

NT TEACHING ON DIETARY LAWS

Are they abolished or not?

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The following are my notes on various NT Scriptures that are related to eating food and keeping (or not keeping) the dietary laws of Torah. Most are often used by traditional Christianity as “proof texts” that the dietary laws of the Torah no longer apply. However, a careful and unbiased look at the context of each of these Scriptures make it hard to come to such a conclusion. The primary passages addressed in these notes are:

- Matt 5:17** Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law.
- Mark 7:18-20** Thus Jesus declared all foods clean.
- Acts 10:9-29** Get up, Peter, kill and eat... do not call anything impure that God has made clean.
- Rom 14:14** Nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.
- 1 Cor 8:1-8** Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.
- 1 Cor 10:14-32** All things are lawful... Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question.
- Acts 15:19-21** Gentiles... abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.
- Eph 2:14-15** [Jesus] abolishing in His flesh the law with its commandments and ordinances.
- Col 2:16-23** Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink.
- 1 Tim 4:1-5** Some will depart from the faith... who require abstinence from foods.

MATT 5:17

Based on Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, it doesn’t seem that Jesus would have advocated anyone breaking *any* of God’s Torah:

Matthew 5:17–19

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

By “law and prophets”, He is referring to the Torah and the Books of the Prophets. In essence He is referring to the entire set of Scriptures (what we call the Old Testament). And it appears He is teaching that even the least of the commands in these Scriptures are to be obeyed. Later He would tell his disciples:

John 14:15

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

and still later Paul would write to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 11:1

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Our call as disciples is to imitate the Messiah and to keep his commands. From all we see in Scripture, Messiah kept the Torah. He never broke it. He entered into the rabbinic debates of the day, and disagreed with some regarding man-made laws and traditions of Jewish life (**halachah**). He even argued against and at times broke with some of those traditions. But Scripture never indicated that Messiah broke any command of God. How could He, if He were to be the perfect Lamb of God, one who knew no sin, to be sacrificed on our behalf? This is the Messiah we are to imitate. And he teaches us to keep even the least of the commandments.

Years later, Paul would write instructions to his young disciple, Timothy, a Gentile pastor in Gentile Asia Minor, and give him this reminder:

2 Timothy 3:16–17

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Even Paul, writing to Gentiles, makes it clear that all Scripture (ALL of what we call the Old Testament, which is the only Scripture they had at the time) is to be used for teaching, rebuking, correction, and training. No doubt, Paul was convinced that all believers should follow all the Torah, just as he did, and just as the Messiah did.

With that as a preface, we will now examine several passages that have to do with dietary questions. While most Christians today would argue that the dietary laws of Torah are not applicable to Christians today, it will become evident that this position cannot be justified based on Scripture.

MARK 7:18-20.

Mark 7:18–20

And he said to them, **“Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?”** (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, **“What comes out of a person is what defiles him.**

This passage starts with the question from some of the Pharisees about Jesus’ disciples don’t follow Jewish tradition regarding hand-washing before they eat bread (NASB correctly translates “bread”). Jesus responds by saying God’s commands are more important than man’s traditions. He accuses the people of following their traditions even when it means rejecting God’s commands. Then He goes on to teach that being clean is about clean on the inside, not about what’s on the outside. The bread they ate with “unclean” hands didn’t make them unclean. It’s what on the inside and comes that makes one unclean. There was never any discussion about eating pork or shellfish here. They were talking about eating bread with hands that were not ceremonially washed.

Regarding the phrase “Thus Jesus declared all foods clean”, the Greek simply says “all foods cleaned” or “all foods purified.” The KJV and NKJV are more accurate translations with: “thus purifying all foods”. “Jesus declared” is not in the original text at all.

See the [NIV Appl. Comm.](#):

The masculine nominative participle, “cleansing” (*katharizon*, with an omega), would modify the verb “he says” in [7:18](#). A well-attested variant reading, however, has a nominative neuter participle (*katharizon*, with an omicron).¹³ It is the hardest reading and may be the best.¹⁴ It would affirm that the food has somehow become clean in the process of its elimination. This reading has two things to commend it. It would help explain why such a dramatic pronouncement from Jesus that declared all foods to be clean was not cited to settle the later debate over this issue in the churches.¹⁵ Jesus’ explanation does not explicitly declare that all foods are clean, only that they somehow come out clean.

Furthermore, the statement fits the rabbinic perspective on defecated food. According to the *Mishnah*, excrement is not ritually impure though it may be offensive.¹⁶ This surprising judgment may be the key to Jesus’ argument. With a droll twist Jesus argues that if food defiles a person, why is it not regarded as impure when it winds up in the latrine—at least according to the tradition of the Pharisees?

Also see [JNTC](#):

Thus he declared all foods ritually clean, even if the participants at the meal have not washed their hands. But Yeshua did *not*, as many suppose, abrogate the laws of *kashrut* and thus declare ham *kosher*! Since the beginning of the chapter the subject has been ritual purity as taught by the Oral *Torah* in relation to *n’tilat-yadayim* (vv. 2–4&N) and not *kashrut* at all! There is not the slightest hint anywhere that **foods** in this verse can be anything other than what the Bible allows Jews to eat, in other words, *kosher* foods. Neither is *kashrut* abolished in Ac 10:9–28 or Ga 2:11–16; see notes there.

Rather, Yeshua is continuing his discussion of spiritual prioritizing (v. 11&N). He teaches that *tohar* (purity) is not primarily ritual or physical, but spiritual (vv. 14–23). On this ground he does not entirely overrule the Pharisaic/rabbinic elaborations of the laws of purity, but he does demote them to subsidiary importance. See Yn 7:22–23&N on the halakhic process of assigning ranks to potentially conflicting laws. Yeshua here is making Messianic *halachah*.

The Greek text at this point is a dangling participial clause, literally, “cleansing all the foods.” There is no “Thus he declared”; I have added these words for the sake of clarifying the one meaning I believe this passage can have, namely, that it is Mark’s halakhic summary of Yeshua’s remarks (see Section V of the Introduction to the *JNT*, paragraph on “The Translator and His Interpretations”). However, some believe this phrase is not a comment by Mark but part of what Yeshua himself said and render it: “a process which cleanses all food.” According to this understanding, Yeshua is explaining that the body’s ordinary digestive process makes all foods clean enough to be eaten, so that handwashing is of minor importance and the *P.rushim* shouldn’t be giving it so much attention. Conclusively against such a rendering is that it suddenly puts the focus on hygiene instead of ritual purity, which is the topic of the rest of the passage. It does not answer the halakhic *sh.eilah* (“question”; see Mt 22:23N) about ritual purity posed by the *P.rushim*, because food can have in it not a single germ and yet be ritually unclean.

Moreover, the nominative masculine form of the Greek participle “*katharizôn*” (“cleansing”) agrees grammatically with “*legei*” (“he replied,” literally, “he says”) in v. 18, so that on the basis of the linguistic evidence it makes better sense to suppose that “cleansing all the foods,” like “he replied,” is a comment by Mark and not part of what Yeshua said.¹

So it could be that Jesus was saying that food becomes clean when processed by the body, or it could be that Jesus said “thus all food are clean”, but in the latter case it cannot be construed to mean that “all” includes prohibited food. Jesus was teaching that any and all **allowed** food would not be made unclean by not properly washing one’s hands. They were talking about bread (or more generally any food that Jewish people would be permitted to eat) that was eaten with unceremonially washed hands. The issue of eating unclean foods such as pork or shellfish was never a consideration in this passage.

ACTS 10:9-29

This is the passage of Peter’s vision, where he sees all the clean and unclean animals coming down in the sheet, and God says, “**Get up, Peter, kill and eat... do not call anything impure that God has made clean.**” The vision itself is recorded as follows:

Acts 10:10–14

And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: “**Rise, Peter; kill and eat.**” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.”

The traditional interpretation is stated clearly in [TNTC for Acts](#):

The effect of the vision was thus to announce to Peter that the distinction made in the Old Testament between foods that were ‘clean’, and therefore fit for human consumption, and those that were unclean, was now cancelled, so that in future Jewish Christians could eat any food without fear of defilement... There need be no doubt, therefore, that at some early point, Peter and other Jewish Christians came to see that they could eat any kind of food and ignore the Old Testament ruling on the matter which was no longer valid.

