PAULINE FREEDOM: IDOLATRY AND THE VIETNAMESE ANCESTOR CULT

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by

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Reader: Dr. Henry J. Langknecht, Th.D.
To all the teachers who have labored for my knowledge;

To all the saints and martyrs,
Who have preserved my Christian Faith;

To my mother,
Who has sacrificed her life for her children’s education;

And to the Mother of my Lord,
Who brought the Word of Life into the world;

Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam.
# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BDAG</td>
<td><em>A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</em></td>
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<td>CPV</td>
<td>Communist Party of Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>LSJM</td>
<td><em>A Greek–English Lexicon</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAB</td>
<td><em>New American Bible</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td><em>New American Standard Bible</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NJB</td>
<td><em>New Jerusalem Bible</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td><em>New Revised Standard Version</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td>New Testament</td>
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<td>OT</td>
<td>Old Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>TDNT</td>
<td><em>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</em></td>
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ABSTRACT

Ancestor worship has been a vexing issue for Christian missionaries since the 16th century in Vietnam due to Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, and Communist influences. However, there are few studies from the Protestant perspective on the ancestor cult. This thesis hopes to contribute to the mission work by analyzing the ancestor cult in light of Paul’s First Corinthians 8—10, namely how Christian freedom informed participants regarding worshiping idols and consuming food sacrificed to idols. The analysis includes delineating the complexity of Vietnamese religious pluralism and tracing the similarities and differences between the Christian cult of the saints and the ancestor cult. This thesis challenges the traditional perspective that the ancestor cult in Vietnam is religious and superstitious; rather, the ancestor cult is cultural in every aspect. A successful inculturation of the Gospel must separate the ancestor cult from the religious components of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and popular folk religion.
1. **INTRODUCTION: MISSIONARY ISSUES IN VIETNAM**

Ancestor worship or ancestor veneration has been a vexing issue in the mission field since the early days when Christianity arrived in Asia, especially in countries influenced by Confucianism such as China, Korea, and Vietnam. There has been a myriad of scholarly works published in the last three to four decades related to Christian mission in Asia on Confucianism and ancestor worship. However, there are few books and articles published on the subject in the Vietnamese context, especially on the Protestant side.\(^1\) The scope of this thesis is focused on the ancestor cult in Vietnamese culture. This thesis will examine how Paul’s view on idolatry and Christian freedom would impact a modern Christian response to the ancestor cult in Vietnam.

1.1 **BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY**

Vietnam is located south of China with its entire west side sharing borders with Laos and Cambodia (and the Gulf of Thailand), and its east side facing the Pacific Ocean. Geographically, Vietnam is slightly larger than New Mexico in total area, and has a population of 93.4 million people (cf. 2.1 million people in New Mexico).\(^2\) After 1975, North

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\(^1\) There have been some articles, books, and theses published by Roman Catholic scholars and missionaries, i.e., Peter C. Phan in America; Vũ Kim Chính, Trần Văn Đoàn, and Thiện Cẩm in Vietnamese Catholic seminaries in Taiwan and the Philippines. A notable thesis was written by Fr. Nguyễn Công Minh, “A Study on the Inculturation of Ancestor Veneration at the Eucharistic Celebration during ‘Tet’ [Lunar New Year Celebration] Vietnam” (Doctor of Ministry dissertation, The Catholic Theological Union at Chicago, 2000). However, Nguyễn Công Minh’s thesis was written in light of Vatican II’s recognition that salvation is possible in other religions. Besides an article written by Reginald E. Reimer, “Religious Dimension of the Vietnamese Cult of the Ancestors,” *Missiology* 3, no. 2 (April 1975): 155–168, there has been virtually no scholarly effort (on the Vietnamese Protestant side) on the subject of ancestor worship in Vietnamese culture.

and South Vietnam were reunited under Communism with its capital in the north, Hanoi. Religiously, it is commonly thought that Vietnam is a Buddhist country; or it is a country with a mixed form of Buddhism–Confucianism. Nevertheless, 80.8 percent of the total population is listed as non–religious (mostly belong to the ancestor cult), 9.3 percent Buddhist, 6.7 percent Roman Catholic, and others 2.7 percent. Based on these statistics, it is more accurate to describe Vietnamese religion as a “melting pot” of foreign religions: it is an assimilated religion of the ancestor cult with Confucianism–Taoism–Buddhism (namely, Tri–Religions).

Historically, Vietnamese religion was mostly indigenous animism. During the early monarchical eras (third millennium BCE), indigenous animism was developed into the cult of the dead, then eventually the ancestor cult. When the country came into contact with the outside world, its geographical position served as a pit stop for commerce, and a landing base for the world’s religions. Vietnam was a commercial bridge between India and China from the 2nd century BCE to the 10th century CE; and its seaports served as landing bases for Christianity from the 16th–20th century CE en route to China and Japan. Over the last twenty–three centuries, each imported religion has helped color the religious shade of Vietnam, for instance, Theravada Buddhism from India and Thailand (and Cambodia), Mahayana Buddhism and Confucianism and Taoism from China, and Christianity from Europe and North America.

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3 Partly, the census is skewed by the way questions are framed and the selected choices are given. Normally, the listed religions would include Buddhism, Catholic, Protestantism, Cao Daism, Hoa Haoism, Taoism, Islam, or non–religions; but, the Ancestor Cult would not be listed as a religious option in many censuses.

4 Vietnamese theologians would not use the term “melting pot” to describe religious pluralism in Vietnam. Some scholars such as Peter C. Phan would be more comfortable with the term “stew–pot” in his works; and other Vietnamese Catholic missionaries and scholars would dismiss Buddhist and Taoist influence on the ancestor cult in Vietnam.
Regardless of the openness to religious pluralism, imported religions did not wipe out the ancestor cult in Vietnam; but each foreign religion was assimilated into the country’s form of the ancestor cult. The contour of Vietnamese religion is still the ancestor cult; but the distinct color of each foreign religion has been blended with the whole body’s shade. That is, the ancestor cult is the shape of the religious body: it has chiseled out any religious component that did not fit into the contour.

Even though Vietnam has been very open to foreign religions, Christianity has not been successful since the first Italian missionary’s arrival, Inigo, during the reign of Emperor Lê Trang Tôn (1532–1548 CE). Unlike the Tri–Religions, for more than 480 years Christianity has suffered political persecution and social rejection due to its failure to accommodate the ancestor cult. Missionaries since the arrival of the Jesuit Fr. Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660 CE) and his companions have recognized the two dimensions of the ancestor cult: sociopolitical and religious. On the sociopolitical dimension, missionaries who appreciated the ethical and social aspects have accepted and incorporated wholeheartedly the religious practices of the ancestor cult. As a result, the Christian form of theologies and worship has been turned into a syncretistic form. On the religious dimension, missionaries

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5 In addition to Inigo, five more Catholic missionary priests arrived in the next 50 years: Gaspar de S. Cruz arrived in 1550; Lopez and Acevedo in 1558; Luis de Fonseca and Grégoire de la Motte in 1580. A more detailed history of Christianity can be found in Nguyễn Hồng, Lịch Sử Truyền Giáo ở Việt Nam [History of Mission in Vietnam], Volume 1, (Hồ Chí Minh City, Việt Nam: Nhà Xuất Bản Тур Диên Bạch Khoa, 2009), 12–13; and Vietnamese Missionaries in Taiwan, “Sự Nghiệp Truyền Giáo tại Việt Nam [The Missionary Work in Vietnam],” http://www.catholic.org.tw/vntaiwan/ghvienam/lichsu1.htm (accessed 10 February 2015).


7 This syncretistic form is similar to the universalist Cao Daism in Vietnam, which worships ancestors, national heroes, Buddhas, Jesus, prophets, Mary, and other saints.
who emphasized the First Commandment have dismissed the ancestor cult as superstitious. Consequently, Christianity has suffered under cultural rejection over the last 480 years or so.

To mitigate the incompatibility between Christianity and the ancestor cult, Pope Pius XII issued the *Propaganda Fide* (1939 CE) which lifted the prohibition of ancestral veneration in the Chinese Rites Controversy (1704–1742 CE).¹ it is permissible for Catholics to publicly participate in honoring ancestors and national heroes by genuflecting, incensing, bowing, and commemorating as circumstance would require. In 1974, Vietnamese bishops detailed the accommodations for ancestral veneration in the context of Vietnamese culture. Moreover, the Vietnamese translation of the *Roman Missal* (1992) included the phrase “our ancestors” (un–identifiably dead or alive, baptized or non–baptized ancestors) in the Eucharistic Prayer of Mass, and five new Mass settings for the three consecutive days of lunar New Year celebration, including a separate setting for ancestors on the second day.¹⁰ To further accommodate the culture, the Catholic Church not only stresses the positive aspects of ancestral veneration, but also incorporates national and cultural identity (i.e., imperial commemoration, psychological and social wellness) into its theological research and catechetical teaching.¹¹

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¹¹ There are memorial altars set up in New Orleans, Los Angeles, San Jose, and Houston for emperors, national heroes who died in the wars (especially in the Vietnam War), and ancestors. The Vietnamese Catholic Diocese in New Orleans annually organizes a memorial ceremony to commemorate the Fall of Saigon, 30 April 1975.
Nevertheless, the Protestant churches continue to reject the religious aspects of ancestral worship such as the sacrificial offering of food and incense to idol–images and ancestral altars. However, in popular practices, linguistic expressions and physical acts are often indistinguishable in certain contexts (italicized words and phrases are my highlights):

12 for example, “ancestor veneration” versus “ancestor cult/worship;” “spirit/soul” versus “god;” “thần” (god, spirit, ghost, deity), “thánh” (saint, holy), or “thánh thần” (saint, deity, god);
13 “kinh” (respect, honor), “sùng kinh” (venerate, hold in reverence), or “sùng bái” (honor, worship, idolize, or venerate);
14 “cúng” (offer sacrifices, make offerings which includes giving gifts to people in higher position),
15 “cúng bái” (make ceremonial offerings including political commemoration), or “cúng tế” (offer sacrifice to);
16 “thờ” (idolize, worship, honor, respect, love, or esteem) the dead or alive;

The italicized words and phrases are the sources of confusion in understanding the ancestor cult. The same confusion can be found in the English language. A quick review of several English dictionaries would bring the confusion to the fore. In general, to venerate is to revere, to honor, or to regard with a deep feeling or an act of respect (e.g., an act of kissing, procession, or bowing/prostrating). To worship is to love, to adore, to revere, or to venerate an object/deity with religious service or rites. Thus, a difference between veneration and worship is how one views the object of veneration or worship as a god/deity or as an object of love (i.e., a material object, a saint, an ancestor, or a leader). Moreover, another difference is in the manner of the act of veneration and worship: how extensive one carries out his or her ritual in venerating. Would the ritual of veneration be extensive enough in order to be constituted religious?

12 Vietnamese people, Christians or non–Christians, would not consider their ancestors as saints or holy ones, deities or gods.

13 “Sùng bái” can mean to honor, to worship, or to venerate. “Bái” means to bow down, to kowtow, or to prostrate; and “Sùng bái” means to bow down in order to honor, to worship, or to venerate.
14 “Cúng” can mean to offer sacrifices, to give gifts to people of higher rank.
15 “Thờ” can mean both to worship and to honor/respect. Because of the fluidity between to worship and to honor/respect in linguistic expression, Christian missionaries and the people in the ancestor cult have often misunderstood the nature of ancestral veneration.
respect, or honor), or “tôn vinh” (respect, honor, or pay homage). To complicate the subject further, the notion of idolatry becomes blurred along the line of \textit{communio sanctorum} in Vietnamese culture. In the ancestor cult, Vietnamese would not equate their ancestors with gods, idols, or the Heavenly God. In a way similar to the Western concept of saints and angels, ancestor souls/spirits are very much alive after death, living and looking after their relatives. Thus, what are the activities, attitudes, and rituals deemed permissible or impermissible, non–religious or religious? Should Christians venerate or worship, respect or bow/kowtow, honor or pray to deceased relatives? One’s expression is contextually interpreted differently depending on civil or religious situations.

Since the ancestor cult is deeply rooted in the cultural identity of the Vietnamese people, the mission work calls for a more comprehensive approach, not just biblical examination. In addition to biblical examination, mission work must entail cultural and popular religious examination. Biblically, the mission work examines the Graeco–Roman culture, especially in St. Paul’s context, in dialogue with the ancestor cult in Vietnam. It is the interplay between Christian freedom and idolatry in Paul’s context that has vexed the mission of the Christian church in Vietnam. Hence, this thesis proposes a three task approach. The first task calls for examining Paul’s First Corinthians, 10:14–22, on the subject of sacrificial offering of food and idolatry that points to Christian freedom in regard to social and cultural

practices in a religiously pluralistic context. The exegetical section will be based on the *Novum Testamentum Graece* as a primary source,¹⁸ and the major biblical commentators as secondary sources.¹⁹ The second task calls for exploring religious pluralism in Vietnam and its interaction with Christianity with a special focus on ancestral worship, namely the ancestor cult. This thesis presupposes a genuine religious experience based on linguistic evidence and evidences from traditional ceremonies.²⁰ This presupposition may not necessarily be in congruence with the Christian biblical viewpoint regarding other religions. Regardless of how Christians view the ancestor cult, the issue under investigation is whether the Church may or may not incorporate certain components of the ancestor cult into Christianity, i.e., practices

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and teaching, without violating the uniqueness and universality of Christ’s soteriology. In other words, how do Christians give an account of their Christian faith, their beliefs and practices and teaching, without judging or misconstruing other religions, especially the ancestor cult in Vietnam? Thus, the third task examines how First Corinthians on idolatry and Christian freedom would impact a Christian response to the ancestor cult in Vietnam; and explores the issues of inculturation in a Vietnamese cultural setting for catechesis, liturgy, and proclamation.

The introductory section will trace the development of Vietnamese religion, and describe how the indigenous ancestor cult has been colored by Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and politics. A survey of popular religions in Vietnam will help bring the exegetical task into a sharper focus. The exegetical section will examine the biblical arguments concerning Christian freedom in regard to the subject of food offered to idols, ancestral worship, and idolatry in the Graeco–Roman period. The contextualization section will examine closely the practices in the ancestor cult, its rites and prayers; and highlight the issues of inculturation in a Vietnamese setting for catechesis, liturgy, and proclamation.

1.2 Christianity among Religious Pluralism in Vietnam

The human being was created in the image of God; therefore, from birth to death it yearns to be drawn closer to its Creator. Being molded in the hands of the Creator and endowed with the divine breath, the primitive couple not only longed to be in fellowship with God, but also

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21 One may recall how the early Christian Church maneuvered its way through religiously pluralistic contexts: circumcision or no circumcision, hand–washing or no hand–washing before eating in the Book of Acts and the Pauline letters.

desired to live harmoniously with one another: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called woman, for out of man this one was taken” (Gen. 2:23). Since the genesis moment, religion and civilization have multiplied and filled the earth. However, somewhere along the historical timeline, human beings forgot which gave birth to which: was it religion that brought about civilization or civilization that created religion? Technically speaking, the word *religion* conveys a sense of corporation, of community, of fellowship, and of continuity from generation to generation. Wherever and whenever two or more gather, there is an organized religion for praying and praising, for making sacrifice and petitioning. Religion is a part of human existence and survival as evidenced by the early ancient temple discovered at Göbekli Tepe (9600–8200 BCE)\(^\text{23}\) and the 21st century’s modern churches, temples, and mosques: giving thanks for the past blessings of hunting and harvesting, and petitioning for protection and prosperity in the future.

Likewise, religion was an integral part of life in Southeast Asia. It was animistic spirits that the Neolithic Asians called upon for protection from flood and fire, and for provision by hunting and harvesting. For example, there are records of spirits named after dragons, water, mountains, thunders, and even the god of kitchen or stove (Ông Táo),\(^\text{24}\) earth


\(^{24}\) The kitchen god was a divinized mortal man named Zao Lun, who was an advocate for family affairs. The idea of worshiping Zao Lun was originally imported from Chinese folk-religion or Taoism in the 2nd century CE.
or land (Ông Địa), and prosperity (Ông Thần Tài). Animism was the way of survival and worship millennia before kings and emperors came onto the scene.

Over the ages, animism developed into the cults of the dead and imperial cult to honor and venerate dead heroes, leaders, kings, and emperors. In China, imperial court records showed that Emperor Shun (2233–2184 BCE) worshiped his predecessor Emperor Yao instead of his own ancestors. Ancestor and imperial cults were not popular until the Xia dynasty (2070–1600 BCE) and the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE). About the same period in Vietnam, the first emperor of the Hồng Bàng dynasty (2879–258 BCE), Emperor Lộc Túc, named his kingdom Xích Quỷ, and took on the title Kinh Dương Vương, which is popularly known as Hùng Vương (Emperor Hùng). When Emperor Hùng passed away, his successors

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25 Ông Địa was formally known as Tu Di Gong, a divinized mortal man imported from Chinese folk–religion.

26 Ông Thần Tài was formally known as Cai Shen in Chinese folk–religion during the 2nd century BCE of Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE). For more discussions on popular religion, please see Mai Thanh Hải, Tìm Hiểu Tín Nguyên Truyền Thông Việt Nam [Exploring the Belief and Tradition of Vietnam] (Hà Nội, Việt Nam: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa–Thông Tin, 2005), 23–24.


28 Xích Quỷ was used to designate the Red Spirit (xích means red due to the rusty soil of the south, and quỷ means spirit). In Vietnamese language and culture, animistic spirits (and the spirits of the deceased ancestors) are not equivalent to God as in Judeo–Christianity, nor are they equivalent to Graeco–Roman gods and goddesses. Ông Trời (Mr. Heaven), Thiên Chúa (Heavenly Lord), or Thượng Đế (Highest Lord), means the Lord in heaven, and is also used for the Christian God.

commemorated his legendary contributions to the people on the day of the anniversary of his
death. Thus, this first imperial commemoration began a long tradition of imperial cult.  

Many scholars tended to attribute the origin of the ancestor cult to the development of
the imperial cult during the Hồng Bàng dynasty. However, Hwang questioned the validity of
the historical association of the ancestor cult to the imperial cult because many successors
divinized and worshiped their ancestors in order to justify their right of succession to reign. Thus, one is uncertain whether Emperor Hùng’s successors actually venerated his spirit as in
the case of the ancestor cult, who was believed to be hovering amidst the family members, or
commemorated his death as a national hero and a divine warrant for the regal line. Regardless
of the uncertainty, scholars differentiated the ancestor cult from the cult of the dead. The cult
of the dead existed in many parts of the world, e.g. in the Graeco–Roman world, and was
probably more ancient in the history of religions. In venerating the deceased, people erected
monuments and altars in the name of the deceased, offered sacrifice and praying to the
deceased in return for protection and blessings in life. The cult of the dead divinized the dead
one’s achievements in life and his or her death itself.

While the cult of the dead recognizes that the departed have moved on to the next
lifecycle, i.e. Buddhist’s samsara, the ancestor cult believes that the departed member is still
living with the family, that is, the departed is still a part of the family existing in the form of
soul instead of bodily. Even though the body is decayed, the soul is indestructible (or

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30 Hùng Vương festival is a national holiday in Vietnam. There are shrines and temples for
emperors and war heroes (e.g., the shrines of Hùng Vương and Lý Thái Tông) throughout the northern
parts of Vietnam, for instance, Hanoi and Hue and Hoi An.
immortal) and is dependent on the living relatives for life sustenance such as food, clothing, and other means.\textsuperscript{32} This assumption of the soul afterlife is explicitly expressed in ritual prayers such as funerary and wedding rites, death anniversary, and lunar New Year days. Moreover, the soul of the ancestor continues to take part in major family decisions, and actively grants blessings or misfortunes to the living if not being taken care of.\textsuperscript{33} In addition to granting blessings and protection (or misfortunes), the ancestor soul serves as a mediator between the living and the spirit world, i.e., the Heavenly God (Ông Trời or Shangti in Chinese). Based on the linguistic distinction, three points are emphasized in the ancestor cult. First, the ancestor soul has never been equated or ranked at the same level with Ông Trời (Heavenly God); therefore, the ancestor soul has never been worshiped as a god. Second, soul and spirit are used interchangeably in Vietnamese culture. Third, the spirit world is comprised of the Heavenly God, Ông Trời, ancestor souls/spirits, and other gods and goddesses (e.g., the earth, fertility, and thundering god).

In addition, sociologists and cultural scholars would not categorize the ancestor cult’s ceremonial offerings as religious (as religious in the sense of the English definition). Instead, the traditional offering of sacrificial food to ancestors conveys a sense of respect and reverence rather than taking care or feeding ancestors.\textsuperscript{34} In the same vein, professor Trần Văn Đoàn

\textsuperscript{32} The belief that the deceased ancestors depend on the living relatives for the provision of food and other needs is prevalent in the Chinese ancestor cult, but is not popular in the Vietnamese ancestor cult.

\textsuperscript{33} The view that ancestors would grant misfortunes to the living if not being taken care of is inconsistent in Vietnamese literature and popular practices. Yes, there would be guilt associated with negligence of offerings from the view of filial duty. But, it would be pushing the envelope to say that the Vietnamese worship ancestors out of fear or out of selfish motivation.

\textsuperscript{34} Phan Kế Bình, \textit{Việt Nam Phong Tục} (Saigon, Vietnam: reprinted by Nhà Sách Tư Lược, 1915), 25–26. A full quotation from Mr. Phan Kế Bình’s research writing would bring to light the purpose of ancestral sacrifice: “Xét cái tục phụng sự tổ tiên của ta rất là thành kính, ấy cũng là một lòng bất vong
quoted sociologist Nguyễn Văn Toán: “Tổ tiên sinh ra ông bà, ông bà sinh ra cha mẹ, cha mẹ sinh ra mình. Người con hiếu thảo phải biết ơn nghĩa sinh thành của cha mẹ, và đã hiếu với cha mẹ phải hiếu với ông bà tổ tiên là nguồn gốc của mình.  [Ancestors gave birth to grandparents, grandparents gave birth to parents, and parents gave birth to us. A pious child must be grateful to his or her parents for nurturing his or her life. And being grateful to grandparents and ancestors is to acknowledge our origin.]” Furthermore, filial piety is a **đạo** (a way of being religious): one cannot be religious without acknowledging one’s origin; and this **đạo** has been bequeathed from generation to generation. As a result of this bequeathing **đạo** in Vietnamese tradition, it is classified as “religious,” or “tôn(g) giáo” (meaning a teaching handed down from ancestors). Based on this cultural analysis, many sociologists and Catholic scholars have argued that “hành vi, cử chỉ, nghi thức bái lạy các người nói lên cái tình thân sâu xa, cái lòng hiếu thảo của chúng ta mà thôi [act, attitude, ritual genuflect and kowtow to ancestors reflect the intimate and deep relationship of our pious affection only].”


36 “Tôn” or “tông” means “ancestor,” and “giáo” means “teaching.” Thus, “religion” or “being religious” means “a teaching from ancestors” or “living/following the way of ancestors’ teaching.” As a result, the Vietnamese meaning of “religion” would convey the intended meaning of “the way of ancestral teachings” for the ancestor cult, but would not accurately represent the Western sense of religion, especially the Christian sense.

37 My English translation from Trần Văn Đoàn, “Nguyên Lý Sinh của Hiếu Đạo Trong Đạo Thờ Kính Tổ Tiên [The Origin and Life of Veneration in Ancestor Worship].”
Moreover, filial piety is often expressed through a traditional proverb: “Ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây, uống nước nhớ nguồn [Eat the fruit remember the planter, drink the water remember the source].” Thus, Catholic scholars, especially in the field of philosophy of religion, do not believe that the ancestor cult is in anyway contrary to Christianity—the cult of ancestors is a moral obligation and an ethical living of Vietnamese culture.  

Besides, the ancestor cult is compatible to Christianity in many ways: the ancestor cult provides an advantageous context, an initial step to advance Christian evangelism because “Thiên Chúa là nguồn gốc mọi gia tộc trên trời và dưới đất [God is the origin of all ancestry in the heaven and on earth].”

Nevertheless, the difficulty in accessing the ancestor cult in Vietnam is its non-standardized practices among the common people, and the religious components which were imported from Chinese folk-religion, and from Buddhism and Taoism. The eclectic and syncretistic nature of the ancestor cult (along with animism) does not completely fit into a religious category (i.e., superstition), nor does it completely fit into a social category (i.e., filial piety). Judging by the popular practices, the ancestor cult is religious in nature. However, judging by the underlying motive, the practices of the ancestor cult seem to spring from fear (i.e., misfortunes of life), from psychological and sociological needs, and from misunderstanding the concept of soul in the afterlife (from a Christian perspective). To

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outright condemn the ancestor cult as superstitious in nature is to court cultural rejection, and further fail to see the ethical and social benefits in honoring and commemorating ancestors. To accept and import the ancestor cult as filial piety along with its religious components (i.e., religious components assimilated from animism and Taoism) would misrepresent the Christian faith, especially the universality and uniqueness of Christ; thus, the practices of the ancestor cult transform the Gospel instead of being transformed by the Gospel. In the last several decades, the Protestant missionaries have undertaken the former position, while the Jesuits and other Catholic missionaries have embraced the latter based on Vatican II’s resolution on the Chinese Rites Controversy during the reigns of Kang Hsi and Japanese Manchukuo. In other words, the Protestant missionaries view the ancestor cult as religious in violation of the Ten Commandments, while the Catholic missionaries view the ancestor cult as merely cultural.

In summary, there are three distinctive components of the ancestor cult in comparison to Buddhism: a recognition of the Heavenly God in sovereignty over ancestor souls and gods/goddesses; ancestor souls are immortal and are actively present in the family; praying and worshiping are done out of fear of misfortunes or out of a desire for blessings. Based on these three components, inculturation of the Gospel—without first taking Paul’s First

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42 Bernard Hwang raised an issue with this fear factor, and suggested more research in his conclusion: “What part unconscious motivations like fear or displacement actually play in the practice and maintenance of ancestor cult, and experiments to test whether the search for roots or the desire to be remembered is a significant factor in the make–up of ancestor cult, are other possible areas for future research” (Hwang, “Ancestor Cult Today,” 361).
Corinthians 8–10 into consideration—is feasible with a sensitive catechetical process. Furthermore, delineating the ancestor cult from Confucianism, Taoism, and ultimately Buddhism would be the first step in evangelizing the Gospel message in Vietnamese culture. That is, Christian missionaries should be more sensitive in pointing out the assimilated religions’ components, what are properly the components of the ancestor cult, or the imported components from Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The second step would be identifying two common components in the ancestor cult and Christianity, namely the Heavenly God and the communion of the saints (dead or alive). The third step would be articulating the Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, divine revelation, soteriology, ecclesiology, and especially pneumatology using the cultural symbols and concepts related to the ancestor cult. Unlike the Catholic Church, merely allowing ancestor worshiping along with venerating the saints would be counter–productive in the long–term transformation of the culture. The recognition of the ancestor cult on the basis of *communio sanctorum* was because Vatican II’s documents recognized that non–religions or other religions contain some “elements of truth and of grace” and thus are possible “ways of salvation.”

1.2.1 Vietnamese Religion and Confucianism

As mentioned in the Background Section, the substance and contour of Vietnamese religion is the ancestor cult, but its blended color is shaded by Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. If the ancestor cult is venerating and praying to ancestors for blessings and protection in life,

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Confucianism was founded by a philosopher named Confucius, or K’ung Fu Tzu (552–479 BCE), who was born in China during a period of anarchy toward the end of the Chou dynasty (1100–500 BCE). In his lifetime, Confucius traveled from province to province to expound on the right way for civil conduct and government. Gradually, his social philosophy was adopted by local officials and eventually accepted by the empire. Confucius’ teachings were written down in the Chinese Five Classics (the sixth \textit{Classic on Music} is extinct) and became the standards for imperial official examinations until the last Chinese emperor, Aisin–Gioro Puyi (1906–1967, reign 1908–1912): the \textit{Classic of Changes, History, Poetry, Ritual, and Spring and Autumn Annals}. Moreover, Confucianism was further developed in the Four Books: \textit{The Analects, The Doctrine of the Mean, The Great Learning, and Mencius}.

During the period of anarchy, Confucius did not set out to establish a religion for the salvation of the soul.\footnote{Burke, \textit{The Major Religions: An Introduction with Texts}, 130.} Confucius was more interested in social order and reform. To be more exact, Confucian teachings were more in line with today’s moral ethics for social order. For Confucius, one’s life is driven by the integration of \textit{ren} (human kinship, compassion, and goodness) and \textit{li} (one’s demeanor and courtesy, social decorum and dignity, reverence and rituals). At the heart of \textit{ren} are the order and loyalty between father and son, husband and
wife, elder and younger siblings, teacher and disciple, ruler and subordinate. According to Confucius, the relationship between father and son is to be ranked above all other relationships; it takes precedent over ruler and subordinate, king and subject. While the ren is the contents of moral ethics, the li brings forms, rituals, and ceremonies to social order.

