

Eating and Idols: A Sermon About the Church in a Post-Christian Setting

1 Corinthians 8:1-13



I am going to begin my sermon by saying something controversial. A shift of what is called “epic proportions” has been taking place over the last several generations in Western culture: the collapse of Christendom. Christendom is the Western culture that existed after the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. For the next several hundred years, Christianity spread, sometimes by mission and sometimes by conquest. The spread of Christianity was so effective that, even after the rise of Islam and the breaking up of the church in the Protestant Reformation, it was generally assumed in the Western world that almost everyone in the culture was in some sense Christian, even if they were not necessarily committed Church members. We see this in all kinds of ways that we don’t even think about. Our calendars are dated from the year that a sixth-century monk named Dionysius Exiguus placed the birth of Jesus, which became the normal way of dating in the Gregorian and Julian Calendars. Christmas and Easter are semi-official holidays

even if some people think that the decorations on Starbucks cups are part of a “war on Christmas.” There are church buildings in most town centers, and states like Pennsylvania still have “blue laws” that place restrictions on such things as the selling of alcohol on Sundays. (You can now buy alcohol on Sunday in Pennsylvania, but apparently it is still illegal to sell an automobile or to hunt on Sunday.) Our money says “In God We Trust,” and even the New Atheists are very clear that the God they do not believe in is the Christian God. And, up until recently, most people identified themselves as belonging to some kind of Christian church – whether Protestant or Catholic.

But this has been changing. Since World War II, fewer members of each generation have been identifying as Christian, and more and more identify as “unaffiliated,” or “nones,” not spelled N-U-N-S, but N-O-N-E-S, as in “none of the above.” In recent surveys, 80% of the World War II Generation identify with some kind of mainstream Christian denomination: Roman Catholic, Evangelical, or mainline Protestant. Only 11% identify as “unaffiliated.” With the Baby Boomers, those numbers begin to shift, and the percentage of unaffiliated rises to 17%. For Generation X, 23% are “unaffiliated,” and, among “younger millennials,” 36% do not identify with any historic Christian tradition.¹

All traditional Christian churches have lost membership, including both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, but the group that has lost most is mainline Protestants, who account for 22% of the World War II Generation, but only 11% of Millennials. Significantly, “nones” are now the largest single group. While you’re more likely to be some kind of Christian than a “none” if you’re a millennial, you’re twice as likely to be a “none” as to be an Evangelical or a Roman Catholic, and you’re more than three times as likely to be a “none” than you are to be a mainline Protestant – a Lutheran, a Presbyterian, an Episcopalian or Anglican, a Congregationalist

or a Methodist. Among millennials, while some raised in Christian traditions become “nones,” the reverse is seldom the case. Those who are raised with no religious affiliation whatsoever stay that way. Growing up in a home without any religion is a good way of never becoming a member of any religious group.

I had to say earlier that this post-Christendom claim is controversial because just yesterday several of my friends on Facebook pointed to a new study that indicated that versions of Christianity that attract seriously committed Christians are not shrinking. However, I don't necessarily see a contradiction here. This could simply mean that the part of the population that was only nominally committed to Christian faith no longer sees the need to keep up the pretense.² Regardless, it appears that with each upcoming generation, a larger percentage no longer identifies with historic Christian faith.

In the last five to ten years, there has been a kind of cottage growth industry of experts who are giving the church advice about how to survive in this new post-Christendom setting. For example, the Eastern Orthodox writer Rod Dreher last year published a book entitled *The Benedict Option*, in which Dreher argues that Christians need to recognize that the dominant culture is now hostile to Christian faith, and we need to create a kind of neo-monastic Christianity whose goal or purpose is to preserve and pass on the faith to the next generation in the midst of this hostility.³ Evangelical philosopher James K. A. Smith has written *You Are What You Love*, in which he argues that post-modern secularism ultimately cannot satisfy basic human needs and that Christians need to recover a liturgical and catechetical spiritual formation that will provide a life-giving alternative to secularism.⁴ While it might seem as if Dreher and Smith are on the same page, they have engaged in a rather

public and nasty feud with one another recently with Smith strongly criticizing Dreher's new book, and Dreher saying that Smith is just angry because he didn't publish with Smith's publisher.⁵

So how might committed Christians respond to this new situation? I would suggest that St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians provides some very helpful advice. Because Paul lived 300 years before Christendom, in some ways his situation has real parallels to our own. Paul was a member of a minority Christian community trying to live within a dominant pagan culture that both misunderstood the rising new church, and persecuted it for not conforming to that dominant culture. In addition, the Corinthian church had a lot of parallels to many of our churches today. The Corinthians were mostly former pagans who were now trying to live as Christians, but still had one foot in the old pagan world, and this led to all kinds of problems. Paul's two letters to the Corinthians are largely a matter of Paul trying to sort out these problems, trying to straighten out the Corinthian mess, and explaining to the members of the Corinthian church how to live as faithful Christians in the midst of a hostile and corrupting pagan environment.