Not all commentators have been able to see the relevance of the dream to Peter’s immediate situation, and some have been tempted to treat the dream allegorically, as declaring all *men* clean, so that Peter need not be afraid of going to a Gentile household. This allegorical interpretation is forced and artificial...²

The commentator totally misses the point of the vision, although it became obvious to Peter, and is also stated clearly in Scripture:

Acts 10:28

And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but **God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.**”

For a more accurate Messianic perspective, see [JNTC](#):

¹ Stern, D. H. (1996). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Mk 7:19). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

² Marshall, I. H. (1980). *Vol. 5: Acts: An introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (197). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Kefa was still puzzling over the meaning of the vision he had seen Kefa's mind was still on the vision. What could it possibly mean? Would God, who established his covenant with the Jewish people and gave them an eternal *Torah* at Mount Sinai, and who is himself unchangeable (Malachi 3:6), change his *Torah* to make unclean animals *kosher*? This is the apparent meaning, and many Christian commentators assert that this is in fact the meaning. But they ignore the plain statement a few verses later which at last resolves Kefa's puzzlement, "God has shown me not to call any person unclean or impure" (v. 28&N). So the vision is about persons and not about food.

God has not abrogated the Jewish dietary laws. Yeshua said, "Don't think that I have come to do away with the *Torah*" (Mt 5:17–20). The specific issue of whether Yeshua abolished *kashrut* has already arisen at Mk 7:19&N; the conclusion there is that he did not. In Kefa's vision the sheet lowered from heaven contained all kinds of animals, wild beasts, reptiles and birds; yet I know of no Bible interpreters who insist that eagles, vultures, owls, bats, weasels, mice, lizards, crocodiles, chameleons, snakes, spiders and bugs must now be considered edible. God specifies in Leviticus 11 what Jews are to regard as "food." Later, the way in which the laws of *kashrut* fit into the New Covenant is clarified for Kefa and for us (Ga 2:12b&N, 14b&N).³

Bruce in [NICNT Acts](#) writes:

Unclean animals could not be used for food at all, and even "clean" animals had to be slaughtered with ritual propriety before their flesh could be eaten. Peter's protest against the divine injunction took verbal shape much as the prophet Ezekiel's protest had once taken when he was commanded to prepare and eat "abominable flesh" (Ezek. 4:14): "No, Lord; I have never eaten anything profane or unclean," said Peter (with the implication: "and I am not going to begin now").¹⁸ Back came the heavenly voice: "You must not regard as profane what God has cleansed." Three times over this interchange took place; then the sheet went up with its contents and the vision dissolved.⁴

Notice that in the vision Peter did not eat the unclean animals. God did not make him eat the unclean food. Neither did God make Ezekiel eat bread cooked on human dung in Ezek 4:14. In both cases, God's people (Ezekiel and Peter) knew what God's law allowed and what it didn't allow. The boundaries God drew were clear to them. God was in effect saying to them, "*I am the one who sets boundaries. I am the one who says what is clean and what isn't clean... What God has made clean, you are not to call unclean.*"

Like most commentators, we can ponder the meaning of the vision. But fortunately God in His word makes clear the meaning of the vision. God said "*What God has made clean, you are not to call unclean.*" Did God ever call pigs and snakes and reptiles clean? I don't find that in Scripture anywhere. Peter is simply told, via a vision, that whatever God calls clean, Peter is not to call unclean. It would very soon become clear to Peter, and to the other Jewish believers as well, that this would refer to Gentiles.

At first Peter was "inwardly perplexed" as to the meaning, but immediately he received the call to go to the home of the Gentile Cornelius. He goes, and immediately "he gets it" - at least part of it. He is welcomed by a crowd of Gentiles, but he knows God has sent him and prepared him:

Acts 10:28–29

And he said to them, "You yourselves know how **unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation**, but **God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean**. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me."

The Mishnah says, "*The dwelling places of Gentiles are unclean.*" (m.Oholot 18:7). "To this day, traditional Orthodox Judaism hold that food prepared by a Gentile without Jewish supervision is not to be regarded as fit for eating, even if it is otherwise biblically fit food." (*Holy Cow*, Hope Egan, p.113)

Peter understood the vision. He didn't say anything about eating spider, snakes, pigs, or reptiles. It was clearly about associating with Gentiles. It is true, however, that the Jewish ceremonial cooking traditions were not observed in the Gentile household, and if Peter was to eat with them, the food would not be prepared accorded to Jewish

³ Stern, D. H. (1996). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 10:17). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

¹⁸ Peter might no doubt have slaughtered and eaten one of the "clean" animals; but he was scandalized by the unholy mixture of clean animals with unclean. This is especially important in view of the practical way in which he had immediately to apply the lesson of the vision.

⁴ Bruce, F. F. (1988). *The Book of the Acts*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (205–206). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

custom. But nothing would indicate that Peter ate prohibited food. There is a difference between not following Jewish tradition and not following God's Torah. This was one of the points of Mark 7.

But did God call the Gentiles "clean"? Look what happens in the next verses:

Acts 10:44–48

While Peter was still saying these things, **the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.** And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, "**Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?**" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

Now Peter understood the rest of the vision. God not only called him to teach to the Gentiles, but God was calling the Gentiles clean. He gave them the same Holy Spirit that He gave Peter and the others at Shavuot. When news of what happened spread, the Jewish believers were upset and called for an explanation. Peter's explanation is to recount the vision and explain how God called the Gentiles clean, by giving them His Holy Spirit:

Acts 11:17–18

If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "**Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.**"

The point of the vision became clear not just to Peter, but to the other Jewish believers as well. There was never a discussion about eating forbidden food. That topic wasn't even on the table! The vision was about people. The point was that God decides what is clean and what isn't. And He was about to invite the Gentiles to be grafted into His Kingdom.

ROM 14:14

Romans 14:14

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

The context of this verse is as follows:

Romans 14:1–6

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. **One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.** Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

This passage is about the strong and the weak, but who are these groups of people? The [NIBC Romans commentary](#) states:

Who were the "strong" and "weak"? We cannot know for certain, but it appears that the weak refer to Jewish converts who continued to accept the yoke of the law, whereas the strong were largely Gentile Christians whose faith freed them from the law. **This identification has been challenged** by some recent interpreters who note that first-century Jews were not forbidden from eating meat and drinking wine. While this is true, we know from 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 that many Jews and Jewish Christians living in the Diaspora avoided eating meat for fear that it had been sacrificed to idols, which would violate the first commandment (" 'You shall have no other gods before me,' " Deut. 5:7). They also may have avoided wine for the same reason, since it may have been used in libations to pagan deities. Or it may have been a practical way of separating themselves from the excessive drinking, carousing, and orgies common in Gentile regions.⁵

⁵ Edwards, J. R. (1992). *New International Biblical Commentary: Romans* (318). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

I would also challenge that the weak refer to “Jewish converts who continued to accept the yoke of the law” and the strong were the “Gentile Christians whose faith freed them from the law”. Tim Hegg in his excellent commentary on Romans, prefers this analysis of the two groups:

Mark Nanos (*The Mystery of Romans*) has made another suggestion, one that I think fits the context and the message of Paul. He suggests that those weak in faith are the Jewish members of the synagogue who had demonstrated a genuine faith in the God of Israel, but who were still in the process of being convinced that Yeshua was the promised Messiah. Their genuine faith had been demonstrated within the community but they were still considering the evidence regarding whether Yeshua was, in fact, the promised Messiah of that faith. In one sense, the genuine character of their faith would be confirmed by their confession of Yeshua as Messiah, but until that time came, they could not be charged with faithlessness. Their faith was weak only in the sense that it was not as strong as it would be when they fully espoused Yeshua.

Thus, these who were not yet confessors of Yeshua may have held more strictly to the Oral Torah of the sages, Oral Torah that the followers of Yeshua had come to realize was, in some cases, to be discarded in favor of unity with the non-Jewish members of The Way. For while a clear distancing from idolatry was to be the perspective of all those who were God’s children, the Sages had built fences which actually separated Jew from non-Jew on the basis that all non-Jews were suspect of idolatry. This simply could not “work” in the emerging Messianic congregations, where a growing majority of Gentiles were being added on a regular basis. Yet for those who had not yet confessed Yeshua as Messiah, their allegiance was still to the prevailing *halachah*. Rather than separate from their Gentile brothers, they chose the more difficult road of eating no meat at all for fear that it might be contaminated by the pagan, idol cults. They were willing to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle in order to remain within the community.

Yet it appears that the followers of Yeshua, perhaps the majority of whom in the Roman synagogue were Gentiles, instead of appreciating the extra efforts these Jewish members were exerting for the sake of unity, were accusing them of failing to measure up to the full maturity that was available in Yeshua. It seems to me that this scenario, while not without its difficulties, best fits the context as well as Paul’s admonitions.

