

IDOL-FOOD, IDOLATRY AND ETHICS IN PAUL*

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Introduction

In Paul's earliest letter, his brief summary of the Thessalonians' response to the gospel describes how they 'turned to God from idols' (1 Thess 1.9). This phrase forms part of what Howard Marshall calls 'a classic description of what it meant for a group of Gentiles to become Christians'.¹ Whether the phrasing is Paul's or that of his predecessors in the Gentile mission — a matter of some discussion — is not crucial for our purposes here: it seems certain that Paul shares with other early Christian missionaries the conviction that conversion for Gentiles entails 'turning from idols'. Elsewhere, Paul describes the fundamental change undergone by Gentile converts in terms of a past characterised by involvement with 'dumb idols': 'when you were Gentiles (ἠὲν ἰδωλολάτραι)' he reminds the Corinthians, 'you were enticed and led astray to idols (ἠὲν ἰδωλολάτραι) that could not speak' (1 Cor 12.2, NRSV). The incompatibility of 'the temple of God' and 'idols' is forcefully stressed in 2 Cor 6.16, while in a number of places 'idolaters' (ἰδωλολάτραι) or 'idolatry' (ἰδωλολατρία) are included in lists of types of sinner or sin: those who are guilty of idolatry, Paul warns, will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6.9; Gal 5.20; cf. 1 Cor 5.10-11).

In fact, nineteen of the thirty-two New Testament uses of words from the ἰδωλολάτραι- word-group — ἰδωλολάτραι, ἰδωλολατρία, ἰδωλολάτρης, ἰδωλολατρῶν, ἰδωλολατρῶν, ἰδωλολατρῶν, ἰδωλολατρῶν and ἰδωλολατρῶν — are in the seven undisputed letters of Paul,² not to mention passages like Rom 1.19-32, where idolatry is clearly a key theme in the story

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¹ I. H. Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* (NCBC; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1983) 56.

² The references are: Rom 2.22; 1 Cor 5.10; 5.11; 6.9; 8.1; 8.4 (*bis*); 8.7 (*bis*); 8.10 (*bis*); 10.7; 10.14; 10.19 (*bis*); 12.2; 2 Cor 6.16; Gal 5.20; 1 Thess 1.9.

The word for idol food, $\text{מִזְבֵּחַ אֱלֹהִים}$ — literally, ‘something sacrificed to an idol’ — which recurs frequently throughout 1 Cor 8–10 does not, however, occur in pre-Pauline literature and may be a word of Christian coinage.⁸ There are clear precursors and near equivalents, however, in phrases like $\text{שֶׁחַטְמוֹת אֱלֹהִים}$ וְזֵבַח אֱלֹהִים $\text{מִזְבֵּחַ אֱלֹהִים}$ (Num 25.2; cf. Exod 34.15; Lev 17.7). The only precisely relevant Septuagint text is 4 Macc 5.2, which may well post-date Paul’s letters.⁹ The text describes Antiochus compelling every Hebrew ‘to eat pork and food sacrificed to idols’ ($\text{καὶ κρέας ἐπιθυμιῶν καὶ κρέας ἀποκρίσεων ἀλλοθῶν}$); elsewhere in 4 Maccabees the verb φαγεῖν ἁβύμακα (to eat defiling food) is used (4 Macc 5.3, 19, 25; 8.2, 12, 29; 11.16; 13.2). As in 4 Maccabees, characteristic of many Jewish writings is the conjunction of concerns about idolatry and about unclean food.¹⁰

Idols, idolatry and idol-food: 1 Corinthians 8–10

However, while it is clear that ‘turning from idols’ is definitive of Gentile conversion, and that ‘idolatry’ belongs in a list of key vices excluded from the kingdom, it is only in 1 Corinthians 8–10 that we gain any concrete view of what, in Paul’s view, ‘turning from idols’ might mean. Here Paul responds in some detail to an issue most likely raised by the Corinthians, ‘concerning idol-food’

($\text{περὶ τῶν εἰδωλῶν καὶ κρέατος ἀποκρίσεων}$ — 1 Cor 8.1).¹¹

This long and complex passage raises many difficulties and has been much discussed.¹² At least some of the scholarly discussion is generated by the key

⁸ See Cheung, *Idol Food*, 43 with n.12; Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 179-83.

⁹ There is disagreement over the date, some arguing for an early date, pre-50CE and others for a date around the end of the first century CE; the latter is perhaps more likely. For a brief summary see J.M.G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE to 117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996) 449.

¹⁰ See esp. Cheung, *Idol Food*, 39-81. E.g. 1 Macc 1.41-64 (note v.62); Daniel provides a clear OT example: cf. Dan 1.8; 3.8-12, etc.

¹¹ See further J.C. Hurd, *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 1965) 65-74; though note the cautions of M.M. Mitchell, ‘Concerning $\text{καὶ κρέατος ἀποκρίσεων}$ in 1 Corinthians’, *NovT* 31 (1989) 229-56.

¹² Besides Newton (*Deity and Diet*) and Cheung (*Idol Food*), recent monographs include W.L. Willis, *Idol Meat in Corinth* (SBLDS 68; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985); H. Probst, *Paulus und der Brief*

difficulty of discerning exactly what Paul's stance was regarding the eating of idol-food and participating in non-Christian meals and cultic acts in various settings. The diversity of scholarly views at least reveals for certain that Paul's instruction is less than crystal clear on these matters! There are also difficulties arising from the apparent contrasts between different sections of the passage: chapter 8 and the latter parts of chapter 10 (10.23ff) seem at least theoretically to accept a Christian's right to eat idol-food, even in an $\mathfrak{M} \times \diamond \circ \bullet \mathfrak{M} \times \square \blacksquare$, while 10.1-22 is full of stern warnings against idolatry. And chapter 9 appears in some respects a digression from the main topic. These literary difficulties have led to various partition hypotheses, in which certain sections of the passage are assigned to different letters;¹³ and to a range of studies which leave some parts of the passage out of consideration.¹⁴ Most recent work, however, has affirmed the unity of the passage, and indeed of 1 Corinthians as a whole, a conclusion with which I fully concur.¹⁵

The challenge to interpreters, then, is to understand the complex argument of the whole passage, and the relations of its various parts. Since I have previously published a detailed exegetical study of this text,¹⁶ I shall avoid repeating that work here and will restrict myself to drawing out some key points concerning Paul's instructions on the issue of idolatry and idol-food.¹⁷

One of the things that makes this passage interesting and important in revealing the character of Pauline ethics is its focus on relational concerns as crucial

(WUNT 2.45; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991); P.D. Gooch, *Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8–10 in Its Context* (SCJ 5; Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1993); P.D. Gardner, *The Gifts of God and the Authentication of a Christian* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1994); K.-K. Yeo, *Rhetorical Interaction in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995); J.F.M. Smit, "About the Idol Offerings" (Leuven: Peeters, 2000); J. Fotopoulos, *Food Offered to Idols in Roman Corinth* (WUNT 2.151; Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2003).

