encountering and responding to particular situations in which the members of his churches found themselves. In the first of his letters to the Corinthians that is available to us,¹⁵ he offered a priceless look at the everyday questions raised by the encounters of Christ followers living in that cosmopolitan city. Among the

matters that the Corinthians raised with their founding father was what to do about *idolothuton*, a word usually translated food “sacrificed to idols” (NRSV, NIV), or “idol meat.” Chapters 8–10 contain an extensive discussion about idol meat, a conversation with conclusions that seem confusing to many readers, especially because other parts of the New Testament are clear in rejecting the eating of such food by Christ followers.¹⁶ In chapter 8, Paul agrees with those Corinthians who argue that only one God exists, with the implication that no harm could come from eating food sacrificed to what is not God (vv. 4–6). Yet in chapter 10, Paul strongly commands them to “flee from the worship of idols” (v. 14), and then gives permission to eat “whatever is sold in the meat market” (v. 25) and “whatever is set before you” (v. 27). In

The charge that humans “worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25) offers an ironic twist from the ancient claim that God created *adam* in God’s image (Gen 1:27).

between we find chapter 9, where Paul offers an apparent digression into questions about his choices on the matter of apostolic support.

Reading more carefully, we find that chapter 8 reveals that “the character of Pauline ethics is its focus on relational concerns as crucial to moral decisions.”¹⁷ Those with the knowledge that there is no god but God have liberty to eat (v. 9), but acting on that liberty could have disastrous consequences for those who are “weak” (v. 7),

those whose lives until recently were lived under the power they believed idols to have. As Christ followers, those who feel no risk of idolatry in eating idol meat are above all responsible for the welfare of sisters and brothers.

In chapter 9, Paul’s description of his apostolic ministry links it to the Corinthians’ questions. The question of eating and drinking is named up front (v. 4) as a “right” of an apostle; here Paul uses the word that is translated as “liberty” (8:9) when it describes what the idol meat eaters in Corinth claim.¹⁸ As an apostle, Paul is free to claim the benefits of room and board as well as the opportunity to travel with a wife. Indeed, he stresses that the Lord himself commanded that “those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (9:14). Yet Paul is willing to forgo these privileges “for the sake of the gospel” (9:23). Finally, wrap-

ping up his treatment of the idol meat question, he summarizes, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (11:1). With that summary ringing in their ears, the hearers of chapter 9 would grasp that those who feel free to eat idol meat should, as their apostle has done, be willing to give up that right for the benefit of others in the community.¹⁹

Chapter 10 returns to the idol meat discussion directly, with a series of sober reminders from the scriptures about the deadly

The promise offered in images of lush fertility was that the empire, if they would acquiesce to it, would make their lives fruitful. Idolatry, in Paul’s world, had to do with efforts to attain and participate in “the generation and sustenance of life” in ways that were not only wrong but unfruitful.

results of taking idolatry lightly. Among the stories referred to, the clearest connection is found in the quotation from Exodus 32:6 (1 Cor. 10:7), describing the eating and revelry that accompanied the Israelites’ worship of the golden calf.²⁰ For Paul, any eating in a worship context, whether among the Christ followers (vv. 16–17), among traditional Jews (v. 18), or among pagans (v. 19), involves “fellowship” with the divine or spiritual beings invoked in each setting.²¹ Clearly, eating idol meat in the setting of a pagan temple is dangerous. But other settings, such as buying marketplace meat or being served when one is a guest in a pagan home, do not carry the same threat of spiritual power, particularly when it is impossible to know the provenance

of the food being served (10:25–27). Even then, however, care for the welfare of sisters and brothers has to be foremost—if someone warns a believer that the food being purchased or served is idol meat, it is best to refrain from eating (v. 28).

Honoring God in right fellowship

Paul’s comments on idolatry at one level underline the wide range of possibilities represented under the umbrella term *idolatry*.²² At a deeper level, the connections between particular cases of struggle against idolatry throughout Paul’s work may be traced by asking how Paul advocates that humans created in the image of God experience fruitfulness and fellowship. When idolatry is examined top-down, its definition might focus on “God as the absolute one.”²³ Thinking bottom-up, as Paul often does, expands our

understanding by focusing on “what idolaters do with their idols.”²⁴ As we read in Romans and 1 Corinthians, we see that food and sex practices are intricately interwoven with the problem of idolatry. Both of these worlds of activity “have to do with matters of utmost seriousness: *the generation and sustenance of life*.”²⁵ But how, for Paul, did these practices connect with the problem of greed—“which is idolatry”?

