

Did Paul Change Regarding Meat Offered to Idols?

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All Scriptures are from the New King James translation unless otherwise noted.

The conference recorded in Acts 15 was a monumental event in the history of the new, but growing Church of God. As Gentiles continued to be added to the Church, they were causing offense to some of the Jewish Christians. In the past, God had commanded His people to remain separate from Gentiles unless they converted and circumcised (Gen. 17:10-14). These new Gentile converts were not adhering to this practice of circumcision.

To make tensions worse, certain men who were associated with James had gone out from Jerusalem preaching that Gentiles must be circumcised before being baptized (Gal. 2:12, Acts 15:1). These men believed that in order to become Christians, Gentiles were required to first become Jews; keeping the Biblical laws pertaining Israel. This caused enormous conflict throughout the churches until it finally came to a head in Antioch. There Paul publicly contested Peter who had also been affected by this error, and a Church-wide conference was called to resolve the mounting dispute.

After the evidence was presented, and witnesses gave account, the conclusion of Church leaders was that circumcision was not necessary for salvation, and therefore it was not required for conversion. Ultimately, the meeting determined four things that were required of Gentile Christians living among Jews.

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell (Acts 15:28-29).

While the Church leadership agreed that Gentiles were not required to be circumcised, they were required to abstain from these four practices. These were chosen because of their offense to both the Jews and the standards set by God.

The Church made this decision based on Scriptural principles. Even the process by which the conclusions were determined was the result of Christ's teachings. This fact is evident when we compare the proceedings to Jesus' instructions about such matters. Jesus said, if issues were taken to Church council, and two or more made the decision, then He would personally influence and sanction the judgment. The founder of God's Church stated:

Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them (Matthew 18:18-20).

Christ was in this decision made by the leadership in Acts 15. It was done according to His command, and therefore it was bound in heaven. The conference had been led by Christ,

through the Church leaders, to decide that Gentiles were not to eat meat offered to idols. Paul could not change this ruling! However, some teach that Paul did change his view of this ruling. Could that be true? Did Paul later oppose the Church ruling about eating meat offered to idols? Did it become acceptable? Did Paul contradict the decision made in the great conference of Acts 15? The answer is no! Nothing could be further from the truth.

Paul's Position

Paul addresses this subject while writing to the Corinthians. Evidently, various members of this congregation were afraid to purchase meat sold at the market because it might have been used in an offering to idols. Since there was no way for the consumer to tell which meats may have been used, they were uncertain of what to do.

Paul not only addresses their concern, but he profoundly expounds upon this subject. He then makes a righteous judgment regarding how the decision made by the Church in Acts 15 should be applied within this Gentile community.

Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol *is* nothing in the world, and that *there is* no other God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us *there is* one God, the Father, of whom *are* all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom *are* all things, and through whom we *live*. However, *there is* not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat *it* as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled (1 Corinthians 8:4-7).

Paul states that the idol is not really a god. It is nothing. But to some who do not understand this knowledge of only one God and Lord, they might think that there are other gods. Therefore, if they ate meat offered to one of these idols, they would defile their conscience. Paul then points out that the meat truly cannot harm us:

But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse (1 Corinthians 8:8).

Paul explains that the meat alone has no real significance. It makes no difference to God, or our body if we eat meat that is offered to an idol for the idol is nothing but a piece of rock or wood. The real issue is offense to those who do not understand this truth. And then, Paul explained how eating meat offered to idols could spiritually hurt those without this knowledge:

But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ (1 Corinthians 8:9-12).

The reason for not eating meat sacrificed to idols is for the sake of others. If we partake of idol meat, and wound their weak conscience, then we sin against Christ. This offense is one where, those who lack understanding might consider the actions of a Christian who knowingly and willingly eats meat offered to idols an act of participating in that which defiles. Upon

witnessing such conduct, it would influence the weaker in faith to lower their standards and therefore defile them self. Paul followed this concept with a personal example.

Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble (1 Corinthians 8:13).

Paul explained that he would not eat meat at all if it offended his brother. If the brother was a vegetarian, and carnivorous meals offended him, he would not partake of it. How much more than if the brother took offense to meat used in offering to idols? Thus, in this account, Paul is actually validating the decision in Acts 15. He is expounding upon its true purpose, and Christians were to follow his example. Not only were they not to eat meat offered to idols while in the Jewish community, they were not to eat meat at all if it offended another person.

