

April 10, 2011

Rich Lusk

“Fleeing Idolatry: Escaping the Cultural Captivity of the Church”
1 Corinthians 10:14-22

Peter Leithart provides a very helpful two paragraph summary of everything Sunday’s sermon was getting at:

Though he did not bring them out explicitly, Paul’s instructions had far-reaching political implications. He was not merely exhorting the Corinthians to separate from pagan “religion,” but to separate from the pagan social and political system. Unlike cities of the modern West, the Greco-Roman city was as much a religious as it was a political organization, where citizens were expected to participate in civic festivals. Ancient civic feasts were not like our national holidays, “secular” holidays celebrating our founding. Rather, they were thoroughly religious feasts, including sacrifices to the gods of the city, whether Athena in Athens, or Artemis in Ephesus. Refusal to participate in the feasts of idols was a refusal of one of the privileges of citizenship. Paul did not require that Christians renounce all rights as citizens, and he himself made use of his rights as a Roman. But the fact that the Corinthians ate at the Lord’s table meant they were citizens of another city, the heavenly Jerusalem, and their citizenship in Corinth had to be radically subordinate to that.

For us as well, eating and drinking at the Lord’s table makes a political statement. If we share the Lord’s table, we cannot be Americans first, or even first of all members of our families. Far above all, we are to be identified as members of the body of Christ, sharers in his table. Citizenship in America or in a city, or membership in family are goods *only if* such groups contribute to our life in the

body of Christ. When a nation or a city or a family is organized in opposition to him, we must refuse the invitation to sit at their tables. With abortion rights, homosexual marriages, and other evils now defended as basic American freedoms, perhaps American Christians will someday conclude that celebrating the Fourth of July is the moral equivalent of feasting at a table of demons, incompatible with feasting at Christ's table. We are nowhere close to that point, but unless we are willing to contemplate the possibility, we have not grasped the radical demands of the Lord's table. Proper participation in the Supper reinforces one dimension of the church's calling and mission, which includes, as Rowan Williams has powerfully suggested, the "fundamental Christian vocation of *not* belonging."

Are we willing to *not belong*? If not, we are still in bondage to our culture's idols. Being a Christian will sometimes mean sacrificing prestige, popularity, and opportunity to remain faithful to the Lord who bought us.

The art of "not belonging" is so hard for us to learn. After all, *everyone* wants to belong; we all desire to fit in. And yet feasting at the Lord's table really does mean there are other tables that we cannot "belong" to. It is a sacrifice for us to flee cultural idols just as it was for the Corinthians -- and yet the grace and privilege of feasting at the Lord's table makes every sacrifice worth it.

Peter Leithart's *First Things* article "The Politics of Baptism" is also helpful background for the sermon. While more about baptism than the Eucharist, it is easy enough to see the

connections

(<http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9612/opinion/leithart.html>):

In the second chapter of his letter to the Galatians, Paul recounts how on a visit to Antioch he publicly rebuked Peter's "hypocrisy" in withdrawing, under pressure from a delegation of the Jerusalem church, from table fellowship with Gentile believers. The New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn contends that for Paul this event resulted in a decisive break with the church that had sponsored his original missionary journey. Significantly too, it was in this context—as an answer to the social problem of relations between the circumcised and the uncircumcised in the church and not as a solution to individual guilt and fear of judgment—that Paul first wrote the formula, "justification by faith and not by the works of the law" (Galatians 2:16). Dunn concludes, "The Antioch incident was probably one of the most significant events in the development of earliest Christianity. It shaped the future of Paul's missionary work, it sparked off a crucial insight which became one of the central emphases in Paul's subsequent teaching, and consequently it determined the whole character and future of that young movement which we now call Christianity." It is a large claim, but Dunn actually *underestimates* how widely Paul's stinging rebuke reverberated, for its echoes produced an earthquake that finally left the ancient world in ruins. Toward the end of *Economy and Society*, Max Weber cites Galatians 2 and Peter's participation in ritual meals with Gentiles to highlight the differences between the antique and the medieval cities. Ancient cities, Weber notes, were socially structured by a separation between those who made a claim of descent from the founding clans (patricians) and those who could make no such claim (plebeians), a separation often spatially represented by the isolation of plebeians either at the foot of the sacred hill of

the polis or in ghettos clustered at the walls.

