

**The Idol's Temple and the Insider Movement Paradigm:
An Examination of 1 Corinthians 8–10**

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Introduction

Should believers in Jesus remain involved in religious activities and rituals of their religion of birth after coming to faith in Jesus as Lord? This is the question with which Kevin Higgins begins his recent article examining 1 Corinthians 8–10 and its implications for “insider movements.”¹ This is a critical question and an important passage as it pertains to the Insider Movement paradigm (IMP), and once again Higgins has made a valuable contribution to the conversation. This article is not intended as a response to Higgins *per se*. Prior to my awareness of Higgins’ recent article, I had planned to address 1 Corinthians 8–10 in relation to the IMP.² However, Higgins’ latest contribution affords the opportunity to interact directly with more specific claims.³

At the beginning, I want to note that I am interacting with Higgins’ article not because of any personal agenda or because I find his proposals particularly problematic, but primarily because it is the only significant treatment of this passage published by an IMP proponent.

¹ Kevin Higgins, “At Table in the Idol’s Temple? Local Theology, Idolatry, and Identification in 1 Corinthians 8–10,” *IJFM* 31 (Spring 2014): 27–36.

² See my previous article in *Global Missiology*. Doug Coleman, “[The Jerusalem Council & the Insider Movement Paradigm](#),” *Global Missiology* 12 (October 2014): np. Although the date on Higgins’ article is Spring 2014, *IJFM* publication is behind schedule and I became aware of Higgins’ article after submitting my previous article on Acts 15.

³ Previously IMP advocates had published only cursory comments related to 1 Corinthians 8–10. For my summary of these comments and my more extensive examination of 1 Corinthians 8–10, see Doug Coleman, *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology, and Ecclesiology* (Pasadena: EMS Dissertation Series, William Carey International University Press, 2011), 159–177.

Although Kevin and I see a number of things differently, I genuinely appreciate his effort to engage in substantive discussion, especially his efforts to discuss biblical passages at length. Ultimately, I find that biblical and theological support for the IMP is lacking, but I believe Higgins has consistently made the best attempt to offer such a foundation; therefore, his thought deserves attention.

Scholars have given considerable attention to 1 Corinthians 8–10, especially in recent decades.⁴ Due to space limitations and a desire to focus on the most important issues, the scope and aim of this article will be rather limited. First, as background to the current topic, I will briefly comment on the relationship between Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 8–10. Second, I will address three questions: 1) What is the situation in Corinth which Paul is addressing in these chapters, especially chapters 8 and 10? 2) What does Paul say to the Corinthian church? 3) What does this mean for the IMP?

The Acts 15 Background

In a [previous article](#) I examined the Jerusalem Council and its implications for the IMP.⁵ In short, I proposed that the Council applied a specific hermeneutic to reach its conclusions about both the matter of Gentile circumcision and the four prohibitions. The Council did not choose these prohibitions randomly, and their purpose was not simply to encourage “table fellowship” between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus or to provide a short list of ethical rules for Gentile believers. These four prohibitions reflect the Council’s concern to instruct Gentile believers to abstain from idolatry. As Witherington notes, it is important to ask where all four of

⁴ For an overview of this literature, see *ibid.* Another helpful summary is Wendell Willis, “1 Corinthians 8–10: A Retrospective after Twenty-Five Years,” *ResQ* 49 (2007): 103–12.

⁵ See Coleman, “[The Jerusalem Council](#).”

these practices would be found in the same setting.⁶ The answer: pagan temple feasts. In other words, the Jerusalem Council’s decision was intended to instruct Gentile background believers to abstain from participation in idolatrous pagan rituals.⁷

I draw attention to this background because both New Testament scholars and IMP proponents have noted the relationship, or apparent lack thereof, between Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 8–10.⁸ They point out that Paul did not cite the Jerusalem decision in his Corinthian letter, and some have suggested that Paul modified or even ignored or rejected it. In his most recent article, Higgins proposes that Paul engages in “local theology” with the Corinthians, applying the principle of the Jerusalem decision in a way that differs from the Council’s actual instructions.⁹ Higgins states that Paul “makes no reference to strangled meat and blood,” and his instructions to the Corinthians “are not the same as the Council’s instructions in Acts 15.”¹⁰ After discussion of 1 Corinthians 8–10, I intend to show that my interpretation of Acts 15 not only coheres with Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians, but provides the best harmony between the two passages.

What Is the Situation in Corinth?