From a religious perspective, Confucianism also recognizes the Heavenly God in heaven, who created human beings. In proper response, human beings are to live out the heavenly will, the Ren Tao (or Đạo in Vietnamese) in the order of the five relationships for the good of the whole society. This heavenly will, or Ren Tao, was summarized in the five obligations: love and humility, right actions in expressing love and humility, observation of rites and courtesy, education, and fidelity. From the five obligations of Ren Tao, Confucianism brings form and structure to filial piety: “He [Confucius] insisted that sacrifice was to be performed with an awareness of the presence of the spirits (Analects 3:12), and he emphasized that the importance of the rites does not reside in their external observance, such as in the offering of gifts and the accompaniment of musical performances: ‘What can rites do for a person lacking in the virtue of human (ren)? What can music do for a person lacking in humanity?’ (Analects 3:3).” In spite of his prescriptions on rituals, Confucius placed emphasis on one’s

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relationship with the living: “To devote oneself earnestly to one’s duty to humanity, and, while respecting the spirits, to keep aloof from them, may be called wisdom (Analects 4:5).”

In spite of his popularity, not until two centuries after Confucius had passed away and during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) did his moral ethics become a state religion. Temples were built throughout the empire, virtually in every province of China, to honor and commemorate Confucius. The annual’s honorary ceremony was gradually elaborated into the cult of Confucius. Confucian Classics were also implemented in all imperial schools throughout the empire. It was this Confucian system that found its way south to Vietnam during the 1st–3rd Chinese subjugation (111 BCE–40 CE, 43–544 CE, and 602–938 CE, respectively). After Vietnam achieved independence from the Chinese subjugations, Confucianism was still the main governmental system of the country until the French colonial period (1945–1954 CE).

For the Vietnamese ancestor cult, what is highlighted in Confucianism is the relationship between father and son, ancestor and successor. It is the utmost duty of the head of the family, usually the eldest son, to observe ancestral rites (e.g., funerary ritual, death anniversaries, lunar New Year days, and looking after ancestral graves). However, the head of the family in Vietnam would not be the eldest son if the father’s wife is still alive; and the eldest child, or the eldest daughter, in the family would take over the family estate if the wife passed away—not necessarily the eldest son. Filial ranking in Vietnamese culture emphasizes seniority (age) over male gender; and Vietnamese culture is a matriarchal society. Moreover,

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52 As quoted in Noss, A History of the World’s Religions, 299.
53 Ibid., 316–318.
during war times (Chinese subjugations and Communist invasion), ancestral rituals were often
shouldered by the wife or the eldest daughter in the family when the family’s males were
drafted.

1.2.2 Vietnamese Religion and Taoism

Taoism is another imported religion of Vietnam. However, the color of Taoism tainted
Vietnamese religion with its superstitious aspect, rather than its philosophical aspect. Below is
a brief history of Taoism and its development in Vietnam. 54

Taoism was founded in China by two philosophers, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, who
were contemporaries of Confucius. While based on the concept of Confucian Tao, Taoism
focused on the harmony between nature and human beings: sickness or misfortune is the result
of living in disharmony with nature (which is usually governed by deities and spirits). And,
longevity and immortality are the goals in life: “He who attains Tao is everlasting.” 55 If
Confucian Ren Tao calls for social responsibility and accountability, Lao Tzu’s Tao calls for
harmony and spontaneity with nature: one is to go where the wind blows. 56 According to
Taoism, there is neither the beginning nor the end: all things flow naturally in the way of
nature. 57 Both goodness and evil are parts of the heavenly Tao; and the distinction of
goodness and evil is from human perspective. What is good will become evil; what is high

54 A more detailed study on the life and moral ethics of Taoism can be found in Burke, The Major
56 Burke, The Major Religions: An Introduction with Texts, 158; and Ching, “East Asian
Religions,” in World Religions: Eastern Traditions, 392.
will become low; and what is life will bring death. All things are relative to one another: beauty exists in relation to ugliness, death comes from life, and good luck turns into bad luck. Beauty and goodness are in the eye of the beholder. Unlike Confucianism, one is not to interfere with the way of nature, a divine pantheon of spirits and gods, celestials and immortals. What opposes the Tao of heaven and earth would bring calamity, and what interferes with nature would court chaos. Therefore, a better form of government is a lesser interfering form in people’s way of life. Unlike Confucianism, instead of conforming to a hierarchical order within the society, one should avoid interfering with the way of nature. Moreover, one should seek help from Taoist priests, who are trained in Taoist doctrines and alchemy, to discern the Tao’s instruction or geomancy, i.e., for proper burial or building a home; or for the date of marriage, a journey, or a project. Gradually, Taoism became popular for its practices of sorcery, fortune–telling, astrology, or necromancy.

Scholars categorized the diversity of Taoism into two branches: philosophical and religious. While philosophical Taoists would seek to be in harmony with life and nature, religious Taoists would seek immortality through the Tao “…to produce within themselves an immortal self (‘a spiritual embryo’) that would survive the death of the body—all of this by one or more of the methods….alchemy, breathing, exercises, hygiene, diet, communal religious rites, and the help of the gods.”

Nevertheless, the philosophical aspect of Taoism has never been assimilated into the ancestor cult in Vietnam, but the religious aspect (sorcery, fortune–telling, astrology, and

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necromancy) was fully imported into the ancestor cult during the 2nd–1st century BCE. During the monarchy period, emperors and officials frequently consulted Taoist clerics on heavenly will through communication with the spirit world (for a major imperial decree or before embarking on a battle). Day and hour of birth were used along with personal astrology (including the death hours and days of one’s ancestors) to foretell the outcome of one’s career, future, or marriage. Palm and mien reading and birthday were parts of match–making selection and employee hiring. Geomantic construction of ancestral graves and family housing (including interior arrangement of furniture) was practiced to better impact the future generations. Sickness and misfortune were cured and alleviated through the means of exorcism by Taoist clerics. Prayers, offerings, and sacrifices were carried out periodically to appease the gods and spirits for protection and good fortune. Just as Confucianism provided formal rites and ceremonies to the ancestor cult, Taoism provided justification and rationale to the ancestor cult. Unfortunately, the superstitious practices of Taoism have been fully embraced by the Vietnamese ancestor cult since the first Chinese subjugation (111 BCE–40 CE).

1.2.3 Vietnamese Religion and Buddhism

Buddhism is the last religion to provide the Vietnamese ancestor cult its tonal color. Even though there are elements of Buddhism incompatible with the ancestor cult, its popularity in Vietnam was due to its flexibility in accommodating the culture and imperial propagation. With the exception of Buddhist monasteries, Buddhism has been readily accommodating in Vietnam over the centuries to the point that one could barely recognize the original doctrines,
teaching, and practices. Below is a brief history of Buddhism and its development in Vietnam.  

A Buddhist looks at life through a chain of cause–and–effect. The reason for suffering and pain is because of human desire and passion. Joy and pain and suffering are fleeting and relative; and nothing in life is permanent, including the self. Hence, one is advised to get rid of one’s desire and passion. According to Buddhism, there are three marks of existence. The first mark of existence is suffering: life is filled with suffering and pain. Human beings tend to see things not as they are in reality, but as something to grasp and secure, to control and manipulate. The process of grasping, securing, controlling, and manipulating is a never ending process because all things are impermanent. Everything in life is ever changing, including one’s desire. And because human desire and perception and outlook in life change in time, the ego–self is also changed from time to time, from place to place. Therefore, impermanence is the second mark; and egolessness is the third mark of existence.

From the three marks of existence, Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, summarized life existence into the four noble truths in his first sermon. The first noble truth is suffering and pain, dukkha, in life. Even though there are moments of joy and happiness,

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63 Burke, The Major Religions: An Introduction with Texts, 66–70.
joy/happiness goes hand in hand with pain/suffering. All material objects, states of mind, and feeling/emotion are perpetually fluctuating and impermanent. Therefore, one’s pursuit of emotions and passions would eventually bring suffering. The second noble truth is human desire (or thirst or craving), tanha, which causes suffering and pain in life. Human beings are egocentric in thinking, conceptualizing, or desiring. The moment that one thinks, his or her thinking is projected by the personal desire of the ego–self, and this egocentric desire, in turn, becomes a controlling or manipulating force onto others. And, the individually egocentric desire has a snowball effect of societal fiction and suffering. The only solution to this cause–effect of desire–suffering is to end the cycle. Thus, nirvana (extinction) is the third noble truth: it is the state of selflessness, or the end of the egocentric self. The fourth noble truth is the path, marga, which entails eightfold paths (can be carried out concurrently in any order) to achieve nirvana: right understanding (of the first three noble truths), right thought (of non–violence and compassion), right speech (without lying and slandering), right conduct (without harm or injury to others), right livelihood (or ethical living/earning), right effort (to cultivate good and wholesome states of mind), mindfulness (in being aware of both conscious and subconscious thoughts and emotions), and concentration (a deep meditative state, a still–point, at which all perturbed feelings, emotions, and desires are extinguished).

In summary, Buddhism does not believe that the soul perishes at death but moves on to the next life–cycle via reincarnation. The goal in life from a Buddhist standpoint is to be free from the cycle of perpetual reincarnation through achieving nirvana, which is the

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cessation of the self: the extinction of all passions, desires, cravings, attachments, and manipulation. And, one can achieve nirvana through the practice of the eightfold “right” paths. Furthermore, there are two major branches of Buddhism: Theravada (the “School of the Elders” or the “Little Vehicle”) and Mahayana (the “Great Vehicle”). In Theravada Buddhism, the path to nirvana is restricted to a lifetime dedication in a monastic community by becoming a monk or a nun. For Theravada Buddhism, nirvana is a private quest of a few due to the ascetic lifestyle; thus comes the name “Little Vehicle.” Unlike Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism is more accommodating and open to the popular; thus comes the name “Great Vehicle.” For Mahayana Buddhism, nirvana is the absence of self-centeredness, or the total compassion and concern for others. This way of obtaining nirvana is possible because Bodhisattva was the embodiment of compassion for others. He had reached the threshold of nirvana but chose to turn around and lead others to nirvana. The act of denying himself nirvana for the sake of others was the act of the absence of self-centeredness and total compassion for others. Because of his absence of self-centeredness, anyone who is faithfully devoted to Bodhisattva, or to the name Amitabha (or Amida), could possibly achieve nirvana.

Both forms of Buddhism, Theravada and Mahayana, were spread to Vietnam starting in the 2nd century CE by Indian missionaries. Theravada Buddhism was predominantly spread through Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos to the southern parts of Vietnam;

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and Mahayana Buddhism was predominantly spread through China to the northern parts of Vietnam. The development of Buddhism during the fifteen centuries of CE was generally sporadic due to the four waves of Chinese subjugation. After the national independence from the 3rd Chinese subjugation (939 CE), Mahayana Buddhism gained more foothold in the northern parts through imperial supports, especially temple constructions and education programs. Many Buddhist monks engaged in teaching and politics from the 10th to 12th century CE throughout the nation’s provinces. During the Lý and Trần dynasty (1225–1400 CE), an imperial decree was issued to harmonize all three religions into one national religion. It was Mahayana Buddhism with its emphasis on the discipline of the eightfold paths and total compassion for others that was assimilated into the national religion, namely Tam–Giáo (Tri–Religion, Confucianism–Taoism–Buddhism). Nevertheless, it is still unclear how the concept of reincarnation is reconciled with the immortality of the soul in Confucianism and Taoism; and more importantly, how the souls of ancestors continue to be present with the family when they are supposed to reincarnate into another existence after death. In addition, the more stringent Theravada Buddhism was fading out during this era (1225–1400 CE) because of its refusal to accommodate popular practices of the ancestor cult.

Toward the end of the Trần dynasty (1225–1400 CE), Buddhism suffered a heavy blow from Confucian scholars, who gained control throughout Vietnam. Buddhist texts were burned, and temples were destroyed. Moreover, during the 4th Chinese subjugation (1407–1427 CE), the Ming dynasty almost wiped out Buddhism in Vietnam. It was the Ming policy

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to have Confucianism as an imperial doctrine while cleansing out Taoism and Buddhism. Many Buddhist monks were exiled to China; Buddha statues were destroyed, and Buddhist property was confiscated and replaced with Confucian temples and schools.

Other major setbacks to Buddhism occurred during the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945 CE), the French colony (1945–1954 CE), the American occupation during the Cold War (1954–1975 CE), and the Communist dictatorship (1975–present). During the late Nguyễn dynasty, the emperor and his wife were educated in France, and were influenced by Catholicism (Empress Nam Phuong was a Catholic). There were attempts to favor the spread of Christianity over Taoism and Buddhism. Furthermore, during this time many Catholic and Protestant missionaries poured into the country, especially via the ports of Hue, Hoi An, Da Nang, Nha Trang, and Saigon. Seminaries and schools were built and strategically mushroomed throughout the country. While Christianity was flourishing, Buddhism continued to be suppressed until the end of the French colony in 1954. At the beginning of the American occupation, the political situation was somewhat neutral. However, during the 1960’s, Communists worked undercover by shaving their heads and hiding under saffrons, and by hijacking pagodas for weapon storage and propagandist cells. Because of these covert operations, the former regime (the two Catholic brothers, the former President Ngô Đình Diệm and Vice President Ngô Đình Nhu, whose brother was an Archbishop of Hue, Ngô Đình Thục) raided and burned many pagodas. As a result, many Buddhist monks and nuns organized protests publicly throughout the country against the regime’s religious persecution, i.e., the self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức. The persecution of Buddhism became worse after South Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam, fell under Communism in 1975. Buddhist
monks and nuns were executed, or were sent to labor camps and eventually died from malnutrition. Many pagodas and monasteries were confiscated for schools, parks, government offices, Party members’ housing, or rededicated as monuments for war–heroes. That is, the Communist government has actively transformed Buddhism into the cult of the dead, namely the cult of Communist war heroes.

Under popular belief and tourist speculation, “Vietnam is a Buddhist country;” however, the label is deceptive. Driving on a freeway in the south and in the suburbs of Saigon, one will observe many pagodas, especially in the southern parts of Vietnam. Nevertheless, the interior setups of many pagodas are more Taoism, ancestral worship, or the cult of dead war–heroes. In many pagodas, a huge Buddha statue is located in the main sanctuary for people to kowtow to and pray; also there are altars throughout the remaining space crowded with ancestor photos (e.g., decorated Communist war–heroes) and food–offerings (even on Buddha altars). While the outside banner is a Buddhist name, all are non–Buddhist from the court–yard leading to the main lobby through the backrooms and in the backyard. In other words, pagodas throughout Vietnam appear to serve as empty shells to house Taoism, the ancestor cult, and Communist propaganda.

1.3 Sociopolitical and Cultural Context in Vietnam

The challenge of the ancestor cult to Christianity appears insurmountable for three reasons. First, the ancestor cult has been practiced for approximately two thousand years with a belief that to not worship ancestors is to bring a curse upon one’s life and family; and, filial piety has been built into the society’s moral codes under Confucianism. Second, the Roman Catholic Church has reinforced the ancestor cult since Vatican II (1962–1965) in the so called “cultural
accommodation” (i.e., along the line of veneration of Mary and the saints). Since approximately 6.7 percent of the people in Vietnam are Roman Catholic, the Roman Catholic Church speaks voluminously in accommodating ancestral worship in Vietnam. Third, the Communist government has capitalized on the cults of the dead with its political agenda by erecting numerous shrines and temples for war–heroes throughout the country. If the church speaks against the cult of the dead, it would speak against the Communist government. And, when the church speaks against any policy or practice which the government sanctions, it would result in serious persecution.

Since the Fall of Saigon in 1975, the country has been ruled by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), a one–party–rule system. Besides replacing street names with war–heroes’ names to honor and highlight the justice of the country’s reunification, i.e. Hồ Chí Minh City, shrines and temples were built to commemorate Communist officials who sacrificed their lives during the war. In many instances, Buddhist temples and churches were turned into memorial shrines. Thus, religious identities have strategically been transformed into national identities. Religious properties (i.e., monasteries, seminaries, and churches) were confiscated and turned into industrial factories, business offices, shopping malls, public parks, and housing for Party members. In the last three decades, unregistered house–churches were confiscated and used as government offices or given to Party members.

On the one hand, on 1 September 2013, the CPV enforced Decree 72 to legalize censorship and filtering of all social media, publications, blogs, websites, and newspapers that
would route through the country’s internet servers. All religious speeches and organized meetings are monitored for potential insurgence “overthrowing the government,” and any quest or desire for freedom of religions would be labeled as “prohibited acts” and clamped down on similar to the way other human rights activists are treated. All public gatherings, i.e. house–churches, are required to obtain a government permit. In many instances, permits for religious gatherings are purposely delayed and then denied at the last hours (e.g., permit applications for Christmas celebrations and Gospel nights were rejected the day before the events). To further dampen religious growth, Decree 92 came into full force in January 2013: house–churches must be registered, and their meetings and activities must be free of both “civil and criminal infractions for 20 years” before the churches are recognized as legal. Moreover, Decree 92, Article 5, stipulated that all religious activities and organizations must foster and cultivate “a spirit of national unity and reconciliation” and “ceremonies and activities that….do not contradict fine national traditions and customs.” Consequently, “national unity” and “national traditions and customs” were used as reasons to impose upon other religions the cult of dead heroes; concomitantly, Roman Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, and Buddhist monks were required to perform ceremonious bowing to veteran altars.

On the other hand, registered house–churches and religious organizations are expected to comply with CPV’s policies and laws such as abortion (two child policy per family). All

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registered gatherings are subjected to unannounced visits and inspections by undercover officials. Ministers who teach against government policies or laws would court prosecution, and would be transferred to rural areas and be limited in travelling, domestically and internationally. Teaching on corruption, social injustice, creation, or against atheism would not be well received by the Party. In addition, applicants to Christian seminaries must be preapproved by the government; and preaching must be limited to moral ethics and social improvement, for example, substance addictions, thievery, and gambling. To circumvent government control, many house-churches are not registered; therefore, they risk being shut down and having their leaders imprisoned.

On top of the sociopolitical issues, Communism has practically been turned into capitalism. However, capitalism is limited to Party members and those who are connected to the network of power and authority. Consequently, the gap between wealthy officials and the common poor has been widened. Corruption and inflation have exacerbated the poverty level. Cheap laborers are exploited by and exported to foreign companies; women are sold via marriage to China, Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore; and healthcare is practically unavailable, or unaffordable, to the common poor. In this social context, the soil for planting the Gospel seed is ready. Nevertheless, three components in the ancestor cult must be examined in light of First Corinthians 8—10: the act of venerating or ceremoniously

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70 For a point of reference, the U.S. dollar exchange rate with Vietnamese đồng was 18,000–18,500 đồng per dollar in August 2010. January 2014’s exchange rate was 21,000–21,500 đồng per dollar. A bowl of beef-noodle soup cost 20,000 đồng during the summer 2010; but at the same store, the same bowl with less portion would cost over 60,000 đồng in the summer 2015.

71 During 2008–2009, there were approximately 80,000 Vietnamese workers from the former East Germany who were living in Berlin, and over 100,000 were scattered throughout Russia.
bowing to ancestral altars, sacrificing food to commemorate ancestors, and praying to ancestors for blessings and protection in life. A single thread through all three components in the ancestor cult is dependent on how St. Paul viewed idolatry and food sacrificed to idols in relation to Christian freedom.
2. PAULINE FREEDOM CONCERNING IDOL–FOOD AND IDOLATRY

2.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The ancient Greek city of Corinth was situated at the 6–km wide isthmus that separated Central Greece (Achaia) to the north and the Peloponnesus to the south. Ancient Corinth enjoyed its two strategic harbors: the east harbor faced the Aegean Sea connecting to Asia Minor, and the west faced the Ionian Sea (Adriatic Sea or the Gulf of Corinth) connecting to other ports in Greece and Europe. Economically and politically, the Greek Corinth was an important city besides Athens, and the Roman Corinth was ranked among Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. Strabo (64 BCE–24 CE), a Greek geographer, described Corinth in his Geography (2 BCE) as a wealthy city due to “its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbours, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; and it makes easy the exchange of merchandise from both countries that are so far distant from each other;” and Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE), a Roman philosopher, called Corinth “the light of all Greece.”

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72 For more detailed geographical and religiocultural descriptions of Greek and Roman Corinth, please consult Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 21–28; Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 1–17; and Witherington, Conflict & Community in Corinth, 5–19.


74 Strabo’s Geography 8.6.20–23 as quoted in Murphy–O’Connor, St. Paul’s Corinth: Text and Archaeology, 53.

75 Cicero’s Pro Lege Manilia 5.11 as quoted in Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 30; and in Murphy–O’Connor, St. Paul’s Corinth: Text and Archaeology, 44.
Geographically, Corinth was enclosed by a 10,000–meter circumferential wall including a 575–meter Acrocorinth hill. Agriculture, the land was rich and fertile, and was filled with springs (especially the fountains of Peirene and Glauke). Homer, a Greek writer living in the 8th century BCE, characterized Corinth in his Iliad (6.152–154) as a “wealthy Corinth” and its people as crafty; and Crinagoras of Mytilene, a Greek epigrammatist (70 BCE–18 CE), lamented in his Greek Anthology 9.284 (48–45 BCE): “What inhabitants, O luckless city, have you received, and in place of whom? Alas for the great calamity to Greece! Would, Corinth, that you be lower than the ground and more desert than the Libyan sands, rather than wholly abandoned to such a crowd of scoundrelly slaves, you should vex the bones of the ancient Bacchiadæ.” Nonetheless, the commerce and wealth of Greek Corinth were brought to an end by the Romans during the Achaian War in 146 BCE.

For more than a century after the Achaian War, Corinth was desolate, with only a small number of native inhabitants living among the ruins. In 44 BCE, Julius Caesar refounded the city with Roman freedmen, veterans, and tradesmen. The reconstruction of Corinth was extensively “Romanized,” from grid–type layout to public buildings, from

76 Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 21.
78 “The most crafty of men” as quoted in Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 22; and in Murphy–O’Connor, St. Paul’s Corinth: Text and Archaeology, 9.
79 As quoted in Murphy–O’Connor, St. Paul’s Corinth: Text and Archaeology, 49.
80 Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 24–25; and Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 2–3.
81 Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 3; and Nancy Bookidis, “Religion in Corinth: 146 BCE to 100 CE,” in Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches, eds. Daniel N. Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 151.
edifices to the public forum, from culture and law to imperial cultic temples. Politically, Augustus made Corinth the seat of the Roman governor and capital of the senatorial province of Achaia in 27 BCE. In Paul’s time, the province of Achaia was granted autonomy; and Roman Corinth became the “head of the entire province of Achaia.”

Religiously, any senatorial capital was subjected to the imperial cult. In 54 CE, the Roman Senate approved and promulgated the Achaian Federal Imperial Cult, which was celebrated every year in Corinth. Murphy–O’Connor reconstructed the city layout, which showed that the city was filled with temples and shrines, for instance, the temples of Tyche, Apollo, Isis and Sarapis, Artemis and Aphrodite, Neptune and Jupiter and Venus. Among the gods and goddesses at Corinth, Aphrodite was the popular goddess of love and fertility; and the temple of Aphrodite was the source of sacred prostitution in Corinth (1 Cor. 6:12–20). Besides prostitution activity in the temple’s precinct, the temple of Aphrodite probably hosted meals associated with sexual plays and revels after a sacrificial ceremony (8:10, 10:7, and 10:14–22). Another source of temple prostitution was a goddess of marriage and fertility, Hera Argaea, who was responsible for cultic unions in a temple near the city marketplace. Besides Aphrodite and Hera Argaea, a temple of Demeter and Kore was also responsible for

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82 Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 26.
83 Ibid., 33.
84 For the city layout, see Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 23 and 26–28; Murphy–O’Connor, St. Paul’s Corinth: Text and Archaeology, 26. For the city’s religions, see Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 33–34; Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 6–7; Witherington, Conflict & Community in Corinth, 12–19; and Nancy Bookidis, “Religion in Corinth: 146 BCE to 100 CE,” 141–164.
85 Witherington, Conflict & Community in Corinth, 12–13.
86 Ibid., 15–16.
sacred rites in the temple’ dining rooms. Although there were more than forty rooms
dedicated for cultic meals in the temple of Demeter and Kore, the majority of the dining
rooms were not restored during the Roman period. Nonetheless, there were enough large
quantities of cooking pots and animal bones discovered in the temple’s area to warrant for
cultic eating in the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore. Based on archaeological and literary
evidence, Peter D. Gooch concluded, “The consumption of food was an integral and important
part of the cultus of Demeter and Kore….The food described above was sacred to the
Goddess, and these instances of eating were sacramental acts of thanksgiving and obedience
to, and commemoration of the Two Goddesses.” Another significant site was a sizable
temple of Asklepiion, who was a god of healing. The temple of Asklepiion housed a health
resort including sleeping quarters, a spring bath for purification, and dining halls. There were
numerous molded clays of body parts dedicated to giving thanks for healing (i.e., arms, legs,
and genitalia). In addition, an imperial temple occupied about twenty percent of the total
land–space, which was probably the source of social pressure that wealthy Christians recline
at temple banquets for political networking. Thus, it was difficult for the Corinthian
Christians not to be affected by the ubiquitous immorality and cultic idolatry. Gordon Fee

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87 Ibid., 16–17.
89 Ibid., 12.
91 For instance, the cult of Julia Augusta (23 CE) and Britannic Victory (52–53 CE) was referenced in Witherington, *Conflict & Community in Corinth*, 18.
rightly stated that the only way the church at Corinth could be “a viable alternative to the
world is for them to be in the world, but not of it (cf. John 17:15–16).”\textsuperscript{92}

In summary, the Roman Corinth of Paul’s time was the powerful capital of Achaia:
Corinth was a multicultural, commercial, and religiously pluralistic city.\textsuperscript{93}

\subsection{2.1.1 Background}
Paul wrote to the Corinthian community sometime during his stay in Ephesus, late 52 to
spring 55 CE (1 Cor. 1:1–2 and 16:21; and Acts 19:1–20).\textsuperscript{94} During his missionary activity in
Ephesus, Paul also wrote Galatians and Philemon, and probably a portion of 2 Corinthians.\textsuperscript{95}
Prior to his stay in Ephesus, Paul set out on his so called “second missionary journey,” roughly
during 48/49–52 CE (Acts 15:36—18:22).\textsuperscript{96} Paul started out from Antioch and made his way
through Syria and Cilicia. While he was travelling through Derbe and Lystra, Iconium,
Phrygia and Galatia to Mysia and Troas (Acts 16:1–7), Paul was redirected by the Holy Spirit
to Macedonia (Acts 16:9–10). Paul then set sail for Samothrace, and evangelized in major
cities such as Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroea, Athens, and Corinth. It was at Corinth that Paul
met a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla, from Rome because “Claudius had ordered all Jews

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{92} Fee, \textit{The First Epistle to the Corinthians}, 244.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Fitzmyer, \textit{First Corinthians}, 25–35.
\item \textsuperscript{94} Marion L. Soards, \textit{The Apostle Paul: An Introduction to His Writings and Teaching} (Mahwah,
\item \textsuperscript{95} Raymond Brown, \textit{An Introduction to the New Testament}, 428; and Soards, \textit{The Apostle Paul: An
Introduction to His Writings and Teaching}, 35.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Fee, \textit{The First Epistle to the Corinthians}, 7; Fitzmyer, \textit{First Corinthians}, 37; and Soards, \textit{The
Apostle Paul: An Introduction to His Writings and Teaching}, 71–72.
\end{itemize}

Based on the imperial edict of expulsion in 49 CE and the assignment of Gallio to the proconsulship of Achaia during the twelfth regnal year of Claudius (began on 25 January 52 CE), Paul was probably dragged before the tribunal as early as spring of 52 CE, or in the late summer of 52 CE (because Gallio left Corinth in the fall of 52 CE).\footnote{According to Fitzmyer, Claudius’ acclamation of Gallio’s proconsulship happened during the 26th acclamation and the 27th acclamation, 1 August 52 CE (Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 41–42). Jewett estimated a slightly earlier date of Gallio’s proconsulship, July 51 CE–July 52 CE (Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, 18–21).} Accordingly, Paul probably founded the community during his stay in Corinth, approximately 50–52 CE (3:10, 4:14–16, and 9:1–2). It was during these eighteen months that Paul met Aquila and Priscilla; and “he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers” (Acts 18:2–3). When Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth from Macedonia, Paul occupied himself with preaching and testifying to the Jews about Jesus as the Messiah. Nevertheless, the Jews opposed and rejected Paul’s preaching of the word, reviled and shoved him out of the synagogue (Acts 18:6). As a result, Paul shifted his focus to the Gentiles and made some progress: “Crispus, the official of the synagogue, became a believer in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized….He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:8–11). Eventually, Paul was hauled by the Jews to the tribunal court facing a charge of inducing people to worship God (possibly Jesus as the Son of God, Acts 18:5) contrary to
the traditional law (Acts 18:13–15). When Gallio refused to judge the case, the Jews seized and beat Sosthenes the synagogue official (who is a co–greeter in 1:1) in full view of the tribunal (Acts 18:17). Thus, the Areopagus trial in Athens (Acts 18:16–34) and the opposition at Corinth reflect Paul’s timid reminder to the Corinthians: “And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling” (2:3).

After leaving Corinth, Paul set out on his so–called “third missionary journey” and settled in Ephesus for three years, roughly 52–55 CE. As stated above, Paul probably sent out a series of letters from Ephesus: Galatians, First Corinthians (before Pentecost, 16:8), Philippians, and Philemon. In addition to communicating with other churches, Paul received news from Corinth through Chloe’s people and correspondence from other leaders regarding dissensions and factions, marriage and sexual immorality, scandals and idolatry, doubts and liturgical issues, proclamation and resurrection. Due to the ad hoc nature of the letter and the abrupt literary transitions, many scholars in the past argued that the canonical First Corinthians was compiled from multiple letters. However, with the discovery of P46 (200

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99 The approximated years of Paul’s missionary activity in Ephesus can be varied according to different scholars: Jewett approximated 52–55 CE, and Fitzmyer estimated 54–57 CE. For more detailed estimates, please consult Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 41–44; and Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 18–21.