¹³ See e.g. G. Sellin, 'Hauptprobleme des Ersten Korintherbriefes', *ANRW* II, 25.4 (1987) 2964-82.

¹⁴ E.g. Willis, *Idol Meat*; J. Murphy-O'Connor, 'Freedom or the Ghetto (1 Cor., VIII,1-13; X,23-XI,1.)', *RB* (1978) 85, 543-574; Yeo, *Rhetorical Interaction*.

¹⁵ See D.G. Horrell, 'Theological Principle or Christological Praxis? Pauline Ethics in 1 Corinthians 8.1–11.1', *JSNT* 67 (1997) 83-114 (84).

¹⁶ Horrell, 'Theological Principle'.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that this particular focus leaves aside many other potentially interesting questions, such as the ontological status and relation of $\mathfrak{M} \times \equiv \circ \bullet \otimes$ and $\circ \otimes \times \circ \square \otimes \blacksquare \times \otimes$ in Paul's thought-world.

offerings and thus counted as ⲙⲉⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ .²² Nevertheless, Paul’s instruction is unequivocal — note the emphatic ⲛⲟⲩⲁⲗⲉⲙ and the imperative ⲙⲉⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ — no food need be regarded as unclean or unacceptable for the Christian.

The prohibitive imperative is to ‘flee from idolatry’ (10.14). It is important to note the word Paul uses here: not ⲙⲉⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ but $\text{ⲙⲉⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ}$. Worship of idols is clearly prohibited, but what is left unclear is when, if at all, eating ⲙⲉⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ *per se* constitutes idolatry.²³ Had Paul meant plainly to prohibit the eating of idol-food he could have done so quite simply, thus making his instruction on the matter clear to the Corinthians and other early Christians²⁴ and depriving modern scholars of one interpretative conundrum. A phrase such as is used in *Did* 6.3 would have been unambiguous: ‘keep strictly from that which is offered to idols’ ($\text{ⲉⲃⲉⲛⲉⲧⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ ⲉⲃⲉⲛⲉⲧⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ ⲙⲉⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ ⲉⲃⲉⲛⲉⲧⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ ⲉⲃⲉⲛⲉⲧⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ}$). But he did not. Hence we are left with the difficult task of determining how this prohibition against idolatry, and the wider section of warning in which it is located (10.1-22), relates to the apparently more permissive instruction elsewhere in chapters 8 and 10.

Derek Newton’s detailed study of the socio-historical background to the issue of sacrificial food at Corinth offers new and significant illumination here. Most

²² Pace Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 783. See esp. the recent study by D.-A. Koch, ‘“Alles, was ⲙⲉⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩ verkauft wird, eßt...” Die *macella* von Pompeji, Gerasa und Kornith und ihre Bedeutung für die Auslegung von 1Kor 10,25’, *ZNW* 90 (1999) 194-219, though Koch is not really correct in suggesting that the North Market at Corinth is the most likely candidate to be identified as the *macellum* of Paul’s time (p. 209; cf. the essay by Williams in n.21 above). Cooked meats were also sold at Corinth in Paul’s time from the buildings immediately east of Theatre (see C.K. Williams II and O.H. Zervos, ‘Corinth 1985: East of the Theater’, *Hesperia* 55 (1986) 129-75 (146-48); D.G. Horrell, ‘Domestic Space and Christian Meetings at Corinth: Imagining New Contexts and the Buildings East of the Theatre’, *NTS* 50 (2004) 349-369).

²³ Pace Markus Bockmuehl (*Jewish Law in Gentile Churches*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000, 168 with n.101), it is not enough to cite this verse as an indication that ‘idol food is certainly *not* a matter of indifference for Paul’. Due weight must be given to the fact that Paul chose the word ⲙⲉⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ , and not ⲙⲉⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲓⲛⲟⲩⲓⲛⲟⲩ , in the midst of a discussion primarily concerned with the latter (8.1, 4).

scholars have been unable to see how there could be any difference between eating in a temple setting, as depicted in chapter 8, and participating in the table of demons, as depicted, and apparently prohibited, in 10.1-22.²⁵ In terms of the activity depicted in chapter 8, ‘reclining $\text{M} \blacklozenge \blacksquare \text{M} \text{X} \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \bullet \text{M} \text{X} \text{☞} \blacklozenge \blacklozenge$ ’, Newton shows what a variety of settings could be included in such a designation, and how those partaking in meals in such contexts might or might not be eating food that had been directly taken from the sacrificial act.²⁶ In many cases, only a small group of worshippers or cultic officials took part in the sacrificial act and ate of the sacrificial offerings; others might eat other food, and might do so in adjacent rooms, or in the open air, or in other settings which evinced no close connection with the cultic act itself.²⁷ In 10.1-22, Newton argues, a different degree of participation is in view. Here Paul talks of those who participate in sacrifice (note $\square \blacklozenge \text{☞} \blacklozenge$; 10.20) and share ‘the table of $\text{☞} \text{☞} \text{X} \text{O} \square \blacksquare \text{X} \text{☞} \blacklozenge \blacklozenge$ ’ (10.21); ‘Paul’s emphasis is thus very much on those involved in the actual act of making and eating sacrifices’.²⁸ Thus the difference between the two sections of the passage is that ‘1 Corinthians 8 dealt with the issue of temple *eating*, whereas 1 Cor. 10.1-22 tackled the problem of actual sacrificial acts

²⁴ Origen, *Cels* 8.24, perhaps implies that Paul’s words were not exactly clear to understand on this matter; more generally, cf. 2 Pet 3.15-16.

²⁵ E.g., recently, Cheung, *Idol Food*, 28-32, in comments on eating in the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore.

²⁶ Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 79-257, 298-305. Newton includes funerary meals, imperial cult, and athletic games in his consideration of the relevant types of meals, as well as those more frequently mentioned by scholars, those associated with the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore, the Asklepeion, etc.