This dualism of the ancient city had a definite religious coloring, since the distinction of patricians and plebeians was equivalent to that between those who had access to the *sancta* and those who did not. As Henri Fustel de Coulange has shown, the polis was a religious as much as a political entity; rights came by participation in the city's rites. Weber observes, "The cities of Antiquity were religiously exclusive not only toward the outside, but also internally against everyone who did not belong to one of the constituted sibs—that is, against the plebeians, and for this reason they remained compartmentalized into initially very exclusive associations."

By late antiquity, this caste system had already declined, and Pierre-Simon Ballanche has argued that the history of antiquity is the story of an ultimately successful plebeian struggle for initiation into political, cultural, and religious privilege. It was, as Weber and Ballanche agree, in medieval Christendom that the religious exclusions lost their political centrality. Weber cites the Antioch incident as an example of the fading of religiously based political exclusiveness. Later, Southern European cities, with their Capulet-Montague feuding, more closely resembled ancient cities than did those of Northern Europe. But even in Italy social and political boundaries, under the impact of Christianity, were stripped of much of their religious legitimation. The medieval city, for all its real inequities and flaws, was a partial realization of a social order ritually imagined in Christian baptism. Baptism, as the church fathers, early medieval theologians, and scholastics consistently noted, confers a participation in the priesthood of *the* Priest, Jesus Christ. In contrast with the Old Testament priesthood, which was confined to the descendants of Aaron, the Christian priesthood encompasses the whole people of God. All the marks of induction into the Aaronic priesthood-

anointing, investiture, participation in the sacrificial meal—were included in Christian initiation. Certainly no one denied the necessity of an ordained ministry in the church, but at the same time liturgists insisted that the *dignitas* of priesthood was conferred by baptism and its accompaniments.

While theologians normally elaborated the priesthood of the faithful by typological contrast with the priesthood of the Mosaic order, baptism held similarly revolutionary implications for the order of the Greek and Roman world. Fustel de Coulanges notes, "What manifestly separated the plebeian from patrician was that the plebeian had no part in the religion of the city. It was impossible for him to fill the priestly office." Christian baptism as baptism into priesthood ended all that. Baptismal water was the universal solvent not only of traditional religious distinctions within Judaism but also of the foundation stones on which the ancient city rested; for the church, it was the *sole* initiation and was not confined to a single family, clan, race, or social class. Everyone within the watery walls of *this* city participates in the rites and shares in the *sancta*; holy things are for holy people, but *all* the baptized are saints.

Politically, the democratic implications of eliminating ancient religious exclusions are obvious; less evident but no less spectacular were the economic consequences. Instead of subordinating artisans and entrepreneurs to the founding aristocracy, as the ancient city had done, the medieval city was ruled by a combination of grand bourgeoisie and small capitalists. Here, it seems, Weber put his finger on a stronger connection between Protestantism and capitalism than his flawed conjectures about election and the Protestant work ethic.

It was in Protestantism that the radical implications of Christian baptism were most dramatically worked out in

opposition to a late medieval system that had hardened the division of priesthood and laity. Catholic apologist Joannis Moldonati, polemicizing against the Lutherans, actually defended the distinction between priest and laity by appealing to analogies with ancient Rome's patricians and plebeians, perpetuating in ecclesial guise the structures of antiquity. Meanwhile, Luther was blanketing Europe with tracts announcing, with an oddly traditional recklessness or reckless traditionalism, that every baptized Christian was priest and cleric, thereby sparking liberation from a captivity that began, almost literally, in Babylon. It is surely no accident that renewed Catholic attention to the priesthood of the laity has in our century been followed by an unprecedented Catholic endorsement of the free economy. To put it simply: No Congar, No Novak. Paul's insistence that Jew and Greek share a common table was the symbolic founding of the Western city. Over the modern megapolis, over its indifferent financial districts and bustling marketplaces, flutters a banner so defaced as to be all but illegible and so ignored as to be all but forgotten, but once inscribed with another stirring passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians (3:27-28): "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

On idolatry, I highly recommend Tim Keller's work, including his recent book *Counterfeit Gods*, and numerous articles, including "Talking About Idolatry in a Postmodern Age" (<http://www.monergism.com/postmodernidols.html>). Keller is very skilled at exposing both our individual and corporate/cultural idols. He identifies personal idols (money,

romance, children, self-expression, drugs/alcohol abuse, pleasure, comfort, status), religious idols (truth/doctrine, morality, spiritual gifts, tradition, art), and cultural idols (the state, nationalism, racism, ideology, reason, science, technology, entertainment, consumerism). Idolatry takes on very different forms in different times and places. In the ancient world, idols were actually false gods; idolatry took place at the temples and shrines built to these false gods. In the medieval world, Christians fell into a more Christianized form of idolatry, focused more on the breaking of the second commandment than the first. Their idolatry consisted in icon worship, and using relics as “contact points” with the divine realm. After the Reformation, the West was cleansed of that kind of blatant idolatry. But we still have our idols, even though they tend to be more abstract, and thus harder to identify.