100 Soards suggested that Paul wrote parts of Second Corinthians from Ephesus, for instance, 2 Cor. 8, 2:14—6:13, and 7:2–4 (Soards, The Apostle Paul: An Introduction to His Writings and Teaching, 35 and 88).

101 Literary transitions are not smooth between 4:21 and 5:1, 7:40 and 8:1, 11:1 and 11:2, 14:40 and 15:1.

102 Scholars argued that First Corinthians was put together from at least two different letters, for example, Johannes Weiss (two different letters), Walter Schmithals (three different letters), and Robert Jewett (five different letters). For detailed arguments on the composition of the letter, see Collins, First Corinthians, 10–14; and Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 36–39.
CE) which contains the whole letter with only three missing verses (9:3, 14:15, and 15:16), there has been an increasing majority of scholars who supported First Corinthians as one single letter.\textsuperscript{103} Moreover, Fee, Murphy–O’Connor, and Thiselton argued that the seemingly contradictory issues can be resolved exegetically, for instance, Paul’s employment of the chiastic pattern, \textit{A1–B–A2}.\textsuperscript{104} In agreement with Fee and Murphy–O’Connor and Thiselton, this exegetical section will treat the letter as one single letter addressed to the Corinthian community.

2.1.2 Issues
There are at least six major issues addressed by Paul in First Corinthians: divisions (1:10—4:21), disorders (5:1—6:20), marriage (7:1–40), food sacrificed to idols (8:1—11:1), liturgical factions and spiritual gifts (11:2—14:40), and doubt about the resurrection (15:1–58).

According to First and Second Corinthians, Paul probably wrote at least five letters in attempts to resolve the issues that occurred in the Corinthian community, which can be labeled as A–Cor, B–Cor, C–Cor, D–Cor, and E–Cor.\textsuperscript{105} But two (letter A–Cor and C–Cor) of the five

\textsuperscript{103} Collins, \textit{First Corinthians}, 13–14; Fee, \textit{The First Epistle to the Corinthians}, 16; and Thiselton, \textit{The First Epistle to the Corinthians}, 37.


letters written by Paul to the Corinthians are extinct, or at least have not been discovered.\textsuperscript{106}

The first letter, A–Cor, was probably written to admonish the Corinthians not to associate with immoral people: “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons— not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world” (1 Cor. 5:9–10). Furthermore, Paul exhorted the Corinthians not to eat with such an evil person, and commanded the community to purge such an immoral and a greedy person, an idolater and a slanderer, a drunkard and a robber from the community (5:11–13). Probably in replying to Paul’s missing letter, the community inquired about the issue of marriage which Paul mentioned in 7:1. Meanwhile, reports from Corinth arrived in Ephesus with more issues on divisions and factions, liturgical practices, and resurrection. Paul then composed a long letter, letter B–Cor, which is the canonical First Corinthians, to exhort the Corinthians on the aforementioned six issues. As a result, First Corinthians was not well received and therefore resulted in a “painful visit” as mentioned in 2 Cor. 2:1 (cf. 2 Cor. 12:14 and 21, 13:1–2). Obviously the “painful visit” did not go well so Paul resorted to a tearful and passionate letter (2 Cor. 2:3–4 and 9, 7:8 and 12, 10:9), letter C–Cor, which is not extant, from Ephesus. Eventually in 54/57 CE, Paul tried to make his way back to Corinth for the “third time;” but while he was on his way to Macedonia, Paul probably received Corinth’s news from Titus. In Macedonia (perhaps in Philippi), Paul wrote letter D–Cor carried by Titus to the community, which is the first part of the canonical Second

\textsuperscript{106} Fitzmyer, \textit{First Corinthians}, 43–44.
Corinthians, 2 Cor. 1—9.\footnote{107} While evangelizing in Macedonia (perhaps in Thessalonica or Beroea), Paul probably received disturbing reports from Titus, hence, dispatched another letter, E–Cor, which is the second part of the canonical Second Corinthians, 2 Cor. 10—13. Shortly after having sent out E–Cor, Paul followed up with a “third” visit to the community in late 57 CE or early 58 CE, before arriving in Jerusalem for the arrest in 57/59 CE.\footnote{108}

The above calculated dates, the year of Paul’s first visit to Corinth (50–52 CE) and when he wrote the First Corinthians (56–57 CE), are based on the Emperor Claudius’ edict of Jewish expulsion in 49 CE,\footnote{109} Gallio’s proconsulship in 51–52 CE,\footnote{110} Paul’s last winter in Corinth during 56–57 CE,\footnote{111} his arrival in Jerusalem sometime in 57/58 CE,\footnote{112} and Festus’ proconsulship following Felix in 59/60 CE.\footnote{113} During the time he stayed in Corinth, Paul probably experienced the hustle and bustle of the glorious Isthmian games held in 49 and 51 CE. In addition to the games, the imperial cult was established in 54 CE for worshiping or honoring the Roman emperors annually, i.e. Tiberius.\footnote{114} The events of the Isthmian games

\footnote{107} Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 44; and Furnish, II Corinthians, 55.
\footnote{108} For a detailed reconstruction of 2 Corinthians, see Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 43–44. The date of Paul’s arrival in Jerusalem is dependent on the year Festus assumed office. Fitzmyer dated Paul’s departure from Corinth for Jerusalem in the spring of 58 CE (Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 44); Furnish estimated Paul’s departure from Corinth for Jerusalem in the spring of 57 CE (Furnish, II Corinthians, 55); Jewett estimated Paul’s arrival in Jerusalem sometime in the spring of 57 CE (Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 20); and Soards suggested Paul’s arrival in Jerusalem and arrest in 56 CE (Soards, The Apostle Paul: An Introduction to His Writings and Teaching, 35).
\footnote{109} Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 39; and Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 19.
\footnote{110} Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 42.
\footnote{111} Jewett placed Paul’s final winter in Corinth around 56–57 CE, and arrival in Jerusalem in the spring of 57 CE (Jewett, Romans: A Commentary, 20).
\footnote{112} Ibid.
\footnote{113} Ibid.
\footnote{114} Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 33–34.
and the imperial cult played crucial roles in the culture of Corinth, as seen in how Paul framed his letter to the Corinthian community. The cultural impact was evident in Paul’s rhetoric to the conflicted community; for instance, Paul urged the community to strive for the foolishness of the cross instead of worldly wisdom and knowledge (chapters 1—2), for unity instead of rivalry and factions (chapters 3—4), for honoring the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit instead of conjoining with temple prostitutes (6:12–20), for an imperishable crown through athletic discipline for the sake of the Gospel (9:19–27), and for the proclamation of Jesus Christ and Him crucified instead of succumbing to sociocultural pressure to participate in temple sacrifices (chapters 8 and 10).

2.1.3 People

It is estimated that there were seventy to eighty thousand inhabitants in the Corinth of Paul’s day.\textsuperscript{115} There were two subcultures in Corinth: a minority of well-to-do Latin-speaking aristocrats, and a majority of Greek-speaking artisans, merchants, and slaves.\textsuperscript{116} Officially, Latin was used in Roman administration and laws, taxation and coinage. However, many educated Romans spoke Greek; and Greek was still the \textit{lingua franca} of common people throughout the city as self-evident in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. Literature employed Greek as the primary language: from Epicurean teaching to Stoic preaching, from Sophistic rhetoric to classical philosophy.

Ethnically, there are archaeological traces in Corinth of immigrants from Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, and other countries in the eastern Mediterranean area. In addition, there are

\textsuperscript{115} Witherington, \textit{Conflict & Community in Corinth}, 18.
\textsuperscript{116} Fitzmyer, \textit{First Corinthians}, 30–31.
archaeological and literary artifacts that attest to a Jewish presence in Corinth and the nearby city–state of Sicyon. Philo Judaeus’ writings also witness to a Jewish Diaspora throughout Greece: “Thessaly, Boeotia, Macedonia, Aetolia, Attica, Argos, Corinth, and most of the best areas of the Peloponnesus.” Likewise, Luke narrated how the Jews opposed Paul’s preaching in Athens and Corinth (Acts 17:16—18:17). Moreover, some of Paul’s audience were probably Jewish Christians as the text of 1 Corinthians implies: circumcision or uncircumcision (7:17–20), Jews and Jewish law (7:20–21), and the Mosaic Law and Exodus tradition (9:9 and 10:1–13). Socially, behind the veil of commerce and wealth, power and elitism, Corinth attracted many slaves and menial workers. Thus, Paul reminded the Corinthians that not many of them were wise or powerful or of noble birth (1:26). In addition to poverty, Corinth was reputed for its social liberalism on sexual license and prostitution (6:12–20).

By the time Paul founded the community in the 50’s, Corinth was becoming the most prosperous city in Greece. The city was a place for bronze, marble, and pottery manufacturers; and its seaports attracted laborers, merchants, entertainers, and artisans for the local games (i.e., the local Isthmian, Imperial, and Caesarean Games). Thus, there were plenty of opportunities for wealth accumulators and social climbers. Honor, pride, and status–seeking were evident in many inscriptions found at Corinth; and slaves often sought public recognition via inscriptions erected at their own expense: “Corinth was a city where public

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117 As quoted in Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 31.
118 Witherington, *Conflict & Community in Corinth*, 5.
boasting and self-promotion had become an art form.\textsuperscript{119} Because of Corinth’s honor and shame driven culture, it was inconceivable for the Corinthians to accept Paul’s self-demotion. Paul had deliberately stepped down the social ladder for the sake of Gospel proclamation. Paul’s wisdom of the cross (2:2), self-demotion to a slavish level (4:9–13), abnegation of right to receive payment for the service of the Gospel (9:3–19), and freedom to become all things to all in order to save some (9:19–23) placed him at odds with the culture at Corinth, which resulted in a painful visit (2 Cor. 2:1–4). Likewise, Paul’s countercultural trait, or his Christian freedom, is evident in chapters 8—10: reclining in pagan temples and eating food sacrificed to idols.

2.2 LITERARY CONTEXT

2.2.1 Purpose and Theology

After the greeting and thanksgiving, Paul urged the conflicted community: “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1:10). The aim for “no divisions” and uniting in “the same mind and the same purpose” is the purpose of writing 1 Corinthians. This aim for unity is more explicit in the sections on faction and divisions (chapters 1—4), and on spiritual gifts and liturgy (chapters 11—14). In other sections, Paul indirectly wove the stress for unity into the body of Christ or the temple of the Holy Spirit, for example, in the sections on incest and sexual immorality (chapters 5—6), and on idolatry and eating food sacrificed to idols (chapters 8—10). Ultimately through the proclamation of Jesus Christ and him crucified (2:2), the brokenness of

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 8.
the ecclesiastical body at Corinth is transformed and glorified just as the resurrected body of Christ (chapter 15). In spite of the religiously pluralistic environment, if the foolishness of Christ is incapable of transforming worldly wisdom and knowledge, incest and sexual immorality, idolatry and adultery, then Christ died for nothing (2:2)!

2.2.3 Literary Form and Outline

Overall, the letter was written with a conversational style and a passionate tone in reacting to multiple reports regarding the situation at Corinth. First Corinthians seems to loosely conform to the ancient format of rhetoric; and it is a combination of epideictic (ceremonial or demonstrative oratory) and deliberative (legislative) genres. On the one hand, the demonstrative function is to praise or to blame concerning the present situations (e.g., the Corinthian issues). On the other hand, the deliberative function appeals not just to a person’s mind but to the whole person: reason, emotions, desires, and action.\footnote{Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 41.} In addition to demonstrative and deliberative oratory, First Corinthians is an illocutionary speech–act. According to Thiselton, illocutionary speech–act seeks to “transform worldviews not merely by rhetorical utterance but in the very utterance.”\footnote{Ibid., 51.} In the letter, Paul combined his own personal examples (e.g., 2:1–5, 4:9–13, and 9:1–27) with relational addresses (e.g., “brothers and sisters” and “beloved children”) to move people to believe, to change, to act, or even to react to a variety of ad hoc scandals and problems. The ad hoc scandals and problems include the scandal of faction and division (chapters 1—4), the scandal of incest and sexual immorality (chapters 5—6), the problem in marriage (chapter 7) and the problem of eating...
food sacrificed to idols (chapters 8–10), the problem in spiritual gifts and liturgy (chapters 11–14), and finally the problem of believing in the resurrection of the body (chapter 15).

2.3 COMMENTARY ON FIRST CORINTHIANS 10:14–22

2.3.1 English Translation

10:14 Therefore, my beloved ones, flee from idolatry! 10:15 Like I say to the wise ones: “You judge what I say.” 10:16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the participation of Christ’s blood? The loaf of bread which we break, is it not the participation of Christ’s body? 10:17 Because there is one loaf of bread, we (who are) many are one body, for we all partake from the one loaf of bread.

10:18 Look at Israel through the flesh: are not the ones who eat the offering participants of the altar? 10:19 What then am I saying? That food sacrificed to idol is anything or that an idol is anything? 10:20 But that which they sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; now I do not want you to become participants with demons. 10:21 You are not able to drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you are not able to partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. 10:22 Or, are we provoking (to jealousy) the Lord? We are not stronger than Him, are we?

2.3.2 Context

In confronting the Corinthians on idolatry and consumption of food sacrificed to idols, Paul used tripartite expositions called palistrophe, a chiastic tricolon of an A1–B–A2 schema: A1, knowledge versus idolatry (8:1–13); B, apostolic rights and freedom (9:1–27); A2, idolatry versus conscience of a brother whose conscience is weak (10:1–11:1). In A1 (8:1–13), Paul urged the one who reclined at table in the temple eating food sacrificed to idols to consider the

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122 My translation from the Greek text, 1 Cor. 10:14–22, as printed in Aland, Novum Testamentum Graece, 537.
123 Collins, First Corinthians, 15 and 306; and Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 16.
brother whose conscience is weak, and for whom Christ died. Since eating or not eating food sacrificed to idols would not bring one closer to God, pursuing one’s right to recline in the temple would cause those whose conscience is weak to stumble, and in turn would be a sin against Christ. Paul then urged those with knowledge and authority to forego their freedom for the sake of others by using personal exemplification. That is, in B Paul was willing to abdicate his apostolic rights and freedom to become all in order to gain some to Christ (9:1–27). The example of apostolic rights and freedom serves two purposes, to establish a basis for reflection and to strengthen rhetorical ethos. After the example on giving up apostolic rights and freedom, Paul used A2 to address idolatry and food sacrificed to idols in two specific contexts (10:1—11:1): participating in cultic sacrifices, and eating market–food sacrificed to idols in the presence of a brother whose conscience is weak. In other words, the Corinthians should place the salvation of their brothers and sisters above their own right and freedom.

The pericope under study, 10:14–22, belongs to the section on idolatry and sharing table with demons, in light of the ancient example on idolatry (10:1–13). Before exhorting the Corinthians not to partake of the table of demons, Paul used an example of idolatry from the Jewish scripture. In the example, Paul symbolically identified the submergence in the cloud and the sea with Christian baptism, manna and water with spiritual food and drink, and the rock from which the Israelites drank with Christ. During the exodus out of Egypt, the Israelites cast a golden calf, consecrated it as a god who brought them out of slavery, and built an altar for sacrificial offerings. During the sacrificial offering to the golden calf, people sat

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down, ate and drank, and rose up to revel before the altar. Consequently, God struck twenty–three thousand people dead in one day. At the festivity, idolatry (εἰδωλολατρία, or εἰδωλολάτρης meaning idolater) was not the only issue; idolatry was coupled with reveling (παίζειν). The recalling of Israel’s idolatry, especially when “they rose up to play” or to revel, is critical for the interpretation of 10:14–22, which raises two questions: the “why” that lies behind the golden calf example, and the “what” that entails idolatrous activities. For the “why,” to offer burnt offerings and sacrifices to anyone or anything besides Jesus Christ (the “spiritual food” and “spiritual drink” provided by God) is to commit idolatry, for example, to partake of the table of idols or demons. For the “what,” Paul raised the issue of eating and drinking and reveling during cultic worship. For Paul, not only the cultic worship in itself was problematic, but also the festivity afterward. In Exod. 32:6, the LXX used παίζειν to translate the Piel verb צחק, which also occurs in five other verses in the OT (Gen. 21:9, 26:8, 39:14, and 39:17; and Judg. 16:25); and its meaning is to mock, to amuse, to play, and to fondle (as Isaac fondled his wife Rebekah in Gen. 26:8). Similarly, Georg Bertram rendered παίζειν as to play, to jest, to mock, and to dance (like a “personification of erotic play”). Besides dancing jestingly or playfully, the ancient dances often carried a religious overtone, i.e., Exod.

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15:20–2, 2 Sam. 6:14–16, and 1 Kings 18:26. In the NT, παίζειν occurs only once in 1 Cor. 10:7, which is from the golden calf narrative in Exodus 32. In 1 Cor. 10:1–13, Paul exhorted the Corinthians not to indulge in immorality (πορνεύωμεν) as the Israelites did in Exodus (1 Cor. 10:8). In regard to the meaning of παίζειν, Conzelmann pointed out that the rabbinical interpretation of παίζειν conveys more than a sense of to play or to dance. In rabbinical tradition, the verb παίζειν refers to idolatry and is often associated with πορνεία: “In itself [Exod. 32:6] it is tempting to interpret the parallelism as follows: they sit down to the meal = εἰδωλολατρία, and rise up to παίζειν = πορνεία—the more so as in the OT and Judaism the association of εἰδωλολατρία with πορνεία is already traditional.” While Fitzmyer would not attribute sexual play to dancing or reveling, he described παίζειν as a move “to join in festivities that their heathen neighbors held in honor of gods.” Besides reveling, Fee highlighted a cultic aspect of the dance which “carries overtones of sexual play:” “Thus for Paul this verb leads directly to the example of sexual immorality that follows, which is also expressed in the context of cultic eating.” In addition to sexual play, Thiselton expanded the meaning of παίζειν to include “religious orgy” as part of cultic ceremony: “Orgy allows for (i)

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127 Ibid., 5:627.
128 Conzelmann, I Corinthians, 167.
129 Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 386.
130 Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 502. In addition, Fee pointed out that ancient festivals usually carried out a “combination of feasting and sexual intercourse that apparently was one of the great attractions on the part of Israel to the idolatry that surrounded them (Num. 25:1–2; Hos. 4:10–14; 7:4–5, 14; cf. Isa. 28:7–8)” (Gordon Fee, To What End Exegesis? Essays Textual, Exegetical, and Theological [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; and Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2001], 116). There was an explicit involvement of sexual intercourse at a sacred meal described in Josephus’ Antiquity 18.65–80, which was pointed out by Fee in the footnote section: “…The lady Paulina ‘after supper’ had night–long sex with Mundus, thinking him to be the god Anubis” (Fee, To What End Exegesis?, 118).
lack of sober restraint and self-control; (ii) religious or cultic ‘enthusiasm’ which goes beyond reasonable or sober limits; and (iii) probably sexual license. If it were not for the probably cultic dimension, we might try to capture the double meaning in modern English by *got up to have a romp* (cf. *romp in the hay*), or (in quotation marks) *got up to have ‘fun and games’.*

Furthermore, the communal festivity and zestful dancing with sexual overtone could destroy the church and damage its Gospel proclamation.\(^{131}\)

Hence, 10:1–13 is more than an example which leads into a section of exhortation to avoid idolatry. Basically, Paul was about to lay the same charge on the Corinthians. That is, the Christians at Corinth were inflicting the same death sentence upon themselves as the Israelites in Exodus.

### 2.3.3 Commentary

Structurally, A\(_2\) can be further divided into three units: 10:1–13, 10:14–22, and 10:23–11:1. The first unit comprises three subsections: 10:1–6, 10:7–11, and 10:12–13. The first subsection reminds the Corinthians to be aware of the past example so that they “might not desire evil” (10:1–6). The second subsection lists the actions which the Corinthians should avoid (10:11): not to become idolaters (v. 7) nor to indulge in immorality (v. 8), not to test Christ (v. 9) nor grumble against God (v. 10). The third subsection concludes with 10:12–13, which warns the Corinthians not to rely on human security and reassures them that no testing will be beyond human strength nor without a way of escape.

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\(^{131}\) Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 735.

\(^{132}\) Thiselton rightly stated: “In 1 Cor 10:1–13 it is precisely the ‘turn on’ which idolatrous cultic festivals gave to an overrelaxed, psychotic mind–set that leads Paul to tackle the issue so forcefully. Such ‘participation’ could damage and destroy all that the Christian community represented” (Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 735).
The second unit (10:14–22) begins with an inferential conjunction (διόπερ) drawn from the Exodus experience. The unit can be further divided into four subsections: verses 15–17 describe what it means to participate in the Lord’s Supper; verse 18 highlights the similarity between ancient Israel’s idolatry and participation at an idol–altar; verses 19–21 contrast the table of the Lord and the table of idols or demons; and verse 22 poses a rhetorical warning to those who provoke the Lord to jealous anger. Hence, the following commentary will be interpreted through the lens of ancient Israel’s experience demonstrated by Paul in 10:1–13.

10:14. Διόπερ, ἀγαπητοί μου, φεύγετε ἀπὸ τῆς εἰδωλολατρίας.—Therefore, my beloved ones, flee from idolatry!

Paul began a new section with an inferential conjunction διόπερ based on the previous Exodus example. In verse 14, Paul addressed the Corinthians affectionately in the vocative case, “my beloved ones” (ἀγαπητοί μου), and employed an imperative form of φεύγω to command the Corinthians: “flee from idolatry!” Since it is a direct command, it would be more appropriate to use an exclamation mark in English translation for emphasis. Moreover, φεύγετε is in the present tense which focuses on the continuous or habitual action in fleeing idolatry.

The noun εἰδωλολατρία (and idol worshiper, εἰδωλολάτρης) occurs eleven times in the NT: 1 Cor. 5:10 and 11, 6:9, 10:7, and 10:14; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5; 1 Pet. 4:3; and Rev. 21:8 and 22:15. It is a compound word that is formed by two nouns, εἴδωλον and λατρία. Just as λατρία denotes the Jewish worship or public service to God, εἴδωλον denotes cultic image, idol, or pagan deity. The compound term is not used in the LXX, Hellenistic
Jewish or Gentile literature. Nonetheless, Paul included image-worshiping or idolatry in his vice catalogue in Gal. 5:20. Similarly, Col. 3:5 equates idolatry to other vices such as sexual immorality, impurity, uncontrolled passion, evil desires and greed. In 1 Pet. 4:3, idolatry is listed along with similar vices: “Living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.” Thus, the imperative φεύγετε urges the Corinthians to flee from idol-worshiping, which is semantically defined by other vices (in Gal. 5:20, Col. 3:5, and 1 Pet. 4:3), to avoid a death sentence as in the Exodus example, 1 Cor. 10:1–13. Idolatry is to be avoided at all cost not because an idol is anything, but because one serves only “one God the Father” and “one Lord, Jesus Christ.”

In 1 Corinthians, εἰδωλολατρία and εἰδωλολάτρης that involved eating εἰδωλοθύτος occur in 8:1, 8:4, 8:7, 8:10, and 10:19 (cf. Acts 15:29 and 21:25; Rev. 2:14 and 20; and 4 Macc. 5:3) meaning “food sacrificed to idols,” which is often used in a derogatory sense by the Jewish people against the pagan sacrifices. The counterpart of εἰδωλοθύτος for the Greek speakers is ἱερόθυτος meaning something that is devoted, offered, or sacrificed to a deity (10:28). When εἰδωλοθύτος is used in the context of εἰδωλολατρία, it denotes “the

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134 Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 389.
135 Derek Newton surveyed ancient literature and concluded that the term εἰδωλοθύτος (plural form εἰδωλοθύτων) “does not occur at all in pre–Pauline Greek literature, except in the Septuagint at 4 Maccabees, which may or may not be pre–Pauline, depending on date. Its usage consistently carries the flavor of anti–pagan polemic and is emotive, negative, critical and decidedly non–neutral” (Derek Newton, Deity and Diet: The Dilemma of Sacrificial Food at Corinth, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 169 [Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, Ltd., 1998], 183).
136 It is unclear why Paul used ἱερόθυτος in 1 Cor. 10:28, but elsewhere in 1 Corinthians only εἰδωλοθύτος was used.
eating as an act of establishing fellowship with the idol.\textsuperscript{137} That is, the sacrificial ceremony serves to strengthen the relation between the deity and participants.\textsuperscript{138} The Greek lexicons define the plural εἰδωλοθύτων as meat sacrificed during civic games or cultic rites when animals were slaughtered and offered for ritual celebration.\textsuperscript{139} In addition, Hermann Büchsel identified εἰδωλοθύτων as a Jewish term and rendered it as meat sacrificed to the dead or pagan deities.\textsuperscript{140} The offered animal meat was divided into three portions.\textsuperscript{141} The first portion of the animal meat was used as a burnt-offering on altars to honor deities. The second portion was eaten at a solemn meal in the temple precincts. And the third portion was dedicated to be sold in the market for people with limited financial means.

In general, the term εἰδωλοθύτων refers to food offered to idols and not necessarily meat.\textsuperscript{142} Ancient literature shows that sacrificial food may include cereals, cheese, and honey as well as animal meat.\textsuperscript{143} For the monotheistic Jewish religion, the rationale of eating

\textsuperscript{137} Conzelmann, \textit{1 Corinthians}, 137.
\textsuperscript{138} Joop Smit described ancient sacrificial rites: “After the introductory procession the consecration forms the first phase of the sacrifice proper: the head of the animal is sprinkled with water and some of its hair is burnt. The second phase is cutting the animal’s throat and pouring its blood onto the altar. The third phase consists in its being flayed and slaughtered. The fourth phase lies in the burning of a small portion of the meat on the altar. The fifth and final phase is a banquet, at which the participants in the sacrifice enjoy the grilled or cooked meat. The verb ϑύω covers this entire series of actions as well as certain parts of it, especially the slaughtering” (Joop Smit, “1 Cor. 8,1–6: A Rhetorical Partitio, A Contribution to the Coherence of 1 Cor. 8,1—11,1,” in \textit{The Corinthian Correspondence}, edited by Reimund Bierincier [Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1996], 581).
\textsuperscript{139} BDAG, s.v. “εἰδωλοθύτος;” and \textit{LSJM}, s.v. “εἰδωλοθύτος;”
\textsuperscript{140} Hermann Büchsel, “εἴδωλον, εἰδωλοθύτον, εἴδωλεῖον, κατείδωλος, εἰδωλολάτρης, εἰδωλολατρία,” \textit{TDNT} 2:378–379.
\textsuperscript{141} Fitzmyer, \textit{First Corinthians}, 338.
\textsuperscript{142} Collins, \textit{First Corinthians}, 311.
\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Ibid.;} and Fitzmyer, \textit{First Corinthians}, 331.
εἰδωλοθύτων is not whether idols do or do not have a real existence. The Jews were forbidden to consume or to come into contact with pagan idol–food for two reasons. First, it was the fact that animals were improperly slaughtered vis–à–vis the Jewish law (i.e., animal blood was not properly drained). Second, sacrificial flesh was considered defiled because it was offered to the dead or pagan deities, or the sacrificed animal was defiled by coming into contact with previously slaughtered animals in the temple. According to the rabbinical law, the flesh was unclean not because it entered a pagan temple, but the flesh was unclean because it came out of a ritually defiled space of the dead or idols. Based on 8:1–13 and 10:23–11:1, Paul seemed to neither endorse nor outright reject εἰδωλοθύτων. On the contrary, Paul seemed to subject the act of eating εἰδωλοθύτων to the law of love for fellow believers. Because an act of eating εἰδωλοθύτων is neutral and subjected to the building up of fellow believers, Fee argued that the basic problem of chapters 8—10 is not about εἰδωλοθύτων, nor is it about consuming εἰδωλοθύτων at home or at social gatherings because an idol is nothing in this world. In the context of 1 Cor. 10:1–22, eating εἰδωλοθύτων associated with cultic worship was Paul’s concern about idolatry: it is the nature of eating εἰδωλοθύτων that overtly objectifies the idol. And it is in the context of cultic worship that Paul warned the Corinthians to flee from any form of idolatry.