In the final analysis, what is important is that the two groups refer to two groups of believers. One group wants to stay far away from meat and wine because in the Gentile culture where they live (Paul is writing to the Romans in Rome), it would have been nearly impossible to buy meat that was prepared according to Jewish tradition. Furthermore much of the meat would have been dedicated to the gods in some way. And sacrificial meat was regularly sold in the market place. The sacrificial meat and the wine would have had clear associations with pagan festivals and orgies such as the guild feasts that regularly took place. One group of believers built a large “fence” and said we will never partake of those things. Another group of believers said nothing here breaks Torah, so it’s OK. We can drink wine and eat meat without breaking God’s commands, so what’s the big deal? Paul writes and says, each must decide in his own mind what is right for him. But don’t judge another in these cases where it is not a matter of breaking God’s law.

The important point to keep in mind in studying this passage is that nowhere is the breaking of God’s Torah implied. We are talking about people who eat meat and drink wine, as opposed to people who are pure vegetarians. We would making in assumptions far beyond the Text to think that “meat” referred to prohibited foods such as pork or shellfish. There is no reason at all to assume that, based on this passage. The “anything” in Rom 14:2 should be taken to mean “any food”. Prohibited animals were never considered be edible. They were not food for God’s people. This is further justified in vs. 6, where the contrast is between one who eats and one who abstains, referring to one who eats meat vs. one who is a vegetarian. And in vs. 21, where Paul clearly specifies he is referring to eating meat and drinking wine as what is causing others to stumble:

Romans 14:21–22

It is good not to **eat meat or drink wine** or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.

Verses 2 and 3 deserve special attention, since this entire chapter is often misinterpreted, and these two verses really identify the main point of the discussion. Tim Hegg’s comments cannot be improved upon:

It seems quite probable that some Jews who were still in the process of being convinced that Yeshua was the Messiah were being torn by the issue of idolatry as it was being defined by the majority rule of the Sages. Did eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol constitute idolatry itself? Could one eating such meat be guilty of idolatry, an offense that drew the karat (cutting off) penalty? Paul’s halachah did not reason so. Since idols are, in reality, nothing, then they could in no way effect the meat that was offered to

them. For Paul, intent was of utmost importance in these issues. Surely if one was participating in the idol ceremony itself, this showed intent to commit idolatry. But to simply eat, and perhaps unknowingly eat, meat that had been in the pagan temple court could not be considered idolatry. (See his explanation in 1 Corinthians 8-10.)

However, there apparently were those who were not so easily convinced. If the Sages were saying that eating meat procured by Gentiles constituted idolatry (since all Gentiles were suspect of participating in idol worship), and if those weak in faith still considered the Sanhedrin to be their primary ruling authority, then the safest thing to do when living and eating among Gentiles was not to eat meat at all. What is more, such a stance would convince the outsiders that these Jewish followers of Yeshua had not abandoned their ties with the wider Jewish community.

On the other hand, Gentile believers who formerly had no ties to the halachah of Sanhedrin, or at least minimal ties, could easily discount the additional halachah of the Sages' "fences" as superfluous in light of the overwhelming victory won by Yeshua against all forms of darkness. Idols were nothing (1 Cor 8:4; 10:19). Since their conscience was clear in matters of eating meat that may have come from the common market (after all, it conformed perfectly with the written Torah), they felt no compulsion to give it up. Moreover, the Master Himself had taught that in some cases, the traditions of the elders had caused the Torah of Moses itself to be neglected (e.g., Mk 7:6-8). Given that Paul had no problem eating meat that had been handled by Gentiles, it makes sense that Gentile believers who had no connection to the traditions of the Sages in this matter would have felt clear in their conscience to disregard the more stringent measures enacted by the rabbis.

Thus, Paul requires that both groups receive each other, and that neither hold the other in contempt. And the reason he makes such a requirement is clear: "God has received him." In other words, to reject a brother on these grounds is to put oneself above the authority of God Himself, for He has received both the one who abstains from meat (because he cannot be sure if the meat had been handled by Gentiles and thus suspect of being offered to idols), and the one who eats meat (because he is not concerned whether the meat came from the common market because he believed idols to be nothing, cf. 1 Cor 8:4; 10:19).

But I hasten to say again, both parties received the Torah and its laws concerning clean and unclean as the unmovable foundation for halachah in the first place. When verse two states "One person has faith that he may eat all things...", the "all things" must be understood within the context of the discussion, and thus as including both meat and vegetables as over against the other person who, in good conscience, could only eat vegetables. The controversy raged, not over issues of the written Torah, but over the additional regulations imposed by the Sages in their attempts to interpret and implement the Torah. While Paul clearly taught the need to establish the Torah (Rom 3:31), he was not concerned to establish all the rulings of certain Sages, even if they did represent the majority opinion. He was no doubt concerned that such a position would hinder the inclusion of the non-Jews as they strove to become full-fledged participants in the Jewish community of faith.

Now let's look at verse 15 and examine what Paul meant when he said "*nothing is unclean in itself*"?

Romans 14:14-16

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that **nothing is unclean in itself**, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.

We know that Paul cannot be saying "anything goes". Paul cannot be throwing out *all* of God's commands here, and saying there is no sin unless you think it is sin. God has a law, and God defines sin. God's commands are clear and not to be broken. So if that is a given, Paul here must be talking about activities which are not breaking God's commands. This makes sense in the context of this passage, where what is under discussion is drinking wine and eating meat of questionable origin. This meat, even if involved in idolatrous ceremony, is not intrinsically unclean. Prohibited animals however, are by command of God, not allowed as food.

Tim Hegg's commentary on Romans has an clear analysis of this verse:

Here is a statement of the Apostle Paul which, if taken out of context, and without reference to the whole scope of the Apostle's life and teaching, could be (and has been) sorely misinterpreted. Wresting the phrase "nothing is unclean of itself" from its context, some have interpreted Paul to be teaching the abolition of the Torah with its distinctions between clean and unclean (**t'horah** "clean"; **tamei** "unclean"). Cranfield is representative of this thinking:

He [Paul] is indicating his own agreement with the basic position of the strong, namely, that the fact that Christ's work has now been accomplished has radically transformed the situation with regard to the ceremonial part of the OT law: now it is no longer obligatory to obey it literally—one obeys it by believing in Him to whom it bears witness.

Stern is no better when he tries to explain the passage from the viewpoint that the ceremonial aspects of Torah are not for the Gentile:

Since the laws of ritual purity apply to Jews only, the statement that nothing is unclean in itself should suffice to free any Gentile whose conscience still bothers him in regard to such matters. As for Jews, even in rabbinic Judaism most of the purity laws gradually fell into disuse (see Encyclopedia Judaica 14:1412).

Stern's last comment disregards all clear indications that purity laws not only maintained among 1st Century Judaism, but was one of the primary concerns among the Sages.

But did Paul actually teach here that the Torah has been modified or abandoned regarding the laws of clean and unclean? To hold such an interpretation one must presume Paul was lying in Acts 28:17 when he is reported as saying:

... Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans.

Paul affirms emphatically that he had not transgressed even the "customs of our father," which not only includes the specific commands of Torah, but also the interpretations of this Torah by the Sages. That this overarching statement must include the laws of clean and unclean is certain.

In addition, Paul must have agreed with the words and teachings of Yeshua that not even the least commandment of the Torah would be done away with (Matthew 5:17-20). To understand him here as teaching that the ceremonial laws of the Torah have been suspended or abolished is to fly in the face of Yeshua's explicit teaching.

Once again, we must keep in mind that the primary focus of the Apostle in this section is how varying "opinions" (v. 1) over disputed matters are causing division within the community at Rome. In the context, those who were not willing to eat meat did so, presumably, because they were not certain that the meat being offered was "clean" according to their standards. The issue at hand, then, was to what extent the current halachah of the Sages should be accepted as an absolute in determining clean and unclean. If the Sages ruled that meat purchased from a Gentile was unclean, did this in fact make it unclean? Was meat obtained from the public market to be considered unclean? Paul clearly says "no." The definition of clean and unclean comes from Torah, not from man. Therefore, any meat declared edible by God should not be ruled unclean by man. It is on this basis that Paul emphatically declares that nothing is unclean in and of itself. That is, if God has declared it clean (and therefore edible) it should not be otherwise considered. That this viewpoint is correct will be seen in v. 20 where Paul includes the word "food": "Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean..." Paul's point must be that everything that qualifies as food (i.e., everything God permits to be eaten) is clean.

