

What About Celebrating a ‘Secular’ Christmas? #5

1 Corinthians 10:19-20; 1 Timothy 4:1-5

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The primary biblical argument used by fellow Christian brethren to defend the practice of celebrating a ‘secular’ Christmas (or Xmas) is found in 1 Corinthians 8 (particularly verses 4 and 8). The appeal to 1 Corinthians 8 by these brethren is focused upon the idolatrous origin of the meat offered to idols, and that Paul does not issue an absolute prohibition against eating such meat in all circumstances. And if the pagan origin of meat offered to idols did not contaminate the meat so as to prevent Christians from eating it at that time, then it is argued by these brethren that the pagan origin of Christmas on December 25th will likewise not prevent Christians from using these objects in the celebration of a ‘secular’ Christmas. Although these brethren rightly and commendably want nothing to do with celebrating a religious Christmas (because God has not appointed such a religious celebration of the nativity of Christ in Scripture or even given to us in Scripture the birth date of our Savior), nevertheless, these brethren insist that if all religious celebration of the nativity of Christ is removed, there is no harm in celebrating a ‘secular’ Christmas on December 25th (that may include a decorated Christmas tree, holly, mistletoe, gift-giving, stockings by the fireplace, etc.).

Paul’s inspired teaching and warnings do not simply end with countenancing Christians to eat meat that has pagan origins (and therefore celebrating a ‘secular’ Christmas that has pagan origins). It is true that the meat itself is not altered or changed by virtue of it having been offered to an idol. But the qualifications Paul makes must likewise be understood and applied in that historical situation and in our application to Christmas (or Xmas) at the present time: (1) Do not eat meat offered to idols if it becomes a stumbling block to fellow Christians (1 Corinthians 8:10; 1 Corinthians 10:27-28); (2) Do not eat meat offered to idols in association with and in symbolizing with idolatry and idolaters who use the same meat in their pagan celebrations (1 Corinthians 10:19-20).

As we look at what Paul writes (by inspiration of the Holy Spirit) in 1 Corinthians 10, let us consider the following main points this Lord’s Day: (1) Meat Offered to Idols Was Forbidden When It Was Used in Associating with or in Symbolizing with Idolatry or Superstition (1 Corinthians 10:19-20); (2) Meat Offered to Idols Was Not to Be Used as an Object of Celebration (1 Corinthians 10:25-29).

I. Meat Offered to Idols Was Forbidden When It Was Used in Associating with or in Symbolizing with Idolatry or Superstition (1 Corinthians 10:19-20).

A. Remember from 1 Corinthians 8 that the specific historical context to which Paul here directs his teaching and warning was in regard to those Gentile Christians in Corinth who knew and were confident that the consecration of meat to the idol did not corrupt or pollute the meat itself (the “knowers”).

1. Thus, they reasoned they could also eat the meat offered to idols in the temple restaurants when invited by their pagan relatives and friends, who would feast and celebrate in banquet rooms at the temple for various special occasions (like an engagement, a wedding, an anniversary, a promotion at work, etc.). Though these Corinthian Christians (the “knowers”) did not go to worship or to bow down before a pagan idol, and though they did not believe the meat offered to idols was infected itself with idolatry, the pagans with whom they associated at these feasts did indeed believe the meat was devoted to their god since it had previously been consecrated to the idol at its altar. So here were Christians (the “knowers”) associating with idolaters in their celebrations and partaking with them at their table with the meat that had been offered to idols.

2. But there was also another group of Christians in the Church of Corinth that could not in good conscience eat the meat that had been offered to idols (whether generally at all times or specifically in the temple restaurant, we are not told) because they did not understand how meat offered to idols was not corrupted by the pagan consecration. These Christians at Corinth we identified as the “doubters” because they had doubts that it was acceptable to God to eat meat offered to idols.

3. Though Paul agreed with the “knowers” that the meat itself was NOT infected with idolatry by virtue of the pagan consecration of the meat to a false god, nevertheless, Paul warned the “knowers” that they must not use this liberty in such a way as to lead by their example the “doubters” to do what the “doubters” yet believed was sinful to do (that is the substance of Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 8).

B. But now in 1 Corinthians 10, the Apostle Paul issues a forthright prohibition against associating with and symbolizing with the superstitious celebrations (even family celebrations) practiced by pagans at the temple restaurant in partaking of the meat offered to idols at their banqueting table.

1. When I speak of “superstitious” celebrations, I don’t mean celebrations that are mysterious or spooky, but rather celebrations that incorporate practices in worship that are not authorized by God in Scripture, but are rather authorized by the will of man (or by will-worship). The word “superstition” comes from the Latin (*super*=above; *stare*=to stand). Superstition is the will of man standing above the will of God in worship (which is the essence of idolatry). This is what Reformed teachers and writers meant by the use of “superstition”, and it is what I mean as well.

