

As we move through Corinthians, we will keep our place by developing the broad outline we started with.

I. Introduction (1.1-9)

II. Conditions reported to Paul (1.10-6.20)

- A. Divisions in the church (1.10-4.21)
- B. Lack of discipline in the church (5.1-6.20)

III. Questions asked of Paul (7.1-16.4)

¹ Cor 7.1 ¶ Now concerning the things about which you wrote...

“The remainder of the body of this epistle deals with questions that the Corinthians had asked Paul in a letter. Paul introduced each of these with the phrase *peri de* (‘now concerning,’ 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 12).”¹

- A. Questions about marriage (7.1-40)
- B. Questions about things sacrificed to idols (8.1-11.1)
- C. Questions about worship services
 1. Head coverings (11.2-16)
 2. Communion practices (11.17-34)

When we completed the study of “things offered to idols,” 1 Cor 8-10, I asked if you had further questions related to the topic. Before we move on to the next controversial area of 1 Corinthians, I thought it would be wise to address these questions.

1. What about Chinese restaurants that have a Buddha displayed, especially those with little offerings of food placed before the statue?
2. How do we define idols?
3. At what point does an interest become an idol?
4. How to separate culture from idols?

It seems to me that the last three questions are connected, so we will deal with them as a group.

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), 1 Co 7.1.

Chinese restaurants and Buddhas

Recall the main issue in 1 Corinthians 8-10 as described in 1 Cor 8.10:

1 Cor 8.10 For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?

What was the main question? **Whether anyone could eat idol meat at the idol temple**

Is a Chinese restaurant an idol temple? If someone saw you go there, would they say, "Hey, he might be worshipping an idol?" Compare someone going to the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar — how would entering that building and buying food from the food carts there compare with entering a Chinese restaurant here?

Also compare attending a Sikh temple here in BC and taking part in the meal there. What should we do about that?

- It seems that a Chinese restaurant is not the same as an idol temple. However, suppose you are with another Christian who is bothered by the Buddha (or the fortune cookies). What should you do then?

Defining idols in our culture

Bible background: "There are rarely any neutral or matter-of-fact references to idols in the OT ... The biblical discourse on idolatry is harshly negative, condemning the worship of images (Exod 20:4–5) and mercilessly mocking the notion that one would worship an object made by human hands (Isa 44:9–20; Jer 10:1–16)."²

"The NT references to idolatry reflect the same attitude as the OT, criticizing idol worship and characterizing it as false, worthless, and ineffective (1 Cor 8:4; 1 Thess 1:9; Rom 1:23)."³

² Douglas Mangum, "Idolatry," in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

³ Mangum.

“On two occasions, Paul links idolatry with the sin of covetousness, perhaps extending the idea of idolatry from worship of other gods to worship of or desire for things (Eph 5:5; Col 3:5).”⁴

Ep 5.5 For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Col 3.5 ¶ Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.

“To covet is idolatry. That which is coveted becomes the center of one’s life and is worshiped instead of the Creator (Rom 1:23). The greedy person is willing to exchange the glory of the incorruptible God for a corruptible idol (Rom 1:25). This is a flawed perspective. For example, Esau was so covetous of the pottage that he sold his birthright—a ten-minute transaction in exchange for a life’s inheritance!”⁵

Consider Psalm 135.15-18 on the transformative effect of Idolatry:

Ps 135.15-18 The idols of the nations are *but* silver and gold, The work of man's hands.¹⁶ They have mouths, but they do not speak; They have eyes, but they do not see;¹⁷ They have ears, but they do not hear, Nor is there any breath at all in their mouths.¹⁸ Those who make them will be like them, *Yes, everyone who trusts in them.*

What happens to those who follow idols? (18) **they become like them**

What characteristics of idols are described in these verses? (15-17)

They have nothing to say, they have no sight, they cannot receive truth, they are dead.

⁴ Mangum.

⁵ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 660–61.

Consider this observation:

[I]t is not surprising that those who worship technology eventually develop machine-like personalities: emotionally under-developed, shallow in their relationships, driven by a desire to control and quantify every human situation, unable to appreciate beauty and value in anything outside the artificial. Those who worship sex, on the other hand, are incapable of trust and commitment in their human relationships and hide a lonely existence behind a mask of superficial 'adulthood'.⁶

Key thoughts in relation to our questions:

1. How do we define idols?
2. At what point does an interest become an idol?
3. How to separate culture from idols?

Idolatry involves worship of the **creation** instead of the **Creator**.

Idolatry **shapes** us into the **image** of our object of worship.

When an object becomes the **source** for meeting our **needs** rather than **God**, it has become an idol.

Illustration: Can someone look to a **hockey player or team** for spiritual well-being?

Can someone enjoy **that same object** without relying on it for **spiritual** strength?

Finally: remember that the issue in 1 Cor 8-10 is the meat offered to idols, not the idols themselves. There are some things that are **not** idolatry, but when used in an idol **context** are forbidden.

⁶ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods that Fail: Modern Idolatry and Christian Mission*, rev. ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 112, cited in Michael J. Ovey, "Off the Record: The Echo Chamber of Idolatry," *Themelios* 41, no. 2 (2016): 214.