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ΕΙΔΩΛΟΘΥΤΑ ONCE MORE

By

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I am glad to have been asked to contribute to this volume in honour of Archbishop Methodios, and, knowing his interest in Corinth, to be given thereby the opportunity of returning briefly to Paul's Epistles to the Corinthian church. I recently had occasion to reconsider¹ 1 Corinthians 15, and, noting that Paul refers in two separate places, 15.21-2 and 15.45-9, to the figure of Adam, was able, I hope, to show that though the chapter is undoubtedly a unity Paul had in mind not only two different aspects of the theological significance of Adam but two different groups in the Corinthian church whom he found it necessary to correct in different ways. The first group were responsible for the blunt assertion, There is no resurrection of the dead (15.12). They had not meant to deny the resurrection of Christ, for they had accepted this when it was preached to them (15.11), but they failed to see that Christ died and rose as a representative, and it is this that Paul presses upon them in 15.20-22: As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. The analogy with Adam enables him to move from the resurrection of Christ, which is accepted, to the resurrection of Christians, which had been denied. Paul turns to the second group at 15.35. They do not deny outright that there is to be a resurrection but ask, How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come? It is clear—perhaps clearer in the twentieth century than in the first—that these questions can be asked with a sceptical intention. This intention however is not necessarily implied; the questioners may have been genuinely puzzled. In answering both scepticism and bewilderment Paul returns to the story of Adam, this time in order to prove his assertion (15.44) that if there is a σῶμα ψυχικόν there is also a σῶμα πνευματικόν.

Thus one of the major themes of 1 Corinthians, that of resurrection, when carefully examined, leads to the discovery of a more complicated situation than has hitherto been recognized. There is nothing surprising in this complication. The Christian faith can

be perverted in many ways and the Corinthians were inventive people. Once this kind of variety has been noticed it is natural to look for it elsewhere. I have already noted an example of sorts in 2 Corinthians², where it seems that Judaizing invaders of the church were obliged in the interests of expediency to adopt criteria of apostleship and churchmanship dictated by the Gentile church on which it was their intention to impose themselves. It is coexistence of these two view-points, two programmes, an end along with means to the end, that has led some commentators to describe the invaders as simple Judaizers, others to think them Hellenistic θεῖοι ἄνδρες.

Other examples may be found. One of the most frequently noted features of the Corinthian church is the existence within it of dissensions and divisions. It is not always pointed out that the divisions are themselves divided; that is, the Corinthian church was divided in at least three different ways.

a) There were divisions based on personal allegiance. Paul has heard through members of Chloe's household that there were such divisions (ἐριδες) and he explains what he means (1 Cor. 1. 11 f.). Each of you has his party-cry: I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas, I belong to Christ. The characteristics of the four groups have been endlessly debated; fortunately there is no need here to enter into the debate. Whatever the tenets, or ways of living, that marked the groups may have been, those who adhered to them attached themselves to persons. It must not be assumed that those whose names were used desired to be leaders of rival factions; it was enough that they existed and had names that could be used as labels.

b) It is clear from 1 Corinthians 11 that when the church assembled for its common meal those who were present fell into groups which were different in number and probably in composition from those in (a) and were probably quite unrelated to them. The rich formed one group to eat and drink as they pleased; the poor receded into the background to eat with

1. The reconsideration will be published in the proceedings of the ninth Colloquium Paulinum held at S. Paolo fuori le Mura in Rome in 1983.

2. See C.K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to Corinthians* (London, 1973), pp. 28-30, 270-87.

shame their scanty supplies. An assembly of that kind, says Paul (11.17), will do more harm than good. But, he reflects, no doubt there must be parties (ἀρέσεις, 11.19) in order that the tried Christians may stand out. Here then was another kind of division in the Corinthian church.

c) A third kind of division arose out of the problem of food sacrificed to idols, which is discussed in 1 Corinthians 8–10. This is often referred to as the division between the weak and the strong; it would perhaps be wise to avoid this terminology (which I recognize that I have used myself) since though Paul uses the word *weak*, and this may be said to imply the word *strong*, the latter word does not occur in this part of the epistle (as it does in Rom. 15. 1, though in that verse only in the chapter and a half in Romans that deal with a similar division). It is worth while to note that *weak* occurs in the following verses:

8.7: Their conscience, which is weak (ἀσθενής), is defiled.