Besides εἰδωλοθύτων and εἰδωλολατρία, another related term is εἰδολόν, meaning image, idol, or pagan deity. Liddell and Scott defined εἰδολόν as any unsubstantial form,
reflected or likened image, image of the mind, or image of a deity;\textsuperscript{146} Walter Bauer defined \textit{εἴδωλον} as any representation or image of a deity in cultic practices.\textsuperscript{147} In the Hellenistic literature, \textit{εἴδωλον} conveys broader meanings: a copy, picture, reproduction, depiction, or even shadow or shade (as a shadow or a reflection in water) of a real object.\textsuperscript{148} In Platonic literature, \textit{εἴδωλον} conveys a sense of unreal or deceptive in differentiating from the true reality or truthful representation of a concept. In the Jewish world (LXX), \textit{εἴδωλον} was forbidden because the term was frequently equated with pagan gods or heathen deities, polemically. According to Fitzmyer, idols may be images of Canaanite, Graeco–Roman, or Egyptian gods which are non–existent; therefore, an idol–image is a meaningless entity.\textsuperscript{149} As a result, in the OT, the usage of \textit{εἴδωλον} as an object of worship (i.e., the golden calf in place of Yahweh) was viewed as an impotent or worthless idol–god, or a nonentity (i.e., Deut. 32:21; Pss. 113:12 and 134:15; Hab. 2:18; Isa. 37:19; and Jer. 16:19).\textsuperscript{150} The noun \textit{εἴδωλον} occurs seven times in Pauline literature (Rom. 2:22; 1 Cor. 8:4, 8:7, 10:19, and 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:16; and 1 Thess. 1:9). In 1 Corinthians, \textit{εἴδωλον} is used in both the Hellenistic sense of a dummy image (8:1—11:1, 12:2), and in the Hebraic sense of idol–image (Rom. 2:22, 2 Cor. 6:16, and 1 Thess. 1:9). On the one hand, \textit{εἴδωλον} is incompatible and even demonic to the body of Christ. On the other hand, \textit{εἴδωλον} is a nonentity or a deceptive concept for it is

\textsuperscript{146} \textit{LSJM}, s.v. “εἴδωλον.”  
\textsuperscript{147} \textit{BDAG}, s.v. “εἴδωλον.”  
\textsuperscript{149} Fitzmyer, \textit{First Corinthians}, 340.  
\textsuperscript{150} Hermann Büchsel, “εἴδωλον, εἰδωλόθυτον, εἰδωλεῖον, κατείδωλος, εἰδωλολάτρης, εἰδωλολατρία,” \textit{TDNT} 2:377.
“nothing in the world” (8.4). Even though εἴδωλον is mute, it can be disastrous to oneself and to others when it is objectified in cultic worship (εἰδωλολατρία) involving εἰδωλοθύτων and “religious orgy.”

In summary, Paul stacked up all the risks of idolatry into one imperative verb, “flee continuously.” Paul recalled the Israelite tradition (10:1–13), especially when twenty-three thousand fell within a single day, to support his exhortation for fleeing from idolatry.

10:15. ὡς φρονίμοις λέγω• κρίνατε ὑμεῖς ὃ ϕημι.—Like I say to the wise ones: “You judge what I say.”

Here Paul appealed to the Corinthians as intelligent, wise, and prudent people. The prudence and intelligence are defined along the line of true understanding of God’s will and wisdom. In Pauline writings (Rom. 11:25 and 12:16; and 2 Cor. 11:19), to be prudent or wise is not to be in one’s own understanding nor to follow one’s own desire, but to be in Christ. Paul used the adjective φρονίμοις to ask those who are in Christ to join him in judging what is the proper judgment. It is a judgment in a “uniform direction, a common mind, and a unity of thought and will” or “to seek the same goal with a like mind” in Christ (i.e., 1 Cor. 4:10). Thus, the judgment of what Paul requested was the understanding of unity in thought and will. However, what exactly did Paul have in mind when he asked the Corinthians to

151 Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 735.
153 Ibid., 9:233.
judge what he was saying? Was it the example from the Exodus experience? Was it about the coming exhortation in vv. 16–22, participating in pagan worship in Corinth? Or both?

10:16. Τὸ ποτήριον τῆς εὐλογίας ὃ εὐλογοῦμεν, οὐχὶ κοινωνία ἐστὶν τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ; τὸν ἄρτον ὃν κλῶμεν, οὐχὶ κοινωνία τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐστιν;—The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the participation of Christ’s blood? The loaf of bread which we break, is it not the participation of Christ’s body?

There is a variant reading εὐχαριστίας (Eucharist) replacing the text εὐλογίας (blessing). The εὐχαριστίας reading is supported by two late Western texts of category II and III, F (IX) and G (IX), respectively, while the text εὐλογίας is consistently supported by witnesses of the first order. The scribal replacement was probably an attempt to clarify the context as a Eucharistic setting (10:16–17, cf. 11:23–26). However, the text εὐλογίας fits better with the immediate verb εὐλογοῦμεν in comparison to the variant reading εὐχαριστίας. Besides external evidence, εὐλογίας or εὐλογοῦμεν is a Jewish term for blessing, especially blessing from God to His people (i.e., Gen. 1:22 and 28, 9:1, and 17:15–16). In addition to the OT’s use as God’s blessing, εὐλογία/εὐλογέω is used in the Gospels for the blessing at the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 26:26, Mark 14:22, and Luke 24:30).

Collins pointed out that the cup is often used as a symbol of God’s blessing or salvation, or a symbol of God’s wrath in the Psalms (God’s blessing, 16:5 and 23:5; God’s wrath, 11:6 and 75:8). In the OT and the Talmud, the cup of blessing is frequently drunk at

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155 Collins, First Corinthians, 379.
a communal meal and not merely at solemn festivals like the Passover ritual. Nonetheless, from the immediate context, the example of the golden calf idolatry and the participation in the table of demons, Paul probably had in mind both meanings for the cup: God’s blessing and God’s wrath.

The word group κοινωνέω and κοινωνία implies fellowship in sharing, participating, taking part, or imparting. The emphasis of κοινωνία is on the participation or impartation in something or with someone; with the following noun phrase, τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, it is partaking in the cup of Christ’s death. In the context of the Lord’s Supper (11:23–34), the cup of blessing in Christ’s blood takes on a new level of meaning beyond the Synoptics (Matt. 26:26–30; Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22:14–20). Partaking in the cup of Christ’s blood is not merely a participation of the Sacrament at liturgy: it is a communal remembrance in the form of confession and proclamation of Christ’s death until He comes again (11:23–34). It is more than proclaiming the Lord’s death until He comes—it is the new covenant in His blood (for the LXX translated בְּרִית as διαθήκη, 11:25). Unlike the Lord’s Supper in John’s Gospel that focuses on serving and loving one another, Paul shifted the emphasis of the Lord’s Supper to “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (11:26b). In Paul’s thought, the Lord’s table, drinking the cup of Christ’s blood and partaking in the same loaf of Christ’s body, are Christological, soteriological, and eschatological. Furthermore, Fitzmyer pointed out that Paul

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used τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ in three different senses: the crucified body of Christ, the ecclesiastical body of Christ, and the Eucharistic body of Christ.  

Hence, the answer to the two rhetorical questions in regard to the cup and the loaf of bread is affirmative. Yes, it is the blood and the body of Christ that the participants partake of at the altar: it is the death of Christ that the participants proclaim. The death of Christ, the body and the blood of Christ, was given as the εὐλογία at the table of the Lord. Thus, the εὐλογία becomes the cup of blessing with which participants bless others. However, for those who exchange the table of the Lord for the table of demons, the cup of blessing becomes the cup of judgment. The participants of the table of demons will drink the cup of God’s judgment for being stumbling blocks in the Gospel proclamation (11:27–32). Both verbs, the blessing of the cup (εὐλογοῦμεν) and the breaking of the bread (κλῶμεν), are present indicative, focusing on the continuous action of Gospel proclamation.

10:17. ὃτι εἷς ἄρτος, ἓν σῶμα οἱ πολλοί ἑσμεν, οἱ γὰρ πάντες ἐκ τοῦ ἑνòς ἄρτου μετέχομεν.—
—Because there is one loaf of bread, we (who are) many are one body, for we all partake from the one loaf of bread.

There is a minor insert, καὶ τοῦ ποτηρίου, which is supported by three late Western manuscripts: D (VI) of category II, F (IX) and G (IX) of category II–III. The insert is probably a case of scribal harmony to be consistent with verse 16: “from the one loaf and cup.” The emphatic meaning of vv. 16–17 would not be lessened even without the insert (καὶ τοῦ ποτηρίου): the oneness of the loaf and the cup.

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157 Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 391.
The causal particle ὅτι stresses the concept of the oneness of Christ’s body in the previous verse 16. The present indicative of μετέχομεν means to have a share or to partake of something in common with another. Furthermore, the unity of one body and many parts is prominent in the letter, whether it is the spiritual or physical body. Just as there is one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ of all, there are many co–workers in God’s field and in God’s building (3:5–9). There is one God and one Spirit of Christ, but there are many bodies in which the same Spirit dwells as the temple (3:16–17 and 6:15–20). There is one God and one Spirit but many parts and many gifts of the same body of Christ (12:1–31). Likewise, just as there is one body of Christ, there is one loaf of bread for the many members to partake of: “The one person of Christ, crucified and risen, given for all, shared by all, to be that which constitutes the unity of the many members of the community.”

10:18. βλέπετε τὸν Ἰσραήλ κατὰ σάρκα• ὥστε οἱ ἐσθίοντες τὰς θυσίας κοινωνοὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου εἰσίν;—Look at Israel through the flesh: are not the ones who eat the offering participants of the altar?

The plural imperative βλέπετε calls attention to the historical experience in the desert. The rhetorical question brings to mind the cultic idolatry which brought about the desert destruction (10:7). The attributive participle οἱ ἐσθίοντες designates those who eat sacrificial food as participants of an idol–altar. Unlike the one who reclined (present singular κατακείμενον) at the table in the temple precinct in 8:10, Paul used an adjectival participle to emphasize the act of eating burnt–offerings as participants (plural) of the cultic altar. Just as the Israelites sat down to eat, drink, and rose up to revel during idol–worshiping, the

159 Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 391.
Corinthians were repeating the same sin: they were reveling at the idol–altar. Fitzmyer pointed out that when the Israelites made burnt–offerings, “they in effect identified themselves with what was offered on the altar of sacrifice and with the Lord, on whose altar the sacrifice was offered.”

10:19. Τί οὖν φημι; ὃτι εἰδωλόθυτόν ѣτὶ ἐστιν ῞ἄν ὃτι εἰδωλόν ῦτὶ ἐστιν;—What then am I saying? That food sacrificed to idol is anything or that an idol is anything?

Structurally, verses 19 and 20 belong together. Paul began verse 19 with a postpositive inferential οὖν, and posed a rhetorical question in order to answer why the Corinthians should not participate in idol–temple sacrifices. The following three ὃτι dependent clauses further qualify the nature of eating food sacrificed to idols, the existence or substance of idols, and to which or to whom the Corinthians offered their sacrifices at the altar. In this rhetorical question, Paul recalled the claim in 8:4b, “no idol in the world really exists.” Based on 8:7–13, if eating εἰδωλόθυτον is a moot point (or “anything”) then an abstract idol is also a moot point, which is consistent with “no idol in the world really exists” (8:4) and “you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak” (12:2). In 8:4, Paul asserted the common understanding that an idol is nothing and that all other gods are nonentities except one God. Since Paul already reduced idols to nonentities and nullified εἰδωλόθυτον, eating or not eating εἰδωλόθυτον would not bring people closer to God. Eating or not eating is a matter of indifference, an adiaphoron. Likewise, here in 10:19, Paul rhetorically questioned the validity of εἰδωλόθυτον or idol: “Do they have any meaning?” The implied answer would be a NO; idol–food and idol do not have any meaning in the world.

Ibid., 392.
10:20. ἀλλ’ ὃτι θύουσι καὶ θεῷ δαιμονίοις, οὐ θεῷ ὑμᾶς κοινωνούς
tῶν δαιμονίων γίνεσθαι.—But that which they sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to
God; now I do not want you to become participants with demons.

The replacement of θύουσιν with θύουσιν τὰ ἔθνη is supported by an Alexandrian P46
(II), Alexandrian Ξ (IV), Alexandrian A (V), and a mixed Alexandrian and Western C (V);
and the text is supported by a mixed Western and Alexandrian B (IV), a Western D (VI), and
two late Western texts F (IX) and G (IX). The insertion “the Gentiles” was an attempt to
point out the difference between “us, the Corinthians” and “they, the Gentiles.” The NAB
renders a generic “they sacrifice;” the NJB and NRSV render “pagans” and the NASB
“Gentiles.” Paul also used τὰ ἔθνη to point out the difference between the Corinthian
believers and pagans in other parts of the letter (1:23, 5:1, and 12:2). This translation omits τὰ
ἔθνη because of three reasons: (1) a shorter reading with a wider geographical distribution is
preferable, especially the Vaticanus uncial; (2) idolatry was a common proclivity of both the
Gentiles and Israelites, which is attested in the midrashic exhortation (10:1–13); and (3) the
Corinthian community was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles (1:22–24, 9:20–21, 10:32, and
12:13).

There are three variants for the reading ἄνδρον θεῷ [θύουσιν] listed in the apparatus
that call attention to the emphasis of Greek word–order and to the singular or plural form of

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162 The mixed Western and Alexandrian B of *category I* is preferred over the three Alexandrian
texts (Alexandrian P46, Alexandrian Ξ, Alexandrian A) of *category I* specifically for a wider
geographical distribution (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*
[Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/German Bible Society, 1994], 11–12).
θύω. The first reading is θύουσιν καὶ οὐ θεῷ, which is witnessed by an early Alexandrian
\(\text{P}^\text{46}\text{vid} \text{ (200)}, \text{a Western D (VI), two late Western texts F (IX) and G (IX), and two late}
\text{Byzantine texts K (IX) and L (IX)}. \text{The second reading is θύει καὶ οὐ θεῷ, which is witnessed}
by two late Byzantine texts K (IX) and L (IX). \text{This second variant is consistent with one of}
the variants of the θύουσιν reading above: ἃ θύει, δαιμονίοις θύει καὶ οὐ θεῷ ("which he
sacrifices, to demons he sacrifices and not to God"). Perhaps, the singular form θύει was
meant to call attention to someone as a member of the community who offered sacrifices to
ids, not someone who was a participant in a pagan sacrifice hosted by a non–member of the
community. The text καὶ οὐ θεῷ [θύουσιν] is supported by four important witnesses: an early
Alexandrian \(\text{N} \text{ (IV)}, \text{an Alexandrian A (V), a mixed Western and Alexandrian B (IV), and a}
mixed Western and Alexandrian C (V). \text{Since the external evidence of the first variant and}
the text are equally weighted, the committee decided to retain θύουσιν in brackets, and to
maintain the parallelism of Greek emphasis in the two clauses, the indirect objects of θύουσιν.
In other words, the text reading calls attention to the contrast of the two datives, “to demons
and not to God.”

Both verses 19b–20b answer the interrogative phrase 19a which begins with a
postpositive inferential particle οὖν, τί οὖν φημι (“what then am I saying?”). The first ὃτι
dependent clause further qualifies the “saying” or the nature of eating food sacrificed to idol:
ὁτι εἰδωλόθυτόν τί ἐστιν (“that food sacrificed to idol is anything?”). The second ὃτι
dependent clause further qualifies the substance or the existence of idols: ὃτι εἰδωλόν τι ἐστιν

\text{163 \cite{163} Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, \textit{The Text of the New Testament,} 99 and 109–110.}
\text{164 \cite{164} Ibid., 107–109.}
(“that idol is anything?”). And, the third ὃτι dependent clause contrasts two indirect objects of the verb θύουσιν: δαμασάω (to demons) and not θεῷ (to God).

In contrast to 8:1–13, one would expect the answer to 10:19 would be along the lines of “No, it would not make any difference because idols are non–entities.” However, Paul’s response differentiates “idol” from “demon.” For Paul, an idol is nothing: an idol is a subjective nonentity. That is, to deny that an idol is anything does not have the same meaning as idols “do not exist at all.” In other words, the superpower attached to idols can be devastating to the community. Likewise, eating food is of no advantage or disadvantage. However, when a subjective nonentity is raised to a level of an objective entity in one’s consciousness, it is problematic for the unity of Christ’s κοινωνία. Furthermore, objectifying an idol in others’ consciousness is equivalent to placing a “stumbling–block” in others’ faith and commitment to Christ’s proclamation. With such conscious reality, idolatry (however unreal an idol is) sends a very different “Gospel” message to those whose conscience is weak and to the potential converts: Jesus Christ is one Lord among many gods and many lords in the heaven and on earth (8:5). The Gospel of “Christ crucified” as the one and only Lord, and from whom all things are and through whom all things exist (8:6) is being transformed into a multiple religious belonging state of affairs. Christ is a deity among many mythical deities: Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite, Artemis, and other idols. According to Collins, these gods are no

165 Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians, 137.

166 Richard Phua suggested that Paul’s use of δαμασάω has a sense of evil spirits, the foreign gods, the powerless gods, the spirits of the world, and the wisdom and knowledge of the world in contrast to the one true God (Richard Liong–Seng Phua, Idolatry and Authority: A Study of 1 Corinthians 8.1–11.1 in the Light of the Jewish Diaspora, Library of New Testament Studies, 299 [New York, NY: T&T Clark International, 2005], 141–145).
longer nonentities as defined in 8:1–13. The objectified idols are Hellenistic demons with supernatural power that wrest control over nature and human lives. Hence, the objectification of idols opposes the universal and unique salvation in Jesus Christ.

In the same way, demons are mentioned in the Gospels as possessive superpowers which are driven out at Jesus’ command (e.g., Matt. 9:33; Mark 7:29; Luke 4:35 and 8:30–33). In Herodotus’ and Xenophon’s writings, a demonic spirit is a “transcendent incorporeal being of divine character” from heaven, or a heavenly sent body. In relating to demonic enslavement, Conzelmann noted, “Sacrifices would make the demon into gods, powers, and bring the participants into bondage to them.” In addition to possessing human beings, demons are completely subjected to Satan: “In the NT there are two kingdoms, the kingdom of the prince of this world and the kingdom of God. Satan fights with all his might against the kingdom of God.” Along this line of detriment to the progress of the Gospel proclamation, Paul did not want the Corinthians to become (as indicated in present tense focusing on the continuous action of the infinitive γίνεσθαι) participants with demons or idolaters: “Now he is not warning the Corinthian Christians about becoming partners of idols (which have no reality), but rather partners with idolaters and so with the demons in whose honor they consume the idol meat.”

167 Collins, First Corinthians, 380–381.
168 Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 393.
169 Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians, 173.
171 Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 393–394.
In summary, Collins succinctly stated, “To participate in idol worship is, implicitly, to deny the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus. Hence, there is a radical incompatibility between the worship of idols and sharing the table of the Lord.”

This radical incompatibility between Christ and idols/demons is consistent with the OT’s injunction: “They made him jealous with strange gods, with abhorrent things they provoked him. They sacrificed to demons [δαμονίους], not God, to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared. You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth” (Deut. 32:16–18). In the OT, idols/demons were foreign or strange gods, or non–gods, which people had never known but blindly entered into an adulterated relationship with. Similarly, when the Corinthians worshiped idols (which were non–gods, demons, or strange gods), the Corinthians inadvertently communicated to the world that idols were living gods.

10:21. οὐ δύνασθε ποτήριον κυρίου πίνειν καὶ ποτήριον δαιμονίων, οὐ δύνασθε τραπέζης κυρίου μετέχειν καὶ τραπέζης δαιμονίων.—You are not able to drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you are not able to partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

Paul expressed two parallel statements to bring out the two contradictory state–of–affairs: drinking the cup of the Lord and drinking the cup of demons, partaking in the table of the Lord and of demons. Partaking in Christ’s death and resurrection is incompatible with partaking in demonic forces. For Paul and the NT world, Christ’s kingdom and satanic force continually seek to claim sovereignty over the creation until the eschaton. On the one hand, to

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172 Collins, First Corinthians, 381.
drink the cup of demons is to participate in demonic worship: it is the confession, proclamation, and belief in the sovereignty of demons over one’s life. On the other hand, to drink the cup of Christ’s death is to partake of the Lord’s table: it is the confession, proclamation, and conviction of Christ’s death and resurrection until Christ comes again (11:26).

10:22. ἢ παραζηλοῦμεν τὸν κύριον; μὴ ἰσχυρότεροι αὐτοῦ ἐσμεν;—Or, are we provoking (to jealousy) the Lord? We are not stronger than Him, are we?

Finally, Paul posed two rhetorical questions, and Paul expected a resounding NO for both questions. The two rhetorical questions echo the context of 10:1–13, especially 10:8 and 10:12. Here, Paul reminded the Corinthians that God’s jealousy and vengeance are attested in the Pentateuch and other Hebrew scriptures. Moreover, 10:20–22 is a summary of Deut. 32:15–31. In other words, the Corinthians should never pit Christ against demons or any other transcendent powers, as if they (the Corinthians) manipulate Christ by threatening to replace Him with demons.

Summary. 10:14–22 is an exhortation to flee from idolatry. Not only did Paul provide the Exodus example as a warning (i.e., twenty–three thousand deaths in one day) for not participating in idolatry, but he also presented two different and contradictory participations: partaking in the table of the Lord and in the table of demons. Those who participate in the temple sacrifices are participants in the altar of demons. Those who break the bread and drink the cup of Christ are participants in the body and blood of Christ. Therefore, the Corinthians

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173 For example, Exod. 20:5 and 34:14; Deut. 4:24, 5:9, 6:15, and 29:19; Josh. 24:19; and Ezek. 8:3.
cannot partake of the table of the Lord and of the table of demons. To participate in both, the
table of the Lord and the table of demons, is to provoke the Lord to jealous anger—and thus to
inflict upon oneself the same death sentence as the Israelites did during the Exodus journey.
Nevertheless, Paul’s absolute prohibition of partaking in the table of demons is not consistent
with Paul’s advice for those who reclined in the temple eating εἰδωλοθύτων (8:7–13). That is,
the context of eating εἰδωλοθύτων in 8:7–13 requires sensitivity for those whose conscience is
weak. Therefore, Paul’s two different stances (8:7–13 and 10:14–22) on eating εἰδωλοθύτων
in the temple of idols point to the nature of eating εἰδωλοθύτων, not to the location (cf. 10:23–
11:1).

2.4 THEOLOGICAL CONFLICTS

2.4.1 The Table of the Lord or of Demons

After the example on apostolic rights and commission, Paul returned to the issue of eating
εἰδωλοθύτων. In his midrashic exhortation, Paul employed an analogy between the two
contexts, idolatry committed during the Exodus experience and idolatry committed by some
Corinthians in the temple cult. The participation in idol–altar was a destructive experience for
the Israelites (10:8). According to Conzelmann, the ancient sacrificial rite is a communal
meal: “The sacrifice institutes a communal meal, and this means communion with the god to
whom the sacrifice is made and to whom the altar belongs.”\(^\text{174}\) In Judaism, the ritual of eating
and drinking and reveling at a pagan festival was a violation of the Mosaic Law. Hence, the
monotheistic identity of Judaism was compromised. The compromise of monotheism was an
act of apostasy or treason against Israel (e.g., Deut. 13:2–6 and Ezek. 17:19–21); and

\(^{174}\) Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 172.
henotheism or polytheism was often viewed as adultery committed against the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel. Thus, idolatry was often labeled as an act of evil or immorality, and was listed along with other vices, especially associated with temple prostitution, i.e., in the temples of Aphrodite.\footnote{Fee, \textit{To What End Exegesis?}, 115.}

However, it is uncertain that the pericope (1 Cor. 10:1–22) alludes to cultic temple prostitution, even though the broader context mentions sexual immorality and incest (5:1–13 and 6:12–20). The clause \textit{“ἐκάθισεν ὁ λαὸς φαγεῖν καὶ πεῖν καὶ ἀνέστησαν παίζειν”} (“the people sat down to eat and to drink, and they rose up to play,” 10:7c) might not exclusively indicate sexual play or prostitution (10:7); and it is uncertain whether the phrase \textit{“μηδὲ πορνεύωμεν”} (“let us not commit sexual immorality,” 10:8a) alludes to spiritual or physical adultery. In general, the OT’s meaning of the verb \textit{πορνεύω} covers both physical and spiritual fornication: to fornicate, to seduce into whoredom, to whore after other gods and be unfaithful to Yahweh, or to turn aside from God (Exod. 34:15–16; Num. 25:1–5; Hos. 1:2, 4:9–11, 4:17–19, and 5:3–4).\footnote{Friedrich Hauck and Seigfried Schulz, \textit{“πόρνη, πόρνος, πορνεία, πορνεύω, ἐκπορνεύω,” TDNT 6:584–585.} In the Hebrew tradition, the charge of idolatry is often mentioned together with \textit{πορνεία} because some Israelite men were intermarried with foreign women and then later invited to pagan sacrifices. Besides, the verb \textit{παίζω} means to play or to dance in a sense of wantonness, folly, or stupidity around the altar of Baal (1 Kgs. 18:26).\footnote{Georg Bertram, \textit{“παίζω, ἐμπαίζω, ἐμπαιγμόνη, ἐμπαιγμός, ἐμπαίκτης,” TDNT 5:627.} Altogether, what is certain was that Israel participated in the cultic worship of idols which included eating, drinking, and zestful dancing. And, to participate in cultic rites means to be in fellowship with
religious conviction, to raise worthless idols from a level of subjective reality to a level of objective reality (in the sense of conviction and commitment). \textsuperscript{178} At this level of objective reality, idolaters commit their minds and hearts to idols (Exod. 20:2–6; Deut. 6:5 and 30:6).

In the Corinthian context, participating in a cultic worship means eating and drinking in the presence of pagan idols; and for the Christians, the Eucharistic meal is a communal meal in the presence of Christ’s body. \textsuperscript{179} In addition, partaking in the table of the Lord, eating from the same loaf and drinking from the same cup, was symbolically a sign of acceptance and belonging. \textsuperscript{180} Hence, by invoking the Lord’s table, in connection with the background of monotheistic Judaism, Paul argued that participation and fellowship with idolatry is the same thing as worshiping demons. The table of the Lord has no share in the altar of other deities. That is, Christ’s death is incompatible with demonic spirits. Christ’s death brings redemption and life to people, while demonic spirits seek to control, manipulate, and destroy human lives. Beyond fellowship and participation, Paul brought together three senses of the body of Christ: the crucified body, the ecclesiastical body which is the community, and the Eucharistic body of Christ. All three senses are incompatible with idolatry and demonic sacrifices for two reasons. First, to partake in the body of Christ is to remember His crucifixion, and to partake

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\textsuperscript{178} Derek Newton described the relationship between gods and worshipers as a “reciprocal relationship” in which the sacrificial offerings would secure blessings, victory, and good health: “A considerable number of ancient texts indicate that offerings were directed to gods both in the expectation that something would happen and in response to something which had indeed already happened….A key ingredient in the reciprocal relationship between gods and humans was through the thanksgiving function played by sacrificial offerings. Those who failed to give thanks and honour to the gods risked reprisal and loss” (Newton, \textit{Deity and Diet: The Dilemma of Sacrificial Food at Corinth}, 212–213).

\textsuperscript{179} Fee, \textit{To What End Exegesis?}, 124–125.

in the blood of Christ is to be part of the new covenant in His blood (10:16–17 and 21; cf. 11:23–25). Second, to partake in the body and blood of Christ is to proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes again. Thus, participating in the Lord’s Supper is to hand over one’s body to be used as the temple of the Holy Spirit, to pledge a total allegiance in the Gospel proclamation. Consequently, how can the temple of the Holy Spirit conjoin or participate or fellowship with the altar of demons? In the NT world, demonic forces are real, and idols are the dwelling places or the temples of demons, for instance, Matt. 17:14–21 and Mark 5:1–20. Since demons are real, to feast in a pagan temple precinct is to fellowship with demons.\footnote{In this way, not only is fellowship with demons incompatible with sharing the body of Christ, but it also compromises the proclamation of Christ’s death and resurrection. Soteriology is exclusive in Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.\footnote{In every way, participants who eat food sacrificed on idol–altars are provoking the Lord to jealous anger (10:22).}} In this way, not only is fellowship with demons incompatible with sharing the body of Christ, but it also compromises the proclamation of Christ’s death and resurrection. Soteriology is exclusive in Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.\footnote{This exclusive lens on Christological salvation is used in evaluating the ancestor cult in the midst of religious pluralism in Vietnam in the contextualization section.}\footnote{Paul used the topic markers περὶ δὲ, cf. 7:1, 7:25, 12:1, 16:1, and 16:25; Collins, First Corinthians, 304; and Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 330–331.}

2.4.2 Freedom and Conscience

Idolatry and eating εἰδωλοθύτων span three chapters (chapters 8—10). An extensive coverage indicates that the issue was weighty and sensitive in the Corinthian community (cf. factions in 3:1–23; incest in 5:1–13; lawsuits in 6:1–8; sexual immorality in 6:12–20; marriage in 7:1–40; headdresses in 11:3–16; the Lord’s Supper in 11:17–34; spiritual gifts in 12:1–31; or speaking in tongues in 14:1–40).\footnote{Paul began the section on idolatry and εἰδωλοθύτων by cautioning people about puffed–up knowledge. Since puffed–up knowledge fails to love God and to}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Fee, To What End Exegesis?, 124–125.
  \item This exclusive lens on Christological salvation is used in evaluating the ancestor cult in the midst of religious pluralism in Vietnam in the contextualization section.
  \item Paul used the topic markers περὶ δὲ, cf. 7:1, 7:25, 12:1, 16:1, and 16:25; Collins, First Corinthians, 304; and Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 330–331.
\end{itemize}
build up others, Paul advised the Corinthians to put aside knowledge for the sake of their fellow’s conscience in regard to eating ιδωλοθύτων. Yes, “all of us have knowledge” (8:1). However, one must exercise knowledge not with pride, but with an attitude of becoming all things to all in order to save some (9:22b). In other words, one must exercise the freedom that is grounded in the salvation for oneself and for others.