Paul seems to have had two main concerns in the first letter to the Corinthians. On the one hand, to preserve Christian identity. If the Corinthian church was to survive, it had to have a distinct identity over against the surrounding pagan culture. On the other hand, the church still needed to engage in mission to the surrounding culture, which meant that it could not simply raise the barricades or bar the doors. Each concern has its dangers. The temptation in preserving identity is that one becomes isolated from the culture, and mission disappears. The temptation in engaging in mission is unnecessary compromise with the culture, and distinct identity gets lost.

We see Paul's concern with Christian identity in a couple of places in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul deals with a doctrinal issue. He corrects a group of Corinthians who do not seem to believe in the resurrection of the dead. Paul replies, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ is not raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain." (1 Cor. 15:13-15). Then there is moral compromise. In chapter 5, Paul deals with the problem of a kind of semi-incestuous relationship of a man with his step-mother. Paul is appalled, and tells the Corinthians to cleanse themselves of this evil: "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump." (1 Cor. 5:6-7). In the next chapter, Paul addresses further questions of sexual immorality by reminding the Corinthians that their bodies belong to Christ, not to themselves: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you . . . You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6: 19-20). It is clear that, for Paul, on some issues there is no compromise. If there is some area in which following the surrounding culture will compromise the church's doctrinal or moral identity, the church must take a firm stand. (And, yes, I think it is absolutely clear where Paul would come down on the issues of sexuality that are currently dividing Western culture.)

At the same time, Paul is also concerned with mission to those outside the church. A great deal of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians has to do with problems concerning worship. There were problems having to do with speaking in tongues, and Paul wrote: "If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?" (1 Cor. 14:23).

So there is a tension that the church needs to maintain. On the one hand, over against the surrounding culture, Christian

identity must be maintained, both in what the church believes and in how it behaves, that is, the church must maintain both Christian doctrine and Christian practice. At the same time, even as the church is faithful to its identity as church, it needs to remember its mission to those outside. The church needs to be aware of how we come across to others – to those who are not the church. As the old saying goes, we should not be so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good.

And this leads us (finally) to this morning's reading. In 1 Corinthians, Paul has made clear how the church has to deal with issues where a clear gospel principle is at stake, but how should the church deal with areas of doctrinal or moral unclarity? What should we do in a situation where there is no clear right or wrong path to take? Here I think Paul might be most helpful for us today. In a sense, he is addressing the kind of disagreement I referred to earlier between Rod Dreher and Jamie Smith. Dreher's argument is that in this post-Christendom period, the church needs first and foremost to protect its own identity. The secular culture is hostile to the church, it is all too tempting to compromise with secularism, but if we do so, we will have no Christian identity to pass on to the next generation. In his own review of Dreher's book, Smith responds that Dreher's approach is alarmist, that it is based on fear rather than hope.

In this morning's passage, Paul is dealing with a problem of moral ambiguity similar to our own, not a clear-cut case of right and wrong, but of how Christians should act when living in the midst of a non-Christian environment. The practical issue for the Corinthians was that of "meat sacrificed to idols," not exactly a problem in our contemporary culture. In first-century pagan culture, there was a practice of sacrificing an animal to a deity; some of this meat would be eaten as part of a religious meal, and the rest would be sold in the meat market. Given the wide availability of this "idol meat," it could happen that a pagan might invite a Christian

over for dinner, only for the Christian to discover that the dinner consisted of this sacrificed meat. What to do? If you think this rather distant from our current setting, imagine the case of an orthodox Christian wedding cake baker or florist who is suddenly asked to bake a cake or prepare a flower arrangement for a gay wedding. Should they do it?

The Corinthians were divided. On the one hand, there was a group with firm consciences. These folks – the ones “in the know” – made the argument that, since, of course, there is only One real God, the pagan idols are not really gods. Since idols don’t really exist, it shouldn’t matter whether we eat meat sacrificed to an idol. To provide a contemporary illustration: should an orthodox Christian baker bake a cake for a gay wedding? Why not? As an orthodox Christian, the baker does not take gay marriage seriously. Why create a scandal when one is not necessary? Bake the cake.

On the other hand, there were those of more sensitive conscience. Their point of view was that to eat meat sacrificed to idols is to participate in idolatry, and a Christian cannot do that. To draw a practical contemporary illustration: for an orthodox Christian baker to bake a gay wedding cake is to participate in and implicitly to give one’s approval to gay marriage. And, as Dreher would argue, this is the one area where the church must not compromise.

Both sides had legitimate concerns, and both made a strong argument. How did Paul respond?

First, Paul urges both sides to remember to keep the main thing the main thing. Paul agrees with those of strong conscience that pagan idols do not really exist. A Jew of Paul’s time would have recited the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4, “Here, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Paul recites what has sometimes been called the Christian *Shema*: “For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’), yet

for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live" (1 Cor. 8:5-6). Paul tells his readers that food will not bring us closer to God, and we are no worse off if we do not eat or better off if we do. (If Paul were writing today, he might say that neither baking cakes nor not baking cakes will make us closer to God.)