²⁷ See e.g. Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 198-99, 202, 230, 233-39, etc. Cheung’s work, by contrast, deals briefly with the socio-historical and archaeological evidence, largely following Gooch in this respect, and thus makes a number of questionable assumptions which affect the range of possible conclusions, most importantly that there could not be any plausible distinction between idolatry and eating idol food (which begs the key question), nor between eating $\text{M} \blacklozenge \blacksquare \text{M} \text{X} \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \bullet \text{M} \text{X} \text{☞} \blacklozenge \blacklozenge$ and sacrificing to demons (*Idol Food*, pp. 36-38, 92-94, etc.). *Pace* Cheung (pp. 28-32), it is actually unclear whether sacrificial eating took place in the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore in Roman times, though dining of some sort evidently did, and it is entirely possible that a distinction could be drawn between participating in the cult itself and eating in some area around the sanctuary. See further N. Bookides and R.S. Stroud, *The Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore: Corinth 18.3* (Princeton, NJ: ASCSA, 1997) 273ff., esp. 434-45; Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 91-96.

²⁸ Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 338.

accompanied by eating'.²⁹ This latter case represents the level of participation which Paul without exception prohibits.³⁰

Inside the limits framed by these instructions are situations where it is the concerns of the other which are crucial: there is no absolute or intrinsic reason why certain actions are sinful, but they should be avoided if they are a cause of stumbling to others. In this category there appear to be two activities about which Paul gives instruction, which may or may not overlap in any given case.

One activity is that of eating $\mu\kappa\upsilon\alpha\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma\alpha\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma$, in settings that may include an $\mu\kappa\upsilon\alpha\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma\alpha\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma$ (8.10: the verb $\epsilon\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma\mu\kappa\alpha\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma$, reclining, implies the activity of dining/eating). Here, Paul essentially accepts as legitimate the theological principles by which the so-called 'strong' justify their freedom to eat idol-food — 'there is no idol in the world and there is no God but one' (8.4) — and thus agrees that they have a legitimate $\mu\kappa\upsilon\alpha\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma\alpha\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma$ to act in this way. But the exercise of this $\mu\kappa\upsilon\alpha\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma\alpha\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma$ is very firmly limited by the offence it may cause to the weak. This 'offence' or 'stumbling', it should be noted, is not to be understood in terms of their being outraged or angered by the conduct of the strong, but rather that they too may be emboldened to eat idol-food even though their weak consciousness connects such food closely with an idol (8.7-10). As in Rom 14.23 whether a practice is ethically legitimate or not can depend, it seems, on the stance of the actor: 'everything that is not from faith is sin.' The danger, as Paul perceives it, is that the weak will be led to destruction by the boldness of the strong, and this act of causing the destruction of 'an $\epsilon\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma\mu\kappa\alpha\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma$ for whom Christ died' (8.11) amounts to a 'sin against Christ' (8.12) — a phrase of stern warning which Paul uses only here in his letters.³¹ Only by accepting that Paul regards the $\mu\kappa\upsilon\alpha\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma\alpha\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma$ of the strong as entirely legitimate, yet nevertheless calls for it to be renounced out of concern for the weak, can we make proper sense of chapter 9 within the wider argument. In this somewhat digressive yet crucial section, after insisting firmly and somewhat defensively that he is a genuine apostle (9.1-3) — an essential basis for the argument that follows — Paul proceeds to pile up reasons to

²⁹ Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 198-99. See further pp. 331-71.

³⁰ Cf. Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 365. This supports my earlier argument, that Paul prohibits participation in 'cultic sacrificial gatherings' but not necessarily all occasions or activities in temples and their precincts (Horrell, 'Theological Principle', 101, 103).

³¹ Cf. Murphy-O'Connor, 'Freedom or the Ghetto', 563.

justify the legitimacy of his right to material support from the church. Arguments from everyday life, from scripture, from temple and cult, and even — climactically — from a command of the Lord, all combine to demonstrate that Paul has a right, an $\mu \diamond \boxtimes \square \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \text{†} \text{†} \text{†}$, which is unquestionably legitimate (9.7-14). Yet Paul sets aside his right for the sake of the gospel, and particularly for the sake of the weak, enslaving himself to all, and hyperbolically asserts that he would rather die than be deprived of his boast in this regard (9.15-23).³² This, then, is the imitation to which Paul calls the Corinthian strong at the end of the whole passage and which he sees as an imitation of Christ (11.1). They may have the ‘right’ to eat idol food but must be prepared to set this right aside out of concern for others, especially for their ‘weaker’ siblings in the church.

A second activity is attending dinners or banquets when invited by an unbeliever (10.27-29). In attempting to understand the relationship between the various sections of 1 Cor 8–10, especially between 10.1-22 and the material in chapter 8 and later in 10, many scholars regard these invitations as those to a private home and see 10.1-22 as concerned with, and prohibiting, any meals in temple settings.³³ However, there is nothing explicit to indicate such a delimitation, and as Newton has shown, not all eating in the context of an $\mu \text{†} \diamond \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \bullet \mu \text{†} \text{†} \square \blacksquare$ need fall into the category of participating in cultic sacrifice, despite the assumptions of most scholars to the contrary. Given too that Paul does not dispute in absolute terms the legitimacy of eating $\mu \text{†} \diamond \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \bullet \square \text{†} \square \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \text{†}$ and even reclining $\mu \diamond \blacksquare \mu \text{†} \diamond \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \bullet \mu \text{†} \text{†} \blacklozenge \blacklozenge$, and given the widespread use of temples and their wider precincts (not to mention other places that might also count as $\mu \text{†} \diamond \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \bullet \mu \text{†} \text{†} \text{†}$) for social, economic, political and religious purposes, it is quite possible that various kinds of social and celebratory occasions at both private homes and in more public settings are in view.³⁴ As Wolfgang Schrage notes, this rather wider interpretation of the contexts that are included here makes better sense of

³² On this passage see D.G. Horrell, “‘The Lord commanded... But I have not used...’ Exegetical and hermeneutical reflections on 1 Cor 9.14-15’, *NTS* 43 (1997) 587-603.

³³ Cf. e.g., G.D. Fee ‘ $\text{†} \diamond \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \bullet \square \text{†} \square \blacklozenge \blacklozenge \text{†}$ Once Again: An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8–10’, *Bib* 61 (1980) 172-197; B. Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) 188; N.T. Wright *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991) 134-35.