Unfortunately, some Corinthians misunderstood Paul’s concept of freedom, or pursued individual freedom at the expense of others. The word “freedom” conveyed a different meaning in the ancient world than in the modern society. In the ancient world, there was no such thing as the “rights” of freedom as in the 21st century, for instance, freedom of democracy, freedom of speech, or freedom of religions. Similarly, Bauer defined ἐλευθερία (or its verbal counterpart ἐλευθερόω) as freedom, or liberty; it is a state of being free from control or obligation, socially or politically. Along the line of being free from political control or lawful obligation, ἐλευθερία is equivalent to doing whatever one wants in life. However, the modern definition of “freedom” only arose in the Graeco–Roman world where free human beings lived together with un–free human beings, and where there was no law, or in the state that everything was lawful (6:12 and 10:23). Absolute freedom could only exist in the state of utopia or lawlessness; or absolute freedom could only be exercised by a few in the state of oligarchy or tyranny. Thus, the knowledge and experience of freedom is dependent on surrounding factors: body, possessions, family, state and government, or natural law.

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184 BDAG, s.v. “ἐλευθερία.”
185 BDAG’s definitions of freedom can be misconstrued without looking into the listed biblical references.
though freedom was an indispensable element (with πλοῦτος, παιδεία, and εὐγένεια for a
democratic state) in the ancient Greek society, freedom could only be maintained under the
common law of the democratic state: “Hence, so long as νόμος exercises its binding force on
individuals, freedom cannot be freedom from or in opposition to the law, but only under the
law.”

Paradoxically, the state’s polity, νόμος, prevents freedom from degenerating into the
state of tyranny: “Only εὐνομία can maintain ἐλευθερία.” Under the common law (εὐνομία
or κοινός νόμος), equal right of speech, honor, and power are essential to maintain the
freedom for those who are under the law, as opposed to tyranny. Likewise, tyranny is a
state when an individual (or a group of individuals) follows self–law and exercises his or her
freedom against the common good of the society: “This degenerate freedom is dangerous to
the state and therefore to the citizen from another angle, for it can easily revert to tyranny,
which means the rule, not of nomos, but of the whim of an individual.”

An undisciplined or absolute freedom can become slavery. Since self–law or self–interest at the expense of others
often leads to a decline of democracy, ancient philosophers (i.e., Cynics) suggested that one
must dispose of personal impulse, passion, desire, and even the fear of death in order to seek
true freedom. Based on this theory, true freedom is only possible if one withdraws from the
society, from the inner self, and ultimately from life itself.

\[\text{Ibid., 2:488.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 2:489.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 2:490.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 2:491.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 2:494.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 2:495.}\]
However, isolation and self-control are difficult due to a myriad of external and internal forces in this vast cosmos. Thus, true freedom does not rely on human disposal and control—but on the knowledge of what is controllable and uncontrollable. Still, what is not controllable can dominate one’s life, for instance, fear and inner passion. Likewise, liberation from the world is liberation only if there is a third possible place to which one can escape. Therefore, true freedom is unachievable: “The impossibility of this freedom impresses itself upon him [the one who withdraws from the cosmos and retreats into inwardness] most powerfully in the practical form of its unattainability. It is recognised that the demand for this freedom can never be fully satisfied.”

Because of this unattainability of true freedom, the biblical writers believed that true freedom can only be granted by a higher power, or can only be achieved by surrendering oneself to God.

As stated above, true freedom lies in the sovereignty of God, who has the power to give and to take away like in the story of the exodus out of Egypt and the exile to Babylon. The biblical ἐλευθερία (and its word group) is often defined in contrast to slavery or bondage. The noun ἐλευθερία (along with ἐλεύθερος and ἐλευθερώ) occurs in fifty-five verses in Scripture (twenty verses in the OT, four in the Gospels, twenty-two in Pauline letters, three in Revelation, and six in other NT letters). In the OT, ἐλευθερία or ἐλεύθερος is used to describe how Israel should treat a slave, or to describe a free citizen. In Exod. 21:1–27, the covenantal ordinances stipulate that a slave should be emancipated on the seventh year (Exod. 21:1–6,

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193 Ibid., 2:495–496.
194 Ibid., 2:496.
195 Ibid., 2:496.
Deut. 15:12–18, and Jer. 34:8–20), and how a slave should be compensated for his or her incurred injury (Exod. 21:26–27 and Lev. 19:20–22). In 1 Kgs. 21:8 and 11, ἐλεύθερος is used to describe (free) citizens of Naboth: “τοὺς ἐλευθέρους τοὺς κατοικοῦντας” (1 Kgs. 21:8); “οἱ ἐλεύθεροι οἱ κατοικοῦντες” (1 Kgs. 21:11); and “παντὸς ἐλευθέρου” (Jer. 29:2). In the Gospels, ἐλεύθερος is used for citizens or free children (Matt. 17:26); and ἐλεύθερος and ἐλευθερόω are used for freedom from the slavery of sin (John 8:31–38).

In relation to Pauline soteriology, freedom and its derivatives (verbal and adjectival forms) are used six times in Romans, once in 2 Corinthians, and nine in Galatians. Specifically in the realm of slavery to sin, freedom is strictly God’s grace. For instance, the Pauline doctrine of justification is expressed in a tripartite freedom: freedom from the power of sin (Rom. 6:18–23 and 2 Cor. 3:17), from the law and its work (Rom. 7:1–3 and 8:2; Gal. 2:4, 4:1–7, 4:21–31, and 5:1), and from death (Rom. 6:21, 8:2, and 8:21).

In First Corinthians (7:21, 22, and 39; 9:1 and 19; 10:29 and 12:13), Paul integrated the political and philosophical thoughts from the ancient Greek philosophers (i.e., Plato and Aristotle in the 6th–5th century BCE) with the biblical concept of freedom from the law, sin, and death. For Paul, true freedom is not only freedom from the law, sin, and death, but also freedom for Christ and for others. In other words, one’s freedom is bounded by the (“law of”) the conscience of others, and by service for others (chapters 7—9). Moreover, in agreement with Aristotle’s Politica (384–322 BCE), Paul used a metaphor of slavery (or a slave) as a model of freedom in Christ for others: “The slave is the one who from the first (== by nature)

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196 Ibid., 2:496.
does not belong to himself but to someone else." That is, slavery is the lowest state in which one could empty all selfish desires and self-control—and hand over one’s life to Christ’s ownership, to be used as the temple of the Holy Spirit (3:16, 6:19, and 7:22–23). Since one’s body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, one’s desire and preference must be driven by the Holy Spirit. In other words, all personal impulses, desires, and passions are adiaphoric, and are to be placed at the Holy Spirit’s disposal for the building up of the body of Christ, for instance, eating εἰδωλοθύτων. Thus, in relation to eating εἰδωλοθύτων, one’s freedom is bounded by the weak conscience of a brother or sister in Christ. Precisely for the sake of the community in Christ, to eat εἰδωλοθύτων or to recline in pagan temples is to assault those whose conscience is weak, therefore, to sin against Christ. Paul concluded with an emphatic denial subjunctive (οὐ μὴ φάγω κρέα εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα), “Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall” (8:13). The double

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198 In ancient Graeco–Roman society, slavery was the lowest social status. In general, the lives of the slaves were controlled by their slave–owners; and the slaves were often subjected to physical cruelty and sexual exploitation (S. Scott Bartchy, “Response to Keith Bradley’s Scholarship on Slavery,” Biblical Interpretation 21, no 4–5 [2013]: 528). Paul’s language of slavery as a metaphor of his disposition for the sake of the Gospel in 1 Cor. 9:19–23 does not reveal the struggles between a slave and his or her owner (i.e., Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21, and Philemon and Onesimus in Philemon). In many cases, the relationship between a slave and his or her owner was frictional; and, physical cruelty or abuse was often used by the slave–owner as a means to keep the slave from running away. Keith Bradley rightly stated, “A slave’s highest aspiration was to be set free and that the slave had the capacity to deliberate about when to realize it. Resistance and accommodation are not mutually exclusive but complementary categories, and accommodation may itself be a resisting form of self–assertion, calculation, protest, or defiance” (Keith Bradley, “Engaging with Slavery,” Biblical Interpretation 21, no 4–5 [2013]: 536–537). Furthermore, slaves’ resistance and protest could be damaging: “A person in slavery could protest and resist being enslaved: by sabotaging property, by feigning illness, by falsifying account books, by finding other ways to deceive or cleverly disobey one’s owner, by simply running away—not to mention the very dangerous violent resistance in assaulting and even murdering the master—or making the final escape via suicide” (Bartchy, “Response to Keith Bradley’s Scholarship on Slavery,” 529–530).
negative (οὐ μὴ plus a subjunctive) and the prepositional phrase “forever” (εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα) reject any future potential in eating εἰδωλοθύτων. In Paul’s thought, true freedom is a choice to relinquish one’s right or authority when the situation poses a threat to or harms others’ well-being, especially other’s salvation. Moreover, Collins rightly reasserted that the relinquishment of one’s right for the sake of others is the foundation of freedom: “The refusal to exercise one’s right for the sake of another is not a limitation of freedom; it is the very foundation of freedom.”

In the context of freedom and εἰδωλοθύτων, conscience takes on an unusual meaning, especially when it is qualified by an adjective ἀσθενὴς meaning weak. Bauer defined συνείδησις as moral awareness or consciousness, or conscience; and Liddell and Scott

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199 Duane F. Watson defined Pauline freedom in the limits of the context: “The Strong: Freedom in Christ is not bounded by consideration of the cultic origin of meat or the conscience of others. The Weak: Freedom in Christ is bounded by dietary considerations, particularly the cultic origin of meat. The question arising out of this conflict of causes is: Does freedom in Christ entail behavior bounded only by the limits of individual conscience or does it entail circumspect behavior which regards the conscience of others as a necessary limit?” (Duane F. Watson, “1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1 in the Light of Greco–Roman Rhetoric: The Role of Rhetorical Questions,” Journal of Biblical Literature 108, no. 2 [Summer 1989]: 303). Thielson pointed out, “Paul lives out not only what he preaches in general terms, but also the specific theology of ‘the right to choose’ versus the benefit or harm to others which may be entailed in claiming or renouncing these rights (cf. 8:7–13)” (Thielson, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 662). In the same vein on Pauline freedom, Murphy–O’Connor stated, “For Paul, on the contrary, freedom was essentially a property of the community, and its reality was conditioned by the vitality of the community. Man was released from the compulsion of Sin by entering an alternative environment (through faith and baptism) where the power of Sin was not operative. He remained free only to the extent that he remained a vital part of the organic whole infused by the spirit of Christ. His freedom, therefore, was conditioned by dependence, and a believer who asserted his independence compromised his freedom. The fundamental error of the Strong was to transfer the absolute character of ‘freedom from Sin’ to the level of decision and action. Since they were absolutely free, they argued, they could do anything they liked. In other words, they confused ‘freedom from something’ with ‘freedom to do something’ without realizing that their exaggeration of the latter would necessarily involve the destruction of the former” (Murphy–O’Connor, Keys to First Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues, 105).

200 Collins, First Corinthians, 327.

201 BDAG, s.v. “συνείδησις.”
defined συνείδησις as consciousness of right or wrong doing or guilt. Generally, Hellenistic philosophy (and also the LXX) defined συνείδησις as moral awareness of one’s own bad deeds, knowledge or experience of a distressing situation of life, and specifically knowledge or understanding of “bad” conscience. Plutarch, in De Tranquilitate Animi, described συνείδησις as a wound in the flesh whenever one finds his or her own moral defect or corrupt past: “The man who is advancing on the way to virtue is the man who is also gnawed by conscience, which reminds him of his defects, and yet who also rejoices by reason of hope and desire.” Thus, συνείδησις is a state of consciousness or self-consciousness against moral defect or corruption. Collins described συνείδησις as self-awareness and refused to render it as moral conscience; but, Fitzmyer related συνείδησις to νοῦς (the mind, intellect, and understanding): “It is a quality of the ‘mind’ that acts as a moral arbiter or internal judge of what is right or wrong, as a guide for coming moral action, but also as a judge of one’s past actions or of those of others.” More narrowly, Hellenistic Judaism related συνείδησις to bearing witness to the revealed knowledge of God. Similarly in Pauline writings, συνείδησις is related to the knowledge and wisdom of God: “The reference is to a γνώσις which embraces in a totality the perception of a distinction between the facts, the acknowledgment and choice of divinely willed obligations, and self-evaluation.” In other

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202 LSJM, s.v. “συνείδησις.”
204 As quoted in Christian Maurer, “σύνοιδα, συνείδησις,” TDNT 7:904.
205 Collins, First Corinthians, 324.
206 Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 345.
208 Ibid., 7:914.
words, συνείδησις means perception, self-evaluation, or self-awareness; but συνείδησις is not necessarily confined to moral judgment. Hence, Paul’s meaning of συνείδησις entails both freedom and commitment to God’s love for others.

In regard to weak conscience, to defile a συνείδησις entails a semantic field: to confound; to defile or to taint; and to wound a fellow Christian’s self-consciousness of God’s willed obligations—namely faith and commitment. Specifically in faith and commitment, the phrase ἡ συνείδησις αὐτῶν ἀσθενὴς οὖσα (their conscience being weak) indicates a weakness in faith lacking advanced knowledge (8:12). The NJB rightly translated the clause καὶ ἡ συνείδησις αὐτῶν ἀσθενὴς οὖσα μολύνεται as “then their conscience, being vulnerable, is defiled.” Therefore, the faith and commitment of those who lack advance knowledge being defiled, confounded, and wounded could lead to destruction. It would not be far off if the present indicative passive form of μολύνω is translated as to strike against other’s conscience in the context of πρόσκομμα in 8:9.

In summary, Paul was urging the Corinthians to walk along the path of orthopraxis instead of orthodoxy. And, orthopraxis is context dependent for the sake of building up the brothers and sisters in Christ. Collins highlighted the issue of someone whose conscience is

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209 Ibid., 7:914.

210 The indicative passive form of μολύνω means to be stained (as with blood in Gen. 37:31 and Isa. 59:3), defiled (as with wickedness in Jer. 23:11), dyed, debouched, or smeared (as with dirt or soil as in Rev. 3:4). And in the NT, μολύνω was used three times: 1 Cor. 8:7; Rev. 3:4 and 14:4.

211 Thiselton wrote a comprehensive discussion on συνείδησις, and concluded that (when the weak συνείδησις is μολύνεται, 1 Cor. 8:7) one can translate as “your right may strike against the weak conscience” (Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 649). For a more comprehensive discussion on συνείδησις, please see Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 338–342 and 639–644.
weak: “Their previous pagan practices would have led them to assume that this ‘right behavior’ was a matter of eating food that really was offered to idols. For these people to eat εἰδωλοθύτων was participation in idol worship.”

Thiselton further suggested, “Habituated patterns of loyalty and devotion long practiced by new converts before their conversion cannot simply be brushed aside as no longer affecting their lives and attitudes in the present.”

Hence, one’s freedom is bounded by the conscience of others for the sake of his or her salvation.

2.4.3 The Gospel Proclamation

The crux of the issue is not about sacrificial food, nor is it about idols because Paul clearly stated that there is only one true God—and an idol is nothing! Paul recognized that there are many gods and many idols in the world, especially in the Graeco–Roman society. Moreover, religion and politics were intertwined and ubiquitous in ancient society. Politics and civic festivals, pagan shrines and cultic worship were part of the social life in Roman Corinth. Pagan and imperial idols were worshiped during civic ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and imperial festivals. And, participating in the imperial cult or in public ceremonies was a civil obligation. Moreover, the Oxyrhynchus Papyri witness to one of the religious gatherings: “Chaeremon asks you to dine in the room of the Serapheion [the temple of Asklepios] at a

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212 Collins, First Corinthians, 323.
213 Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 633.
214 Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 331; and Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 617.
215 Collins, First Corinthians, 304–305.
216 Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 331.
banquet of the Lord Serapis tomorrow the 15th from the ninth hour.”\textsuperscript{217} If religious and civil gatherings in pagan temples were commonly conducted, it would not be a surprise that some elite members from the Corinthian community were invited (8:10).\textsuperscript{218}

Consequently, Christian identity was at stake amidst the Roman syncretistic and pluralistic culture. The issue for Paul was the authentic proclamation of Christ crucified amidst congregational factions and religious syncretism. Moreover, the Corinthians’ social dynamic contributed to the complexity; and, perhaps, there were multiple subgroups within the community at Corinth, i.e., the poor and the wealthy. Ancient literature reported that food sacrificed to idols during imperial festivals, civic games, or cultic worship was distributed at social gatherings or sold in the public markets.\textsuperscript{219} On rare occasions, poor Corinthians had access to meat, or cheap food, at the completion of sacrificial festivities.\textsuperscript{220} In other cases, poor Gentiles had been accustomed to idolatry and consumption of εἰδωλοθύτων until their conversion to Christianity. In addition, those who lacked sophisticated knowledge and were weak in conscience were offended by the more knowledgeable members of the community reclining at social gatherings and enjoying sacrificial food. The situation at Corinth was

\textsuperscript{217} The Oxyrhynchus Papyri as quoted in Collins, First Corinthians, 322; and Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 619.

\textsuperscript{218} Murphy–O’Connor also cast doubt on the religious nature of temple banquets: “In Greek religion the mood of [sic] cult was festivity, and all too often it got out of hand. Thus dining groups had to introduce regulations to govern behaviour, and fines were levied for misconduct. If the piety of Greece was relaxed and unthreatened, then the gods might be accorded lip–service, but little real respect. Athenaeus [a Greek writer from Naucratis, 2nd–3rd century CE] describes a dinner where the god is so disgusted at the behaviour of his worshipers, who evidently came to play and not to pray, that he covers his face and departs, abandoning not only the house but the city” (Murphy–O’Connor, Keys to First Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues, 118).

\textsuperscript{219} Collins, First Corinthians, 305.

\textsuperscript{220} Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 619.
complicated by the fact that “the commercial, social, and religious factors were intertwined.”^{221}

2.5 **ANCIENT ISRAEL AND GRAECO-ROMAN RELIGIONS**

2.5.1 **The Corinthian Context**

Paul addressed the issue of idolatry and eating εἰδωλοθύτων in three contexts. In the first context, some Corinthians reclined at the table in the temple precinct, perhaps at the temple banquets or social gatherings: “For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating εἰδωλοθύτων?” (8:10). In the second context, some Corinthians directly participated in the temple sacrifices (10:1–22). In the third context, some Corinthians were eating εἰδωλοθύτων sold in the market places or at private meals (10:25 and 27). In the first and the third contexts, Paul seemed to permit Christian participation in eating εἰδωλοθύτων, both in private homes and at the temple festivities, unless in the presence of those whose conscience was weak. In the second context, Paul obviously rejected any form of participation in the temple worship—for the table of the Lord and the table of demons are incompatible. In other words, to partake in the table of the Lord is to partake in the blood of the new covenant in proclaiming Christ’s death until He comes (11:23–26)—which is a contradiction in proclaiming the lordship of demons. Because the prohibition of eating εἰδωλοθύτων at the cultic worship is sandwiched between reclining at the temple festivals (8:1–13) and at private meals (10:23–11:1), there have been agreements and disagreements among scholars over the last several decades. Wendell Willis helpfully surveyed scholarly positions and issues on the

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^{221} Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, 331; and Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 617.
nature and location of \( \varepsilon\iota\delta\omega\lambda\omega\theta\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu \), for instance, Paul’s norms, warrants, and motivations for not eating \( \varepsilon\iota\delta\omega\lambda\omega\theta\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu \). The following points are pertinent to the subject of this thesis.

Regarding the nature of eating \( \varepsilon\iota\delta\omega\lambda\omega\theta\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu \), the line that distinguishes between what is or is not permissible is cultural. For non–Jewish Christians (converted Gentiles), when the circumstance called for one to participate in civil festivals (religious or non–religious), would eating food commemorating the dead be counted as \( \varepsilon\iota\delta\omega\lambda\omega\theta\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu \)? Would the Judaic law on ritual purity (i.e., properly draining of blood or cultic defilement) be applicable to other cultural contexts? In general, scholars are basically divided into two camps. The first camp believed that Paul encouraged the knowers to be more sensitive to their fellow Christians, those whose conscience was weak. The basis for being more sensitive was based on 8:1–13 and 10:23–11:1. The second camp believed that Paul prohibited eating \( \varepsilon\iota\delta\omega\lambda\omega\theta\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu \) altogether due to idolatry, or advised the Corinthians to abstain from \( \varepsilon\iota\delta\omega\lambda\omega\theta\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu \) due to

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222 Willis, “1 Corinthians 8–10: A Retrospective after Twenty–Five Years,” 110–112.
223 An example of this is a festival held to commemorate war heroes in monarchal nations.
224 According to Willis, “But the question really should be, what does ‘religious’ mean in the first–century pagan world? Their gods gave, as one of their great gifts, occasions for conviviality and enjoyment as an essential aspect of sacrifice. This social enjoyment was a positive part of religious sacrifice” (Willis, “1 Corinthians 8–10: A Retrospective after Twenty–Five Years,” 109). In regard to social gatherings, whether the gatherings were in the temple dining hall or in a private home, “The decision to refrain from such meals brings social isolation with it. Anyone desisting from public sacrificial meals is unfit for political functions” (Smit, “1 Cor. 8,1–6: A Rhetorical Partitio, A Contribution to the Coherence of 1 Cor. 8,1—11,1,” 582).
225 For a brief description of scholarly positions, see Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, 332; for extensive scholarly reviews, see John Fotopoulos, Food Offered to Idols in Roman Corinth, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, ser. 2, vol. 151 (Tübingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2003), 4–48.
226 On the sensitivity of eating \( \varepsilon\iota\delta\omega\lambda\omega\theta\upsilon\tau\omicron\nu \), Bruce Fisk argued that “Paul’s intent was not to declare all temple meal attendance off limits; the nature of the meal, not its location, was the issue” (Bruce Fisk, “Eating Meat Offered to Idols: Corinthian Behavior and Pauline Response in 1 Corinthians 8–10 [A Response to G. D. Fee],” Trinity Journal n.s. 10, no. 1 [Spring 1989]: 69).
cultic defilement (cf. Acts 15). The basis for this abstaining from εἰδωλοθύτων was 10:1–22. Yet, the difficulty with an absolute prohibition of idol–food consumption in the Graeco–Roman world is that political, civil, and religious gatherings were indistinguishable. That is, drawing an absolute boundary between a Christian fellowship and a social gathering would be impossible when Christians were living in the midst of a religiously pluralistic city.

Regarding the coherence of Paul’s argument, the three contexts on εἰδωλοθύτων are not easily reconciled. The issue is how one reconciles the context in 8:1–13 or 10:23–11:1 with 10:1–22. The difficulty in reconciling the three contexts is the absolute prohibition in partaking in cultic sacrifices (10:1–22). In addition, the nature and location of eating εἰδωλοθύτων could not be easily distinguished in Graeco–Roman culture, for instance, reclining in the temple’s dining hall for a social gathering such as a birthday or a civil ceremony. Because of the difficulty in distinguishing the nature and location, some scholars resolved the issue of eating εἰδωλοθύτων by giving priority to Paul’s literary presentation.

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227 One of the proponents of this absolute prohibition regardless of the location and the nature of eating εἰδωλοθύτων is Alex T. Cheung. According to Cheung, those who knowingly or deliberately eat εἰδωλοθύτων sold in the markets or at a private dinner do commit idolatry regardless of the nature of eating. Cheung concluded, “Paul responds that food which is possibly sacrificed to idols is not off limits—unless this possibility becomes a certainty. One who has unknowingly eaten idol food would not be defiled. Therefore, one may eat anything that is sold in the marketplace μηδὲν ἀνακρίνοντες διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν. There is no need to inquire ‘for the sake of consciousness,’ that is, for the sake of knowing the nature of the food with the entailed moral obligations….Paul’s position in a nutshell is this: to eat idol food knowingly is to participate in idolatry; therefore, for the sake of the weak and for the sake of yourselves, avoid any food if, and only if, you know that it is idol food” (Alex T. Cheung, Idol Food in Corinth: Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 176 [Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999], 153 and 162).

That is, the concluding section (10:23–11:1) should be taken as the final thought of Paul’s exhortation on eating εἰδωλοθύτων. It was this concluding thought that Paul had in mind while he was anticipating his opponents’ objections in 8:1–10:22 (by means of popular slogans). Based on Paul’s concluding exhortation, Watson pointed out that Paul used a figure of thought called accumulation to anticipate his opponents’ refutation: “In his recapitulation in 10:23–11:1, Paul is using the figure of anticipation to portray the objections that the strong can be expected to make against his previously stated position that the conscience of another should restrict freedom in regard to eating meat offered to idols (10:28–29a).” Nevertheless, the “recapitulation in 10:23–11:1” position poses a difficulty in explaining the injunction in 10:1–22. If Paul’s intention in writing 8:1—11:1 was to exhort the Corinthians to be more sensitive to others by imitating Christ, then his injunction in 10:1–22 would pose a conflict in his logic, especially when a death penalty is attached to any violation.

Besides Watson, Harold S. Songer suggested that Paul’s norm regarding εἰδωλολατρία and εἰδωλοθύτων was based on 10:23–11:1, specifically 11:1. According to Songer, “Paul’s conclusion at this point does not relate to the larger issue of the eating of food offered to idols, only to the eating of that food in the cultic context of the temple of the

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229 For instance, scholars attributed the followings slogans to the knowers at Corinth: “We know that ‘no idol in the world really exists,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’” (1 Cor. 8:4); “‘Food will not bring us close to God.’ We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” (1 Cor. 8:8); and “‘All things are lawful’” (1 Cor. 10:23a).


idol….The food itself was not the issue with Paul as it was in Jewish tradition." Thus, the Jewish law is now in conformity with Christ, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (11:1). Consequently, Christian freedom and conscience are then gearing toward what is more beneficial for the glory of God, for peaceful living whether to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, and for the salvation of everyone (10:31–33). David Horrell argued along the same vein as Songer, “Here in 1 Corinthians 8—10 Paul demonstrates that this ethical imperative has priority over the theological or scriptural justifications which otherwise might legitimate a particular practice.”

Recently, two scholars, Joop Smit and John Fotopoulos, employed rhetorical partitio to interpret 1 Cor. 8:1—11:1. The basic argument was that 1 Cor. 8:1—11:1 forms a single and coherent argument: Paul denounced any form of idolatry for the sake of the Gospel proclamation. However, the problem in Corinth was outside the walls of pagan temples. Smit stated, “The temple is no longer the place of action, but the market–hall and the private home. Now the question is whether believers may eat food of which the sacrificial origin is uncertain. Participation in sacrificial meals is forbidden. Outside the temple precincts, food of uncertain

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232 Ibid., 373.
origin is allowed without any further inquiries.\footnote{Smit, “1 Cor. 8,1–6: A Rhetorical Partitio, A Contribution to the Coherence of 1 Cor. 8,1—11,1,” 582.} To allow for “food of uncertain origin,” Smit proposed a bipartite partitio for 8:1–6 based on rhetorical genre and functions of the text, for instance, policy and strategy, “participation/recommending…loss/profit; danger/safety.”\footnote{Ibid., 589.}

The parallelism in 8:1–3 and 8:4–6, called anaphora, is stressed in the bipartite partitio: περὶ δὲ τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων and περὶ τῆς βρώσεως οὖν τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων (8:1a and 8:4a).

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<td>8:4–6. The many gods and many lords are nonentities. And, there is one God the Father, and Jesus Christ.</td>
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The first partition is 8:1–3, which is about knowledge and love for the building up and not harming others on the matter of εἰδωλοθύτων. Based on this first partition, 8:1–3, Paul elaborated on the situation at Corinth (i.e., reclining at the temple precinct) and used his apostolic rights as an example of freedom for the sake of the Gospel (8:7–9:27). The second partition, 8:4–6, stresses the monotheistic acclamation: “…There is no God but one…there is one God, the Father.” The brief summary of the argument in 8:4–6 is then elaborated with the Exodus example (10:1–13), and an exhortation on not partaking in the table of demons (10:14–22). However, when the social gathering moved beyond the confinement of the
temple walls (10:23–11:1), Paul granted an exception for eating εἰδωλοθύτων: it would not be advisable to eat εἰδωλοθύτων in the presence of those whose conscience is weak. According to Smit, a recognition of the Graeco–Roman social engagement should be taken into account concerning eating εἰδωλοθύτων: “Sacrificial meals form an integral part of the civic order in Corinth. Taking part in social and political life unavoidably includes participation in sacrificial meals. The decision to refrain from such meals brings social isolation with it. Anyone desisting from public sacrificial meals is unfit for political functions.”

Likewise, Gooch surveyed literary sources (dated from 200 BCE to 200 CE) and concluded that social banquets could be held in temple dining halls or in private homes, and could be religiously solemn festivals or casual meals with entertainment (i.e., drama, music, and/or dancing).

Occasions for the wealthy to gather would include religious feasts dedicated to gods (e.g., Zeus, Apollo), birthdays, weddings, funerals, or dedicated thanksgiving (i.e., religious or political tributes). Moreover, social gatherings often carried religious overtones, and had significant social impact. To be invited to a social gathering was a social marker of status in the society; and participation in a sacrificial celebration was a requirement for public office. To decline an invitation to a social gathering would jeopardize a chance for social advancement; and to abstain from sharing food at a social dinner would be offensive to the

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237 Joop Smit, “1 Cor. 8,1–6: A Rhetorical Partitio, A Contribution to the Coherence of 1 Cor. 8,1–11,1,” 582; and Derek Newton stated in a similar way: “Primary evidence clearly shows that participation in public meals was a definite requirement of those holding public office” (Newton, Deity and Diet: The Dilemma of Sacrificial Food at Corinth, 249).

host and breed hostility. It would be surprising if Paul was not aware of the Graeco–Roman practices on social gatherings at Corinth.