Yet there were apparently those in the synagogue at Rome who still, to one measure or another, held the Oral Torah as binding in the matter of food prepared by or eaten in the presence of Gentiles. In their opinion on the matter, they would rather forego eating meat at all rather than risk violating the prevailing rabbinic halachah. Paul does not want those strong in faith to coerce those weak in faith through pressure of rejection. Rather, he wants each person to be fully convinced in his own conscience as an exercise of genuine faith.

What is more (and perhaps this was Paul's greater worry), if those who are weak in the faith leave the congregation because they are wounded in conscience over matters of opinion, they likewise leave the place where the gospel of Yeshua is taught and lived out. It must be in this context that Paul gives the warning "For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Messiah died."

It is also important to look at the Greek word for "unclean" that Paul uses in Romans 14. He uses the word **koinos**, which means "common", not the Greek word **akarhartos**, which means "ritually unclean". Lancaster in *Holy Cow* (p.114-115), explains it well:

In Jewish estimation, any food that had been offered to an idol or as part of an idolatrous feast was regarded as “common”. The Greek word is **koinos**. It means common, vulgar, or profane. This is not the same as saying that it was ritually unclean in the biblical sense. The Greek word for biblically, ritually unclean is **akathartos**. The Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, translated ritual uncleanness as **akathartos**. It is critical that we understand the difference between these two Greek words.

Koinos: common. When used in reference to traditional Jewish dietary law, it refers to otherwise biblically fit food that man or tradition has rendered unfit for consumption.

Akathartos: unclean. When used in reference to Jewish dietary law, it refers to the meats that the Bible has declared unclean and forbidden.

The word **koinos** (common) does not refer to impurity as defined by the Torah. The word **koinos** is reserved to apply to things made unfit through contact with idolatry or with Gentiles. Therefore, in Greek, pork would be **akathartos**. Wine poured out to an idol would be **koinos**.

In Romans 14:14, Paul says he is convinced that “nothing is **koinos** in itself”. Lancaster continues (Holy Cow, p.116-117):

Unfortunately, this passage is almost universally misapplied to laws of clean and unclean animals as if Paul said that “nothing is unclean (akathartos) in itself.” He did not. He did not use the Greek equivalent for “unclean,” he used the equivalent for “common.” There is a huge difference between the two. His statement that “nothing is unclean in itself” is completely unrelated to the laws of clean and unclean animals. It is a question of whether or not food is permissible when it might potentially have been offered to an idol.

In summary, this passage does not teach that God’s commands regarding dietary restrictions are no longer applicable. It is addressing believers who are abstaining from certain food – that, by definition, would be **allowed** meat, and wine, because they want to avoid breaking the Jewish traditions of **halachah**. Paul is saying, as Yeshua did, that the traditions of man should not nullify the commands of God. We should not let our traditions about food preparation, or our concerns about the origin of the food, prevent us from fellowshiping with other believers. Instead we are to walk in love, and understand that these things which are not specifically commanded by God are matters of conscience and personal opinion.

1 COR 8:1-8

1 Corinthians 8:1-8

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—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. However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. **Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.**

As verse 1 clearly states, this passage is concerning food offered to idols. In these verses we find many of the same elements of Paul’s teaching that we see in Romans 14. There were always questions about how believers should live in a Gentile world, especially when Gentiles were now coming to faith in Messiah as well. Not only do the new Gentile believers not practice Jewish traditions and **halachah** (regarding food and all matters of life), they also bring with them pagan influences and associations from their culture and past life. Idol worship, guild feasts, and associated sacrifices were a regular part of life. It was impossible to buy and sell at the market without paying tribute to the god of the market place. Animals that were butchered commonly had blood dedicated to the god of the marketplace before it could be sold there. These things in their culture were so integrated with their lives that it was hard for them to know what was in conflict with God’s Torah. Paul was addressing these issues.

1 Corinthians 8:8-9

Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

In the context of the passage, Paul is teaching that whether food has been sacrificed to idols or not, it really doesn’t really matter. Later (in Chap 10) he addresses the issue of participation in idol sacrifices, and how wrong that is.

But at this point he is only addressing the issue of food, and saying that it really doesn't matter what happened to food. What's more important than whether you eat the food or not, is what the impact of that is upon your brother, and whether it causes him to stumble in his faith.

It is interesting that in this passage, as in Rom 14, the weaker brother is the one who does not eat the meat sacrificed. The one who is stronger has the full knowledge of truth, but needs to show love and give up his "rights" for the good of the one with less knowledge.

There is really nothing in this passage that should lead one to conclude that the God's prohibition on eating certain animals is no longer valid.

1 COR 10:14-32

1 Corinthians 10:14–22

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

This context of this passage is that Paul is admonishing the believers to live morally pure lives. This section deals with fleeing from idolatry. Paul is teaching that it is wrong to participate in idol worship and in the sacrificial meals to the idols. Eating food sold in the market place, however, even if it had been associated with idol worship was not a problem. Again we see the same theme as in Rom 14 and 1 Cor 8. It doesn't really matter where the food came from. The food itself won't defile a person. Believers are not participate in idol worship, but eating food sold in the marketplace is OK, even if may have been dedicated to an idol or associated with idolatrous ceremonies.

Just like our participation by eating the bread and drinking the wine in the Lord's supper makes us one with Him, in the same way those that partake of idolatrous meals are communing with demons. This cannot be. It's not that the food itself is defiled, but rather it is the activity that is wrong. Believers cannot participate in these feasts.

1 Corinthians 10:23–24

"All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

In this statement, Paul is recalling something he has stated before:

1 Corinthians 6:12–13

"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be enslaved by anything. "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food"—and God will destroy both one and the other.

Contrary to popular interpretation, this verse isn't necessarily something Paul is quoting as true. Paul is quoting a Corinthian philosophy that says "all things are lawful to me". Paul is not saying that for himself all things are lawful. in fact he is countering their philosophy with opposing statements. The [NIBC commentary on 1 Cor.](#) has a interesting and probably correct understand of these verses:

Perhaps the best way to follow Paul's imaginary conversation with the Corinthians in these diatribe-style verses is to set out the lines of verses 12–13a in the form of a drama:

Corinthians:	"Everything is permissible for me";
Paul:	but not everything is beneficial.
Corinthians:	"Everything is permissible for me";
Paul:	but I will not be mastered by anything.
Corinthians:	"Food for the stomach and the stomach for food";
Paul:	but God will destroy them both.

The Corinthians' slogan literally says, "All things to me permissible." This is a remarkable claim, and they may have learned this statement from Paul himself, for he never denies its validity; rather, he qualifies the idea with his arguments. Beyond the generic notion of everything, Paul initially mentions food, which will

become the subject of detailed discussion in later chapters of the letter. For now, one should know that in antiquity many meals were served in pagan temples, and often the food itself was from the sacrifice(s) offered to a pagan god or goddess. In this connection, some Corinthians must have maintained that it made no difference what or where they ate.⁶

It is in this context that Paul goes on to say:

1 Corinthians 10:24–29

Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. **Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience.** For “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, **eat whatever is set before you without raising any question** on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience?

Paul is saying, “Don’t make a big deal of what happened to the food, because it is not important in God’s eyes.” But if someone tells you it has been associated with idols, then don’t eat it, not because it is defiled meat, but because it apparently matters to the one telling you, and it’s better to not eat it than to risk causing the weaker brother to stumble, as he taught in 1 Cor 8.

But what about verse 27: “If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, **eat whatever is set before you...**” Does this include pork and shellfish, for example? It is quite possible that both would be a part of the normal gentile diet.

Bruce in the [NICNT of 1 Cor](#) writes:

In a similar way Paul addresses the other kind of eating available to someone in the Greco-Roman world (apart from the temple meals, which functioned for them as “restaurants”)—invitations to someone else’s home.³¹ In this case there is no question as to the source of the invitation. It comes from one of the “unbelievers.”³² As he has already implied in 9:20–22, the acceptance of such invitations is perfectly legitimate (another place where he would be treading on sacred Jewish traditions³³); it depends on whether “you want to go.”⁷

Spence in the [Pulpit Commentary on Acts](#) notes that Paul’s teaching is in contrast with Jewish teaching, which forbids such interaction with Gentiles around their table:

The rabbis decided very differently. “If,” said Rabbi Ishmael, “an idolater makes a feast in honour of his son, and invites all the Jews of his town, they eat of the sacrifices of the dead, even though they eat and drink of their own” (‘Avodah Zarah,’ fol. 18, l).⁸

The context of Paul’s teaching is clearly focused on eating meat that may have sacrificed to idols. Nothing is said about eating animals that have been prohibited by God. However the question remains open, since Paul says eat whatever is before you. It is possible, and even probable, that pork was a part of the common diet for the Gentiles of that region.