8.9: ... a stumbling-block to those who are weak (ἀσθενέσιν).

8.10: ... this weak (ἀσθενοῦς) man's conscience.

8.11: ... the weak man (ὁ ἀσθενῶν) perishes.

8.12: ... their conscience, weak (ἀσθενοῦσαν) as it is.

9.22: ... to the weak (ἀσθενέσιν) I became weak (ἀσθενής), in order that I might win the weak (ἀσθενεῖς).

It appears that ἀσθενής, ἀσθενεῖν, occur only in chapter 8 and in the summarizing, backward-looking verse 9.22. The word does not occur in 1 Corinthians 8–10; the nearest approach to it is the comparative ἰσχυρότερος at 10.22, which is scarcely relevant since the comparison is with God (Are we to provoke the Lord? Are we stronger than he?). It may possibly allude to a group who thought and spoke of themselves as of ἰσχυροί, but this is hypothetical and not probable. What is certain is that Paul saw fit to use the word *weak* very frequently in chapter 8, not at all in chapter 10; that the word *strong* is not used at all (unless 10.22 is allowed to count), so that it is only stretching the evidence that we can find in either chapter 8 or chapter 10 a group whom we may properly, that is, with some basis in Paul's usage, describe as *the strong*. The point that we must note at present is that terminology does not unite but rather separates the treatments of εἰδωλόθυσια in chapters 8 and 10.

These two treatments have been made the ground for dividing 1 Corinthians into two or more letters written on different occasions. I have tried elsewhere to show that this argument is unconvincing³. Chapter 9 is not (as some think) out of place. In chapter 8 Paul appeals to those who feel free (as he does himself) to eat sacrificial meat to forgo their right of Christian freedom and (when occasion requires it) to abstain in the interests of weaker Christian brothers whose

weak consciences might be hurt or even constrained into sin by the unbridled exercise and example of liberty. In chapter 9 he goes on to show that he is not asking of these liberated Christians anything that he does not himself voluntarily do. As an apostle he has even greater rights, but he has abjured them in the interests of the Gospel. He is prepared to become all things to all men, and this includes becoming weak to the weak. All this is by no means irrelevant, so that when in chapter 10 Paul returns to the question of sacrificial food and the Christian housewife's Sunday joint⁴ we have no occasion for surprise or for conjecturing the combination of two letters.

I still find this argument convincing and do not wish to retract it, or the fuller statement of it that I have given in the past. There are however two points to which, in the light of the two Adam passages in chapter 15, it seems right to give further attention. The first is the simple fact that Paul deals with food sacrificed to idols twice. If it can be shown that the two treatments are not inconsistent, why did he not put them together, say all that had to be said by way of counsel to the advanced, free Christians, and then proceed to the material contained in chapter 9? It may be that the explanation is simple; Paul believed that he had finished with the subject and then thought of other points that he had omitted to make. Rather than rewrite the whole he added his new points as they occurred to him: Oh, and I forgot to say... This is possible, but it is a counsel of despair and not to be accepted unless all other possibilities fail. The second point to be borne in mind is that between the two treatments of εἰδωλόθυσια there intervenes not only chapter 9, which on consideration proves to be reasonably close to both, but also 10.1–13, which at first sight seems to diverge further from the point, and to be intended to introduce the treatment of the Supper which follows (after an interval) in chapter 11. Can the intervention of 10.1–13 be explained as satisfactorily as that of chapter 9?

Yes, it can; provided that we may suppose that chapter 10 deals with a different group of «free Christians», who contended for freedom to eat things sacrificed to idols on different grounds, which however Paul could no more regard as satisfactory than he regarded those of chapter 8.