The introduction to the Colossian letter, in which this equation appears, emphasizes fruitfulness (1:6, 10). This focus directs a

If Paul’s vision of a community of Christ followers from all nations is to bear fruit in our time, we must join together to repudiate false promises of abundant life, and find our sustenance in deeper sharing with all those who have entered the community of the true Image of God.

clear word to believers in a city in which public art and buildings, as well as items used at home, carried images of “lush fertility” linked to the imperial structure. For Colossae, as for the other major cities of the Roman world, the promise offered in these images was that the empire, if they would acquiesce to it, would make their lives fruitful. Yet the empire ruled by brute military force and harshly hierarchical social systems.²⁶

Colossians rebuts this worldview with the claim that Jesus Christ “is the image of the invisible God” (1:15). The argument of the letter then proceeds: true fruitfulness comes not through “the hoarding abundance touted by the empire,” but rather “in the following of

a Savior who calls his followers to practice a loving and forgiving generosity.”²⁷

Idolatry, in Paul’s world, had to do with efforts to attain and participate in “the generation and sustenance of life” in ways that were not only wrong but unfruitful. The realities of existence for many of the members of Paul’s churches were shaped by the struggle for daily survival—eating at the subsistence level, high infant mortality, and low life expectancy.²⁸ Paul, in contrast, offers the goodness of the Creator of the cosmos, made visible by those called into the community of God’s anointed one. Those “in Christ” should participate at a table of fellowship where food is shared and where those facing constant hunger are protected. They should enter a world of sexual relationships based in mutual-ity, constancy, and the self-sacrifice of Christ for the church, and

they should develop an attitude that challenges the accumulation of worldly goods.

Paul's twenty-first-century readers need to ponder the interwoven nature of all the matters Paul addresses throughout his letters. While we may have more individual freedom to choose against the idolatries linked to sexual behavior and food usage, we recognize quickly, when we begin to think about a world of enough, that questions related to greed are complex and global. Many of us Canadians and Americans need an ongoing conversation and practice of economic sharing throughout a global community of believers in order to understand and turn away from the greed that is idolatry. If Paul's vision of a community of Christ followers from all nations is to bear fruit in our time, we must join together to repudiate false promises of abundant life in the global marketplace, and find our sustenance in deeper and more radical sharing with all those who have entered the community of the true Image of God.

Notes

¹ Stephen C. Barton, "Food Rules, Sex Rules and the Prohibition of Idolatry: What's the Connection?" in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 153.

² Mark Bonnington, "Fleeing Idolatry: Social Embodiment of Anti-Idolatry in the First Century," in *Idolatry*, ed. Barton, 107.

³ My italics. All scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

⁴ See Isa. 45:20; Jer. 50:2; Ezek. 6:9, 22:4, 23:30.

⁵ However, see the discussion on Caesar's coins (Mark 12:13–17//Luke 20:20–25//Matt. 22:15–21), and the accusation that Jesus referred to the Temple as "made with hands," a Septuagint phrase for the temple of an idol (Mark 14:58) (Barton, "Food Rules," 141–42).

⁶ Rom. 2:22; 1 Cor. 8:1, 4, 7, 10; 10:14, 19; 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:16; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 1:9.

⁷ Four of Paul's ethical lists that include the vices are found in his undisputed letters: Rom. 1:29–31; 1 Cor. 5:1–11; 6:9–10; Gal. 5:19–21. Five others are in letters some view as deutero-Pauline: Eph. 5:3–8, Col. 3:5–9; 1 Tim 1:9–10; 2 Tim. 3:2–5, Titus 3:3.

⁸ David H. Horrell, "Idol-Food, Idolatry and Ethics in Paul," in *Idolatry*, ed. Barton, 121.

⁹ John E. Toews, *Romans* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2004), 69–70.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹ See Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

¹² A. B. Caneday, "'They Exchanged the Glory of God for the Likeness of an Image': Idolatrous Adam and Israel as Representatives in Paul's Letter to the Romans,"

Southern Baptist Journal of Theology 11, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 37.

¹³ For “all” references in Romans that indicate both Jews and Gentiles, see 1:7, 8; 2:12, 16; 3:10, 12, 22, 23; 4:16; 5:12, 18; 6:3; 8:14; 10:12; 11:32; 14:10; 15:33.

¹⁴ Caneday, “‘They Exchanged the Glory of God for the Likeness of an Image,’ ” 39–40. It is possible to translate “the truth about God” (NRSV) or “the truth of God” (NIV) (1:25) as “the truthfulness of God.”

¹⁵ Paul refers in 1 Corinthians to an earlier letter which we do not have. See 1 Cor. 5:9.

¹⁶ Horrell, “Idol-Food, Idolatry and Ethics in Paul,” 122; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 134. See Acts 15:28–29, Rev. 2:14, 20.

¹⁷ Horrell, “Idol-food, Idolatry and Ethics in Paul,” 123.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

²² Brian S. Rosner, “The Concept of Idolatry,” *Themelios* 24, no. 3 (May 1999): 21. See also Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

²³ Rosner, “The Concept of Idolatry,” 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁵ Barton, “Food Rules,” 145 (Barton’s italics).

²⁶ Sylvia C. Keesmaat, “In the Face of Empire: Paul’s Use of Scripture in the Shorter Epistles,” in *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 199.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

²⁸ Steven J. Friesen, “Injustice or God’s Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty,” in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 20–21.

About the author

Nancy R. Heisey is undergraduate academic dean and professor of biblical studies at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia.