

1 Corinthians 10:19

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

What say I then? that the idol is any thing, or that which is offered in sacrifice to idols is any thing?

Analysis

What say I then? that the idol is any thing, or that which is offered in sacrifice to idols is any thing?—Paul anticipates an objection. Haven't I (8:4) already agreed that **an idol is nothing** (ouden estin eidōlon, οὐδέν ἐστιν εἰδωλον)? If idols aren't real gods, why prohibit eating food offered to them? The rhetorical questions expect negative answers—no, Paul isn't contradicting himself by now implying idols are "something."

The distinction is crucial: eidōla (εἰδωλα, "idols") as physical objects are nothing—mere wood, stone, or metal fashioned by human hands. There's no deity named Zeus or Aphrodite. In this sense, Paul maintains his earlier position (8:4)—the carved image itself has no power or divinity. The food offered to it isn't magically contaminated.

However—and this is the turn in v. 20—while the idol itself is nothing, the spiritual reality behind idol worship is very real: demons. Paul navigates between two errors:

1. treating idols as real gods (superstitious fear),
2. treating idol worship as spiritually neutral (presumptuous dismissiveness).

The carved image is nothing; the demonic activity it channels is deadly serious. This distinction allows Paul to forbid temple participation without lapsing into superstitious fear of material objects.

Historical Context

Ancient polytheism populated the world with countless deities. Paul's monotheism (influenced by Deuteronomy 6:4, "The LORD our God, the LORD is one") denied these beings' deity while acknowledging demonic spiritual realities behind pagan worship. Greco-Roman religion involved real spiritual transactions, not mere cultural theater. The physical idol was nothing; the demons receiving worship through it were dangerous realities.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How can Christians today distinguish between carved objects (which are nothing) and spiritual realities behind false worship (which are dangerous)?
2. What modern "idols" are spiritually neutral objects but gateways to demonic influence when worshiped?
3. How does Paul's nuanced view prevent both superstitious fear of objects and presumptuous dismissal of spiritual danger?

Interlinear Text

τί	οὖν	φημι	ὅτι	εἰδωλον	τί	ἐστιν;	ἢ	ὅτι
What	then	say I	that	the idol	any thing	is	or	that
G5101	G3767	G5346	G3754	G1497	G5100	G2076	G2228	G3754
εἰδωλόθυτον				τί	ἐστιν;			
which is offered in sacrifice to idols				any thing	is			
G1494				G5100	G2076			

Additional Cross-References

1 Corinthians 8:4 (Sacrifice): As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one.

Isaiah 40:17 (Parallel theme): All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.

Isaiah 41:29 (Parallel theme): Behold, they are all vanity; their works are nothing: their molten images are wind and confusion.

1 Corinthians 3:7 (Parallel theme): So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.

1 Corinthians 1:28 (Parallel theme): And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:

1 Corinthians 13:2 (Parallel theme): And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

Deuteronomy 32:21 (Parallel theme): They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.