Because of the religious overtones at social gatherings, John Fotopoulos proposed a more rigorous rhetorical partitio than Smit’s bipartite partitio. Instead of the bipartite partitio presented by Smit, Fotopoulos presented a four–part partition arguing for a “coherent, sustained prohibition of intentional consumption of food offered to idols.” According to Fotopoulos, there are four partitions in 8:1–9 (cf. 8:1–6 for Smit): 8:1–3, 8:4–7, 8:8a, and 8:8b–9.

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<td><strong>10:14–22.</strong> Paul warned those who participate in pagan sacrifices because the act of eating is equivalent to partaking in the table of demons.</td>
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<td><strong>8:8a.</strong> Food sacrificed to idols is a matter of adiaphoron, and</td>
<td><strong>10:1–13.</strong> Paul argued that even though eating or not eating would not bring one closer to God, partaking in the</td>
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239 Gooch, Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8–10 in Its Context, 43 and 45–46; and Newton, Deity and Diet: The Dilemma of Sacrificial Food at Corinth, 248–249.


241 Fotopoulos, “Arguments Concerning Food Offered to Idols: Corinthian Quotations and Pauline Refutations in a Rhetorical Partitio (1 Corinthians 8:1–9),” 611.

242 Ibid., 619.
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<td><strong>8:8b–9</strong>. One’s freedom cannot be used as a stumbling block in someone else’s salvation.</td>
<td><strong>10:23–11:1</strong>. Paul warned those who exercise Christian freedom in eating food sacrificed to idols at private dinners (or food bought from the market) not to cause anyone to fall.</td>
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Similar to Smit’s *partitio*, each of the four partitions in 8:1–9 points to a more elaborated exhortation on idolatry and eating εἰδωλοθύτων: 8:1–3 persuades the knowers to use their knowledge and love to build up the weak, which is exemplified by the renunciation of ever eating meat again and abdicating apostolic rights and freedom (8:10–9:27); 8:4–7 emphasizes the monotheistic Shema by equating partaking of the table of idols with idolatry (10:14–22); 8:8a describes idol–food consumption as an adiaphoron but one that may have disastrous results when one participates in the cultic festivity (10:1–13); and 8:8b–9, which urges one to refrain from exercising one’s rights for the sake of those whose conscience is weak, corresponds to abstaining from eating εἰδωλοθύτων purchased in the market (10:23–11:1). Even though the order of the four partitions is not neatly laid out (section 10:14–22 and 10:1–13 are reversed in its order), Fotopoulos argued that the four–part partition would explain Paul’s thought coherently. To strengthen his argument, Fotopoulos provided a reason for the reversal of the second and the third partitions by pointing out that ancient rhetors often made a similar mistake.  

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243 Fotopoulos pointed out, “It should be noted that Paul has committed what Quintilian considers to be a serious mistake for an orator, since Paul does not treat the issues in his *probatio* in the sequential order that they are addressed in his *partitio* (8:4–7 corresponds to 10:14–22, while 8:8a corresponds to 10:1–13). It seems, however, that Paul’s error was a common mistake for orators; Quintilian’s disdain
and the “strong” Corinthians leading up to denouncing even the right to eat εἰδωλοθύτων, because eating εἰδωλοθύτων would potentially cause someone to fall. Hence, Fotopoulos’ position would rule out most social gatherings in both private homes and pagan temples, which public figures would be required to attend.

In spite of how neatly Fotopoulos’s rhetorical partitio is laid out in 8:1–9, 10:23–24 and 10:27 and 10:29–33 do not call for an absolute prohibition of eating εἰδωλοθύτων outside the temple.244 Regarding the location of eating εἰδωλοθύτων, Fee rightly stated, “…The tensions that some find between the beginning and the conclusion of the passage dealing with ‘idol food’ (8:1–13 and 10:23–33) are the result of Paul’s speaking to two quite different, though related, issues.”245 That is, εἰδωλοθύτων is contextual; and, contextualization of εἰδωλοθύτων is guided by seeking to build up the body of Christ and salvation of others: “Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other….So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved.” The chief concern here is rather a subjective judgment for the glory of God so that others may be saved (10:33).

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244 Fee pointed out that Paul prohibited εἰδωλοθύτων “…because it means to participate in the demonic. But marketplace idol food, which apparently Paul has been known to eat and for which he has been judged (κρίνεται, v. 9), is another matter altogether….Thus one is free to eat marketplace food at home, and in a neighbor’s home as well, because ‘the earth and its provisions are the Lord’s.’ But one is also free not to eat, if such eating ‘offends’” (Fee, To What End Exegesis?, 125).

245 Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 16.
Surprisingly, the simple phrase “Do everything for the glory of God” (10:31b) encapsulates the complexity of 8:1–11:1 regarding εἰδωλολατρία and εἰδωλοθύτων. Scholars have shed volumes of ink to resolve the conflicting contexts among the three sections: 8:1–13, 10:1–22, and 10:23–11:1. Yet, there has been no satisfactory solution to the different contexts of eating εἰδωλοθύτων. A clue to a common thread which could resolve the issues of εἰδωλολατρία and eating εἰδωλοθύτων lies in Fee’s suggestion, “…the result of Paul’s speaking to two quite different, though related, issues.” Regardless of the different contexts, εἰδωλολατρία and eating εἰδωλοθύτων were two different issues but related through mute idols. Inadvertently, an act of negating the existence of idols and in turn imposing the negation upon others is itself an objectified idol. As a result of the objectified idol, the abusers at Corinth misused their freedom to seek social gains at the expense of those whose conscience was weak. Because freedom was critical for the building up of the ecclesiastical body of Christ, Paul dedicated an entire chapter 9 to address personal rights, authority, and freedom. Moreover, Paul’s conclusions to the context in chapter 8 and chapter 10 are the very definition of Christian freedom, the freedom which Christ has “bought with a price” (8:13 and 10:31–33; cf. 7:17–24, especially 7:23–24, 8:11b and 9:19–23). For Paul, it is freedom from idolatrous knowledge and wisdom, from slavery to social honor and advantages, and from the claim of rights and authority that hold the key to resolving the conflicts at Corinth. Thus on the surface, chapters 8 and 10 would sound like Paul’s concern was about εἰδωλολατρία and eating εἰδωλοθύτων. However, Paul’s chief concern was the lack of freedom: the freedom to forgo one’s rights for the sake of the Gospel proclamation—not the freedom to act as one
Because of the conflicts in the Corinthian community (i.e., reclining in the temple precinct eating εἰδωλοθύτων), Paul exhorted the Corinthians to ground their freedom in Christ for the sake of others’ conscience. With the freedom that is grounded in Christ, one will refuse to recline in the temple precinct, to partake of the table of demons, and to forgo eating εἰδωλοθύτων that is sold in the market. For Paul, Christian freedom is necessary to discern what is right or wrong in the pluralistic Corinth.

Furthermore, the context at Corinth was a mixed culture; that is, Jewish Christians and pagan converts. The Jewish Christians were living and breathing the Graeco–Roman culture through the Mosaic lens of ritual purity and defilement; the pagan converts were interpreting their knowledge and action through the lens of religious pluralism. The cultural clash in the Graeco–Roman world was the occasion for the Corinthians to re-focus their priority, or to re-evaluate their freedom in Christ: “‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up” (10:23). Therefore, a discernment of the things that are beneficial to the community must trump traditional laws or

246 Murphy–O’Connor, Keys to First Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues, 105.
247 On the dietary conflicts at Corinth, Murphy–O’Connor argued that the conflicts at Corinth were more than between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians. Idol–food dietary conflicts occurred between the Strong and the Weak Corinthians. For a more detailed argument, please see Murphy–O’Connor, Keys to First Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues, 87–128.
248 On this point, it would depend on what constitutes or qualifies as εἰδωλοθύτων. For Christians of Jewish background in Corinth, εἰδωλοθύτων meant food sacrificed to idols regardless of the context in which it appears, and was prohibited in Paul’s thought. E. Coye Still III argued for this absolute position of εἰδωλοθύτων, “Paul does acknowledge the knowers’ authentic right to consume food offered to idols, even in some temple meals (see 1 Cor 8:10), but calls for complete non–use of the right—abstinence from all temple meals and all food identified as having been offered to idols” (E. Coye Still, “The Meaning and Uses of EIDÔLOTHYTON in First Century Non–Pauline Literature and 1 Cor 8:1–11:1: Toward Resolution of the Debate,” Trinity Journal n.s. 23, no. 2 [Fall 2002]: 234; and “Paul’s Aims Regarding ΕΙΔΩΛΟΘΥΤΑ: A New Proposal for Interpreting 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1,” Novum Testamentum 44, no. 4 [2002]: 243).
policies which specified a setting—religious or non-religious—for food to be qualified as idol-food (i.e., defiled or undefiled, clean or unclean). And, such a discernment of the things that build up the community presupposes the freedom that is grounded in Christ.

2.5.2 The Context of Acts and Idol-Food

For a Jewish Christian, the task of discernment between what is clean or unclean, defiled or undefiled is important. In Acts 10, while praying Peter fell into a trance and saw a vision. In his vision, Peter saw the heaven torn open, and all kinds of reptiles and four legged animals were lowered down on a large sheet. Then, a voice commanded Peter to slaughter the animals and eat (θῦσον καὶ φάγε). However, Peter refused to eat because the animals were profane (κοινὸν) and unclean (ἀκάθαρτον) according to the Torah (Lev. 11:1–47, Deut. 14:3–20, and Ezek. 4:14). But, the voice commanded again, “What God has made clean (ἐκαθάρισεν), you must not call profane (κοίνου)” (Acts 10:15 and 11:9). The vision occurred three times to Peter in the same trance. Later, when Peter arrived at Cornelius’s residence and found many Gentiles gathered, he acknowledged that prior to his vision he understood Gentiles to be profane and unclean: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane (κοινὸν) or unclean (ἀκάθαρτον)” (Acts 10:28). The key terms used in Acts 10:9–16 were the ritual terms mentioned in Lev. 11:1–47 and Deut. 14:3–20: θύω (to slaughter sacrificially), κοινὸς (profane, unholy, or ceremonially impure), καθαρίζω (to make or declare ritually clean), and ἀκάθαρτος (ritually impure or unclean). Here in the vision, God sanctified what the Pentateuch declared to be ritually unclean animals. This event marked the beginning of a new

BDAG, s.v. “θύω,” “κοινὸς,” “καθαρίζω,” and “ἀκάθαρτος.”
era in cultural accommodation for the Gentiles: it ratified table fellowship between the two
cultures, the Jewish religion (e.g., the Jewish code of holiness) and the Greek culture.

In Athens, Paul became irritated when he saw the city full of cultic images and idols
(Acts 17:16–34). Paul then engaged in teaching and debating about the one true God with the
local philosophers and common people. In response to Paul’s teaching, the Athenians
ridiculed Paul as a “proclaimer of foreign divinities” (Acts 17:18). For the Gentiles, who were
living in a pluralistic world, Jesus Christ was just another foreign deity claiming recognition
among many shrines and statues, and even competing with an altar inscribed, “To an
Unknown God” (Acts 17:23). For Paul, God is the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, and
God sustains everything that lives and moves and has its being (Acts 17:26–29). Moreover,
God is the omnipotent and omnipresent God. Thus, it is impossible for human beings to
confine God to images and sanctuaries made by human hands: “Since we are God’s
offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed
by the art and imagination of mortals” (Acts 17:29). Here, Paul asserted what he will assert in
Corinth: even though there are many so-called gods and lords in heaven and on earth, yet “for
us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one
Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6). For
Paul, idols are non-entities. Since idols are non-entities, there are two implications of Paul’s
monotheistic sermon. First, to worship idols is to falsely proclaim the existence of idols—and
inadvertently to buttress the socioeconomic structure of the pluralistic empire (i.e., Acts
19:23–40). Second, abstinence from εἰδωλοθύτων is a matter of indifference; to prohibit
eating εἰδωλοθύτων beyond the temple precinct, except for the sake of those whose
conscience is weak, is to grant idols more power than necessary. In light of the two implications, would Paul agree with the decree of Jerusalem Council in light of 1 Cor. 10:23–11:1?

When the circumcision requirement was brought up at the Jerusalem Council for the Gentile converts (Acts 15), the apostles decided that the Gentile converts should not be troubled with circumcision. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the Council declared that there should be no further burden than the essentials, which included abstaining from “what has been sacrificed to idols (εἰδωλοθύτων) and from blood (αἵματος) and from what is strangled (πνικτῶν) and from fornication (πορνείας)” (Acts 15:20, 28–29, and 21:25; cf. Lev. 17—18). Here again, the context of sacrificial ceremony, especially in the temple precinct, was spelled out in accordance with the code of holiness in the Mosaic Law. The decree of the Jerusalem Council seemed to be drafted based on what was prohibited in the Torah: “An unstated subsidiary point is that all the obligations of Torah remain in effect for Jews.” Was this minimum requirement on εἰδωλοθύτων for the Gentile believers applicable in the context beyond the temple precinct? Was Paul aware of these minimum requirements for the Gentile believers when he penned 1 Cor. 10:23–11:1? In light of εἰδωλοθύτων in private homes, Luke Timothy Johnson argued that the Council’s decree paved the way for “table–fellowship and

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full communion” between Jewish Christians and Gentile converts.252 According to Johnson, “How could Jews eat with those whose practices fundamentally defiled themselves and the land and the people? These requirements of the Gentiles therefore enable Jews to remain in communion with them, since the Gentiles would not be engaging in practices in radical disharmony with the Jewish ethos, and the Gentiles would be ‘keeping the Torah’ as it was spelled out for ‘proselytes and sojourners in the land.’”253 Hence, do Gentiles in the 21st century need to observe Jewish regulations before being admitted into the Christian church? What would constitute table fellowship in the 21st century? Would it be doctrine, church policy, or freedom and the conscience of others? In the same vein, would missionaries in Asia impose the same regulations upon indigenous converts, especially to the culture of the ancestor cult in Vietnam?254

2.5.3 Ancestral Worship and Ancient Israel

Before the discussion shifts gear to the ancestor cult in Vietnam, a brief survey of the OT on mourning for the dead, contacting the spirit of the dead, and making sacrificial offerings to the

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253 Ibid., 273.
254 In a context of religious pluralism, Bruce W. Winter elegantly concluded that to simply affirm one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ (8:6) would not be enough in the mission field: “There are now substantial issues for Western churches which some Christian churches in the East have faced for centuries viz. living in the midst of religious pluralism as the people of God. The latter’s first hand experience cannot be ignored by the West as it now comes to grips with religious pluralism on its own shores. Nor can it dismiss the costly affirmations Corinthian Christians had to make as they lived in the midst of a pluralistic society. They affirmed that there was one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. But simply affirming that was not sufficient, for to be a Christians [sic] meant to live in such a way as to glorify God by modifying ethical conduct so as not to give any occasion for stumbling to the church of God, nor to create hindrances to Jews or Gentiles so they may be saved, 10:31–33” (Bruce W. Winter, “Theological and Ethical Responses to Religious Pluralism—1 Corinthians 8–10,” Tyndale Bulletin 41, no. 2 [November 1990]: 226).
dead would be beneficial. The reason for this survey is because critics of the ancestor cult pointed to an extensive mourning period (i.e., ranging from three months to three years) as unhealthy and superstitious. Furthermore, during the mourning period, it is believed that the deceased spirits often make efforts to communicate or to comfort the living relatives. There were cases of communication between the dead and the living documented during the Vietnam War (1954–1975), for example, a soldier’s spirit communicated with his relative where his body was disposed.

On mourning, the authors of Genesis recorded mourning for the dead when Abraham mourned for Sarah’s death and cared for her burial (Gen. 23:1–20); when Rachel died, Jacob set up a monument on Rachel’s grave site (Gen. 35:19–20); and when Jacob was mistaken about Joseph’s death, he put on sackcloth and mourned for many days (Gen. 37:33–35). In addition, ancient Israel commemorated its forefathers through reciting tribal genealogies (i.e., Gen. 10 and Num. 1). Thus, mourning for the deceased was allowed in the OT, and the

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255 Generally, in the ancestor cult in Vietnam, the lines that separate mourning and honoring/venerating, venerating and worshiping are blurred or indistinguishable. The next section of the thesis will elaborate on this issue.

256 A murder case in 1974 was pointed out by Reimer: “Evidence of the belief in contact of souls with the living occurs even in daily newspapers. In early 1974, Saigon newspapers carried the story of how the soul of a murdered wife came back to accuse her husband. A soldier in Gia Định had murdered his wife in order to get her inheritance and buried the body near a hamlet on the outskirts of Saigon. Not long afterwards, the murdered wife’s mother came from her home in the Mekong Delta to civil authorities in Gia Định to accuse her son–in–law of murder. She announced that evidence of murder was on the body and told officials precisely where the body was buried. An investigation proved her accusations correct. The woman explained that her daughter’s soul had appeared to her and provided her with the details. A story like this, regardless of what the reader may think, is widely credible in modern Saigon and, of course, quite in keeping with traditional beliefs about the soul” (Reimer, “The Religious Dimension of the Vietnamese Cult of the Ancestors,” 164).

257 For more detailed research on Ugaritic and Hebrew texts, please see Theodore J. Lewis, Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit, Harvard Semitic Monographs, no. 39 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars
length of the mourning period was left unspecified, e.g. as “many days” (Gen. 37:33–35). However, harmful rituals of mourning such as lacerating one’s flesh (Lev. 19:28 and Deut. 14:1), using the temple’s sacrifices to offer to the dead (Deut. 26:13–14), and making libation and offerings to the dead (Isa. 57:6) are forbidden in the OT.

Contacting the spirits of the dead via medium and wizard was prohibited (i.e., Lev. 19:31, 20:6 and 27; and Deut. 18:10–11). In spite of the prohibition, there is a story of Saul seeking the spirit of the prophet Samuel through the witch of Endor (1 Sam. 28:3–25). Saul was devastated when the spirit of Samuel foretold his death: “Moreover the LORD will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines; and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me; the LORD will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines” (1 Sam. 28:19). What is more interesting about this example is that Saul “shall be with” Samuel, among the spirits of the dead. Likewise, other prophetic passages also witness the existence of the cult of the dead, for instance Isa. 57:6 and 65:4 mention drink, grain, and incense offering in the valley and among the tombs.258

In summary, grieving and mourning for deceased relatives were allowed, but performing sorcery, divination, necromancy, and harmful ritual in mourning were prohibited in ancient Israel. Nevertheless, consulting the spirits of the dead was sanctioned, depending on the traditions (e.g., 1 Samuel 28, cf. Deut. 18:10–11).

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258 Another OT passage gives evidence to the cult of the dead: “…The spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out, and I will confound their plans; they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead and the ghosts and the familiar spirits” (Isa. 19:3).
2.5.4 Ancestral Worship and the Cult of the Saints

Even though the Deuteronomistic and Priestly traditions were able to centralize the temple cult and successfully suppressed the local rituals and worship, the nascent Christian movements brought back the cult of the dead, especially after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (70 CE) and under the Roman persecutions. It was during the times of persecution that honoring the deceased became widespread under a different label, the cult of the saints. \(^{259}\) Christians were scattered throughout the empire, and sought cover among the tombs communing with the spirits of the dead. \(^{260}\) Christians dwelled and worshiped in underground shelters called catacombs in Damascus, Rome, and Naples dating back to 2\(^{nd}\)–4\(^{th}\) CE. \(^{261}\) Martyrs were buried and venerated under a number of basilicas, for instance, excavation underneath St. Sebastian’s, St. Paul’s, and St. Peter’s floors discovered shrines and sarcophagi of saints. \(^{262}\) In addition, there are archaeological inscriptions which showed that banquets and picnics were held in which Christians prayed to the saints for good health and safe travel. \(^{263}\)

\(^{259}\) The cult of the saints, or the cult of martyrdom, was further sanctioned in the “Martyrdom of Polycarp,” which was written (early 2\(^{nd}\) century) by a Christian named Marcion at the church of Smyrna to the church of Philomelium in Phrygia, “18.1 When the centurion saw the contentiousness caused by the Jews, he placed Polycarp’s body in the center and burned it, as is their custom. 2 And so, afterwards, we removed his bones, which were more valuable than expensive gems and more precious than gold, and put them in a suitable place. 3 There, whenever we can gather together in joy and happiness, the Lord will allow us to commemorate the birthday of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already engaged in the struggle and as a training and preparation for those who are about to do so” (Bart D. Ehrman, ed., The Apostolic Fathers: 1 Clement, 2 Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Didache, Vol. 24.1, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003], 393).

\(^{260}\) Revelation also mentions the “prayers of the saints” (Rev. 5:8–9 and 8:3–4).


\(^{263}\) Ibid., 606.
The widespread practice of the cult of the saints during the early church period was helped by two factors: support of the church fathers and ascetic theology. Peter Brown pointed out that the cult of the saints is not the same as the imperial cult in the Graeco–Roman world. In the imperial cult, commemorating, worshiping, or deifying the rulers and heroes was a way to sanction the authority of the Roman state, or to ensure the Roman state’s continuation. Moreover, the Hellenistic and the Graeco–Roman system of dualism believed that the soul would leave behind the earthly dirt and dregs in the decayed body to join with the divine stars. To the Graeco–Roman mind, Paul’s argument for the resurrection of the body would be considered primitive thinking because the body is the nonessential shell covering the soul, the substance of a human being. To a Graeco–Roman person, it would be irrational and disgusting to camp out in the cemetery digging up and dismembering dead bodies, handling and kissing dead bones of the saints. For instance, Emperor Julian (361–363 CE) decried the masses gathering behind a procession of the cult of the saints: “You keep adding many corpses newly dead to the corpse of long ago. You have filled the whole world with tombs and sepulchers...The carrying of the corpses of the dead through a great assembly of people, in the midst of dense crowds, staining the eyesight of all with ill–omened sights of the dead. What day so touched with death could be lucky? How, after being present at such ceremonies, could anyone approach the gods and their temples?” And in the Graeco–Roman world, it would be a nightmare for someone to have a dream of being a tanner because

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265 Ibid., 2.
tanners often came into contact with corpses. Therefore, the widespread practice of the cult of the saints did not originally spring from the imperial cult of the Roman state.

Originally, the cult of the saints was probably developed out of the cult of the dead, or the care of the dead, in pagan practices. According to Peter Brown, the care of the dead by family or community members was the most stable practice in the Mediterranean culture:

“Burial customs are among the most notoriously stable aspects of most cultures. They are also an element in the religious life of a society that is splendidly indifferent to the labels usually placed upon forms of religious behavior by the tradition of religious history.”

The care of the dead also functioned as social bonding in a larger social unit within a city or a town. For instance, the excessive funerary rites, expensive burial customs, and festive commemorations of the dead among the powerful elites caused tension and segregation in the community. A growing tension between a few wealthy families and the larger community, and at the same time more reports on miraculous healings at the tombs of the saints moved the church fathers to delimit the filial bond and to redirect the practices to the cult of the saints. By the late 4th century, the shift from private burial places to the tombs of patron saints of the community became official: the sarcophagi of saints became church altars for many communities.

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268 Brown quoted a pagan inscription (late 3rd century) from Mauretania (Morocco): “We all set out the furnishing suited to a worthy grave, / And on the altar that marks the tomb of our mother, Secundula, / It pleased us to place a stone tabletop, / Where we could sit around, bringing to memory her many good deeds, / As the food and the drinking cups were set out, and cushions pile around, / So that the bitter wound that gnawed our hearts might be healed. / And in this way we passed the evening hours in pleasant talk, / And in the praise of our good mother. / The old lady sleeps: she who fed us all / Lies silent now, and sober as ever” (Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 23).

269 Ibid., 24.

270 Ibid., 33.
Heaven and earth met at the tombs of the holy martyrs; therefore, blessed were those who took part in the annual commemoration of the saints. Thus, liturgical rites and communal processions were sanctioned by the church fathers, for instance, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine. St. Jerome once challenged a critic of the cult: “[So you think,] therefore, that the bishop of Rome does wrong when, over the dead men Peter and Paul, venerable bones to us, but to you a heap of common dust, he offers up sacrifices to the Lord, and their graves are held to be altars of Christ.” In addition, St. Augustine expressed his love for the martyrs in one of his sermons, “They really loved this life; yet they weighed it up. They thought of how much they should love the things eternal if they were capable of such deep love for things that pass away.”

The “invisible companion” or “guardian angel” was another theological concept that helped buttress and popularize the cult of the saints. The term “invisible companion” (which was coined by Theodoret, a bishop of Cyrrhus, 393–458 CE), was used for the deceased saints as guides and protectors of individual Christians: “…It was an invisible being entrusted with the care of the individual, in a manner so intimate that it was not only the constant companion of the individual; it was almost an upward extension of the individual. For the individual had been entrusted to it at birth, and continued under its protection after death. The abiding identity of the self was in its keeping. There was nothing strange, therefore, in late–antique etiquette, in addressing a person simply as ‘Your Angel.’” There were two primary causes

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271 As quoted in Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 9.
272 As quoted in Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 72–73.
273 As quoted in Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 51.
that contributed to the idea of having patron saints among both elites and common people: miracles and healings, and an assurance of amnesty in the End Time.\textsuperscript{274} People longed for an assurance of amnesty not because they sinned more than their ancestors did, nor because they believed that the End Time would arrive sooner—but because they believed their patron saints, the true servants of God, had the power to bind them to God.\textsuperscript{275} Furthermore, the “binding” with the “invisible companions” was strengthened amidst the ascetic demands, and was popularized by the church fathers. For instance, a new convert was given a new identity, a new baptismal name, associated with a patron saint. In other words, the new baptismal identity (the patron saint’s name) was a life–long coping mechanism in the age of ascetic piety: the “invisible companion” was there for the convert to look upon for comfort and guidance.\textsuperscript{276} Thus, the concept of “invisible companion” or “guardian angel” was systematically incorporated into the church liturgy, and was eventually developed into the cult of the saints. By the late Middle Ages, the piety and veneration of the saints became part of atonement for sins in the form of indulgences.\textsuperscript{277}

In a similar way, the Virgin Mary has been adored since the late 1\textsuperscript{st} or early 2\textsuperscript{nd} century. For instance, the Lucan Gospel praises her as the one who has “found favor with God…the servant of the Lord” (Luke 1:30 and 38). Later in the same chapter, Mary is hailed as the “mother of my Lord” by Elizabeth; and the child in Mary’s womb causes the unborn

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{274} Brown,\textit{ The Cult of the Saints}, 65.
\textsuperscript{275} \textit{Ibid.}, 61.
\textsuperscript{276} \textit{Ibid.}, 57 and 65.
\textsuperscript{277} As pointed out in the Background and Methodology section, the line between worship and veneration is blurred. A practice that is deemed veneration in one culture can be labeled as worship in another culture.
\end{footnotes}
John the Baptist to leap for joy (Luke 1:41 and 43). In the 5th century, she was given the title Theotokos (Council of Ephesus, 431 CE) meaning “The one who gave birth to the one who is God.” That is, the Virgin Mary brought the Logos, the salvific Word who is the Christ, into the world. For the Greek fathers, only God the Trinity can be worshiped (as in to prostrate, προσκυνέω) and adored (as in to serve, λατρεύω). Any object used for worship or adoration is called an idol according to the First Commandment. Technically, one cannot worship or adore saints because saints are not God; one can only pay reverence (δουλεία) to saints. However, the Theotokos falls entirely into a different classification for she is not a true God, and at the same time, she does not share the same status with human saints. Therefore, to pay reverence (δουλεία) to the Theotokos does not do full justice: “For she was certainly less than God, but just as certainly she was more than an ordinary human being and more than any other saint; therefore she was not entitled to latria, yet she was entitled to more than dulia. For her cultus, then, the appropriate term was hyperdulia.” However, the theological process of deification, theosis, places the Virgin Mary into the divine status as Athanasius once stated, “God became human so that man might become divine.” Since Mary was chosen to be the bearer of the Son of God, her human nature was transfigured into a “partaker of the divine nature” (similar to Christ’s transfiguration) at the moment of the Annunciation.

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278 A more popular translation of Theotokos is “The Mother of God.” Jaroslav Pelikan provided a more precise translation for Theotokos as “The one who gave birth to the one who is God” (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 55.


280 Ibid., 102.

281 As quoted in Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries*, 106.

282 Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries*, 107.
Hence throughout history, the Catholic Church and Orthodox Church have defended the divine quality of the Virgin Mary just as much as the divinity of Christ: “…The defense of portraying the divine human Christ led to a defense of portraying the human Mary who, through him and because she was chosen to give birth to him, had been made divine.”\(^{283}\) With her divine quality and her role in the salvation of human beings, she has been honored, venerated, adored, and worshiped as the highest intermediary between God and humanity, the favorable intercessor for human prayers; and at times in the history of the Church, her role has been extolled as the co–redemptorist. In addition, Mary has been looked upon as the perfect model of faith, and the protector of the children of the Church. Ultimately, Pope Pius XII (1876–1958) in 1950 gave the Virgin Mary the title “Queen of Heaven.”\(^{284}\)

The roles of the saints and the Virgin Mary are strikingly similar to the ancestor cult in Vietnam. If the Virgin Mary and the saints are protectors of the Christian faith, then ancestors play no lesser roles in the ancestor cult in Vietnam. Ancestors are like the saints; ancestors are the “invisible companions” who guide and protect family members in life; and the ancestors serve as social bonds of family and relatives.\(^{285}\) In addition, ancestors serve as intermediaries between heaven and earth, between the deceased and the living.