³⁴ See further J.E. Stambaugh, ‘The Functions of Roman Temples’, *ANRW* II.16.1 (1978) 554-608.

the reticence Paul expresses in the phrase ‘and [if] you wish to go’ (καὶ εἰ θέλετε ὑμεῖς ἵνα ποῦτε, καὶ εἰ θέλετε ὑμεῖς ἵνα ποῦτε), which contrasts with the straightforward and unqualified imperative expressed in 10.25; ‘because here the limits of what is permitted threaten to become rather blurred’.³⁵ However, as in the case already outlined by Paul in chapter 8, here too it is the consciousness of the other which is crucial for determining legitimate practice. If someone points out that the food is ἑρμηνεύματα — a more positive term, denoting something ‘offered in sacrifice’, than the implicitly negative ἑρμηνεύματα — then one should desist from eating, not for the sake of one’s own consciousness, but that of the other. It is difficult to determine whether this hypothetical ‘someone’ (ἄλλος) is a Christian or a non-Christian,³⁶ but if the latter may at least be included among those in view, then unlike in chapter 8, here Paul’s concerns are with the impact of Christians’ actions *outside* as well as inside the church (see further below).

In practice, then, in both of these cases, Paul’s instruction (if heeded) could well be to restrict Christians’ conscious eating of idol-food and their full participation in meals with unbelievers where such food would be served. But it is important to stress that any such avoidance is entirely conditional on the awareness or concerns of others and does not rest on any intrinsic grounds related to the action itself. Moreover, in each case the scenario of others being harmed or imparting information is depicted as a hypothetical situation: a real possibility, but not one to be assumed as routine or inevitable.³⁷ Since the so-called ‘weak’ appear to be a reality in the congregation at Corinth, *pace* John Hurd and Peter Gooch,³⁸ the presence of people on any given occasion who might be caused to stumble by the strong’s actions, or might point out that some food was ‘sacrificed food’, is certainly to be reckoned with. Paul thus gives considerable power to the so-called weak in determining the conduct of the strong: any member of the community, however insignificant, can embody sufficient reason for others to forego important social involvement in the city.³⁹ On the other hand, however, it is important to note that Paul presents no absolute reason why

³⁵ W. Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther (1 Kor 6,12–11,16)* (EKKNT 7.2; Zürich & Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger, Neukirchener, 1995) 469.

³⁶ Cf. Horrell, *Social Ethos*, 147 with n. 109.

³⁷ See 8.10; 10.28; Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 652, 787.

³⁸ Hurd, *Origin*, 117-25; Gooch, *Dangerous Food*, 61-72.

³⁹ See further Horrell, *Social Ethos*, 148-49.

⌘ ✨ ❖ ☉ ◆ ● ◻ ◻ ◻ ◆ ◆ ◻ should be avoided, except in the context of cultic sacrificial acts; the basis for its avoidance elsewhere is entirely relational.

What, then, are the implications for our understanding of Pauline ethics that emerge from these various instructions, and from the general Pauline rhetoric against idolatry? I shall explore these under three headings: relational morality and its christological basis; identity and boundaries, food and the body; rhetoric and social practice.

Relational morality and its christological basis

While Paul does appear to set down some absolute limits in terms of what is permitted and prohibited regarding idolatry and idol food, it is also clear that a substantial amount of his argument in 1 Cor 8–10 is focused on promoting a form of relational morality. In other words, the moral practice he urges on the Corinthians is not specified as some particular stance regarding idol food but rather as a pattern of relating, a ‘looking to the interests of the other’ (10.24). It is this ‘other-regard’ which is morally imperative. Inside the limits of the absolutes Paul sets down, what is right or wrong in terms of one’s conduct cannot be specified in absolute or abstract terms relating to the substantive issue of idol food, but only in terms of relational moral imperatives which encapsulate one’s duties in relation to the others with whom one is placed.

These relational moral imperatives have a clear christological grounding: it is the identity of the ‘other’ as a sister or brother for whom Christ died (8.11) that renders any action that leads to their destruction as a ‘sin against Christ’ (8.12) — an extremely strong indication of its seriousness. And it is Christ’s self-giving for others, his taking the form of a slave and humbling himself even to death, that evidently provides the paradigm for Paul’s practice of renouncing his own rights, becoming weak and slave-like, for the sake of the gospel and in imitation of Christ (9.15-19; 11.1 etc.). This pattern of conduct is one to which he calls the Corinthian ‘strong’, urging them to place a christologically-grounded concern for others above any theologically-legitimated rights they may justifiably consider themselves to have.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ On the christological basis for Paul’s ethics here see Horrell, ‘Theological Principle’ and T. Söding, ‘Starke und Schwache: der Götzenopferstreit in 1Kor 8–10 als Paradigma paulinischer Ethik’, *ZNW* 85 (1994) 69-92, who focuses rather heavily on 8.11 (e.g. p.88).

Given this major focus on an ‘other-regarding’ morality, those who focus on attempting to elucidate ‘Paul’s position regarding idol food’,⁴¹ whatever their conclusions, fail to appreciate one of the key features of Paul’s moral argument here. In trying to pin down clearly what Paul thought about the rights and wrongs of eating idol food, it is all too easy to ignore the extent to which Paul refuses to approach the issue in this way.⁴² To be sure, there are some reasonably clear absolutes, which Paul legitimates and undergirds theologically (10.26) and christologically (10.16-17), but much of his argument is based on the presumption that ‘right’ practice can only be determined in relation to the context of human relationships in which one is enmeshed, the possible injury that one’s actions may cause to others. Even if this communal context were to be such that eating idol food would often need to be avoided, it is nonetheless important to appreciate the basis on which Paul argues for its (conditional) avoidance and the relational concerns on which he focuses. Also worth noting is that while Paul’s concerns are very much focused on the others within the church, they are not exclusively so: seeking the benefit of ‘the many’ outside the community is also imperative (10.32-33). The significance of this is something to which we shall return.

Identity and boundaries, food and the body

Given the clear indications that turning from idols is for Paul definitive of Gentile conversion, and in view of the treatment of practical issues concerning idol food and idolatry in 1 Cor 8–10, we may ask: How are the Corinthians to ‘mark’ their transfer from the worship of idols to the service of the one true God, to indicate to themselves and to the world their distinctive identity as those ‘called’ by God? Or, to put the issue in broader terms, how does Paul envisage that the boundaries of the church are to be maintained, the identity of its members confirmed and sustained?