2. Thus, the pagans in offering meat to idols and in celebrating various occasions (even family events) with this meat offered to idols were superstitious in these celebrations (because they believed the meat was devoted to that idol—it was part of their worship and celebration, but obviously not appointed by the Lord). Now the Christian “knowers” did not go to the temple restaurant to worship the idol; they did not acknowledge the authority or virtue of meat being consecrated to idols. But Paul nevertheless forbids the “knowers” from sitting at the table in the temple restaurant where they would be associating with those who did understand these celebrations and the meat eaten as devoted to their idols (1 Corinthians 10:19-20). **Once again, Paul did not forbid eating meat offered to idols at the temple restaurant because the meat itself had become infected with idolatry, but because the meat offered to idols was being eaten in association with idolaters and their superstitious practices.**

C. Notice very briefly Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 10.

1. First, Paul brings forward the example of Israel of old, who was God’s Church in the Old Testament (1 Corinthians 10:1-4), and yet they were carried off into idolatry and fornication (1 Corinthians 10:5-10). So Paul tells the Corinthian Christians (primarily the “knowers”) that they should beware because the same thing could happen to them as happened to Israel of old (1 Corinthians 10:11-14).

2. Second, Paul brings to the attention of the Corinthian “knowers” the relationship of eating at the table of the Lord (the Lord’s Supper) and communion with the Lord, and eating at the table of the idols and communion with demons (1 Corinthians 10:15-21). It may not be the intent of the Corinthians “knowers” to be signifying communion with the demons which the idols represented, but Paul states that is what it means to join in celebration with those who devote their meat to idols—it is associating with and symbolizing with idolaters and their superstitions (even if that is not your intention or motive). Paul states that when the Corinthian “knowers” were associating with and symbolizing with these idolatrous practices, they were provoking the Lord to jealousy, who does not want to share them, His beloved saints, with demons in the use of superstitious objects that were used in the celebration of the pagans (1 Corinthians 10:22).

D. Application to the celebration of a ‘secular’ Christmas.

1. It is not because an evergreen tree that is designated a Christmas tree is sinful in itself

(or mistletoe, or holly, or gift-giving, or stockings), any more than the meat offered to idols was sinful in itself. What is sinful is the use of these objects (that have been and are used superstitiously) and the use of these objects for the celebration of a day of superstition (even if the intent of the Christian is not to use the day or the objects in a superstitious way). That was not the intention of the Corinthian Christian “knowers” either, and yet Paul forbade their eating the meat offered to idols in association with the celebration at the temple restaurant. Thus, it is not the intention of the Corinthian “knowers” that Paul states is sinful, but the association with and symbolizing with the superstitions of the pagans—it is communion with them in their pagan celebrations in eating the same meat offered to idols that the pagans used in a superstitious way.

2. If Paul forbids a Christian’s eating of meat offered to idols in association with a **PLACE** dedicated to superstition (namely the pagan temple and its restaurant), then I submit Paul (and the Holy Spirit) would likewise forbid a Christian’s eating of meat offered to idols in association with a **DAY** dedicated to superstition (namely a pagan holy day).

a. Whether a **PLACE** or a **DAY**, we are not to associate with or symbolize with those who practice false religions (for clearly both a **PLACE** and a **DAY** can be and have been superstitiously dedicated to the practice of false religion, and to associate with either the superstitious **PLACE** or the superstitious **DAY** is essentially the same thing).

b. My point is simply this, Paul forbade the eating of meat offered to idols in association with temple restaurant celebration because of its dedication to idolatry and superstition (regardless of the intention of the Christian), so likewise by application, Paul forbids the use of a Christmas tree (or gift-giving etc.) in association with Christmas Day because of its dedication to pagan and Roman Catholic idolatry and superstition (regardless of the intention of the Christian). **The Lord forbids us to have any association with the PLACE or the DAY that is devoted to superstitious religious celebration (even if we have no intention to join in with that which is superstitious and that which proceeds from a false religion).**

II. Meat Offered to Idols Was Not to Be Used as an Object of Celebration (1 Corinthians 10:25-29).

A. There are two hypothetical situations that Paul now raises outside of the temple restaurant concerning which the Corinthian Christians that were “knowers” might occasion some questions. Paul’s words were very clear about eating meat offered to idols in association with the pagan temple restaurant—stop doing it (“I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils” 1 Corinthians 10:20). But what about the following two scenarios?