\(^{283}\) Ibid., 108.
\(^{284}\) Ibid., 201.
\(^{285}\) Brown, The Cult of the Saints, 50–51.
3. FIRST CORINTHIANS 8—10 AND THE ANCESTOR CULT

Paul’s conclusions call his hearers to prioritize the proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of others above all else in all places and at all times regardless of the sociopolitical context. For this aim, the following section will examine the ancestor cult closely in its prayers and rites (i.e., lunar New Year celebration and wedding rite), and will particularly look for ways to accommodate the Vietnamese culture for the incarnated Word to take root.

Words of caution must be stated in regard to the nature of the ancestor cult in Vietnam. The practices of the ancestor cult are different from region to region. Moreover, the ancestor cult has no standard doctrine; nor is the ancestor cult an organized institution. And because of the non-unifying practices, the ancestor cult has freely accommodated and assimilated foreign religious components in the last two thousand years. Hence, the accommodating nature of the ancestor cult poses both an advantage and a disadvantage for Christian evangelization. On the one hand, it would be a disadvantage in the task of research and study because references and literature are scanty. On the other hand, the ancestor cult would be an advantage in the task of acculturation because there is ample room for flexibility.

Accommodation is probably the recommended first step when the Christian church comes into contact with other cultures. When the Holy Spirit brought a host of Gentiles into the early church, the Jerusalem Council was held to figure out how the two cultures could peacefully live and worship together in a community (Acts 15:1–29). Awkwardly, the new Gentile converts had to refrain from eating food sacrificed to idols. Yet, as discussed below, restrictions dealing with food consumption, table manners, worship space and location did not last long. When Paul came back to Jerusalem at the end of his so-called the “third missionary
trip” (Acts 21:15–26), and with James’ suggestion, Paul conceded to the purification law in order to please the Jews. In the same way, Peter refused to share the table with Gentiles in the presence of circumcised Jews in Antioch (Gal. 2:11–14)—even though he was the one whom God ordered to kill and eat unclean animals, and was the pioneer in reaching out to the Gentiles (Acts 10). Thus, accommodation was only a temporary solution, and not a solution for long–term mission impact.

Acculturation is another concept that is closely related to accommodation; and it is the next stage of inculturation. Acculturation is an encounter between two or more cultures; and, because of the cultural encounter, elements of one culture are picked up in another culture, and vice versa. Nonetheless, taking elements from another culture can only be done after an awareness of conflicts, dialogues and exchanges, sifting through ideas and choices, and discernment. For instance, Paul was working on acculturating dietary laws into the multicultural setting in Corinth, and social dining activities into the Jewish tradition. Internal conflicts can flare up either to preserve the so–called orthodoxy and orthopraxy (i.e., the purity laws of Jewish tradition), or to be opened up for further transformation. But, transformation demands an exchange of ideas and behaviors between two or more cultures: “Culture being made up of intercommunicating ideas and forms of behaviour, the introduction of new behaviour entails an eventual change in ideas, and vice versa…shared forms of behaviour may be interpreted differently, and a shared idea may be expressed in differing forms of behaviour.

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Whatever may be the case, behaviour and ideas cannot be separated from one another.\textsuperscript{287} As a result, there is no superior or better culture; nor is there a pure culture that exists in a timeless world; neither is there an impermeable culture.\textsuperscript{288}

After acculturation, inculturation is the next stage. Inculturation is synonymous with incarnation. The concept of inculturation was first used by a Jesuit, Fr. Joseph Masson, shortly before Vatican II (1962–1965): “Today there is a more urgent need for a Catholicism that is inculturated in a variety of forms (d’une façon polymorphe).”\textsuperscript{289} Inculturation is an implementation stage of the Christian faith. That is, inculturation is a stage at which the Gospel is inserted into different cultures: the Gospel becomes a new creation planted and rooted in foreign soils of different environments. The term inculturation was defined by Fr. Pedro Arrup in 1978: “The incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a ‘new creation.’”\textsuperscript{290} Thus, this new creation would take part in preserving and developing the evangelized culture: “People must be helped not only to preserve their culture, but to adapt it to a changed social situation. They have to be helped to realize their cultural ideals, to learn about their culture and to develop it creatively. They also

\textsuperscript{287} Aylwar Shorter, \textit{Toward a Theology of Inculturation} (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 7.

\textsuperscript{288} For detailed theories of culture, please see Kathryn Tanner, \textit{Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology, Guides to Theological Inquiry} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

\textsuperscript{289} As quoted in Shorter, \textit{Toward a Theology of Inculturation}, 10.

\textsuperscript{290} As quoted in Shorter, \textit{Toward a Theology of Inculturation}, 11.
have to learn how to enrich, and be enriched by, people of other cultural traditions.\textsuperscript{291}

Inculturation is a two-way street for the evangelizing and the evangelized culture. Inculturation used the old Feast of the Passover and then symbiotically re-expressed it into Christ’s Passion, the Jewish harvest festival into the Feast of Pentecost, and the Roman crucifixion into the symbol of salvation. Moreover, Christian inculturation in the evangelized culture is judged successful when the church becomes part of the people’s history and custom: “Meanings and motivations are transformed from a Christianized culture to a culture in course of being Christianized and vice versa. Each undergoes a reinterpretation without losing its identity.”\textsuperscript{292} Hence, inculturation is a long-term development to firmly grow the Gospel seed in foreign soils. At times, religious prayers and rites are often the top layers of the cultural soils to be examined before sowing the Gospel seed. Frequently, the cultural soils must be plowed, irrigated, and reconditioned before the Gospel can be seeded.

3.1 \hspace{.2cm} THE ANCESTOR CULT: ITS RITES AND PRAYERS

3.1.1 Incense and Lunar New Year

When it comes to religion, incensing is the foundation of rites and rituals. After establishing the Sinaitic Covenant in Exodus, Yahweh commanded the Israelites to dedicate spices and oil for the fragrant incense (Exodus 25—30). Moreover, the Leviticus tradition prescribed the ritual of sacrifices that involved incensing throughout the burnt offering: “Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house; he shall slaughter the bull as a sin offering for himself. He shall take a censer full of coals of

\textsuperscript{291} \textit{Ibid.}, 246.

\textsuperscript{292} \textit{Ibid.}, 62.
fire from the altar before the LORD, and two handfuls of crushed sweet incense, and he shall bring it inside the curtain and put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the covenant, or he will die” (Lev. 16:11–13). In addition to the Priestly tradition, incense was also part of NT worship and the eschatological vision (Luke 1:9–11; Rev. 5:8 and 8:3–4). Fragrant incensing is a way to establish one’s communication and to please the deity being worshiped.

Similarly, incense has become the tradition of the ancestor cult.\(^{293}\) It is the traditional belief that incensing establishes a line of communication between the worshipers and their ancestors, between the heaven and the earth, and between the living and the world of spirits.\(^{294}\) Fragrant incensing would create a pleasing atmosphere for the ancestors to gather, or to come home. In addition to playing the role of inviting ancestors to come home, incensing sanctifies the atmosphere or cleanses the air from the aroma of death and evil spirits.\(^{295}\) In other words, incensing provides a warm and pleasing environment for ancestors to dwell. Based on this belief, many families incense daily in the evening to keep their ancestors warm throughout the night.

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\(^{293}\) The tradition of incensing in the ancestor cult in Vietnam can be traced back to the 2nd century CE when Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam. Incensing tradition was invented at least 5,700 years ago in India, and was introduced to China, Japan, and Korea along with Buddhism. On the history of incensing, please consult Minh Dương, Nghi Lễ Thờ Cúng trong Đình, Chùa, Miếu, Phú [The Rituals of Sacrificial Worship in Pagodas, Temples, Shrines, Imperial Palaces], 49–55.


\(^{295}\) Ibid., 13.
Gradually, the practice of incensing at the family’s ancestor altar has become a custom. When children come home (i.e., for the lunar New Year holiday) after a period of studying or working away from home, they light incense sticks to greet their ancestors (even before greeting their living parents). When children are leaving home on a long journey, they pray with joss sticks to their ancestors for protection and a blessed trip. On the Eve of lunar New Year (Tết), family members gather before the altar with burning joss sticks to invite their ancestors to come home. The meaning of gathering at the family altar would go beyond establishing connection with ancestors: it reminds the living of their rootedness in their ancestors. The solemnity of the family ritual conveys a sense of gratitude for what has been received in life, and a sense of thankfulness expressed in the food offering on the altar. When family members gather around the table with their ancestors (while the joss sticks are burning), they join in solidarity with their past ancestors in living and in looking forward to the future generations. The Tết ritual has become an ethical virtue for many Vietnamese families: to commemorate the ancestors, to strengthen family bonding, and to build the next generations. To the Vietnamese, the celebration of Tết is religious (tôn giáo) in the sense of ancestors’ teaching passing down to the future generations. In the ancestor cult, to worship or to venerate means to commemorate the deeds and teachings of the ancestors. In a similar way, the Israelites celebrated their Passover Feast by remembering the salvation from Egyptian bondage—and by telling that story to their children.

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296 Ibid., 28.
297 This attitude was evident in the first generation of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States after the Vietnam War in 1975. The parents sacrificed their lives working in factories to build up better lives for the future generations.
The celebration of the lunar New Year is called Tết (meaning festival); and the significance of Tết is like a combination of Christmas, New Year, and Thanksgiving in America.²⁹⁸ It is formally called Tết Nguyên Đán; and Tết Nguyên Đán literally means the Festival of the Early Days (Đán means the Dawn) of a new Beginning (Nguyên means a new beginning). In other words, it is “the festival of the early days of a new beginning.”²⁹⁹ Annually, the preparation for the festival starts as early as the 27th or 28th of December (lunar calendar, which occurs around mid–February in the solar calendar), culminates on the last day (the 29th or 30th) of the previous year, and lasts until the 7th day of the New Year.³⁰⁰

Since Tết is a national holiday, offices and businesses are closed throughout the country for a week. The last three days of the year are more hectic than the last couple weeks before Christmas in North America. People stock up enough food for a week of family celebration, and shop for a new beginning (i.e., clothes and presents).³⁰¹ Family members

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²⁹⁹ The Tết Nguyên Đán was imported from China after the invention of the lunar calendar around 2000 BCE. Nevertheless, the estimated date for the beginning of Tết in Vietnam would not be older than the 1st century CE, and was imported along with Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Please see the historical development of Tết in Vũ Văn Khieu, Đất Lề Quê Thói: Phong Tục Việt Nam [The Habit of the Land, Tradition of the Country: The Custom in Vietnam] (Hanoi, Vietnam: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2001), 323.

³⁰⁰ Actually, the preparation for the New Year festival begins on the 23rd of December with the cleaning of the kitchen and celebrating the ascension of the kitchen god. The traditional belief teaches that once a year, on the 23rd of December, the kitchen god ascends to heaven to give a report on the family’s conduct and deeds in the previous year to the Heavenly God. To please the kitchen god, the family would make a food offering to the kitchen god before his ascension, and petition for a good report to the Heavenly God. After his ascension, the kitchen god would descend back to the family kitchen on the 30th to restart with a new year. This belief and practice were probably imported from Taoism during the 1st or 2nd century CE.

³⁰¹ Superstitiously, many Vietnamese believe that changes of new clothing (or household utensils, tools, materials) would bring a new beginning (with luck).
begin to travel home for a reunion; cleaning and dusting both at home and at ancestors’
gravesites are also carried out by family members. More importantly, family members
participate in cooking Vietnamese traditional food (i.e., traditional rice–cakes) and prepare
sacrificial offerings to ancestors (i.e., ancestors’ favorite dishes). During the Tết preparation,
parents recall the past memories with their parents, remind one another of the ancestral deeds
and teachings, and share with one another what has been going on in the past year.

On the last day of the year, the family makes a visit to ancestors’ graves for an annual
offering; and in the evening, the extended nuclear family gathers before the ancestor altar for a
meal–offering. All family members are expected to bow before the altar and say a prayer
(usually a brief thanksgiving for the past blessings, and a petition for protection and blessings
in the coming year). Then, ancestors are invited to dine with their children, and to be present
with the family in the New Year days. After the dinner, family members are gathered for New
Year blessings and presents (usually grandparents and parents bless the children and grand–
children, and the youngers wish the elders good health and long–life); and all wait for the
midnight Giao Thừa (the hour between the old and the New Year). It is believed that there are
twelve zodiac gods who take turn to guard the earthly life; and Giao Thừa is the hour when the
guarding god is exchanged. Firecrackers are lighted to make joyful noise (also to cleanse

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302 It is believed that dusting and cleaning are symbolically sweeping off the past misfortunes to
make room for a new beginning. Therefore, all family members are expected to participate in cleaning
and dusting.

303 It is unclear why offerings have to be made twice, first at the gravesite and second at the family
altar. Anyway, the offering at the gravesite would be a simple offering (i.e., fruits or a simple favorite
dish, and burnt paper money).

304 Giao Thừa also means Trừ Tịch. Trừ means the old guarding god is handing over the authority
and position to the new guarding god; and Tịch means the night hour in between the previous and the
coming of the New Year.
the air of evil spirits) saying farewell to the previous guard ing god and welcoming the new
one for the New Year, and reminding family members to put behind past misfortunes,
conflicts, and painful memories before stepping into the New Year.305

Each day of the first five days of Tết has its own schedule. A popular proverb outlines
Tết’s itinerary: “Mồng một thì ở nhà cha [The first day is at the father’s house], mồng hai nhà
vợ [the second day at the in–laws], mồng ba nhà thầy [the third day at teacher’s house].” 306
The third and fourth days of Tết are reserved for close relatives (i.e., aunts, uncles, and
cousins); and the subsequent days are dedicated to close friends. For many families, visiting
relatives could take up all five days, from the third to the seventh day of Tết. A similar custom
is carried out at the relatives’ home: visitors are to pay respect at the relatives’ family altar
with burning joss sticks; young nieces and nephews and cousins are to bow and offer wishes
to the elder relatives, of course in exchange for monetary gifts or presents; and all are to gather
for a meal, of course in the presence of the hosts’ ancestors.307 One emphasis here is that the
relatives’ ancestors are venerated just like one’s ancestors because the family lines are traced

305 It is believed that what is happening at the midnight hour (and the first day of the New Year)
will be played out in the coming year, i.e., one’s thought, attitude, and action. One superstitious belief
is not to trespass others’ home. An immoral person or someone who suffered misfortune in the
previous year, or someone who is going through mourning is to refrain from stepping into others’
homes during the last hours and the first day of the New Year. Other superstitious beliefs include
breaking glass (i.e., dish or bowl) which would bring separation, damage, or brokenness to the family;
wearing white clothes (a funeral color for family mourning) which would be an omen of mourning; or
taking out trash which would bring loss and misfortune in the coming New Year.

306 Vũ Văn Khürü, Đất Lề Quê Thói: Phong Tục Việt Nam [The Habit of the Land, Tradition of the

307 Monetary gift, lì–xì, is given in a small red envelope (red is a symbol of prosperity or luck in
Asia) to little children, i.e., cousins, nieces, or nephews.
to the same root. In addition, a similar practice is carried out on the death anniversary: children are to gather before the family’s altar, food and prayer are offered by children, and children are to pay a visit to the ancestor’s grave.

Since the practices of the ancestor cult vary from region to region, the prayers and petitions during the Tết celebration cannot be generalized. Many published prayers and rituals were Buddhist efforts in accommodating the ancestor cult. The following prayers are quotations from Buddhist literature (bracketed phrases are my translations, and bold–faces are my highlights):

Nam mô A Di Đà Phật! [Amitabha!]
Nam mô A Di Đà Phật! [Amitabha!]
Nam mô A Di Đà Phật! [Amitabha!]
Kính lạy…Ngài… [Reverently pray…god of such and such…]

When friends pay a Tết visit, the ritual of venerating ancestors would be waived, and the family meal may not happen.

When I asked my aunts and uncles and friends who practice ancestor worshiping, they all agreed that they had never followed any form of prayer when they make food offerings to ancestors. My uncles and aunts would simply ask “grandma and grandpa” (their mom and dad who were my grandma and grandpa) to have a meal with “us children,” just like when the ancestors were still around. Unlike many Buddhist prayers published in literature, prayers to deceased ancestors practiced by the masses are personalized and conversational as if ancestors are still living.

For more prayers during Tết, please consult Gia Lộc, Văn Hóa Hương: Tục Động Hương và Nghi Lễ Thờ Cúng [The Culture of Incense: The Tradition of Incensing and Sacrificial Rites], 157–196. Moreover, similar prayers were listed in Trần Ngọc Lân, Giỗ Tết Xưa và Nay [New Year Rites of Yesterday and Today], (Hà Nội, Vietnam: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2009), 123–136.

Generally, the headers of every prayer invoke all the relevant gods, for instance, the earth god and the guardian gods of the city, the righteous judges and kings and emperors in history, and the Five Officials and Five Lords. All the addressees are gods/spirits imported from popular animism and Chinese folk–religion. There are sixth lines of addressees besides Amitabha: “Ngài Kim Niên Dương Cai Thái Tú Chì Đức Tồn Thần;” “Ngài Kim Niên Hành Bình Công Tảo Phán Quan;” “Ngài Bản Cạnh Thánh Hoàng Chur Vị Đại Vương;” “Ngài Bản x stderr thần linh Thọ Địa Tồn Thần;” “Các Ngài Ngụ Phương, Ngụ Thọ Long Mạch Tồn Thần;” and “Cùng các Vị Tồn Thần cai quản trong xứ này.”

Evidently, the mentioned gods/spirits are heavily influenced by Taoism, for instance, “Tồn Thần” means “divine spirit,” “Thái Tú” means “celestial/astrological spirits/gods,” and “Ngụ Phương” and “Ngụ Thọ” means “five directions” and “five regions” (all gods/spirits from five directions and five regions). Hence, the first line, “Ngài Kim Niên Dương Cai Thái Tú Chì Đức Tồn Thần,” prays to “the
Kính lay hương linh các cử… [Reverently pray to the spirits of ancestors…]
Hôm nay là ngày 30 tháng chạp, năm… [Today is the 30th of December, year…]
Vì a tiết cuối đông, sắp sang năm mới. [On this occasion at the end of winter and stepping into the New Year.]
Tìn chủ con là……cùng toàn gia quyến. [As the head of the family, I am……and the rest of the family.]
Cư ngư tại…… [Living at this address……]
Sâm sành phẩm vật, hương hoa, đèn hương phù túa, trình cáo Tôn thần. [We prepare these offerings, fragrant incense, candles to lift up our prayers to ancestor spirits.]
Kính trước vòng linh ban gia tiên tổ chúng con là… [We respectfully invite our family ancestor spirits…]
Có phần mộ tại đây vế với gia đình cùng con cháu đón mừng năm mới. [Whose graves laid here to come and be with your children to celebrate Tết.]
Để cho con cháu phục sự trong tiết xuân thiên [Let us children serve you during this spring’s festival]
Báo đáp ân thâm, tỏ lòng biết kính. [Let us repay your kindness, and express our reverence.]
Cúi xin tôn thần, phù thủy đoán hựa. [We pray ancestor spirits for blessing and protection.]
Âm dương cách трờ, bất môn nén hương, [We are separate in spirits and bodies, but here food and drink transcending through incense.]
Biểu tâm lòng thành cúi xin chứng giám. [We ask you to witness our sincerity and thankfulness.]
Cẩn cáo! [Respectfully yours!]

Kinh lay hương linh các cử… [Reverently pray to the spirits of ancestors…]
Hôm nay là ngày 30 tháng chạp, năm… [Today is the 30th of December, year…]
Vì a tiết cuối đông, sắp sang năm mới. [On this occasion at the end of winter and stepping into the New Year.]
Tìn chủ con là……cùng toàn gia quyến. [As the head of the family, I am……and the rest of the family.]
Cư ngư tại…… [Living at this address……]
Sâm sành phẩm vật, hương hoa, đèn hương phù túa, trình cáo Tôn thần. [We prepare these offerings, fragrant incense, candles to lift up our prayers to ancestor spirits.]
Kính trước vòng linh ban gia tiên tổ chúng con là… [We respectfully invite our family ancestor spirits…]
Có phần mộ tại đây vế với gia đình cùng con cháu đón mừng năm mới. [Whose graves laid here to come and be with your children to celebrate Tết.]
Để cho con cháu phục sự trong tiết xuân thiên [Let us children serve you during this spring’s festival]
Báo đáp ân thâm, tỏ lòng biết kính. [Let us repay your kindness, and express our reverence.]
Cúi xin tôn thần, phù thủy đoán hựa. [We pray ancestor spirits for blessing and protection.]
Âm dương cách трờ, bất môn nén hương, [We are separate in spirits and bodies, but here food and drink transcending through incense.]
Biểu tâm lòng thành cúi xin chứng giám. [We ask you to witness our sincerity and thankfulness.]
Cẩn cáo! [Respectfully yours!]

high celestial/astrological spirit/god who is currently ruling the lands;” the second line, “Ngài Kim Niên Hành Bình Công Tảo Phán Quan,” to “the twelve Chinese zodiac divine judge/god who takes turn to guard the lands;” the third line, “Ngài Bản Cảnh Thành Hoàng Chư Đại Vương,” to “the city’s ruling divine spirit/god and the divine emperor who is ruling the lands;” the fourth line, “Ngài Bản xứ thần linh Thổ Địa Tôn Thần,” to “the regional god/spirit at this location;” the fifth line, “Các Ngài Ngũ Phương, Ngũ Thổ Long Mạch Tôn Thần,” to “the gods of all five directions and five lands (an idiom meaning everywhere as the Chinese often use five instead of four directions in Western geography);” and the sixth line, “Cùng các Vị Tôn Thần cai quản trong xứ này,” to “all the gods/spirits who are ruling this region.”

312 This phrase “Âm dương cách трờ” cannot be translated literally, and can only be paraphrased.
Another similar prayer includes more petitions for blessings and protection to the family on the New Year Eve (bracketed phrases are my translations, and bold–faces are my highlights):

...Nay là ngày 30 Tết [Today is the 30th of Tết...]
Chúng con cũng tổ chức gia quyến [We are gathering here as family]
Sắm sanh phẩm vật hương hoa, trà tiểu, cơm canh thình soan [We prepare these offerings, fragrant incense, tea, and plenty of food]
Phù thủy chứng giám, thụ hương lễ vật. [Witness, protect, and bless us, enjoy our offerings.]
An ninh khang thái [Security and prosperity]
Tăng phúc tàng thọ. [Increase in blessings and long age.]
Người an vạt thình, [Peace to us with plentiful harvest.]
Vạn sự hành thông. Sở cầu Như ý. [Our success in everything. Our desires and wills are met.]
Giải tẩm lòng thành cái xin chứng giám. [We ask you to witness our open and sincere heart.]
Cẩn cáo! [Respectfully yours!]

From the two prayers, there are three highlighted points. First, the offerings are meant to be “bảo đáp” (the fifth line from the bottom in the first prayer) meaning a payment or a return; but it is unclear whether the offerings are meant to be a repayment for all the caring, nursing, and raising up during young ages, or a down–payment for future blessings and protection. Second, the petitions in both prayers are for the family’s success and protection, wealth and prosperity, peace and security, good health and longevity. And third, there is no atonement of sins; nor is there any request for forgiveness of transgressions.

313 Gia Lộc, Văn Hóa Hương: Tục Dâng Hương và Nghi Lễ Thờ Cúng [The Culture of Incense: The Tradition of Incensing and Sacrificial Rites], 161–162.
314 There are similar addressees (gods and goddesses) as the first prayer.
Finally, a prayer on the first day of New Year is mainly focused on the well-being of the family (bracketed phrases are my translations, and bold-faces are my highlights):  

...Nguyên cho toàn gia chúng con [...We wish our whole family]  
Người người vui tươi tràn kiêng [Everyone would be happy and strong]  
Con cháu cắt tượng [Blessings and good fortune to us children]:  
An ninh khang thái [Peace and prosperity]  
Mong ơn Đường cảnh Thần hoàng [Waiting for our ancestors’ blessings]  
ĐốiGPCS mức Tôn thần bạn xã. [We are in debt of your spirits’ virtue.]  
Gia ăn gia phước [Grant us your favor and blessings]  
Phủ hộ đỡ trì, xã quätt ríveis [Protect and help, get rid of the past and purge danger]  
Đầu năm chỉ giữ, nửa năm chỉ cuối [From the beginning of the year till half year, from mid-year to the end of the year]  
Sự nghiệp hành thông, sờ cầu như ý [Successful business, wishes are fulfilled]  
Giải tâm lòng thành cуй xin chứng giảm [We ask you to witness our open and sincere heart.]  
Cảm cáo! [Respectfully yours!]

Here again, the same petitions are recurring in every prayer: happiness and favor, strength and health, peace and security, prosperity and good fortune.

### 3.1.2 Full-Moon Festival

Mid-August Festival is a more popular name (Tết Trung Thu) than Full-Moon Festival in Vietnam, which is another imported festival from China during the Tang Dynasty (around 650–750 CE). Mid-August Festival is celebrated throughout Asia, for instance, China,
Korea, Japan, and other Asian countries. It is a brief one day holiday equivalent to the American Thanksgiving. Family members gather to give thanks for prosperity, for birth and fertility, and of course for the loving care and protection of ancestors. For prosperity, people give thanks to the Heavenly God for favorable weather and plentiful harvest, especially protection from monsoon, typhoon, and flooding. Since agricultural products are the country’s main resources, drought and flooding could easily destroy lives; and the wellness of the people is dependent on stable weather. On this festival occasion, giving thanks to ancestors for their blessings and protection cannot be ignored. Thus, traditional moon–cakes, rice cakes, and rice–wine are offered to ancestors in thanksgiving for good health and safety.

Food and drink made from rice (i.e., rice cakes and rice–wine), which are offered at the ancestor altar and eaten during the family meal, are symbols of good harvest.

3.1.3 Wedding

Outside Christianity (Catholic and Protestant), the wedding rite is tainted with superstitions from Taoism. After a couple has met the parents, both the groom and bride to–be are subject to fortune–telling and astrology based on the hour and day of their birth. If the Chinese zodiac symbols are matched, then the couple may proceed to plan their wedding (of course the wedding date will be based on certain dates and hours selected by the fortune–teller). Usually, the engagement and wedding are scheduled on the same day, for instance, the couple is engaged in the morning and then married in the afternoon.

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319 There is a long Buddhist prayer for the Full–Moon Festival in Gia Lộc, Văn Hóa Hương: Tục Dâng Hương và Nghĩa Lễ Thờ Cúng [The Culture of Incense: The Tradition of Incensing and Sacrificial Rites], 185–187.

320 Bùi Xuân Mỹ, Tục Thờ Cúng của Người Việt [The Traditional Rites of Vietnamese People], 12–13.
On the day of the engagement, the groom and his family arrive at the bride’s family asking permission to get married. In exchange for permission, the groom’s family brings along the required presents (i.e., wine and cake for ancestral offering, and special fruits that symbolically and traditionally represent a long–lasting marriage until old age). The engagement presents (e.g., wine, cake, and fruits) are placed on the bride’s family altar. The bride’s father then lights the altar candles and joss sticks for both the bride and the groom. Both the bride and the groom then kneel before the ancestor altar and pray for permission to get married:

Hôm nay, ngày tháng năm giờ... [Today, day...month...year...hour...]. Gia chủ tại... [The groom’s residence at address...]. Có con trai tên là... [Son with the name...]. Kết duyên cùng con gái tên là... [is getting married with your (grand–) daughter with the name...]. Cuờ ông bà tại... [born of Mr. and Mrs., residence at address...].

Nay thủ tục hôn lễ đã thành [Now the marriage preparation/process is complete]. Xin kính dâng lễ vật gồm: hương dâng trái quả là theo phong tục nghi lễ thành hôn và hợp can [We are making offering with incense and fruits according to the tradition and marriage rite].

Trước linh toa Ngụ tự gia thành chr tôn linh [Before your spiritual seats on this family altar]. Trước linh vị liệt gia tiên chr chân linh [Before your names and spirits], xin kính cẩn khẩn cầu [we reverently pray you earnestly]:

Phúc tổ di lai, sinh trai có vợ [It has pleased you to give us a daughter to get married]. Lễ môn kính dâng, duyên lành gặp gỡ giai lão trâm năm, vững bền hai họ [This little offering we lift up to you for a good match and a life together till old age at hundred years old, and for a long–lasting relationship between the two families].

Nghi thật nghi gia, có con có cứu [From land to home filled with children and...]

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321 If the bride’s father has passed away, then her elder brother (along with his spouse even if he is her brother–in–law) or the father’s brother (along with his spouse) may represent her father as long as the representative is more senior in age.