We now turn to the question of the situation which Paul was addressing. What exactly were the Corinthian believers doing or saying that warranted Paul addressing the topic of things sacrificed to idols? The first indication occurs in 8:10. Here Paul asks, “For if anyone sees you

⁶ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 461.

⁷ This is not to suggest, of course, that the Jerusalem Council would encourage participation in sexual immorality if it took place outside the context of a pagan ritual. Such a suggestion would be nonsensical.

⁸ See Richard Bauckham, “James and the Jerusalem Church,” in *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting* (ed. Richard Bauckham; vol. 4 of BAFCS; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 470–72; Alex T. Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth: Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy* (JSNTSup 176; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 177–97; Paul Douglas Gardner, *The Gifts of God and the Authentication of a Christian: An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 8–11:1* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994), 184; Richard N. Longenecker, *Paul: Apostle of Liberty* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 234–35, 241–43, 254–60; Ben Witherington III, “Not So Idle Thoughts about *Eidolothuton*,” *TynBul* 44 (1993): 248–52.

⁹ Higgins, “At Table?” 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?" Two basic options are possible: 1) either Paul is addressing a hypothetical scenario which has not actually occurred but is in danger of becoming reality, or 2) Corinthian believers were actually dining in idol temples. I think Higgins is correct in agreeing with Fee who concludes, "There is simply too much urgency in all of this for temple attendance to be purely hypothetical."¹¹ This was a reality, and Paul sees a need to address it.

However, this raises other questions, perhaps the most important of which is, what was the nature of these meals? Were they religious, merely social, or something else? Wendell Willis, who has studied and written extensively on these chapters, identifies several options regarding the nature of these meals: (1) clearly idolatrous, (2) formative for the worship community, (3) eating in conscious awareness of the deity's presence, and (4) primarily social gatherings but with gratitude to and belief in the deity and its provision of food.¹² Recent scholarship, including surveys of archaeological data tend to agree that any "objective separation between meals eaten 'in an idol's temple' and meals involving idolatrous rites was highly improbable in Paul's Corinth."¹³ We cannot be dogmatically certain based on Paul's comments in chapter 8, but as I will discuss below, insofar as these meals or rituals were religious, they would be subject to Paul's instruction in chapter 10 to avoid idolatry.

A second question would be the Corinthians' motivations for visiting the pagan temple. We can speculate regarding all sorts of possible motivations: maintaining a sense of community

¹¹ Gordon D. Fee, "*Eidōlothyta* Once Again: An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8–10," *Bib* 61 (1980): 176. Others also agree that the situation is not hypothetical. See Gooch, *Dangerous Food*, 80; Cheung, *Idol Food*, 93–96; Bruce N. Fisk, "Eating Meat Offered to Idols: Corinthian Behavior and Pauline Response in 1 Corinthians 8–10 (A Response to Gordon Fee)," *TJ* 10 (Spring 1989): 61–63; David Horrell, "Theological Principle or Christological Praxis? Pauline Ethics in 1 Corinthians 8.1–11.1," *JSNT* 67 (S 1997): 99; Derek Newton, *Deity and Diet: The Dilemma of Sacrificial Food at Corinth* (JSNTSup 169; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 312–13.

¹² Willis, "1 Corinthians 8–10: A Retrospective," 111.

¹³ Gooch, *Dangerous Food*, 82. Cheung and Newton conclude that such meals carried both and social and religious meaning. Cheung, *Idol Food*, 27–38, 93–94; Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 255. Willis also agrees that the meals had a religious function. Willis, "1 Corinthians 8–10: A Retrospective," 109.

belonging, networking for business purposes, a desire to share the gospel, and others. The short answer is that we simply do not know. The text gives us no clear indications, and perhaps this is more significant than it may first appear. I will return to this further below.

A final question I will mention here is the Corinthian believers' justification, or defense, for continuing to visit the temple. Although we cannot be dogmatically certain, Paul seems to mention their defense in 8:4: "Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'an idol has no real existence,' and that 'there is no God but one.'" There is widespread agreement among commentators that Paul is here quoting opinions cited by the "strong" in Corinth.¹⁴ As Horrell states it, "These statements represent the theological legitimation for the strong's assertion of their freedom to eat idol-food without restriction."¹⁵ It is clear from the text that Paul shares this opinion. Perhaps he has even taught it to them in the past. These "strong" believers then use this as justification for continuing to frequent the pagan temple. After all, if a believer knows that an idol really is "nothing" (KJV) or "has no real existence" (ESV), what harm is there in going? In other words, although the pagans believe the idol, or the god represented by the idol, truly exists, the Jesus follower knows better. The Jesus follower, therefore, can simply reinterpret the significance or meaning of the ritual and supposedly attend without problem. But while Paul agrees with this basic truth that an idol is nothing, he will correct their application of it.