⁴¹ The phrase is from Cheung (*Idol Food*, 171), for whom it is self-evident that the early Church needed ‘a clear-cut answer to the rightness or wrongness of the act of consumption of idol food’ (p. 168) and who sees ‘Western secular materialism’ as the reason why commentators have underestimated ‘the sinfulness of eating idol food’ (p. 303). But other writers approaching the issue from non-Western contexts have stressed the ambiguities and complexities which make any ‘clear-cut’ position difficult to elucidate and justify (e.g. Newton, *Deity and Diet*; Yeo, *Rhetorical Interaction*, 217-20; *idem*, ‘The Rhetorical Hermeneutic of 1 Corinthians 8 and Chinese Ancestor Worship’, *BibInt* 2 (1994) 294-311).

⁴² Cf. further W.A. Meeks, ‘The Polyphonic Ethics of the Apostle Paul’, *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1988) 17-29.

One of the major contributions of the anthropologist Frederick Barth in his work on ethnic groups and boundaries was to insist, on the basis of wide ranging empirical studies, that ethnic identities and distinctions

do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact and information but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained *despite* changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories.⁴³

Previous studies of ethnicity, in Barth's view, had begged 'all the critical questions' by assuming that 'boundary maintenance' was 'unproblematical' and followed from the *isolation* which the key characteristics of ethnic identity were taken to imply: 'racial difference, cultural difference, social separation and language barriers'.⁴⁴ Barth argued that only 'some cultural features are used by the actors as signals and emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences are played down and denied'.⁴⁵ In other words, the maintenance of distinct identity does not depend on distinctiveness or, still less, isolation in all aspects of social life, but only in certain areas which are taken to be definitive and salient. Barth divides such key signals of difference into two main categories, 'overt signals or signs', such as dress, language, house-form, etc., and 'basic value orientations', 'the standards of morality and excellence by which performance is judged'.⁴⁶ The persistence of ethnic groups does not imply or require an absence of interaction with other groups; it does imply 'not only criteria and signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows the persistence of cultural differences'.⁴⁷

Clearly, Barth's ideas cannot be unproblematically applied to the early Christian groups as Paul portrays them, which are not exactly 'ethnic' groups in the usual sense, not being 'largely biologically self-perpetuating',⁴⁸ and with their members remaining conscious of possessing other ethnic identities that continue in some sense to inform their sense of self-identity (in Paul's case, see Rom 9.3; 2 Cor

⁴³ F. Barth, 'Introduction', in F. Barth (ed.) *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969) 9.

⁴⁴ Barth, 'Introduction', 11.

⁴⁵ Barth, 'Introduction', 14; see 14-15.

⁴⁶ Barth, 'Introduction', 14.

⁴⁷ Barth, 'Introduction', 16.

⁴⁸ See Barth, 'Introduction', 10.

11.22; Gal 2.15). At this early stage, a sense of ‘Christian’ identity is only beginning to develop and solidify, and that ‘Christian’ identity in any case owes a great deal, of course, to the Jewish traditions out of which it grew.⁴⁹ However, Barth’s reflections are relevant insofar as they concern ethnic groups as ‘a form of social organization’ in which the ‘critical feature’ is that the group ‘has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order’, what Barth calls ‘the characteristic of self-ascription and ascription by others’. ‘A categorical ascription’, he continues, ‘is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background.’⁵⁰ While early ‘Christian’ identity, associated with a newly founded movement requiring voluntary conversion to join, is not ‘determined by origin and background’, it is, at least as Paul sees it, one’s ‘basic, most general, identity’: being ‘in Christ’ fundamentally describes one’s identity and establishes the boundary between insider and outsider (1 Cor 7.39; 12.12-13; 2 Cor 5.17; 12.2; Gal 3.26-29 etc.); other identity descriptors are relativised or negated (cf. 1 Cor 7.19; Gal 5.6; Phil 3.4-8 etc.).⁵¹

But if it is, at least in Paul’s terms, being ‘in Christ’ that crucially demarcates and identifies Christians as a distinct human group, an ethnic-religious ‘category’, then what are the cultural features — the ‘overt signals’ or ‘basic value orientations’ — that are taken to be significant, ‘organizationally relevant’?⁵²

Paul sets out a distinction of principle, making clear that *food* is not a relevant marker of group-distinctiveness while the *body* is; or in ethical terms, that food *per se* is morally irrelevant while the body is highly relevant.⁵³ The clearest expression of

⁴⁹ See further D.G. Horrell, “‘Becoming Christian’: Solidifying Christian Identity and Content”, in A.J. Blasi et al., (eds), *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches* (Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2002) 309-35.

⁵⁰ Barth, ‘Introduction’, 11, 13.

⁵¹ See further D.G. Horrell, “‘No longer Jew or Greek’: Paul’s Corporate Christology and the Construction of Christian Community”, in D.G. Horrell and C.M. Tuckett (eds), *Christology, Controversy and Community: New Testament Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole* (NovTSup 99; Leiden: Brill, 2000) 321-44.

⁵² Barth, ‘Introduction’, 14.

⁵³ Pace Cheung, *Idol Food*, 16, 133-35. Cf. Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 343, 375-76; A.S. May, ‘*The Body for the Lord*’: *Sex and Identity in 1 Corinthians 5–7* (JSNTSup 278; London: T&T Clark International, 2004) 106-10.

ὁ θεὸς ἢ ὁ κύριος, ⁵⁷ a participation at their table, which is incompatible with belonging to the body of Christ. Participation in the Lord's supper is a ἔκδοσις ἐν τῷ αἵματι καὶ τῷ σώματι τοῦ κυρίου, in the blood and body of Christ, the bread in particular a demonstration of the identity of the Christian congregation as 'one body' (10.17). Far from the rites of Christian belonging, baptism and Lord's supper, protecting the Corinthians against danger, they imply a requirement of loyalty, an avoidance of any competing or incompatible participation, with the threat of punishment arising from divine jealousy (10.1-13, 22). Indeed, the Corinthians' failure with regard to the Lord's supper can be summarised as a failure to 'discern the body' (11.29), a failure to appreciate the identity of the community as the body of Christ, demonstrated as it shares the bread which is the body of Christ. ⁵⁸

In terms of 'overt signals' or 'basic value orientations', then, it is the christologically-grounded notions of participation in the body and of self-giving for others that function for Paul as key bases for distinctive Christian values and practice and which undergird the construction of distinct group-identity and boundaries between inside and outside. These are signalled positively through participation in baptism, which marks incorporation into the body, and in the Lord's Supper, which confirms and reaffirms the members' participation in Christ, specifically in his body and blood, and negatively through the avoidance of what are seen as competing unions, whether in the realm of sex or of idolatry. In terms of actions which are in themselves morally neutral, notably those regarding food, there is a general principle of not causing offence to anyone (1 Cor 10.32; 1 Thess 4.12) and especially to one's ὁ θεὸς ἢ ὁ κύριος; seeking the benefit of others can require a sacrificial renunciation of one's own rights, in imitation of Christ.

