



## Christian Identity

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on 4th Sunday after Epiphany Sunday, February 3, 1991. Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

You've been invited to a dinner by an old high-school friend whom you haven't seen for 25 years. Your friend explains that she's invited about 10 other class-mates. You're looking forward to getting caught up on the lives of your old friends. After appetizers all of you are invited to sit down at the dining room table. Your host says she'd like to give thanks for the food. Since you're a Christian you think, "Great! I didn't know she was a Christian."

Before she prays, however, she shares a spiritual experience with everyone. Three years ago, she says, she had a religious experience. As a result she has been converted to Melanesian Frog worship.

"Frog worship!", you think. You're stunned! You can't believe that in this modern world people worship frogs. That explains all those frog statues in the living room. That explains the large green ceramic statue of a frog on the dinner table with an incense holder. Your host lights the incense and asks all of you to hold hands while she calls upon the Great Green Creator Bull Frog who is the source of all that is.

As a Christian, what do you do?

(a) You get up and leave saying that you feel very ill and need some fresh air. By doing this you avoid participating in the worship of other gods and no one will be offended by your seeming intolerance.

(b) You remain, but you don't bow your head. Instead you take out your date book and look through it while the prayer is being said or you quietly hum, "Amazing grace". By doing this you feel that you aren't participating.

(c) You bow your head, not wishing to embarrass your host or make a scene. You tell yourself, "I know that there's no such thing as the Great Creator Bull Frog. I know that Jesus alone is Lord." I'll pray to God, through Christ, while she prays to this false god.

(d) You get up and say loudly, "This is idolatry! I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you're all going to hell if you persist in this wickedness.

This is not very likely to happen to us but things like this happened quite often in the ancient city of Corinth. People would sacrifice chickens and pigs and goats at the various pagan temples with the hope of winning the favor of the gods. Afterwards the priests would sell the ~~the~~ meat from the temple precincts or they would give banquets. Should Christians living in a pagan society buy meat dedicated to a pagan god? <sup>After all, it was good meat at a good price.</sup> Should Christians attend these dinners where it was customary to offer some of the food to one of the Greek gods?

The intelligentsia <sup>The</sup> in Corinth <sup>in Church</sup> felt that there was nothing wrong with doing this. After all, they said, "we know that an idol stands for something that doesn't really exist. We know that there's only one God. Even if there are so-called 'gods,' and 'lords,' yet there is for us only one God, the Father, who is the Creator of all things and for whom we live; and there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created and through whom we live."

"What do you think Paul? You're an apostle. Do you agree with us?"

St. Paul's response is interesting. It's interesting, first, because of what he doesn't say. First, he doesn't say, "Don't eat meat offered to idols." He

doesn't forbid this practice. In some ways this is surprising because a few years earlier the same question had arisen. A church council in Jerusalem had ruled that Christians should not eat meat that had been offered to idols (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25).

Why didn't Paul simply quote that rule? Apparently Paul believed this was only a provisional rule. At that time in the life of the church its members were predominantly Jewish Christians who had very strong views about doing anything that might be seen as condoning idolatry. For their sakes the gentile Christians were instructed to refrain from eating meat sacrificed to idols.

But Paul doesn't lay down an absolute prohibition. He, in fact, seems to agree with those in the know in Corinth.

But if Paul doesn't prohibit the practice neither does he encourage it. He doesn't say, "Go ahead and eat this meat sacrificed to idols." He doesn't encourage the practice because "not everyone knows this truth that an idol stands for something that doesn't really exist. Some weak, illiterate Christians, recently converted out of paganism have been so used to idols that when they eat such food they still think of it as food that belongs to an idol and they feel defiled and dirty. They feel like they're participating in pagan worship."

So Paul says, "there's nothing wrong with this practice of eating meat sacrificed to idols but that doesn't mean you should participate, nor does it necessarily mean you shouldn't. Whatever you do, whether you eat or refrain from eating, do it with love in view.

How do we apply this today?

1. Like Paul, our church, doesn't lay down rules and regulations other than those which are contained in Scripture. There are churches who require

their members to tithe. There are churches that discipline members who drink alcoholic beverages even in moderation. There are churches that have rules and regulations concerning how long one's hair can be and what kinds of clothes you can wear. But Presbyterians don't lay down those kinds of rules, other than what the Scriptures forbid. "God alone is lord of the conscience and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable...."

2. And yet we recognize that there are all sorts of things which are good and legitimate in themselves which we might refrain from doing because of the consequences. What's important is not what ~~is~~ we have a right to do and what ~~are~~ <sup>are</sup> we allowed to do, but what is the best thing to do.

In everything we do we need to ask ourselves questions such as these:

Will my behavior build up another person, or will it tear them down?  
 Will it hinder or improve my friends' relationship to God? If I do this ~~thing~~  
 thing will I gain at the expense of someone else's loss; perhaps even the  
 loss of their spiritual life? May my actions perhaps even destroy someone  
 spiritually and make it impossible for them to respond to the gospel? Will  
 my action strengthen a friend or weaken them?

These are difficult questions to answer but we must? God has not given us a book of rules other than the 10 Commandments and the Golden Rule. Rather God has given us the Word of God in Scripture which shows us how God's people in the past have sought to obey God's will. God has also given us the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us. God has given us the church so that we can support one another in our decisions. Every day we're faced

with ambiguous situations and difficult decisions as individuals and as a church. What we do may either build up or tear down others.

We aren't infallible. Only God is infallible. Therefore even the best of us will make mistakes, even disastrous mistakes and bad decisions. But because of Jesus, his death and resurrection and the gift of his spirit we may be forgiven, strengthened, guided and brought back into fellowship with God's will.