¹⁴ Horrell, "Theological Principle or Christological Praxis?," 85. Here Horrell mentions others who agree. The quotation marks around certain phrases in the ESV obviously indicate that translation's editors' belief that Paul is quoting some source here.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

What Does Paul Say?

Paul says a lot, of course, but I will limit my comments to two specific matters.¹⁶ First, I agree with Higgins when he notes that Paul's ethical instruction in chapter 8 is based on a concern for the weaker brother.¹⁷ This is fairly obvious. Furthermore, I also agree that it is interesting that Paul refuses in chapter 8 to outright condemn the practice of dining in an idol's temple, especially when he speaks so strongly against idolatry in chapter 10. Higgins finds this point quite significant,¹⁸ and other commentators have noted it as well. In fact, it has been one of the most discussed elements of this section of 1 Corinthians.¹⁹ There are reasonable explanations, but first it will be helpful to briefly consider the second important issue in Paul's instructions: his strong warning about idolatry in chapter 10.

If Paul offers a relative ethic in 8:9–13 based on concern for the weaker brother, he offers an objective standard in 10:14: flee from idolatry—period. As Higgins rightly points out, Paul does not define the term “idolatry” here. However, the context makes clear how he intends for the Corinthians to understand and apply this instruction. In the first verses of chapter 10 Paul cites the Israelites' Old Testament failure as an example and warns the Corinthians against putting Christ to the test via idolatry (10:1–13). Paul then issues his clear command: “flee idolatry” (10:14). Immediately, Paul picks up the theme of “participation” and uses two illustrations to make his point: the Lord's Supper and the Old Testament sacrifices (10:16–18). The main idea is that “eating” necessarily involves “participation.” In the Lord's Supper, to drink

¹⁶ Following Bailey's structural analysis, Higgins sees chapter 9 as formative for the entire section. As important as it is, I do not intend to discuss chapter 9 here because I do not believe Paul's approach in chapter 9 relativizes his instructions regarding idolatry in chapter 10. Higgins, “At Table,” 29–30, 33–34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31–32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁹ See Willis' helpful summary of issues and views. Willis, “1 Corinthians 8–10: A Retrospective,” 103–105.

is to participate in the blood of Christ, and to eat is to participate in His body (10:16). In the Old Testament, to eat of the sacrifices was to “participate” in the altar (10:18).

Paul assumes in verse 19 that the Corinthians have understood his point even before he applies his comments to their situation. He asks, “What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?” Such an implication, of course, would contradict his own comments in chapter 8. Paul is not here affirming the real existence of other gods, or idols. He makes his point clear in the next two verses: “No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (10:20–21). While Paul denies the real existence of idols (they are “nothing”), he does not agree with the Corinthians’ assertion that participating in pagan religious meals is therefore harmless, or acceptable. On the contrary, to do so is to “participate with demons” (10:20).

Here we must return to an issue raised earlier. We do not know the Corinthians’ motivations for continuing to visit the pagan temples. For Paul, however, the motivation seems irrelevant. Nowhere does Paul state or even remotely imply that any motive would render void his instruction to avoid participation in pagan sacrifice. His instruction is objective and without any qualification. No matter how good the motivation (evangelism, etc.), participation in these rituals is not acceptable for a follower of Jesus. The cup and table of the Lord are incompatible with the cup and table of demons (10:21).²⁰ In other words, it is not permissible for one to participate in pagan sacrifices—no matter the motive and no matter how redefined or

²⁰ For more on connections between idolatry and demons, Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006), 144–147.

reinterpreted the ritual might be—while also participating in the Lord’s Supper, i.e., belonging to Christ.

This is one point at which I find Higgins’ definition of idolatry and interpretation of this passage inadequate. Regarding Paul’s instructions in chapter 10 Higgins comments, “We might say that the bottom line then is ‘no worship of, or *attempt* to commune with, or pray to, an idol, or rather, the demon behind the idol’” (emphasis added).²¹ He then defines idolatry as “seeking (by *intention* and action on the part of a believer in Jesus) to commune with, placate, worship, and obey a spiritual being or entity other than God” (emphasis added).²² This obviously makes “intent” the defining criteria. However, Paul seems to be saying the opposite: regardless of your intent, if you participate in pagan sacrifices, you will be “partaking” of the table of demons, and this is incompatible with your union with Christ.