Idol food, then, is in an ambiguous category and hence receives somewhat ambivalent treatment in Paul's discussion. Insofar as it is food, it is, in itself, though not necessarily in its consequences and its impact on others, morally neutral (1 Cor 8.8; Rom 14.14). But insofar as it is idol worship, seen as participation in a

⁵⁷ Semi-divine beings, divinities, spirits, powers, etc. (BDAG, 210), not necessarily hostile or regarded negatively, though clearly so in this context, as in other Jewish and Christian writings; see further Newton, *Deity and Diet*, 349-62.

⁵⁸ On the ambiguous phrase, ὁ θεὸς ἢ ὁ κύριος, ἢ ὁ κύριος, ἢ ὁ θεὸς, see Horrell, *Social Ethos*, 152-53.

incompatible with union with Christ,⁵⁹ then it is dangerous, and forbidden.

In one sense, then, with his focus on the body and on preserving its purity (cf. 5.7) Paul well exemplifies Mary Douglas's view that the human body serves as a symbol of society. Concern for the boundaries of the body, for the substances which enter and exit from its orifices, Douglas argues, mirrors a wider social concern for the (often precarious) boundaries of society.⁶⁰ Yet in terms of this model Paul is surprising for his lack of concern about food, simply declaring all foods 'clean' (Rom 14.20) for the one with faith to regard them so. Returning to Barth, it appears that Paul does not regard food *per se*, even food that may have been offered to idols, as an area of cultural practice in which the Christian groups are to indicate their distinctive identity.

Rhetoric and social practice

This raises the wider question as to how the distinct identity so strongly affirmed by Paul and signalled on the basis of certain values and practices impinges on and shapes the social interaction of members of the Christian communities. Specifically, I am interested in the relationship between what we may call the rhetoric against idolatry on the one hand and the implications for social practice on the other.

A number of scholars have recently suggested that the Corinthian Christians are rather comfortably and unproblematically integrated within their wider society and that part of Paul's aim in 1 Corinthians is to draw boundaries more tightly around the church. John Barclay's article on 'Thessalonica and Corinth' has been an important stimulus to such views. In contrast to the Thessalonians, Barclay sees the Corinthian church as characterised by an 'absence of conflict in the relationship between Christians and "outsiders"'. 'Paul is somewhat uneasy about the degree of integration which the Corinthian Christians enjoy... he has a much more sectarian and separatist expectation of the social standing of the church'.⁶¹ More recently Edward Adams

⁵⁹ Note the striking references to Christ in 10.4 and 9, where Paul retells the story of Israel in the wilderness.

⁶⁰ M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 115, and esp. 14-28. See also D.B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1995).

⁶¹ J.M.G. Barclay, 'Thessalonica and Corinth: Social Contrasts in Pauline Christianity', *JSNT* 47 (1992) 49-72 (57-59).

argues on similar lines that the ‘dominant issue’ in 1 Corinthians is that of group boundaries: the Corinthians define the lines of demarcation between church and society too loosely for Paul, and ‘1 Corinthians may be interpreted as a sustained attempt by Paul to strengthen the social and ideological boundaries of the church’.⁶²

However, it is important to do justice to a distinction between Paul’s rhetoric and the social practice which he encourages, or, in Adams’ terms, between ‘social’ and ‘ideological’ boundaries. Certainly it is clear, in rhetorical or ideological terms, that Paul draws a stark distinction between the church and the world, the former inhabited by those who have turned from idols to serve the one true God and who have been washed clean in baptism; the latter characterised by those who are idolaters, sexually immoral, greedy, and so on. Paul can express a strong appeal for separation (2 Cor 6.17, based on Isa 52.11 and Ezek 20.34). Indeed, despite the variations among Paul’s letters, he consistently reflects the assumption that the Gentile world is one of idolatry and immorality, in stark contrast to the Christian communities, whose members are holy, elect, and washed clean from the dirt of the world.⁶³ This draws a clear identity-distinction between Christians and the Gentile world.

Yet we must also consider how this identity-defining rhetoric translates into social practice, where, interestingly, the degree of distinction seems somewhat less, the boundaries between church and world less tightly drawn, than the rhetoric might lead us to expect. Here the nature of Paul’s arguments in 1 Corinthians 8-10, so strongly orientated to the interests and concerns of the other, makes it difficult to be precise. The two absolute instructions which frame Paul’s more relationally-orientated advice suggest certain clear limits and opportunities. Christians may eat whatever they like from the market, without worrying about its origins or idolatrous connections, so in this context their social interaction and participation is entirely open. They are forbidden, however, from direct involvement in Gentile cultic sacrifice, so here a strict limit on social involvement is placed. Other situations are placed under the

⁶² E. Adams, *Constructing the World: A Study in Paul’s Cosmological Language* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T&TClark, 2000) 87, cf. 93. Similar views are expressed by C.S. de Vos, *Church and Community Conflicts* (SBLDS 168; Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1999) 205-32 and T.L. Carter, *Paul and the Power of Sin* (SNTSMS 115; Cambridge: CUP, 2001).

⁶³ Cf. J.M.G. Barclay, ‘Paul among Diaspora Jews: Anomaly or Apostate?’, *JSNT* 60 (1995) 89-120 (107).

rubric of not causing offence to others, especially to those within the church of God (10.32), so cannot be categorically ruled in or out on their own intrinsic terms. Eating ⲙⲓⲗⲁⲃⲧⲟⲩ or at a variety of meals hosted by unbelievers is theoretically permissible, but must be curtailed if others raise concerns, for the sake of those others; and whatever is served at such meals may be eaten, unless someone present points out the sacrificial connections of some dish or other. In some sense Paul has therefore left open, at least in terms of their inherent ethical acceptability, a considerable range of occasions for social interaction with those outside the church, yet at the same time has insisted that those opportunities must be renounced if they are a cause of stumbling to any member of the church, however socially insignificant — not causing ⲧⲟⲩⲉⲧⲉⲧⲱⲛⲉⲥⲧⲟⲩⲉⲣⲥⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛⲥⲁⲛⲁⲥⲟⲩⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛ to stumble is a higher ethical priority than continuing interaction with outsiders.