On idols and the demonic, see also Clifford Arnold, *Powers of Darkness*. For a helpful discussion of the principalities, see Lesslie Newbigin in various places, perhaps best summarized by Michael Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*, 171. Newbigin and Goheen both consistently point out that the powers were originally part of God’s good creation, though they have now been corrupted and demonized. In Christ, the powers can again be subdued and put in their rightful place. Thus, Christians can participate in the powers in various ways without sinfully absolutizing them.

C. S. Lewis is also very helpful on idolatry. From his essay “First and Second Things”:

Put first things first and we get second things thrown in:
put second things first and we lose both first and second things.

To sacrifice the greater good for the less and then not to get the lesser good after all - that is the surprising folly.

The woman who makes a dog the centre of her life loses, in the end, not only her human usefulness and dignity but even the proper pleasure of dog-keeping. The man who makes alcohol his chief good loses not only his job but his palate and all power of enjoying the earlier (and only pleasurable) levels of intoxication.

It is a glorious thing to feel for a moment or two that the whole meaning of the universe is summed up in one woman - glorious so long as other duties and pleasures keep tearing you away from her. But clear the decks and so arrange your life (it is sometimes feasible) that you will have nothing to do but contemplate her, and what happens?

Every preference of a small good to a great, or a partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which the sacrifice was made.

You can't get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first. From which it would follow that the question, "What things are first?" is of concern not only to philosophers but to everyone.

Or as he made the same point in his *Readings for Meditation and Reflection*, pp. 14-15:

The woman who makes a dog the centre of her life loses, in the end, not only her human usefulness and dignity but even the proper pleasure of dog-keeping. The man who makes alcohol his chief good loses not only his job but his palate and all power of enjoying the earlier (and only

pleasurable) levels of intoxication. It is a glorious thing to feel for a moment or two that the whole meaning of the universe is summed up in one woman--glorious so long as other duties and pleasures keep tearing you away from her. But clear the decks and so arrange your life (it sometimes feasible) that you will have nothing to do but contemplate her, and what happens? Of course this law has been discovered before, but it will stand re-discovery. It may be stated as follows: every preference of a small good to a great, or partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which the sacrifice is made.

Nancy Wilson (<http://www.feminagirls.com/2008/07/25/a-restless-discontent/>) puts her finger on the source of our discontentment (which is just another word for idolatry):

Discontent can come in many forms, disguised as many different things. But the bottom line is that discontent is the result of looking for contentment in the wrong things. If you are like a small child who needs a new toy every few minutes, you will quickly hit the wall. The brightly colored toys may take your mind off your troubles, but they get boring quickly, and they don't satisfy. Once we have plowed through everything in the toy basket, it's pretty much a rerun, so we look elsewhere, restless for something new to keep us distracted.

Discontent comes of being self-absorbed. How am I doing? Am I happy? Do I have a hard life? Am I too fat? Too thin? Too broke? Picked on? Ignored? Am I under-appreciated? Is my car too old and my house too small? Discontent is all about me.

Joy comes from self-forgetfulness. And the only access we have to such joy is when we are put right. And we can't put ourselves right, try as we might by digging into the toy bin again. Only God can restore us, tune our strings that we

might be in harmony with our Creator. And that comes through being reconciled to Him through His Son. Without this reconciliation, we are hopeless and helplessly out of tune.

Once the reconciliation has taken place, we are no longer at odds with our Creator. We are adopted, remade, restored, and forgiven. In spite of this unspeakable gift, being thick-headed and short-sighted creatures, we can slip into ingratitude and discontent, forgetting who we are and what He has done in and through us. We can turn into grumpy, fussy, joyless saints. We need reminders, we need review. And so He gave us a weekly reminder every Sunday. And He kindly bestowed His Word on us and has given us teachers to prod and encourage us.

Contentment is comforting. Discontent is uneasy.

Contentment is peaceful. Discontent is stressful.

Contentment looks out for others. Discontent looks in.

Contentment is grateful. Discontent refuses to say thanks.