For he did not regard as adequate the grounds he described in chapter 8 as adduced by some of the Corinthian Christians. Their conclusion was correct, but their method of proof was mistaken. We all have gnosis, said the Corinthians. The content of their gnosis was that an idol has no real existence. There is only one God; there is only one Lord. They used the formula:

For us there is one God, the Father, from whom come all things and to whom our own being leads;

And one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things, including ourselves, come into being (8.6).

3. C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London, 1958), pp. 12–17; also e. g. H. Conzelmann, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (KEK; Göttingen, 1969), pp. 13–15.

4. A. Ehrhardt, *The Framework of the New Testament Stories* (Manchester, 1964), pp. 276–90.

With this statement Paul cannot but agree. Indeed, he probably framed it himself; the Corinthians quote it back at him. But he makes two comments on it. First, *gnosis* puffs up; it is love that builds up. And secondly, it is not true that we all possess this *gnosis*. There are some Christians for whom idolatry is intensely real. They are truly Christians; they believe that Christ has delivered them from the evil powers; but they also believe⁵ that the powers still exist and still constitute a threat. For these reasons those who feel themselves free will, in the interests of their fellow Christians, use their freedom with restraint. They have overlooked the true ground of freedom, which is not *gnosis*, not the fact that they are *γνώστικοί*. Their point of view can be seen behind verse 8 which reveals a Corinthian opinion, to obtain which all that is necessary is to redistribute the negatives. We may infer that the liberated Corinthians said, «Abstinence from food will not commend us to God; if we eat we lose nothing, nor if we do not eat are we advantaged». This is true; there is nothing on which we can stand before God but his grace and the faith he grants us to enable us to receive his grace. But this carries with it the proposition that Paul actually writes. «Food—the food that the free Christian feels at liberty to eat—does not commend us to God; if, like the weak, we abstain from eating, we lose nothing; if, like the free, we do eat, we gain nothing». Thus the whole of chapter 8 deals with the position of those who approach the question of sacrificial food from the angle of *gnosis*. Their conclusion is correct, but it calls for qualification in the light of Christian charity; more fundamentally, it is correct, but vitiated by the fact that it is based on the wrong premises and established by the wrong methods. It depends on *gnosis* not on faith and love.

What of chapter 10? It begins abruptly. There is a connection with what immediately precedes, but it is not close. The *γὰρ* of verse 1 looks back in the first instance to 9.27. I discipline myself, says Paul, because there is in the past history of Israel a shocking case of indiscipline which had disastrous consequences. The real connection however does not appear till we have come round once more to the matter of food sacrificed to idols. The opening paragraph of chapter 10 recalls the story of Israel in the wilderness. Our distant forefathers had a baptism; they were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They had also a sacred meal consisting of spiritual food (presumably Paul is thinking of the God-given manna) and spiritual drink (he is certainly thinking of the water made to gush out of the rock). They were thus exceptionally blessed by God; but with most of them God was not pleased. Small wonder: they fell into idolatry, they committed fornication, they put God to the test, they complained against him. For these things they were severely punished.

5. As did Paul himself; see e. g. Rom. 8.38f. with its reference to threatening powers.

Commentators for the most part agree that Paul recalled this piece of Old Testament history because the Corinthians misunderstood their sacraments, taking them to be a kind of defence behind which they could safely shelter. «We have been baptized; we take part in the Lord's Supper; we may do what we please, and do it with impunity». Doubtless this general interpretation is correct. But should not the point be made more precise? Is not the cue for the second discussion of *εἰδωλόθυτα* the fact that just as some Corinthians argued for freedom in this matter on the grounds of *gnosis*, so others were saying, «Because we have baptism and the Supper, and are protected by them, we may eat *εἰδωλόθυτα*? Again, the conclusion was correct but the argument faulty.