322 Bùi Xuân Mỹ, Tục Thờ Cúng của Người Việt [The Traditional Rites of Vietnamese People], 15.
prosperity]. Các sát giao hòa, trông nhờ phúc tọ [lute and lyre \textsuperscript{323} are harmoniously played is dependent on ancestors’ blessing]. Cảm cáo [Respectfully yours]!

Likewise, the third paragraph calls upon ancestors to be witnesses; and the fourth paragraph gives thanks for the birth of a son or a daughter for marriage. Moreover, the fourth paragraph asks for a long–lasting relationship, for children and prosperity, and for longevity.

After the engagement rite at the ancestor altar, both families may proceed to the wedding reception. If one of the families (or both families) is Catholic, the wedding may be held at the Catholic Church after the family engagement. The family engagement before the ancestor altar is the “official matrimony” for the couple.

3.1.4 Funeral

Funeral preparation in the ancestor cult is complicated by Taoist influence, and is tainted with superstitions. When the loved one is “crashing” (or dying in clinical terms), the family brings in a Buddhist monk or a Taoist priest for the so–called “last–rite” prayers (more like exorcisms). People believe that demons and evil spirits hover over the dying body waiting to take possession. In addition to exorcism, the Taoist priest or Buddhist monk also visits the family’s home for geomancy reading, for instance, where and in what direction the deceased body should be laid. The death hour and day are recorded for divination; and the hour and day of the burial are chosen carefully to bring good fortune to the next generations. If the result of divination predicts bad fortunes for the children, the burial place is to be built in such a way so that the misfortunes could be rectified, amulets are purchased and hung at home and encased within the casket to keep the evil spirits away, and good deeds (i.e., making donations to

\textsuperscript{323} Lute and lyre are the traditional symbols of a harmonious marriage.
pagodas) are to be done to compensate for the bad fortunes. Exorcism must be carried out on everything and in every part of the funeral, for instance, the burial clothes, mourning clothes for family members, casket, hearse, burial vault, and headstone. After the burial, a mourning headband (white color) is to be worn by all family members, especially spouse and children.

In general, mourning for a parent is kept for three years; for a brother, a sister, or a spouse is kept for one year; and for other relatives is from three to nine months. In addition to proper mourning attire, there are prayers for the loss of a father, mother, spouse, and sibling to pay tribute for their sacrifices for the family: for giving birth to children, for nourishment and provision of daily living, for his or her care and love for family and children.

3.1.5 Analysis

Based on the above Văn Tế (i.e., sacrificial prayers of Tết and the wedding rite), the same recurring petitions are repeated: success and prosperity, peace and security, guidance and protection, good health and longevity.

Besides the headers mentioning gods and goddesses in Taoism and Buddhism (i.e., Buddha’s name Amitabha), the prayers are non-religious and do not address transgressions or salvation. Moreover, the sacrificial prayers were designed to be recited by family members to Gia Tô (family ancestors) at the altar, for example, “We

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325 Ibid., 485–496.
326 The same recurring themes are repeated in Full-Moon Festival’s, minor festivals’, and funeral’s sacrificial prayers. Please consult Gia Lộc, Văn Hóa Hương: Tục Dâng Hương và Nghi Lễ Thờ Cúng [The Culture of Incense: The Tradition of Incensing and Sacrificial Rites], 157–196; and Vũ Văn Khiếu, Đại Lễ Quê Thới: Phong Tục Việt Nam [The Habit of the Land, Tradition of the Country: The Custom in Vietnam], 485–496.
327 The Christian church prays similar themes weekly in its Prayers of the Church, i.e., good harvest, peace and security, guidance and protection, good health and healing.
respectfully invite our family ancestor spirits,” or “Let us children serve you during this spring’s festival.” However, it seems that the headers, which addressed other gods and goddesses including the name Amitabha, were appended to the top of every sacrificial prayer, Văn Tế. A family meal to commemorate ancestors on the occasion of Tết and other festivals was turned into an occasion proclaiming the name Amitabha and giving credence to the existence of Taoist gods and goddesses. And, the acts of bowing down and incensing to venerate ancestors before the family altar were turned into worshiping gods and goddesses when the prayers were recited. If the act of bowing to the ancestors’ altar, who are viewed as “invisible companions” of the family, is called religious worship, then would also an act of bowing to a living authority (i.e., a parent, a grandparent, or a state leader) be counted as religious worship?  

Furthermore, scholarly literature and popular practices do not view ancestors as dreadful spirits who seek revenge against their children if not being venerated or fed. The deceased ancestors are believed to be as caring and loving toward their children as when they were still alive. The sacrificing attitude of parents and grandparents in building up the future generations is evident in Vietnamese literature and popular practices. Therefore, neither the idea that children venerate their ancestors out of fear of misfortunes or punishment if they fail to take care of their ancestors is a component of the ancestor cult; nor the idea that children worship their ancestors out of selfish motivation (i.e., for the blessings and protection) is

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intrinsic to Vietnamese family value.\textsuperscript{330} Rather, the attitude and ritual bowing in the ancestor cult spring from filial affection.\textsuperscript{331} Yes, there are people in the ancestor cult who make sacrificial offerings to the wandering spirits (cô–hồn meaning orphan spirits; or yêu–tinh meaning evil spirits) out of fear of being harmed.\textsuperscript{332} However, the concept of evil (or malevolent) spirits or orphan spirits was imported from Taoism—cô–hồn and yêu–tinh were not originally parts of the ancestor cult in Vietnamese culture.

Two critical issues must be raised in regard to the recurring petitions in the offering prayers (Văn Tế). First, if the deceased ancestors have the supernatural power to bless their children with success and prosperity, peace and security, guidance and protection, good health and longevity, then the argument that the deceased ancestors are dependent on their living children to make food offerings is not consistent. In other words, the duty of the living children to make sacrificial offerings (i.e., food offerings and burning paper money or clothes) for the “survival” of their ancestors is moot. Thus, the religious argument from Confucianism and Taoism to strengthen and preserve the practices of making sacrificial offerings in the ancestor cult cannot be maintained. Moreover, the “explicit belief in an afterlife” and atonement of sins are not the underpinning reasons in the practices of the ancestor cult.\textsuperscript{333} Second, the petitions in the offerings prayers (Văn Tế) reveal more about human need for good health, security, and prosperity. Along this line of argument, the ancestor cult is not

\textsuperscript{330} Hwang, “Ancestor Cult Today,” 348–349 and 361.
\textsuperscript{331} Trần Văn Đoàn, “Nguyên Lý Sinh của Hiếu Đạo Trong Đạo Thờ Kính Tổ Tiên [The Origin and Life of Veneration in Ancestor Worship].”
\textsuperscript{332} Reimer, “The Religious Dimension of the Vietnamese Cult of the Ancestors,” 161 and 163.
\textsuperscript{333} Hwang, “Ancestor Cult Today,” 344.
religious—the ancestor cult is in every way a social and psychological bonding. At best, the ancestor cult’s prayers resembles the “prosperity–Gospel–prayers” preached by many American TV–evangelists. Unfortunately, the components that have turned the ancestor cult into a religion were imported from Buddhism and Taoism, for instance, Amitabha and gods and goddesses from Chinese folk–religion. Hence, the task of Christian evangelization to the ancestor cult must be more than tweaking prayers and fiddling with rites and rituals. The task of evangelization must be heavily focused on teaching: teaching on what properly belongs to the ancestor cult, its historical and cultural development; teaching on the reasoning and meaning of honoring and venerating ancestors, the moral ethics behind respecting and caring for both the deceased and living ancestors; teaching on the differences among Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism in relation to the ancestor cult; and teaching on the ultimate Source of ancestors, the one and only Creator from whom all things are and for whom all things exist (1 Cor. 8:6a).

3.2 Proclamation and Inculturation in the Ancestor Cult

One of the principles in Buddhism is to achieve a complete cessation of all human cravings and desires. The reason for emptying all human cravings and desires is that human cravings and desires lead to suffering and pain. However, the offering prayers (Văn Tế), which were published from Buddhist literature for Tết and other festivals, showed the contrary. Based on the petitions in the prayers, Buddhist literature seems to teach people to yearn for success and prosperity, peace and security, guidance and protection, good health and longevity. In addition, the socio–political context in Vietnam has been on a downward trajectory: corruption, consumerism, materialism, and the gap between a few wealthy officials and the
majority population has been widening in the last two decades. With this socio-political context looming in the background, appending Amitabha and other popular gods and goddesses to the sacrificial prayers of ancestral rites is an ingenious accommodation. According to the Pure Land Buddhism, salvation or achieving nirvana (enlightenment) is possible if one repeatedly calls on the name Amitabha. What could be more effective to proclaim the hope of salvation to those who are suffering and lacking protection, security, and healthcare? Thus, salvation in Amitabha is printed in every prayer and sold to the masses, and posted on social media (i.e., Facebook and blogs). The Buddhist vision is grand and effective: acclaiming and praying to Amitabha are accomplished at every festival throughout the year in every home and every place, not just in the temples.

Nonetheless, the belief and popular practices in the ancestor cult could be boiled down to two proverbs: (1) “Tai qua, năn khói [Let calamity pass, and misfortune be gone];” (2) “Công cha như núi Thái Sơn [The works/deeds of the father are as vast as Mt. Thái Sơn],334 nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra [The indebtedness of the mother is as inexhaustible as a spring]. Mốt lòng thờ mẹ kính cha [Let our hearts honor our mother and respect our father], cho tròn chữ hiếu mỗi là đạo con [Let fulfilling our filial piety be our way of living as

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334 Mount Thái Sơn (Mt. Tai) is located in south China, Shandong. It is a large mountain range.
How should Christianity accommodate the two proverbs in the ancestor cult? How difficult is it for a Christian to share with an ancestor worshiper the commandment on honoring parents, “Honor your father and your mother” (Exod. 20:1–17 and Deut. 5:6–21)? How effective would it be for the task of acculturation if Christians were to open the Bible to the places where many genealogies are recounted, both in the OT and NT? Yes, Christians too have a moral duty to respect and honor ancestors, just as Christ was incarnated into the human race according to the Matthean and Lucan genealogies: the Matthean genealogy traces Jesus back to Abraham who is the father of the Jewish race; and the Lucan account traces back to the first couple of the human race. Moreover, the desire to live in the world without evil and temptation is not foreign to Christians: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13, Luke 11:4); and the promise of protection is directly from the Heavenly God, “See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you” (Luke 10:19). Would the task of the missionaries

This moral ethic is taught in every elementary school in Vietnam. Based on this popular teaching, the ancestor cult in Vietnam does not share the same view as in China. According to Khiok–Khng Yeo, “We observe that most filial pietists do look for supernatural power in deceased parents or ancestors, for blessing, guidance, protection from evil, or forgiveness of wrongs. Much is done out of fear and bondage. Many Chinese filial pietists are living in fear of the supernatural power of the ancestors, who might punish them if they either do not worship or worship inappropriately. Others worship with manipulative motives” (Khiok–Khng Yeo, “The Rhetorical Hermeneutic of 1 Corinthians 8 and Chinese Ancestor Worship,” Biblical Interpretation 2, no. 3 [1994]: 309–310).

In general, the two proverbs would hold true in Vietnamese culture (perhaps with some exceptions in the northern regions). Lung–Kwong Lo pointed out different motivations behind ancestral worship in China: “Thus there are different motivations and understandings of the rite of ancestral worship among the Chinese. For most intellectuals it is a cultural activity which helps to express filial piety, serves the purpose of integrating the community, and has a function of moral enhancement in society. For common people it is religiously significant as a way to communicate with departed kinsmen and even has a function of pursuing blessings and avoiding curses” (Lung–Kwong Lo, “The Nature of the Issue of Ancestral Worship among Chinese Christians,” Studies in World Christianity 9, no. 1 [2003]: 36).
sound more pastoral when an ancestor worshiper hears the Lord’s Prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11 and Luke 11:3); and Jesus’ promise, “Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!” (Luke 12:24)? The emphasis here is that people in the ancestor cult feel more at home with the moral ethics in the Second Tablet, and the comforting aspect of the Gospel. Therefore, missionaries do more harm than good when the First Tablet is introduced as injunctions before the relationship with ancestor worshipers has been built.

When Christianity shares more in common than in differences with the ancestor cult, the task of proclamation should emphasize teaching and clarifying, rather than persuading and converting. For instance, missionaries should focus on clarifying the linguistic confusions: the difference in souls or spirits of ancestors versus gods or idols in relation to venerating versus worshiping. That is, the task of acculturation first requires missionaries to be in dialogue with the evangelized culture. The commitment to be in dialogue allows the missionaries to seek and understand the cultures of the ancestor cult, its historical development, and its popular practices from region to region. Besides understanding the history and the cultural practices, learning the motives behind certain practices and prayers is critical (rather than relying on Buddhist or Taoist publications). Moreover, tracing the changes in popular practices allows the missionaries to understand the impact of regional cultures, for instance, how big cities (Hanoi and Saigon) differ from the rural areas, how the southern cities (Saigon, Ben Hoa, and Thu Duc), mid–cities (Hue, Hoi–An, and Da Nang), or northern cities (Hanoi and Hai Phong) are different from one another. The reason for comparative studies is that the northern regions
and mid-regions are more influenced by Taoism and Confucianism; the southern regions are more influenced by Buddhism and Western culture (American culture during the Vietnam War); and the western regions along the borders of Laos and Cambodia are influenced by Buddhism and animism. Besides demographic impacts, socio-economic impacts cannot be ignored: the wealthy and highly educated people are less influenced by Taoist superstitions, and the poor people with less education tend to believe in animistic and Taoist superstitions, for instance, gods and goddesses in folk-religion.

When missionaries seek to understand the what’s and the why’s behind the practices of the ancestor cult, they are able to better understand the proper components of the ancestor cult, and the imported components from other religions. Then, missionaries not only will be able to teach and explain the ancestor cult with clarity, and to further implant and develop the Gospel in the seedbed of the ancestor cult, but also will be able to deconstruct the imported components in the ancestor cult. That is, the proclamation of the Gospel in the context of the ancestor cult takes on a two-pronged approach. The first prong is to deconstruct the foreign components in the ancestor cult, and to teach—in relation to the ancestor cult—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism to the masses. The reason behind teaching Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism is to help people understand what components were imported into the ancestor cult. The second prong is to further develop the cultural identity and moral ethics of the ancestor cult—through the lens of Christian teaching. That is, how will missionaries maintain the cultural identity and at the same time further develop, shape, and mold the ancestor cult so that it would be more amiable to or even compatible with the Christian faith? The ultimate goal in inculturation is the lordship of Jesus Christ: “Faith consists not in the thesis that there
are no gods, but in the confession of the true God—a confession whose result is not to deny the ‘so-called’ gods, but to overthrow them.” Nonetheless, to overthrow the so-called gods and lords in folk-religion does not mean to deny the social and family value of the ancestor cult.

During his stay at Corinth, Paul encountered Christians partaking in temple sacrifices and reclining in temple precincts eating food sacrificed to idols. To avoid idolatry and sexual immorality in the temple precincts, Paul prohibited Christian participation in sacrificial offerings (1 Cor. 10:1–22). However, regarding eating food sacrificed to idols in private homes, Paul asked that Christians need to be more sensitive to those whose conscience is weak, or to give priority to the Gospel proclamation (1 Cor. 10:23–11:1). Not only is the temple context as described in 1 Cor. 10:1–22 missing in Vietnamese culture, but also the social context described in 1 Cor. 8:1–13 and 10:23–11:1 is reversed in the ancestor cult. In the Graeco–Roman context, eating food sacrificed to idols would proclaim idols as lords of one’s life. On the one hand, in the Vietnamese context, to partake in the family table sharing the food offered to ancestors would build bridges between the two cultures, Christianity and the ancestor cult. On the other hand, to refuse eating food sacrificed to ancestors or partaking in the family meal (i.e., during Tết celebration) could project a negative witness to the

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337 Conzelmann, 1 Corinthians, 142.

338 First, Vietnamese would never view their ancestors as gods/deities, saints, or idols. Second, Buddhist temples normally do not have dining halls to accommodate social gatherings such as a wedding or a funeral like in Corinth. Furthermore, Buddhist temples normally do not allow festive gatherings; shrines and temples are places of quiet prayer and meditation. Third, food offerings are mainly brought into the temple by individual families; and, food offerings are not sacrificed and prepared in the temple precinct. While there are occasions when Buddhist temples feed the poor and the homeless, the food used in serving people would not be sacrificial food.
Christian faith. That is, refusing to eat food sacrificed to ancestors or to partake in the family meal implies that the Christian faith prohibits members from honoring and respecting ancestors. And, to dishonor or disrespect one’s ancestors is equivalent to denying one’s cultural identity, to rejecting one’s family, and to betraying one’s roots (or ancestors). These negative projections onto the Christian faith by the ancestor cult in regard to dishonoring ancestors are completely untrue and contrary to the biblical teaching, both in the OT and the NT. Nevertheless, this is what Christians proclaim to the ancestor cult when they refuse to exercise their Christian freedom (to participate in the family meal) for the sake of the Gospel.

In addition, the sociopsychological functions of the ancestor cult cannot be overstressed. Choan–Seng Song distinguished the “consciousness of the living presence of

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339 To be converted to Christianity in Vietnam is viewed as forsaking one’s cultural identity (or is viewed as not being grateful to one’s ancestors). However, Mary Yeo Carpenter pointed out a different attitude among the Chinese practitioners: “Parents are worried that if their children become Christians, they will not be provided for in the nether world. A surviving parent is also concerned that if the children do not perform the rites of filiality, the spirit of the dead parent would be restless and harm the rest of the family” (Mary Yeo Carpenter, “Familism and Ancestor Veneration: A Look at Chinese Funeral Rites,” *Missiology* 24, no. 4 [October 1996]: 507). Derek Newton’s dissertation showed a similar “reciprocal relationship” between gods and worshipers in the Graeco–Roman sacrificial offerings (Newton, *Deity and Diet: The Dilemma of Sacrificial Food at Corinth*, 212–213).


341 Even though the ancestor cult in Chinese culture differs from Vietnamese culture, Khiok–Khng Yeo came to the same conclusion: “Also, ancestor worship is a Chinese ‘gospel of love’ for the ancestors by showing respect and love for them. One has no right to criticize this practice just because it is shaped by a different culture. In fact, understanding ancestor worship from the perspectives of its cosmic, spiritual, social, and family values, one cannot but affirm and encourage its practice” (Khiok–Khng Yeo, “The Rhetorical Hermeneutic of 1 Corinthians 8 and Chinese Ancestor Worship,” 310).
the dead” in the ancestor cult from the cult of the dead.  

By analyzing Vietnamese poetry and literature on the loss of war, Song elegantly likened the healing aspect of the ancestor cult (in Vietnam) to the eschatological hope of the Lord’s Supper:

Similarly, the chief concern of the Asian mother who prepares a daily bowl of rice for her deceased son is life, not death. The tragedy of death is very much with her. She cannot hold back her tears of sorrow. Yet she tries to overcome her sense of bereavement by turning to the bowl of rice, which for her symbolizes life. That is why she visualizes her son in his full vigor and life. Her son is real and alive to her. The presence of her son, she feels, is a bodily as well as a spiritual presence….When the Asian mother fills the bowl of rice and places a pair of chopsticks beside it, she must be feeling as if she hears the sound of her son’s voice, sees his face and familiar gestures, and feels the touch of his hand. The ritual of the bowl of rice is thus not a ritual of death but a ritual of life. It is not a communion with the dead but a communion with the living. There is an insurmountable gulf separating the living and the dead. But in the communion through the bowl of rice, the barrier between death and life is overcome. It is the living mother and the living son that become united in bodily and spiritual communion.

Pastorally, spiritual communion is in every way a healing process in the ancestor cult—just like the true presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper which Christians celebrate weekly. Thus, Christian knowledge and freedom cannot disregard the grieving process of those who are practicing ancestor veneration. Moreover, there were many parents and grandparents who mourned the deaths of their sons and grandsons during the Vietnam War (1954–1975). Because of the Vietnam War, the nature of the ancestor cult in

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343 Ibid.
Vietnam has been transformed. The ancestor cult defies the Confucian societal structure: father to son, husband to wife, elder to younger, teacher to disciple, ruler to subordinate. In a Confucian society, worship can only be done by someone who is lower in status to a higher status; veneration can only be performed by someone who is younger in filial rank to an older relative. However, the ancestor cult in Vietnam refuses to make any distinction in its ritual: the language of worshiping alone does not fully represent the living presence of the deceased relative; the language of venerating alone does not fully capture the loss and love for the living soul/spirit; and the language of mourning alone does not fully express the tangible communion with the living. Neither the language of worshiping nor venerating nor mourning alone can fully be attributed to the ancestor cult. Hence, the only term that can fully capture the relationship between the deceased and the living relatives in the ancestor cult is the *communio sanctorum*, the communion among the living and deceased saints. In the ancestor cult, the deceased relatives are the “invisible companions” who guide, protect, and serve as filial bonds. Reciprocally, the living relatives serve (thờ phượng), adore (kính mến), venerate (tôn sùng), and even worship (tôn thờ) the deceased ancestors, who are the living “invisible companions.”

### 3.3 Liturgy and Catechism for the Ancestor Cult

Cultural implementation of the ancestor cult in liturgy and catechism is the last step of inculturation. This can only be done after a thorough research and analysis. The issue here is not about orthodoxy, nor is it about orthopraxy. Rather, the difficulty in implementation is due to the non–homogeneity in the practices of the ancestor cult.

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344 Other wars also contributed to transformation of the nature of the ancestor cult, for instance, World War II (1941–1945) against the Japanese, and the French Indochina War (1945–1954) against the Vietnamese Communists.
Between liturgy and catechism, liturgy is probably more difficult to implement in a religiously pluralistic culture like Vietnam, especially in the ancestor cult. On top of the non-standard and eclectic nature of the ancestor cult, ancestor worship or veneration is almost a taboo idea in the Protestant churches. The Anglican and the Lutheran are the only two Protestant churches that would come close to accepting the ancestor cult by honoring the All Saints Day. But the two church bodies, the Anglican and the Lutheran, are more or less absent in Vietnam. Besides, further research is needed to understand how the ancestor cult views the souls or spirits of the deceased ancestors. Likewise, the Christian doctrine on the souls in the afterlife is relatively underdeveloped in comparison to other doctrines.\(^{345}\) Given that the church could successfully garner more knowledge on the souls after death, how will theologians reconcile the unevangelized souls with the Christian saints? How will the church pray for the unevangelized ancestors without violating the uniqueness and universality of Christ’s soteriology? Yes, the Roman Catholic Church has developed multiple Mass settings for Tết and All Saints Day; but, the Church’s Congregation for Divine Worship left the issue of soteriology open for the unevangelized ancestors: “Remember also the faithful, our brothers and sisters, who rest in peace in the expectation of the resurrection, and the dead who can only trust in your mercy. Remember in particular our ancestors, our parents and our friends who have left this world…”\(^{346}\) Even though the issue of soteriology could be resolved biblically, how will the Christian liturgy be implemented for the ancestor cult in different

\(^{345}\) There are a few places in the Bible that mention the soul in the afterlife, for instance, the story of Saul invoking the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 28:3–25), the Parable of a Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), and St. John’s vision (Rev. 5:8–9, 6:9–11, and 8:3–4).

\(^{346}\) The Prayer for the Dead is quoted in Peter C. Phan, “Culture and Liturgy: Ancestor Veneration as a Test Case,” 424.
regions of Vietnam? Peter C. Phan raised a number of challenges in the Asian Catholic Church when Rome pushed for liturgical uniformity, for instance, the colorful costumes of the highlanders versus Roman liturgical garments, matriarchal society versus male priests, vibrantly experiential worshipers versus the somberly liturgical mood of Rome.\textsuperscript{347} In other words, how much uniformity or unity will the church impose on the local cultures? On this difficulty, Peter C. Phan rightly suggested that Christian freedom be used as the guiding principle in the mission field: “To what extent does this doctrine or practice allow Christ’s saving grace to be most effective to the greatest number of people.”\textsuperscript{348}

Along the same vein, Christian catechesis should be designed to “allow Christ’s saving grace to be most effective to the greatest number of people.” The church will be confronted on the same soteriological issues: salvation for unevangelized ancestors, the need for salvation after death, and the compatibility between the Heavenly God (of the ancestor cult) and the Triune God. The most vexing question missionaries are often asked by an ancestor worshiper is, “Are my unevangelized ancestors saved?” It is disrespectful to tell an ancestor worshiper that his or her ancestors have lost their chance of eternal salvation. In addition, the concept of sin is foreign to the ancestor cult. For an ancestor worshiper, to be a good person is all one needs (i.e., as long as one does not kill, steal, or harm anyone). To explain the concept of sin and a need for salvation to an ancestor worshiper is, at the same time, saying: “Your unevangelized ancestors are suffering in hell.” The salvation answer would slam shut the door to any conversation before the dialogue could progress to the nature


\textsuperscript{348} \textit{Ibid.}, 206.
of the Triune God. To say that salvation for those who died without confessing Jesus Christ as
the one and only Lord and Savior is in the mercy of the Triune God is not very comforting to
the people in the ancestor cult. A thorough curriculum for catechesis must be biblical and at
the same time pastorally sensitive to the ancestor culture.
4. CONCLUSION

The exegesis of 1 Cor. 10:14–22 called for a prohibition on idolatry (εἰδωλολατρία) and consumption of food sacrificed to idols (εἰδωλοθύτων) during a sacrificial offering, especially when idolatry involved sexual immorality (πορνεία). However, in the larger context of chapters 8—10, Paul was flexible and urged the Corinthians to exercise their Christian freedom to accommodate those whose conscience was weak. Since “no idol in the world really exists” and “there is no god but one” (1 Cor. 8:4), what was considered “idol” or “demon” was one’s enslaving freedom which caused those whose conscience was weak to stumble. That is, Paul warned the Corinthians not to exercise their freedom at the expense of others’ salvation—for such freedom is not true freedom but slavery to self-seeking motivation. In 10:23–11:1, Paul offered a guiding principle on Christian conduct: “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved” (10:31–33). Yes, the same principle was operative for the apostolic church in Acts (specifically in Acts 10:9–16 and 17:16–21). The key principle in the apostolic church was to exercise Christian freedom for the sake of contextualization of the Gospel.

Moving forward in time, the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols was transformed to honoring and venerating saints and martyrs. The church fathers sanctioned venerating deceased saints because the saints were believed to be the “invisible companions” of Christians. Coincidently, living in communion with the “invisible companions” was encountered in the early days of Christian mission in Asia. However, instead of deceased
Christian saints, missionaries encountered the “invisible companions” as deceased unconverted ancestors. In the ancestor cult in Vietnamese culture, the deceased ancestors are the living souls of every home, and they are the objects to whom food is offered at every festival. The pagan communal meal that was meant to be partaking with idols is now a meal with filial ancestors. But, the deceased ancestors are neither idols nor gods. The deceased ancestors were once loving parents who are now still caring parents looking after their children’s welfare and safety. And, this is an important aspect of the cultural identity which has been handed down from generation to generation in Vietnam. That is, parents are to care for and raise up children; and in turn grown up children are to care for and look after their elderly parents and ancestors. Hence, the language of worshiping, venerating, or mourning alone does not fully give an account of the ancestor cult. However, Protestant missionaries have disregarded the cultural identity of the people in the last two or three centuries. Not only have Protestant missionaries labeled the ancestor cult superstitious, but they also have expected converts to stop practicing ancestral veneration. In other words, Protestant missionaries have expected the ancestor cult to adopt the decree of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–29).

Based on the traditional teaching, which has been handed down from generation to generation (tôn giáo = the teaching of ancestors), the so-called “ancestor cult” and “food offerings” are non-religious. Hence, it is important for missionaries to identify which ritual components were parts of the cultural identity that formed the ancestor cult, and which components were imported from Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and folk-religion in China over many centuries. Specifically, the imported components from Taoism are religious
and superstitious, for example, sorcery, divination, and necromancy. The gods and goddesses
of Taoism (and folk–religion) are in every way demonic, and are foreign to the ancestor cult as
Paul would have labelled them as demons. The so–called many gods and many spirits in
Taoism (and folk–religion) seek to control and manipulate people’s lives, for instance, from
picking out a mate to selecting dates, from birth to burial. The many gods and goddesses are
the sources that buttress the socioeconomic structure of popular religions, for instance, Taoism
and animism.

Because of a host of foreign components which were imported into the ancestor cult,
the task of teaching and researching is critical for acculturation. The remaining challenges for
further research are the ancestor cult’s ritual prayers (Văn Tế) and view of the deceased
soul/spirit. In addition, on teaching, more development should be focused on the need for
salvation in light of the deceased ancestors, and on how to reconcile the differences between
the Heavenly God in the ancestor cult and the Triune God.

The apostolic principle is still operative for the Christian church in the 21st century.
Do “Gentiles” in the 21st century need to observe Christian laws and regulations before being
admitted into the Christian church? What will constitute table–fellowship in the 21st century?
Will it be doctrine, church policy, or the freedom and conscience of others? Will missionaries
in Asia impose the same regulations upon indigenous converts, especially upon the culture of
the ancestor cult in Vietnam? Missionaries with hopes of reaching the Vietnamese people
with the Gospel message are doomed to failure unless they study and understand the culture of
the people, and prayerfully remember Paul’s admonition to “become all things to all people”
in order to reach them for Christ (1 Cor. 9:22).
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