While concern for other members of the church is paramount, and despite the strong rhetoric against idolatry, Paul also makes explicit a concern for smooth relations with all, outside as well as inside the church (9.19-22; 10.32-33). Part of his concluding exhortation is the instruction to be

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ⲧⲟⲩⲉⲧⲉⲧⲱⲛⲉⲥⲧⲟⲩⲉⲣⲥⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛⲥⲁⲛⲁⲥⲟⲩⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛ ⲧⲟⲩⲉⲧⲉⲧⲱⲛⲉⲥⲧⲟⲩⲉⲣⲥⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛⲥⲁⲛⲁⲥⲟⲩⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛ ⲧⲟⲩⲉⲧⲉⲧⲱⲛⲉⲥⲧⲟⲩⲉⲣⲥⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛⲥⲁⲛⲁⲥⲟⲩⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛ ⲧⲟⲩⲉⲧⲉⲧⲱⲛⲉⲥⲧⲟⲩⲉⲣⲥⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛⲥⲁⲛⲁⲥⲟⲩⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛ ⲧⲟⲩⲉⲧⲉⲧⲱⲛⲉⲥⲧⲟⲩⲉⲣⲥⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛⲥⲁⲛⲁⲥⲟⲩⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛ

ⲧⲟⲩⲉⲧⲉⲧⲱⲛⲉⲥⲧⲟⲩⲉⲣⲥⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛⲥⲁⲛⲁⲥⲟⲩⲉⲛⲁⲧⲉⲛ (10.32). It is often noted that this formulation already expresses embryonically the notion that would later develop into the explicit description of Christians as a third race, sociologically distinct from both Jews and Greeks.⁶⁴ But the expressed desire for peaceful co-existence with outsiders is less frequently discussed (cf. 1 Thess 4.12). In this particular context Paul’s comment may reflect his sense in dealing with the idol-food dilemma that he is treading an awkward path amidst the customs and convictions of various groups and that his ideal would be for Christians’ practice in this regard to offend no one (see esp. v.33). This brief instruction clearly echoes Paul’s earlier and more famous description of his accommodatory missionary stance, becoming all things to all people (9.19-22) and is explicitly part of the imitation to which he calls the Corinthians (10.32–11.1). Acting so as not to cause offence to others within the church has been a dominant theme throughout the passage. But it may also have been part of Paul’s aim — however


⁶⁴ See e.g. E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (London: SCM, 1983) 171-79; Horrell, ‘No Longer Jew or Greek’, 341.

unrealistic — to encourage the Corinthians to act with regard to idolatry and idol-food in such a way that they accommodated themselves as far as possible to those among whom they lived, and did not offend either their Jewish or their Greek neighbours; hence, perhaps, Paul’s solution of eating whatever is served at meals, *unless* anyone points out that it is sacrificial food. That this could imply a rather flexible, even (to some) offensively vacillating practice with regard to food should not cause surprise, in view of Paul’s own description of his variously being to the Jews ‘like a Jew’ (note the $\diamond \Pi \epsilon \rho$) and to those outside the law, $\diamond \Pi \epsilon \rho \quad \text{☉} \equiv \blacksquare \square \bigcirc \square \epsilon \rho$, an indication that his identity and practice are no longer defined by these categories, but rather by a ‘being in Christ’ which Paul understands to demand precisely this chameleon-like flexibility, with its missionary and community-building purpose (9.19-23).

Further relevant and important material on the relationship between rhetoric and social practice emerges in 1 Corinthians 5. In the context of pronouncing judgement on a ‘brother’ who has committed gross sexual immorality, of a kind not tolerated among Jews or Gentiles, Paul urges the Corinthians not even to eat with such a person. Paul here refers back to his earlier letter (5.9), which evidently warned the Corinthians not to ‘mix’ with the sexually immoral and other sinners. The stark warnings in 2 Cor 6.14-7.1 against being ‘yoked’ with unbelievers, and about the incompatibilities of light and dark, could exemplify the kind of material Paul wrote,⁶⁵ even though it is difficult (but not impossible) to envisage how a fragment of this former letter could end up in the middle of 2 Corinthians. In any case, Paul now makes clear that he did *not* mean them to avoid contact with these immoral people in the world, ‘since then you would need to come out of the world’ (5.10). He evidently does not envisage the church as a community with boundaries closed to social interaction with the sexually immoral, the idolaters, etc. Rather, what he objects to is social interaction with a fellow Christian who by their sinful conduct reveals their identity to be other than truly Christian: the sinner here is ‘named’ a ‘brother’ ($\text{☉} \diamond \text{⋈} \text{⋈} \text{⋈} \bullet \text{⋈} \square \text{☉} \epsilon \rho \quad \square \diamond \blacksquare \square \bigcirc \text{☉} \text{⋈} \square \text{☉} \text{⋈} \text{⋈} \blacksquare \square \epsilon \rho$) but he is *actually* a $\square \square \text{☉} \square \blacksquare \square \epsilon \rho$ (5.11) — note that it is types of person, not types of sin, that are

⁶⁵ Cf. Hurd, *Origin*, 235-37.

listed here.⁶⁶ It is people such as this, rather than outsiders, who are a dangerous threat to the holiness of the church.

Mary Douglas's well-known reflections on 'dirt' are apposite here: 'dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder.'⁶⁷ The classification of things as dirty or clean, Douglas argues, represents a human attempt to order and structure experience. Dirt is matter which is out of place, which has transgressed a boundary and thus threatens to pollute. So in 1 Corinthians 5, the brother who is actually a  threatens to pollute the whole church (5.6-7); he does not belong in the community and must be expelled (5.13). Fellowship with such persons, even eating with them, is to be avoided; but by implication, social interaction, including commensality, with 'sinners' outside the church does not raise the same problems of contamination.

It is notable that this is the only case where the conduct Paul criticises is so bad that it 'redefines' the identity of the offender such that he no longer belongs in the community of the church (though even here some hope for the man's final salvation remains [5.5]). From the point of view of Pauline ethics this is interesting because the man's actions are such as to be regarded as unacceptable from the perspectives of Roman law and Jewish tradition as well as from Paul's Christian point of view (cf. 5.1).⁶⁸ In other words, the action which is so bad as to require expulsion from the church is action which Paul's wider society agrees in defining as sinful — so while the rhetoric with which Paul's judgment is expressed is based on the notion of the church as a pure entity from which polluting evil must be expelled, the moral judgment is one which conforms to that of the wider society and does not set 'church' in contrast to 'world'.