So it would appear that Paul has sided with those of strong conscience here. There is only one God, and Jesus Christ is Lord, so idols do not really matter. (Sorry, Rod Dreher. Jamie Smith is right.) But to leave things there would be to forget what Paul had written earlier about this one Lord Jesus Christ in response to those who wanted to bring factionalism into the church by saying "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas" (1 Cor. 1:12). In response to this Christian factionalism, Paul wrote, "[W]e preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength." Paul then reminded the Corinthians, "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord'" (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

In that earlier passage, Paul's point about the foolishness of

the cross is that Christians should not imitate the world's factionalism by bringing factionalism into the church. The gospel is about the crucified Christ, not about Apollos or Cephas. Now Paul reminds those of confident conscience, those who "know" that idols have no reality, that that this person with whom they are in disagreement is a brother or sister in Christ, who has the same God as their Father, and is someone for whom Christ died. Paul reminds the strong of the foolishness of the cross. Those of strong conscience need to beware lest their "knowledge" might destroy someone for whom Christ died by forcing him or her to compromise their own conscience. Paul reminds his readers that there is something more important than being right – love: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Cor. 8:1).

Paul does something that is very unusual here, and totally "out of sync" not only with ancient culture, but with our own – he tells us to respect the conscience of someone who disagrees with us, even if we are convinced that that person is wrong. One has a duty not to force someone else to compromise his or her conscience. I may be convinced that I am right, but my moral actions have consequences not just for me, but for others, and this needs to be a factor in my choices. Again, love is more important than being right. (So, sorry, Jamie Smith, is Rod Dreher right after all?)

Finally, note that Paul does not tell the Corinthians what they should do about their disagreement, but he does tell them what he would do: "[S]inning against your brothers or sisters and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother or sister stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother or sister stumble." Paul provides the Corinthians with principles, but not specific advice or rules, and he leaves the final decision up to them.

How then might what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians provide guidance for us as we seem to be moving into a post-Christian

culture? Should we listen to Rod Dreher or to Jamie Smith?

First, I would say that Paul does not give us clear-cut advice about whether we should do things like bake wedding cakes for gay weddings. He leaves it up to us to figure out how to sort out these kinds of disagreements. However, he does provide us with some basic principles.

Second, we need to be concerned about both Christian identity and Christian mission. In issues that are genuinely connected with basic Christian faith or practice, the church needs to remember who we are, and we cannot compromise. At the same time, we need to remember that the church does not exist for itself, but for those outside the church. If there can be no mission without identity, neither can there be identity without mission.

Third, we need to keep the main thing the main thing. Christianity is about Jesus Christ crucified, what Paul calls the “foolishness of the cross.” To follow Jesus does not mean that we will never have to suffer or experience pain or discomfort. We will. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “The cross is laid on every Christian. . . . The cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”⁶

However, because the cross is the main thing, we can relax a bit about things that are not the main thing. In times of confusion and strong disagreement, we in the church need to live with a certain humility. There is something more important even than being right, and that is to love our brother and sister for whom Jesus Christ died, even if that means that we might have to let someone have their way when we are certain that we are right and they are not.

Finally, I think in the current situation that we need to be

content with a certain amount of uncertainty. In a post-Christendom setting, the church is moving into a new situation, and in a lot of areas, there might well be no clear right or wrong answers. Certainly there are areas of Christian doctrinal identity or moral practice where the church must not compromise, but otherwise, what St. Paul provides us with are not absolutely certain answers about how to live as Christians in the midst of a no-longer Christian world, but rather a few basic principles about how to be faithful to and to trust Christ, how to remember that we have a mission to those outside the church, and, finally, how to be patient with and to love our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ even when we think they have got it wrong, because like us, they too are those for whom Jesus Christ has died.

1 For the source of the statistics, see Michael Lipka, "Millennials increasingly are driving growth of 'nones'"; <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/millennials-increasingly-are-driving-growth-of-nones/>.

2 For the new study that claims that at least some kinds of churches are not losing members, see Landon Schnabel, Sean Bock, "The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion: A Response to Recent Research," *Sociological Science* (Nov 2017), vol. 4, 686-700; https://www.sociologicalscience.com/download/vol-4/november/SocSci_v4_686to700.pdf. Schnabel and Bock claim: "Rather than growing irrelevance of religion in America as suggested by the secularization thesis, rising secularism is solely a function of the decline of moderate religion . . ." (p. 692).

3 Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017).

4 James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016).

5 James K. A. Smith, "The new alarmism: How some Christians are stoking fear rather than hope," *The Washington Post* (March 10, 2017); <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/03/10/the-new-alarmism-how-some-christians-are-stoking-fear-rather-than-hope/>; Rod Dreher, "The Benedict Arnold Option," *The American Conservative* (March 10, 2017); <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/benedict-option-benedict-arnold/>.

6 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 99.