1. What should we do about the meat sold at the meat market (1 Corinthians 10:25-26)?

a. This question arises out of the historical/cultural context in which meat that was sold at the shambles or meat market might come directly from a slaughter house or might come directly from the pagan temple where the meat was first offered to idols. There was no way of knowing (from appearances) where the meat that was being sold had originated from. It all looked the same.

b. Paul states that the Christian should not even inquire about the origin of the meat whether it had been previously offered to idols or not. Since outside its association with the superstitions of the pagan temple and its restaurant, it was just ordinary meat that God had provided, just buy it and eat it with thanksgiving to God (1 Corinthians 10:26; 1 Timothy 4:1-5).

c. In this instance, there is certainly no celebration at home associated with meat offered to idols—in fact, it would be impossible to do so because the Corinthians were not even to inquire whether the meat had previously been offered to idols. They were simply to take it home and eat it. However, when talking about bringing home a Christmas tree and placing gifts under it in association with the celebration of Christmas (even if it is called a “secular” Christmas), there is no likeness to what Paul says about the meat bought at the market place; for the Corinthian Christians were commanded not even to inquire about the origin of the meat, and certainly there is absolutely no mention made of using meat they knew was

devoted to idols in celebration at home.

d. I would suggest that the parallel to what is done by Christians who bring home a Christmas tree and place gifts beneath it to celebrate a “secular” Christmas would be like Paul approving of a Corinthian Christian buying meat that he knows was devoted to an idol, bringing that meat offered to an idol home and placing it on the table and decorating the table with the boughs of an evergreen tree and candles, then placing gifts underneath and around the meat offered to idols, and enjoying a family celebration at home around the decorated table that had upon it the meat offered to an idol. But Paul in no wise suggests anything like that. Simply buy the meat without asking anything about its origin, bring it home, thank God for it, and enjoy it to the glory of God with your family. No ‘secular’ celebration at home of meat offered to idols is in any way countenanced.

2. What should we do about private invitations to eat at the homes of pagan family members or friends where meat would be served that might have been offered to idols (1 Corinthians 10:27-28)?

a. Paul makes it clear that it is not forbidden to join a pagan family (in his context) or for us to join a non-Christian family (in our context) for a meal (or to invite them to our home for a meal). Jesus likewise ate with “sinners” (Matthew 9:10-13). However, the Lord Jesus did not eat with those outside the household of faith in order to be like them, but in order to draw them to Himself and to save them.

b. However, in that hypothetical context of a meal being served in which there was a beautiful steak cooked to perfection brought and placed on the plate of the Christian, and just as he was about to take his first bite, someone happened to inform him that the meat had been offered to an idol, what was the Christian to do? Eat it knowing he had the liberty to do so? No, Paul states that it was not to be eaten for the sake of the person who informed him that it was offered to an idol. Once again, it was not because the meat had been infected with idolatry, but rather because self-sacrificing love had a controlling interest over one’s Christian liberty in such a case. This is similar to what was stated in 1 Corinthians 8, that a Christian should not eat or do what a Christian has the Christian liberty to eat or do if it would cause someone else to stumble by not coming to Christ or by falling away from Christ.

c. Even in this hypothetical answer to a supposed question from the Corinthian Christians, nothing is hinted by Paul that it is permissible (even away from the context of the pagan temple restaurant) to use meat offered to idols as an object associated with a Christian’s celebration. In this hypothetical case, once again don’t ask any questions about the origin of the meat, just eat it to the glory of God. But if someone informs you that it is meat that was offered to an idol, don’t eat it for the sake of the one informing you.

d. Dear ones, if Paul did not even allow a Christian to inquire about the origin of the meat bought at the meat market or the origin of the meat eaten at a meal to which a Christian was invited, but commanded the Christian simply to eat of it in ignorance of its origin, then I ask our dear brethren, how is it that we can take those symbols of Christmas with knowledge of the pagan and Romish origins of those symbols and then use them in association with pagans, Roman Catholics, and sadly many Christians who use the same symbols in their superstitious celebration of Christmas? I submit there is no biblical warrant for the celebration of a ‘secular’ Christmas in 1 Corinthians 8-10, but rather there is a warrant for not celebrating a ‘secular’ Christmas in 1 Corinthians 8-10.

In conclusion, Paul’s command to the Corinthian Christians is the same command to us: “Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry” (1 Corinthians 10:14). Even if they had no intention of worshipping the idol (or even if you have no intention of worshipping on Christmas Day), flee from idolatry. What Paul commands is not to flee “out of” idolatry (as if the Corinthian Christians were going in order to worship at the pagan temple and needed to come “out of” their idolatry); for if Paul had intended to say that, he would have used a different Greek preposition: *ek*. However, Paul uses the Greek preposition *apo*, which means “away from”. In

other words, the command is not to come out of idolatry (as if they were in it), but to flee away from idolatry, i.e. all association and symbolizing with idolatry, which is what the Corinthians “knowers” were doing. Dear ones, to allow our sentimental attachment to Christmas (even to a ‘secular’ Christmas) to control our heart even over the command of God to flee from idolatry is opening the door in our lives to other forms of idolatry to which we may give ourselves as well. If we flee “from”, we will not have to flee “out of” (1 Thessalonians 5:22).

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