After digressing to a subject of physical Israel's place in God's plan for mankind, Paul again addressed the subject of idols and meat offered to them in chapter 10:

Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? (1 Corinthians 10:18)

Paul first explained that, in the sacrificial system designed by God, the offerings are accepted and symbolically eaten by God. The ones who make the offering also partake of this meat. In so doing, they take part in the altar, and therefore take part in the worship of God. For this reason, those who may eat meat offered to an idol might think that they were partaking of the altar on which the meat was offered—condoning and participating in the worship of false gods. Because of this concept, Paul reminded them that the idol is not really a god:

What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons (1 Corinthians 10:19-21).

Was Paul teaching that we can eat what is offered to an idol? Absolutely not! Paul stated that the things the Gentiles sacrifice to idols, they sacrifice not to a god, but to devils. This is because of the fact that the worship of false gods is promoted by demonic beings. Further, converts were absolutely not to have fellowship with devils, and by this Paul is conveying that we are not to partake of the meat offered to idols. Once again, Paul is supporting the decision made in Acts 15. After this, Paul makes a judgment regarding the purchasing of such meat.

Since there simply are no other deities but God, and the meat offered to idols was often sold right along side other meat in the market place that was not used in such a way, the Christian did not have to ask about it or make a big fuss over finding out which meat was and which meat was not offered to idols. Paul explained:

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's *well-being*. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake; for "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness" (1 Corinthians 10:23-26).

The apostle's judgment is based upon the Church decision in Acts 15. In essence, he is saying that, since the meat is not affected by the process of offering it to an idol, if one does not know it was offered, it does not break God's law, or the decision of the Jerusalem conference, to eat the meat. The reason for this judgment is because the issue is one of conscience, not the meat's status or composition. If the meat were used in an offering to idols, it does not change the nutritious value it holds. It does not become unclean by reason of ritual, for the Lord created it and everything in the earth is His.

Next, Paul addresses going to an event where the preparation of food is out of our control. There, the Christian also does not need to ask if it has been offered to an idol. We can eat it without making an investigation:

If any of those who do not believe invites you *to dinner*, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake (1 Corinthians 10:27).

It is important to point out that unclean meat is not the subject of these chapters. Unclean animals, as designated in Leviticus 11, were never a part of this discussion. It is understood that these kinds of meats were never to be eaten. The issue at hand is clean meat offered to idols, and Paul tells us we do not have to search out if the meat was used in this way. However, if we come to realize that the meat had been offered to idols, we are not to eat it. Paul explained:

But if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake; for "the earth is the Lord's, and all its fulness" (1 Corinthians 10:28).

So, if we discover that the meat has been offered to an idol, then we are not to eat it. This judgment is in line with the decision of Acts 15. And that decision, along with Paul's judgment, is a matter of conscience:

"Conscience," I say, not your own, but that of the other. For why is my liberty judged by another *man's* conscience? But if I partake with thanks, why am I evil spoken of for *the food* over which I give thanks? (1 Corinthians 10:29-30).

The issue is the conscience of the other person. It is still an issue of offense to another, and Paul is telling us to avoid such situations. Why should we expose ourselves to attacks of others, and being spoken evil of, regarding the food we give thanks for? It is something that may offend the weak in understanding, which we are not to do. Paul continued:

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all *men* in all *things*, not seeking my own profit, but the *profit* of many, that they may be saved (1 Corinthians 10:31-33).

Thus, Paul explained the bottom line of this entire subject. We are not to give offense to either the Jew or Gentile in this matter. Instead, he explains the reason to refrain from and avoid offense. In doing so, we are not to eat meat that we know has been offered to idols. Never does the apostle Paul advocate eating meat offered to idols. In truth, Paul repeatedly states the reason why Christians are not to eat meat offered to idols.

Further, we know that the practice of eating meat offered to idols could not have changed, because the apostle John recorded the words of Christ at the end of the century reprimanding the Church of Pergamos for such practice.

But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality (Revelation 2:14).

God is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8). Christ was in the decision in Acts 15, and He changes not. Thus, over 6 decades after the conference, and about 4 decades after Paul wrote the above scriptures to the Corinthians, Jesus personally spoke to the apostle John and He still considered eating food offered to idols wrong. He did not change on this issue and He does not change on issues of similar importance.

In conclusion, consider the real lesson of Paul in these verses. He was not contravening the decision in Acts 15, he was deepening the understanding. Paul further explained and upheld the judgment of the Church leaders, and the decision that Christ both influenced and sanctioned.