It is possible, therefore, that Paul could be saying that in certain situations there is a greater law than eating kosher. That law is the law of love toward your neighbor. As we know, the Jewish rabbis were continually debating over

⁶ Soards, M. L. (1999). *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (129). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

³¹ As Findlay, 867, observes: “When one buys for himself, the question arises at the *shop*; when he is a guest of another, it arises at the *table*.” Paul’s point is that neither location is a legitimate place to inquire about the origin of the food.

³² Gk. ἄπιστος; see the discussion on 7:12.

³³ See, e.g., the story of Peter in Acts 10:9–23, and esp. 11:2–3; cf. the haggadah in *t.Abod.Zar.* 4.6: “R. Simeon b. Eleazar [late 2nd c. A. D.] says, ‘Israelites who live abroad are idolaters.’ ‘How so?’ ‘A gentile who made a banquet for his son and went and invited all the Jews who live in his town—even though they eat and drink their own [food and wine], and their own waiter stands over them and serves them, they nonetheless serve idolatry, as it is said, and one invites you, and you eat of his sacrifices (Ex. 34:15).’ ”

⁷ Fee, G. D. (1987). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (482). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

⁸ *The Pulpit Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (325). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

the priorities of the various laws. There were times when you could not keep both. Were you to work on the Sabbath if it meant helping your neighbor? If it meant saving a life? If it meant rescuing your neighbor's animal from a pit? Which has higher priority, loving your neighbor, or keeping the Sabbath?

Matthew 12:9–13

He went on from there and entered their synagogue. And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse him. He said to them, “**Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.**” Then he said to the man, “**Stretch out your hand.**” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other.

Jesus also quotes the passage about David and his men eating the bread from that only the priests were allowed to eat.

Mark 2:23–27

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields, and as they made their way, his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. And the Pharisees were saying to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And he said to them, “**Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?**” And he said to them, “**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.**”

The fact that Jesus prioritized saving a life over not working on the Sabbath does not negate God's command to keep the Sabbath. Nor does the fact that Jesus and his men picked grain to eat on the Sabbath negate God's command to keep the Sabbath. Just like the fact that in God's eyes it was OK for David to ate the bread reserved only for the priests, and that did not negate God's law about the bread being solely for the priests. In this case, it could be that Paul is teaching that for the sake of your witness among the Gentiles it is best not to let God's dietary laws prevent you from associating with them. This does not negate God's dietary laws for his people. But Paul is saying, don't ask questions about the food; just eat whatever they put before you. If it comes up, then don't eat it. But don't let the food interfere with your opportunity to interact with them. “Love your neighbor as yourself” in this case takes precedence over the dietary prohibitions.

So it makes sense that Paul finished this section by saying:

1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, **do all to 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, **that they may be saved.** Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Once again, it should be stated that nowhere it is implied that the dietary laws are not in affect. Nowhere does Paul teach that prohibited animals are to be used as food. It would have been inconceivable for the Jewish believers to buy pork at the marketplace. This would have contradicted God's Torah. Believers would not have prepared a meal consisting of food that was prohibited by God. This passage, like others, has a specific teaching purpose. In this case, the teaching is that is OK to eating meat sold in the marketplace, regardless of its origin. And that it is wrong for believers to participate in idolatrous ceremonies and feasts. There is no Scripture here to justify questioning the assumption that food refers only what God has classified as edible. The only qualification to this is in the specific case of being invited to a Gentile's home for a meal. In that case, you are to eat whatever is put before you, without question, unless it is of concern to someone else at the meal. This does not negate God's dietary laws, but it prioritizes the application of the dietary laws under God's law of loving your neighbor.

ACTS 15:19-21

This is the passage about the Jerusalem Council ruling with respect to what they would require of new Gentile believers. Their conclusion is often used to say that this is the only part of the Torah that Gentiles were required to follow:

Acts 15:19–21

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”

The chapter starts out with Paul and Barnabas teaching the believers in Antioch, some of whom were Gentile believers. Trouble started when Jews from Judea came to Antioch and began saying that the Gentiles must be circumcised – in effect, that they must convert to Judaism and then follow all the Jewish traditions and **halachah**.

Acts 15:1–2

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, there were some Pharisees who agreed that these Gentiles needed to convert to Judaism:

Acts 15:5

But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

So the core issue of this entire passage is whether or not Gentile believers need to convert to Judaism or not. After much discussion, Peter asks:

Acts 15:10

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

Jesus said my yoke is easy and my burden is light, so what is the yoke that Peter says they and their Jewish fathers have never been able to keep? [Stern in the JTNC](#) provides the answer:

So then, if the “yoke of the commandments” is not burdensome, what is Kefa talking about? He is speaking here of the detailed mechanical rule-keeping, regardless of heart attitude, that some (but not all!) *P.rushim*, including, apparently, the ones mentioned in v. 5, held to be the essence of Judaism. This was not the “yoke of the *mitzvo*” prescribed by God, but a yoke of legalism prescribed by men! The yoke of legalism is indeed unbearable...⁹

Tim Hegg (*The Letter Writer* p. 244) states:

Rather, the yoke they are unwilling to place upon the backs of the Gentile believers is the yoke of man-made rules and laws that required a ceremony to “get in” and submission to untold number of intricate **halachot**. Indeed, the layer upon layer of rabbinic additions to the Torah had made the whole matter a burden and had even at times clouded the very purpose of the Torah. It was this burden the Apostles were unwilling to place upon the Gentiles, a burden every proselyte would have been expected to bear.

In the end, they agree to require only the following four things of these new Gentile believers:

Acts 15:19–20

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the **things polluted by idols**, and from **sexual immorality**, and from **what has been strangled**, and from **blood**.

These were to keep them set apart from their culture. All four were related to pagan worship. They were keep unstained from the pagan activities of their culture. These were the minimal signs of repentance necessary to welcome Gentiles into the fellowship of believers.

This is repeated in their message delivered to the people of Antioch, the only difference being that “things polluted by idols” is more clearly defined as “what has been sacrificed to idols”:

Acts 15:28–29

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from **what has been sacrificed to idols**, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.”

Hegg (*The Letter Writer*, p.251) argues that these four things are really parts of one general requirement – abstaining from things related to pagan temple worship:

⁹ Stern, D. H. (1996). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 15:10). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

Thus rather than listing four separate categories of prohibited practices for Gentiles, the four requirements describe a single category – the pagan temples and their rituals. And though idolatry would naturally be considered outside the scope of a believer’s life, what the Apostles are calling for was conformity to the additional rabbinic **halachah** that pertained to idolatry – the “fences” not found in Scripture but necessary in the realm for inclusion into the Jewish community.

If the **Mishnah** gives us a picture of the 1st Century rabbinic viewpoint then we can see that fences had been built to guarantee a clear separation between the synagogal community and the idolatry of the Hellenistic culture in which it existed. The Apostles were willing to lay this “burden” upon the believing Gentiles in order to preserve them from any accusations of idolatry, something that could have never been tolerated in the wider Jewish community.

But when we speak of pagan temples and their rituals we must remember that in great measure these were seen as cultural and social institutions and not merely as religious ones. For instance, the local pagan temple often served as the bank for individuals as well as the state and were the locations for all manner of political issues. For Gentiles who had been born and raised in the idolatrous culture of Greece and Rome, a great many aspects of family and community life centered around the local temples. Could the believing Gentile continue to participate at these temples and even join in political, family and community events without actually participating in idolatry? Could they eat there without giving their allegiance to the god or goddess to whom the meal was dedicated?

From a cultural standpoint there were doubtlessly believing Gentiles who thought they could, especially since meals were eaten in the courtyard and not in the temple itself. Since the idol was housed in the temple, participation in the courtyard events could have been viewed as separated from idol worship and therefore permissible. But how “close” could one get in one’s participation without actually being involved in idolatry? This was a question that must have concerned the Jewish community as they welcomed more and more Gentiles in.

And it was this very issue that Paul addresses when he makes it clear that one cannot eat at the “table of demons” and the “table of the Lord.” In making this comment Paul is simply implementing the Jerusalem Council’s edict. It was not as though Gentiles could escape contact with idol worshipers and even with pagan temples. But how could they continue to live in the Gentile society while at the same time demonstrating to the Jewish community that they were not participating in the idol worship of their culture?

That much of the general day-to-day activities within the Roman and Greek society involved the local temple meant that the Gentile believers needed to commit themselves to extra precautions to assure their Jewish brothers that they had forsaken all aspects of idolatry. The four prohibitions listed by the Council were given to do just that.