Contentment counts its blessings. Discontent counts its

grievances. Contentment is cheerful. Discontent pouts.

Contentment takes the hit. Discontent points the finger.

Contentment is generous. Discontent won't share.

Contentment is settled. Discontent is restless.

C.S. Lewis wisely said (somewhere) that "the happiest moments are those when we forget our precious selves and have...everything else (God, our fellow humans, animals, the garden, and the sky) instead."

On Greco-Roman polytheism as the root of idolatry in the Corinthian church, see David Garland's commentary, p. 472f. "Paul's insistence on exclusive loyalty to a religion was something uncommon in paganism. People were accustomed to joining in the sacrificial meals of various deities, none of which

required an exclusive relationship...The Hellenistic world was a great religious melting pot, and tolerance and syncretism reflected the spirit of the times....” Our times of rampant pluralism mean we have to deal with the same problem. No one cares who we worship so long as we do not claim that our God demands *exclusive* devotion, because at that point we’re no longer playing the same game.

Hays (p. 159) makes the point that while most of 1 Cor. 8-10 call upon the strong (who know that idols are “nothing”) to surrender their rights for the sake of the weak, in these verses (10:14-22) he shows that idol feasts are not only a danger to the weak, but also to the strong, who *think* they are standing firm. “The Corinthians who attend these temple meals are not only endangering the weak but also putting themselves in spiritual peril. By causally participating in idolatrous practices, they are putting Christ to the test (v. 9) and provoking the Lord to jealousy (v. 22). The dangerous folly of such actions is shown by the story of Israel in the wilderness (vv. 1-11), which serves as the basis of the admonition in 10:14.”

The strong are right that the pagan gods are nothing. But they are wrong to think that means there is no threat in participating in idolatrous temple meals. They should have known that homage paid to pagan deities actually devolves onto demons (Deut. 32:16-17).

It’s been well said that when it comes to idolatry the issue is not “how close can I get?” but “how fast can I run?” We are explicitly commanded to *flee* idolatry. There are actually a number of parallels between 1 Cor. 10 concerning idolatry and 1 Cor. 6 concerning sexual immortality. In both cases, the sin involved violates a bond of covenant union; jealousy is provoked; and the antidote is found in fleeing.

Anthony Hoekema on how man was made for God: “Man is bound to God as a fish is bound to water. When a fish seeks to be free from water, it loses both its freedom and its life. When we seek to be ‘free’ from God, we become slaves of sin.”

Herbert Schollossberg on the difference between good created desires and idolatrous desires: “All true needs—such as food, drink, and companionship—are satiable. Illegitimate wants—pride, envy, greed—are insatiable” (*Idols for Destruction*, p. 107).

If we only think of sin as lawbreaking, we think all sins are “obviously” bad things. But viewing sin as idolatry helps us come to grips with the deceptive nature of sin. We sin when misuse good things, or use good things in bad ways, as well. All sin is a matter of disordered and misdirected desire; those deformed desires are idolatrous.

Peter Leithart follows John Beck on the structure of 1 Cor. 10:14-22 (<http://www.leithart.com/2010/11/04/table-of-lord-table-of-demons/print/>):

1 Corinthians 10:14-22 forms a paragraph of its own. Prior to this section of 1 Corinthians 10, Paul is drawing out an extended comparison between Israel’s exodus and wilderness wanderings and the state of the Corinthian church. After verse 23, he draws the conclusion that eating and drinking should be governed by love for the brothers. Between these two, the paragraph in verses 14-22 forms a rough chiasm:

A. Flee idolatry, v 14

B. Argument from Eucharist: cup and loaf are *koinonia* in body and blood and partake (*metecho*) of loaf, vv 15-17

C. Argument from Israel according to flesh (*koinonos*), v 18

D. Idols are nothing; Gentiles worship demons, vv 19-20a

C'. No fellowship (*koinonos*) with demons, v 20b

B'. Cup and table; partake of demons (*metecho*), v 21

A'. Don't provoke the Lord to jealousy, v 22

Breck's helical reading of chiasms works pretty well here:

A/A': Flee idolatry → what's more, don't provoke the Lord to jealousy with your idols

B/B': Cup and loaf are communion in body and blood → what's more, pagan cup and table are communion in devils

C/C': Israel according to flesh partook of altar by eating → what's more, don't be partners with demons by eating from their altars

D: The central theme is an exposure of the idols, an exodus humiliation of the gods as nothings – as worse than nothings: demons.