To be fair to Higgins, at one point he concludes that Paul does not allow permission to participate in the actual ritual of sacrifice itself, but the meal following the sacrifice.²³ However, Higgins later comments:

Paul’s position on this topic is admittedly complex. I believe that he is trying to help the Corinthians see that *mere participation* in an act or ceremony doesn’t tell the whole story when it comes to idolatry. For some, a given act may not be idolatrous at all; for others, past connections and experiences may, through their participation, pull them into a spiritual experience with a spiritual being other than God. This, I believe, is the force of Paul’s argument in chapters 8 to 10 and his primary concern.²⁴ (emphasis added)

Again, I find no warrant in the text that allows for such a relativizing of Paul’s comments about participating in pagan sacrifices. Furthermore, if Higgins agrees that Paul does not give permission for the actual ritual of sacrifice itself, does this not indicate some objective standard for idolatry?

²¹ Higgins, “At Table,” 33.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Additionally, the New Testament seems to indicate that idolatry can be committed unintentionally in other ways. For example, in Col 3:5 Paul defines covetousness as idolatry. If one who is covetous is also committing idolatry, it would be nonsensical for us to even ask whether such a one is intentionally seeking to commune with an idol or another god. Yet his covetousness amounts to idolatry. If the idolatry of covetousness is an “unintentional” idolatry, is it not possible that other forms of idolatry may be unintentional as well?

Admittedly, there are elements of Paul’s instructions in both chapter 8 and 10 that are indeed relative. For example, Paul allows the Corinthians to eat whatever is sold in the market without raising any question on the ground of conscience (10:25). Commentators frequently note that meat sold in the market would likely have been used in pagan sacrifices. This raises the question of how Paul’s instructions here cohere with Acts 15, a point to which I will return shortly. Second, Paul allows the Corinthians to eat meat set before them in unbelievers’ homes without asking any questions (10:27). However, if someone informs them that the meat has been sacrificed to idols, they are to refrain for the sake of the other’s conscience (10:28–29). This seems to imply that the one informing is a “weaker” believer, since an unbeliever’s conscience would presumably not be bothered by eating. From these instructions, we can deduce that Paul did not object to eating of meat sacrificed to idols in two cases: 1) as long as the eating did not harm the conscience of a weaker believer (8:9–13 and 10:28–29), and 2) as long as the eating was not part of a pagan ritual (10:14–25).

We now return to the question of why Paul did not outright condemn in chapter 8 the eating of meat in a pagan temple as part of a religious ritual. Commentators have offered various proposals. Gordon Fee suggests that Paul employs a gradual method of argumentation because of his understanding of the relationship between the indicative and the imperative. “An imperative

which precedes the indicative (obedience in order to be justified) is anathema to Paul, but so also is an indicative with *no* imperative.”²⁵ Therefore, Paul never corrects behavior with a simple prohibition, but addresses deeper issues first, particularly a proper understanding of the gospel. According to Fee, this pattern is found several times in 1 Corinthians alone (1:10–4:21; 6:12–20; 12–14; 8:1–11:1).²⁶ While Paul will ultimately outright forbid eating at an idol’s table, the Corinthians’ abuse of their rights based on false “knowledge,” evidenced in a failure to love, is “the far greater urgency” and is therefore addressed first, in chapter 8.²⁷

Alex Cheung agrees that Paul withholds his final judgment on the matter until chapter 10, but Cheung does not believe this is because Paul considers the abuse of Christian freedom more urgent than fornication and idolatry.²⁸ Cheung sees Paul’s rhetorical strategy as a governing force in shaping the structure of chapters 8–10. Using their language, starting where they are and moving them where he wants them to be, Paul presents a two-stage argument against idol food.²⁹ “He first softens the Corinthians’ resistance to the prohibition by appealing to their better nature,” encouraging them to be more considerate of the weak, a point that would be very powerful in an honor-and-shame based culture.³⁰ Yet Paul reserves his strongest argument for last.³¹ As Cheung notes, Chrysostom agrees. Commenting on verse 22, Chrysostom states:

“Well, but why,” some one [*sic*] will say, “did he not set down these things at first, which would be most effectual to withdraw them?” Because it is his custom to prove his point by many particulars, and to place the strongest last, and to prevail by proving more than was necessary. On this account then, he

²⁵ Fee, “*Eidōlothyta* Once Again,” 196.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Cheung, *Idol Food*, 115.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 115–16.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

began from the lesser topics, and so made that last point also became more easily admitted, their mind having been smoothed down by the things said before.³²

Derek Newton agrees that Paul’s argument, reflective of his typical rhetorical style in “gradually moving from indirect to direct statements,” rejects Christian participation in temple meals in 1 Cor 8:7–13, but reaches its full climax in 10:14–22.³³ My purpose here is not to argue for a definitive answer to the question but to demonstrate that reasonable explanations exist as to why Paul would not take a stronger stance in chapter 8.