Let’s now examine briefly each of the four items:

1. “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols”

This phrase is only one word in the Greek (εἰδωλόθυτος “eidolothytos”). It could also be translated “*meat offered to idols*”. It is used 9 times in the NT, and always in the context of eating food **at a pagan temple**. By using this word, they were not restricting the Gentiles from buying food at the marketplace, or eating food in a Gentile’s home, even if it may have been associated with idolatrous practices. Thus, this requirement is not in conflict with Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor 8 and 1 Cor 10. Hegg (*The Letter Writer* p254) writes:

And since the Jewish community generally suspected Gentiles of continuing in their former idolatry, it was necessary for the Apostles to make clear rulings on the matter and thereby negate all suspicions. The Gentile believers could not eat a meal in connection with the pagan temples... Of course there were meals and activities in the temple precinct that had nothing to do with the idol housed inside. Even these, it would appear, were off limits for the Gentile believer, because to participate in such eating would have raised questions in the Jewish community as to whether they had actually forsaken their former idolatrous ways.

Note that this requirement is not a command from Torah, but a requirement of **halachah** – a ruling or application giving instruction on how to live a godly life in their culture. Torah forbids idol worship, but this requirement has to do with eating food associated with that worship.

2. “abstain from blood”

Hegg (*The Letter Writer*, p.254) notes this:

This does not refer to eating meat with blood (which is taken up in the next prohibition), but rather to the ingestion of blood itself, something not uncommon in idol rituals. Whether or not the common person drank the blood of the sacrificial victim is not certain, but there is evidence that the priests did. From a Jewish perspective, to participate in a ritual in which the representative priest drinks the blood of the sacrifice is to participate in the same abominable act. Of course, the torah itself prohibits eating blood (Lev 3:17, 17:12), but the Apostles required the Gentiles to distance themselves from any ritual in which blood was ingested and/or improperly used. Such a thing was simply too abhorrent for the Jewish community.

So it would seem that while this prohibition is also found in the Torah, the implication here is that it restricts the Gentiles from not just drinking the lifeblood of an animal, as the Torah states, but from any part of idolatrous rituals involving the use of blood, which would have been a common activity in their culture.

3. “abstain from things strangled”

This is not a prohibition from Torah. The only thing close is the command not to eat blood. There is nothing in Scripture which describes how an animal is to be killed. The Jewish people reasoned that an animal killed by strangulation would not be properly drained of blood, and so established this ruling as a fence around the law not to ingest blood. In the pagan cultures of those days, there would have been a significant probability that animals were killed by strangulation. Philo, who lived during the time of Messiah, describes pagan sacrifices in this way:

They prepare sacrifices which ought never be offered, strangling their victims, and stifling the essence of life, which they ought to let depart free and unrestrained, burying the blood, as it were, in the body.¹⁰

How does this prohibition fit with Paul’s writing in I Cor 8-10? Hegg (*The Letter Writer*, p.255) argues that Paul’s teaching is in total harmony with the Council’s ruling:

Paul argues that an “idol is nothing” [1 Cor 8] and his subsequent words have been taken to mean that meat offered to idols is allowed as long as no one is offended by it. But in the larger context it is clear that Paul maintains the Council’s decision by emphasizing the need for believers not to participate in the meals served at Pagan temples. [1 Cor 10:20]

His admonition to flee idolatry [1 Cor 10:14] is surely to be understood as a warning not to participate in the pagan temple rituals. But his willingness to allow meat to be eaten without questioning where it was slaughtered must be seen as an attempt to stop the uncontrolled piling up of **halachah**. For the meat he was specifically talking about is that purchased in the market, not the pagan temple. Perhaps people argued that some meat in the market was actually from the pagan temples. But Paul is not willing to make additional **halachah** over and above that sanctioned by the Jerusalem Council. Where would it end? How could one be sure whether the meat was from the pagan temple or not?... In the end we can only conclude that Paul prohibits meat known to have been from the pagan temple, but allows meat from the market place even if its origins are not known. He clearly continues the Council’s prohibition against any participation in idolatrous rituals.

I would add that Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor 10 specifically makes exception for what is offered to a believer when eating *in the home of an unbelieving Gentile*. In this case Paul says, don’t ask questions about the origin of the meat - just eat what is offered unless somebody makes a point of telling you it was associated with idolatry.

4. “abstain from sexual immorality”

The Greek word is *porneia*, and covers a wide range of prohibited sexual activity. Quoting again from Hegg (*The Letter Writer*, p.257)

The word *porneia*, however, is associated with the pagan temples where temple prostitutes were common. So notorious was temple prostitution in Corinth that the coined phrase “play the Corinthian” meant to engage in sexual promiscuity.

Surely the Apostles wanted to make it clear that participation with temple prostitutes was outside of the realm of the holy life expected of believers. Joining oneself to a prostitute was to negate God’s ownership of each and every child called by His name. But this prohibition goes even further. The Apostles wisely prohibited any connection with the temple rituals that utilized temple prostitutes, including any kind of support or participation in any service that included temple prostitutes, seen or unseen. Such distancing would telegraph the reality that Gentile believers were no longer participants in their former life of idolatry.

¹⁰ Philo, o. A., & Yonge, C. D. (1996). *The works of Philo : Complete and unabridged* (628). Peabody: Hendrickson.

In the end, the four prohibitions each attach to an aspect of the pagan temple, and require the believing Gentile to conform to the current halachah of the Jewish community with respect to all matters of idolatry. While it was both impractical and even impossible to prohibit the Gentile believer from any contact at all with the local temple (since it was the bank and the place where certain legal transactions took place), the prohibitions given to the Gentile believers required them to submit to Jewish **halachah** as a way of demonstrating a complete break with their former idolatrous life. While they might have occasion to be in the temple precincts, there to demonstrate their exclusion from all idolatrous worship and ceremonies that they were “new creations”. There was to be no doubt that they had forsaken the God’s of their fathers and turned to the One God of Israel.

Having examined all four prohibitions, we see that they can all be associated with living free of idolatry and such associations with pagan temple worship practices. These prohibitions are not a subset of four Torah commands, and should not be viewed in any way as replacing Torah, or reducing or eliminating some of the commands of God for the Gentiles. These prohibitions were applications, **halachah**, of Torah which provided specific instruction on how the Gentiles were to live in their pagan environment, and yet be accepted as members of the Jewish believing community.

This is why there is no mention of any of God’s commands in Torah. It is expected and understood that believers in YHWH will follow all of his commands. How could it be otherwise? There is no mention made of any of God’s commands, such as do not kill, steal, covet, etc, yet clearly these commands would be expected to be obeyed. Therefore, this passage cannot be used to negate any of God’s commands in His Torah. **It does not imply that pork or other prohibited animals may be eaten.** It does not even imply that circumcision was not required.

Regarding the issue of circumcision, it must be remembered that the term was not used just to signify the act of cutting, but rather it was used to refer to the entire process of converting to Judaism. The fact that the Council did not require the Gentiles to be “circumcised” means that they did not require them to undergo the ritual process of converting, which would mean becoming totally Jewish and taking upon themselves the entire yoke of Judaism with all its traditions and halachah – a yoke that Peter argues neither they nor their Jewish fathers were able to bear.

I would argue that these early Gentile believers probably were indeed later circumcised, in obedience to the Torah. But not as a part of Jewish ritual conversion – only in obedience to God’s commands. It is interesting to contrast Paul’s discussion of circumcision with Titus and with Timothy. In the case of Titus, Paul writes:

Galatians 2:1–5

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. **But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek.** Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

Paul writes of “forced” circumcision, something that was going to be done as a requirement, to convert Titus to Judaism. Paul resists this move, in an effort to preserve their freedom in Christ. The mystery of the Gospel, according to Paul (Eph 2) is that Gentiles together with Jews have become partakers of the Messiah. Gentiles don’t have to undergo “circumcision” (that is, ritual conversion to embrace the traditional yoke of Judaism). They were given the Holy Spirit (Acts 10) and made clean by God, accepted based on their faith, just as the Jewish people were.

So with Titus we have a case of Paul resisting forced conversion (labeled as circumcision). With Timothy we have a different scenario. Here Paul has Timothy circumcised:

Acts 16:1–4

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. **Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him** because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.

It is extremely interesting that this passage in Acts 16 comes immediately after the decision of the Council in Acts 15. So right after the Council makes its ruling about not requiring circumcision of Gentiles as conversion to Judaism, the very next thing that Paul does, as he is delivering the decision of the Council to the churches in Asia Minor, is to have the half-Gentile disciple named Timothy circumcised. This circumcision, then, is not to be seen as

a ritual conversion to Judaism, but rather simply as the act of circumcision itself. It was in obedience to the Torah, so that Timothy would be accepted by the Jewish community, and seen as one who was obedient to Torah, even though not a Jewish convert.