It was faulty in its disregard of the Old Testament. The ancient dipping, eating, and drinking were no guarantees of immunity, and these things «were written down as a warning for us» (10.11). The argument was faulty also in its understanding of the Supper⁶. Paul therefore found himself obliged to counter the false inference from the Supper by setting forth its true meaning; hence the reference to it in 10.16,17. «Paulus ist nun hier wie sonst nicht in der Lage, den Glauben an das Sakrament im Sinn einer modernen Geistigkeit bestreiten und damit zugleich seine Überspannung abwehren zu können, sondern er ist in der viel schwierigeren Lage, aus dem (echten) Sakrament gegen das (unechte) Sakrament streiten, mit dem Sakrament die Sakramentierer bekämpfen, aus dem Sakramentsglauben den Sakramentsaberglauben widerlegen zu müssen»⁷. The Christian Supper, Paul says, is not a religious immunization; rather it will teach you the true significance of sacred eating⁸. The cup of blessing which we bless is (as you yourselves profess) not merely a common cup of wine; it signifies, it is, a joint participation in the blood of Christ, that is in all that his blood-shedding has obtained for us. The broken loaf is not merely a basic part of our diet; it signifies, it is, a joint participation in the body of Christ. These therefore join us to one another, because they join us all to him. You may see an analogous relation between worshippers and that which a material object (the

6. Paul does not develop the theme of baptism.

7. H. von Soden, *Urchristentum und Geschichte I* (Tübingen, 1951), p. 260. Cf. in the same work p. 259: Certain critical questions «gehen von einer das theologische Verständnis von I Kor. auch sonst mehrfach hemmenden oder irreleitenden Auffassung der korinthischen Gnostiker als aufgeklärter Libertinisten aus, während sie vielmehr überspannte Enthusiasten des Pneumaglaubens sind. Sie setzen ihr Vertrauen nicht entscheidend auf die rationalistische Erwägung, dass es keine Götzen gibt... sondern darauf, dass die mit den Sakramenten Christi Geweihten gegen alle Mächte gefeit sind und deshalb eine schrankenlose *ἐξουσία* haben». Much of this is very well observed, but it fails to recognize that Paul has to deal with two groups. One is not inaccurately described as aufgeklärte Libertinisten, whereas the other consisted of those who put an exaggerated trust in the sacraments.

8. It is true also that useful inferences can be drawn in the opposite direction.

altar) signifies in the religious life of Israel (verse 18). At this point there is contact with Paul's argument against the gnostics in chapter 8. The meaning of the rhetorical questions is clear: an εἰδωλόθυτον is nothing—nothing more, that is, than any other piece of meat; an εἰδωλον is nothing—nothing more, that is, than any other piece of wood or stone or metal. But it would never have occurred to Paul to say that a demon was nothing; it was real, evil, and dangerous⁹. And to eat in a context determined by demons was incompatible with eating in a context determined by the Lord. Food will not harm you, but demons, if you let them, will.

Paul was in an awkward and complicated position. Two groups were contending for a view which he believed to be correct, but they were contending for it by arguments that he was bound to reject. Others were taking a view which he knew to be mistaken, but he was obliged by Christian charity to defend them in

their error. He could hardly take a step without appearing to say something that he did not mean. Hence he winds up the discussion in the most practical terms. You may buy in the meat-market any meat that pleases you. You may go out to dinner in any company you wish and eat whatever is laid on the table. But you must consider the conscience of others; in all you do you must seek the glory of God; you must never do anything that would prevent another from accepting the Gospel, or, if he has accepted it, would drive him from it. All this¹⁰ is clear enough for anyone. But no doubt Paul was wise, even if it led to some repetition and the possibility of some confusion, to separate from each other two erroneous arguments, the one based on gnosis and the other one an exaggerated sacramentarianism. And we may be grateful that his method contributes one more small insight into the make-up of the Corinthian church.

9. Cf. note 5.

10. Except verse 29b, which I have tried to explain in my commentary (note 3).