Other material worth noting includes the highly positive theological grounds Paul offers for remaining in 'mixed' marriages (1 Cor 7.12-16): children in such marriages are sanctified by the Christian spouse and there is always the hope of the other partner's salvation. Certainly there is no need for Christians to withdraw from such relationships. Endogamy, marriage to another believer, is the preferable course of action, given the choice (1 Cor 7.39), but the rejection of divorce forms a higher

⁶⁶ On this passage in 1 Cor 5 see further May, *The Body for the Lord*, 58-80, from whose work I have learnt a great deal.

⁶⁷ Douglas, *Purity*, 2.

ethical principle than the ideal of unions only among those who belong to Christ. It is interesting too that Paul envisages unbelievers being present during the church's worship meetings (1 Cor 14.23), an important though neglected indication that these were not expected to be the meetings of an entirely exclusivist sect.

In a nutshell, Paul effectively says, 'you are a pure and holy community, and the world is full of wicked, idolatrous people... but of course you can still go and share meals with them, remain married to them, and generally accommodate yourselves to the world so as not to cause offence'. Within certain rather wide but important absolute limits, this social interaction is limited above all by an over-riding concern for the well-being of others, fellow believers in particular, for whose sake extreme renunciation may be called for.

This conjunction of strong and stark ideological distinction and relatively open social interaction might to some extent be illuminated using the distinctions John Barclay draws between assimilation, acculturation, and accommodation. When related to diaspora Jews, including Paul, these represent respectively the extent of social interaction with Gentiles (assimilation); the degree of Hellenistic linguistic, educational, and cultural influence (acculturation); and the use to which acculturation was put, with either integrative and oppositional tendencies (accommodation). Because of his extensive and intimate contacts with Gentiles, Paul ranks high on the scale of assimilation; but because of his scripturally-based and apocalyptically-strengthened portrayal of the Gentile world in starkly negative terms he ranks low in terms of accommodation, presenting an antagonistic stance towards Gentile culture.⁶⁹ However, viewing Paul from the perspective of diaspora Judaism, it is mainly the contacts Paul enjoys with Gentile *Christians* which Barclay adduces as evidence for this high assimilation.⁷⁰ Yet, as Barclay notes, from Paul's perspective this high degree of intimate contact is explained by the fact that Paul moves 'the chosen few among the Gentiles into territory traditionally ascribed to Jews' — they are now children of Abraham, God's children, his temple, even the Israel of God, and so on.⁷¹ From the point of view of other Jews, it is understandable that this was regarded as a dangerous and apostatising level of intimacy with Gentiles; but from Paul's point of

⁶⁸ See Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 385-86, and the primary and secondary sources mentioned there.

⁶⁹ Barclay, 'Paul among Diaspora Jews'; *idem*, *Jews*, 92-98, 381-95.

⁷⁰ Barclay, 'Paul among Diaspora Jews', 103-104; *Jews*, 384-87.

view these Gentiles have now become part of the community of God's people, defined as all who are in Christ.

What is striking, however, from the evidence we have surveyed in 1 Corinthians, especially on the idolatry and idol food issues, is the extent to which Paul's starkly antagonistic rhetoric contrasting church and world goes hand in hand with a policy of quite open interaction with *outsiders*, albeit circumscribed by certain clear limits. There is, then, in this case a distinction to be drawn between the rhetoric which constructs a strong sense of group-identity and distinction, and the ways in which social interaction is structured. A strong sense of ideological distinction does not necessarily translate into strongly separatist or antagonistic social practice. Rather, returning again to Barth, it translates into specific aspects of social practice, defined in certain ways — for Paul in terms of avoiding incompatible unions — and not into blanket isolation or antagonism.

Conclusions

In exploring, albeit briefly, Paul's general statements about idolatry and his specific treatment of the issue in 1 Corinthians 8–10, a number of points have emerged that are significant in understanding Paul's ethics. They may be summarised as follows.

(1) While Paul sets some clear and absolute limits in terms of what is permitted and prohibited regarding idolatry and idol food, much of his focus is on the relational moral concerns that arise because of the interests and concerns of others, especially others within the $\aleph \diamond \& \& \bullet \approx \blacklozenge \boxtimes \boxplus$.

(2) Paul bases his arguments on theological, and especially christological grounds. In substantive terms, Christology provides a basis for Paul's focus on the body, both individual and collective, as the key foundation for group-identity and distinctiveness, and also for his emphasis on the need for self-giving and other-regard.

(3) In terms of the construction and preservation of a distinct group-identity food does not serve for Paul as a marker of religio-cultural distinctiveness, while the body does, specifically as perceived in relation to ideas of union, $\& \square \boxtimes \blacksquare \blacklozenge \boxplus$, participation and so on. The group's identity is marked on the positive side by the practices of baptism and Lord's supper which initiate and confirm this union, and on

⁷¹ Barclay, *Jews*, 388; Horrell, 'No Longer Jew or Greek', 341-42.

the negative side by the avoidance of incompatible unions in sexual immorality and idolatry.

(4) There is in Paul a collocation of on the one hand a strong rhetoric of difference, with its stark contrasts between the idolatrous world and the pure $\aleph \cdot \diamond \& \& \bullet \approx \diamond \ast \boxplus \boxtimes$, which underpins a strong sense of group-identity and separation, and on the other hand a concern for accommodation and peaceful coexistence which permits a considerable degree of social integration and open interaction.

This last point may bear some moral significance. What Barth relates as an empirical observation — that distinct ethnic identities can be sustained along with inter-ethnic interaction and co-operation — is also a pressing moral task, the task of allowing ethnic and cultural difference to be treasured while at the same time building human solidarity and reducing inter-ethnic hostility.⁷² In relation to this task, we might judge Paul negatively, as someone who rants against a hostile and sinful world while sharing more of its moral values and participating more in its life than he admits. Or we might see in Paul, though not, of course, uniquely, some potential for the co-existence of a strong sense of distinct group identity alongside a considerable degree of social integration.

⁷² On this theme in Pauline studies, see D. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1994); D.G. Horrell, 'Solidarity and Difference: Pauline Morality in Romans 14–15', *SCE* 15.2 (2002) 60-78.