Finally, before moving to implications we must return to the question of harmony between Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 8–10. As noted earlier, some commentators, including Higgins, believe Paul either modified or ignored the Jerusalem Council’s decision. However, if [my interpretation](#) of Acts 15 is correct, no discontinuity exists between the decision and Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians. With the combination of the four prohibitions, the Jerusalem Council was indicating its primary concern was participating in pagan rituals and consuming things sacrificed to idols in that immediate context. Therefore, Paul’s prohibition on participating in pagan sacrifices and his permission to consume meat sold in the market or in unbelievers’ homes are both in harmony with the Council’s instructions.

What Does This Mean for the IMP?

I submit that Paul establishes two basic principles for the Corinthians and for us: 1) participation in pagan *religious* rituals are prohibited, regardless of motivation and in spite of attempts at reinterpretation, and 2) when elements such as food, etc., used in these rituals are later available for consumption in non-religious settings, matters of conscience and concern for weaker believers become the standard for deciding. If and how these principles apply to Insider

³² John Chrysostom, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (LFHCC 4; Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1839), 331. For Cheung’s reference to Chrysostom, see Cheung, *Idol Food*, 117.

³³ Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 313.

approaches in specific religious contexts will depend on how we answer additional questions. First, are these religious contexts analogous to first-century pagan Corinthian religion(s)? To take a specific example, are Islamic religious rituals such as the Friday noon prayers at the mosque analogous to the rituals Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians? One obvious difference is the lack of animal sacrifice during the weekly Friday prayers. Additionally, Islam is monotheistic whereas Corinthian religion(s) may have recognized multiple gods. Many other differences could be noted. However, the more important question is whether a fundamental similarity connects the two. It seems nonsensical to suggest that Paul would approve of participation in pagan religious rituals as long as they did not include animal sacrifice. The bigger problem is the fact that somehow participation in a pagan religious ritual amounts to “titular idolatry.”³⁴

Lurking in the background of all of this are additional questions. Is Islam idolatrous? Do non-Jesus-following Muslims worship the true God but worship him incompletely or ignorantly? Or is the Allah of the Qur’an so different from the God of the Bible as to constitute an idol? Space limitations do not permit a discussion of the question here. I have done so elsewhere, concluding that a fundamental difference exists between the two.³⁵ Therefore, participation in Muslim *religious* rituals is prohibited by 1 Corinthians 10. However, recent objections to the “essentialist” view of religions force us to ask whether we can even speak of “Islam” at all. I recognize that many different expressions and interpretations of Islam exist. As it concerns the principles Paul establishes in 1 Corinthians 10, as long as the particular religious expression or interpretation of any religion is idolatrous, participation in that religion’s *religious* rituals is prohibited for the follower of Jesus.

³⁴ Willis, “1 Corinthians 8–10: A Retrospective,” 111.

³⁵ See Coleman, *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm*, 59–62.

Finally, some may object that it is impossible to separate religion and culture, particularly in Muslim settings. I have lived among Muslims for more than 15 years, and I recognize that the cultural and religious can be closely connected in events such as births, circumcisions, weddings, funerals, etc. I do not suggest it is necessarily easy to distinguish between these, or to determine if and how one might participate in the events without endorsing or participating in their religious aspects. However, other rituals are surely simply religious, for example Friday noon prayers at the mosque. I am arguing that based on 1 Corinthians 8–10 those *clearly religious* events are prohibited for the follower of Jesus, regardless of motive or personal reinterpretation.³⁶ This leads us back to approaches that have previously been described as C-3 or C-4.³⁷

³⁶ I am NOT arguing here that the mosque premises are always and forever off limits to any follower of Jesus. I am simply arguing that active participation in the Friday noon prayers at the mosque are analogous to what Paul prohibits in 1 Corinthians 10.

³⁷ I also recognize that C-5 may happen by default as new believers in Jesus rethink their past, their current identity, and how to function in their culture as a follower of Jesus. What I am suggesting is that Paul prohibits this as a strategy or an aim.