Perhaps there is a similarity with circumcision of the believers then, to our baptism today. We typically don't require a new believer to immediately understand and follow all the command of God, including baptism. We expect that in time, as the believer matures and comes to a deeper understanding of God's Word, he will choose to walk in obedience to these commands. At some point we expect that new believer to be baptized in obedience to God's commands. But we don't expect or require it of someone as a prerequisite for acceptance into the believing community. With time, they will understand, and will act accordingly, as they are taught His word and follow the example of other believers.

This ties in with the last verse in this passage, which I believe is crucial to putting the ruling of the Council into proper perspective:

Acts 15:21

For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.

While there are many viewpoints about the meaning of this verse, the straightforward reading is simple to understand and makes complete sense in the context of this passage. The reason for their ruling, the Council says – the reason that they are not requiring more, that they require only these four things, is that there exists in every city those who follow the Torah. These believing Gentiles, no matter where they live, will be part of a believing Jewish synagogue community where they will the Torah read every Sabbath, and where they will see examples of believers who are living out the Torah in their lives, obedient to the commands of God. Therefore, the Council reasons, while we are only requiring these four minimal prohibitions for these new believers, we know that with time, because of the exposure they will have to the Torah every Sabbath, and because of the example of those who proclaim the law of Moses in their lives, they will grow in their understanding and obedience. They will mature in their faith. They will choose to obey the whole of Torah as they are taught and understand His Word.

Lancaster (*Holy Cow*, p. 121) discusses Acts 15:21 verse this way:

[Paul's] words mean exactly what they say. The Torah is read in the synagogue every week. At this early time in the development of the Messianic faith, the believers were still assembling within the synagogues and meeting in homes. Not until Paul moves his House of Study out of the Corinth synagogue and into the next door house of the Gentile Titius Justus do we see a change of venue where believers assemble outside of the local synagogue – and that does not happen until Acts chapter 18. At the time of the Jerusalem Council, Jewish and Gentile believers were still assembling in the local synagogue every Sabbath. And in those synagogues, the Torah was read every week.

So regarding the question of Gentile believers and their obligation toward the written Torah, James says that Gentile believers will hear the Torah. They will hear it read aloud every week. They will hear it preached every week. The obvious expectation is that hearing it read and hearing it preached will lead to doing it. Given time to hear and study, the Gentile believers will eventually learn the ways of the People of God. But to require observance of them prior to their salvation and their participation in the Kingdom is putting the cart before the horse.

EPH 2:14-15

The NIV translated Paul's words about the Messiah in this way:

Ephesians 2:14–15 (NIV)

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by **abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.**

The NLT translates it this way:

Ephesians 2:14–15 (NLT)

For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. **He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations.** He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups.

If Paul taught this - that Jesus abolished the law with its commandments and regulations - then his teaching contradicts the very words of Jesus himself, who stated clearly that he did not come to abolish the law:

Matthew 5:17-19

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; **I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.** For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus came to correctly interpret the Torah, not to misinterpret it. Even the least of the commands should be taught, according to Jesus. Before we assume that Paul is contradicting Jesus, we should carefully the Eph 2:15 to make sure we have the best possible translation. It is too easy for today’s translators to allow preconceived notions and traditional teachings to influence how they interpret Scriptures, and therefore to influence wording choices which may not correctly reflect the original text, as is the case in many translations of this verse. The ESV has a more accurate translation:

Ephesians 2:14-18 (ESV)

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility **by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances**, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

The key is to understand what exactly it was that Jesus abolished. We start by looking at a word-for-word translation from the Greek:

“For he is the peace of us, the (one) making both one, and the dividing wall of partition having broken, the hostility in the flesh of him, the law of commandments in decrees having abolished.”

So in the Greek it doesn't really say “abolishing in his flesh the law with all its commandments and regulations”. Unfortunately the NIV provides a rather loose translation of this verse. The operative clause here is “the law of commandments in decrees (Greek *dogma*) having abolished.” So what law was really abolished? It doesn't seem like it was the Torah in general here. It specifically says the law of commandments in decrees was abolished. So what decrees would Paul be talking about? The Greek word here is *dogma* usually translated “decree” or “ordinance”; here the NIV translates it “regulation.”

One way to get a handle on what this word means is to study the context of its usage in other places. The Greek *dogma* is used in four other places in the NT:

Luke 2:1

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.

Acts 16:4

As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.

Acts 17:7

and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.”

In these three passages the Greek *dogma* is used to refer to enactments by ruling authorities - either Caesar or the religious leaders. So it could be that what Paul is referring to in Eph 2:15 are enactments of Jewish religious authorities that separated Jews and Gentiles. Before exploring that further, however, we should mention the only other NT passage using the Greek *dogma*:

Colossians 2:13-14 (ESV)

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Note that for Col 2:14 the NIV again provides a somewhat inaccurate translation: “having cancelled the written code with its regulations”. Such a rendering leads readers to associate the Torah with the written code, and to conclude that the Torah with *all* its regulations was cancelled. However, the ESV captures more accurately the intent of Col 2:14 which speaks of *our record of debt* being cancelled. Our sins were cancelled, forgiven

completely, through Messiah's death. God didn't eliminate our debt by cancelling the Torah, he eliminated the debt by sending a perfect, unblemished Lamb to make a complete and lasting sacrifice on our behalf. Because of our sins, we fell short of complying with the many legal demands/regulations/enactments (*dogma*). In this case one could argue that it was God, through his Torah, who put in place certain enactments (*dogma*) of which we have fallen short.

In all cases it seems that the use of dogma refers to enactments put in place by leaders or authorities (Caesar, Jewish leaders, and even God Himself). So the question is, regarding Eph 2:15, what enactments were abolished?

The context makes this fairly clear. Paul is reminding the Gentiles how they used to be apart, separated not only from Messiah but from the Jewish people.

Ephesians 2:11–13

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, **called “the uncircumcision”** by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time **separated** from Christ, **alienated** from the commonwealth of Israel and **strangers to the covenants** of promise, having no hope and **without God** in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who **once were far off** have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Why were they separated? Because God's chosen people were Jewish. To be a part of God's chosen people, one had to convert to Judaism. There were Jewish laws (enactments / **halachah**) which prevented the association of Gentiles with Jewish people. Recall what Peter said when he first came to the house of Cornelius:

Acts 10:28

And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.

The Jewish **halachah** had put huge barriers between Jews and Gentiles. Furthermore, in the temple court itself, there was a barrier wall, called the “**soreg**”, which was a physical barrier to Gentiles. Gentiles could enter the outer court area of the Temple, but they were prohibited by law (an enactment by Jewish religious leaders) from crossing the boundary of that dividing wall. Josephus (who lived during the time of Christ) writes that there 13 signs located along the entrances through the **soreg**. The [Anchor Bible Dictionary](#) states:

An enclosure or barrier (Gk *druphaktos*; Heb *soreg*) surrounded the inner sanctuary beyond which gentiles were forbidden to go. Tablets written in Greek and Latin were apparently placed at thirteen entrances on the low parapet that marked the boundary to the area specifically reserved for Jews; the tablets warned non-Jews not to enter (Joseph. *JW* 5.5.3; 6.2.4; *Ant* 17.11.5; cf. *m. Mid.* 2.1–3). Two tablets with a Greek inscription have been found, a complete one in 1871 (Clermont-Ganneau) and a fragment in 1935 (Iliffe). The complete one reads “**No foreigner is to enter within the forecourt and the balustrade around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death**”

In Acts, Paul was accused of taking a gentile, Trophimus the Ephesian, into the temple, presumably meaning that they passed from the court of gentiles through the enclosure (Acts 21:28–29). Around the court's perimeter were porticoes; it was probably in one of these porticoes that, according to gospel tradition, Jesus overturned the money changers' tables (Matt 21:12; Mark 11:14; Luke 19:45; John 2:15).¹¹

So it is evident that Jewish **halachah** included enactments, created by Jewish leaders and not explicitly stated in Torah, which created barriers separating the Gentiles from the Jews, and in effect separating them from the God. It seems that this is what Paul is referring to in Ephesians 2:11-22. Notice the direct reference to the **soreg** (the dividing wall) in 2:14:

Ephesians 2:14–16

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the **dividing wall of hostility** by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one

Gk Greek

Heb Hebrew; Epistle to the Hebrews

Joseph. Josephus

JW Josephus, *The Jewish War* (= *Bellum Judaicum*)

Ant Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* (= *Antiquitates Judaicae*)

cf. *confer*, compare

¹¹ Freedman, D. N. (1996). *Vol. 2: The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (963). New York: Doubleday.

new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Paul says that through Christ this dividing wall was broken down. The enactments of men (not the Torah, but rather man-made Jewish laws that forced a hostile separation between Jews and Gentiles) have been abolished. Through Messiah the two have become as one, making peace and unity where there used to be separation and hostility. Paul goes on, in subsequent verses to the say that now, because of Messiah, we all have access through the same Spirit to the Father. Gentiles are not longer strangers and aliens, but members of the household of God, just like the Jewish people. We are joined together, as part of the same structure, with Messiah as the cornerstone, growing into a holy temple to YHWH.

Paul's teaching of the Jews and Gentiles becoming one, is a reminder of his teaching in Romans 11 on the concept of Gentiles being "grafted in" to the Jewish people:

Romans 11:17-24

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were **grafted in** among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you... you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and **grafted**, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree...

It is the concept of the Gentiles being grafted in, of the two groups becoming one, of the Gentiles for the first time being allowed to become partakers of the Messiah and of the household of YHWH, that Paul refers to as the "mystery of the gospel:

Ephesians 3:4-6

When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

This is the mystery of the Gospel that Paul refers to. The mystery is that Gentiles have now been included, as one, with God's people. The Gentiles have been grafted in. And it is this mystery that Paul is committed to boldly proclaim:

Ephesians 6:19-20

and [make supplication] also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the *mystery of the gospel*, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

COL 2:16-23

It is better to read this passage in the ESV, rather than the NASB or NIV (and probably others) which have more translation issues and biases, some of which I'll mention below.

Colossians 2:16 (ESV)

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

Remember Paul's mission is primarily to Gentiles, not Jews. The Colossians, living in Asia Minor, are predominantly Gentiles living in a very pagan land. They are living under great pressure of their fellow Romans, who are pushing them to conform again to their pagan culture. Perhaps some are being drawn away, back into the practices of the pagans around them, of their former lives. These are the traditions of men and the elementary principles of the world which are opposite the teachings of Messiah:

Colossians 2:8 (ESV)

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

Note that the elemental spirits of the world are according to human tradition. This cannot be referring to Torah. Torah was not human tradition, but communicated by God himself. And certainly Paul would never consider the Torah to be an "elemental spirit of the world".

Paul goes on to explain to the Colossians that their sins are totally forgiven through Messiah. He is saying that they don't need to participate in pagan rituals. There is nothing to be gained. Messiah did it all for them already. The debt of their sins has been totally cancelled.

Therefore, Paul goes on to argue, don't listen to those around you who are critical of your Godly practices. Don't succumb to letting them pass judgment upon you because you hold to keeping Torah. The believers were no doubt living very differently from the pagan world around them, and being criticized for it. They didn't participate in the drunken "guild feasts" or eat the meat sacrificed to the idols as part of the worship ceremony. Instead, they kept the Sabbath. They ate and drank different things, no doubt keeping the dietary laws of Torah. They would probably have celebrated the beginning of each new month as instructed by Torah. They would most certainly have kept the Appointed Times (see for example 1 Cor 5:8). So Paul says don't let anyone judge you for keeping these Godly observances:

Colossians 2:16-17 (ESV)

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Why does he say to not anyone judge them for keeping these days? Because they are a shadow of things to come! They are important special days, with meaning, that foreshadow things to come – the substance of which is Messiah.

Note the word translated "but" that begins the last clause: "but the substance belongs to Christ" - the "but" is the Greek particle **δέ** which is a general particle that can be commonly translated as *either* "**and**" or "**but**":

δέ (**de**) one of the most common Greek particles, used to connect one clause to another, either to express contrast or simple continuation. When it is felt that there is some contrast between clauses—though the contrast is often scarcely discernible—the most common translation is '**but**'. When a simple connective is desired, without contrast being clearly implied, '**and**' will suffice, and in certain occurrences the marker may be left untranslated. (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. 2000. *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature.*)

In this particular passage, there is no need to translated this word as "but". The more common translation of **δέ** is actually "and". And the fact is that there need be no implied contrast between the first clause and the second. Rather, the second **builds upon** the first. Translating **δέ** as "and" captures this **continuation** better.

The NASB does a poor job with this verse since it adds the word "*mere*", as well as translates **δέ** as "*but*":

Colossians 2:16-17 (NASB)

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

The word "*mere*" isn't there in the Greek, and leads the reader to discount the former clause as being insignificant. Both the "but" and the "*mere*" work together to give the reader a false understanding of contrast and insignificance that is not there in the Greek.

The NIV adds even more negative bias, again not in the Greek, translating "these are a shadow of the things that **were** to come – the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Colossians 2:17 (NIV)

These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

The "**were**" makes it sound like it already happened, but that's not what the Greek says. It says literally "a shadow of things about to come" – in the future. Then the NIV adds "the reality, however, is found in Christ". This is very poor translation with a lot of Western Christian bias, communicating thoughts that simply are not present in the Greek.

In summary, when you read the Text correctly, with no bias, you see that Paul is saying that the Godly observances are both shadows of what is to come AND the substance of Messiah. We know from looking at the appointed time how all of those are truly shadows of the Messiah. He is the true substance that these days represent.

So the truth of this passage is that Paul is really **commending** the Gentile believers for keeping the Sabbath and the other Appointed Times, and telling them not to let anyone "judge" them for doing so. Furthermore, they should be keeping these special days because they are symbols what is to come (events relating to the end times and the fellowship and enjoyment of the presence of the Father for all eternity) and also symbols of the Messiah Himself.

1 TIM 4:1-5

1 Timothy 4:1-5

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to

deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

At first glance, Paul's words to Timothy that "*everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude, for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer*" could seem to indicate that it is OK to eat any food, and those who require abstinence are following deceitful spirits and teachings of demons. However, this is a false and dangerous line of reasoning. First of all, it is God's word that originally specified which foods God created to be received. God's word can never be equated with the teaching of demons. Furthermore, Paul is grouping together teachings that advocate abstinence from certain foods as well as abstinence from marriage. Nowhere does God's word forbid marriage. So it cannot be the Torah that Paul is referring to in this passage as "teaching of demons".

Paul was teaching against the heresy of the Gnostics, which was having an influence on the believers of that day.

It is erroneous to suppose that the "doctrine of demons" Paul refers to in 1 Timothy 4 has anything to do with traditional Jewish teaching on marriage and food. On the other hand, the early Gnostics did teach abstinence from sex, marriage, and certain foods. What is Gnosticism? Gnosticism was a troublesome perversion of Judaism (and subsequently Christianity) with which the Apostles were forced to contend and refute. Among Gnosticism's many strange teachings, some adherents taught that the physical world was intrinsically evil, and that the human body was a cage for the spirit. Only by rejecting the physical world and its delights could the spirit be set free to soar. Gnostics taught the dualistic belief in which the spiritual world is regarded as good and the physical world is regarded as evil. Some branches of Gnosticism manifested in extreme asceticism. Their adherents swore off sex and marriage and often subjected themselves to long fasts and rigid diets in order to weaken their bodies so their spirits could be freed. They believed that the secret to setting the spirit free was the secret knowledge (*gnosis*) imparted by the divine revelation, usually through visions or angelic encounters. It is the heresy of Gnosticism that Paul addresses in 1 Timothy and Colossians. (Lancaster, *Holy Cow*, p.124)

It would be a mistake not to consider these words of Paul to Timothy in light of what he also tells him in his second letter. Paul holds all the teachings of God in highest esteem:

2 Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Here is clear that Paul knows and is teaching that ALL Scripture is useful for teaching and for correction and for training. Remember that Paul is writing here to Timothy who is leading a largely Gentile group of believers. And the only "Scripture" that they have is what we now refer to as the "Old Testament." So Paul is reminding Timothy as he leads and instructs these Gentile believers, that ALL of the Torah and the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures is useful for training and for correction. In other words, the Gentile believers were to be taught and trained to live a life that was in complete compliance with the commands of the Torah.

SUMMARY

A careful look at the cultural context of NT Scriptures makes it difficult, if not impossible, to conclude that there is any teaching within Scripture to justify the abandonment of God's dietary laws for His people, as established in the Torah. The origins of such teachings, based on teachings from the Gentile "church fathers" which began early within the development of the church, come from an incorrect interpretation of Scripture taken out of its original context.