

# Part 9: God remains faithful: the principle of the thing



Are Rock Badgers  
acceptable food?  
Photo by Bjørn  
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*At the start of this series we took notice of the way God chose to give Scripture to us. To make the Bible, God inspired many people (all very different) in many times and places.*

*"...Moses in the desert, David in Jerusalem, Ezekiel in Babylon... different people, different periods, different places, different life-issues... This varied collection was God's deliberate choice, so we should take the variety seriously."*

*Thus Scripture is time-bound, tied to the language, customs and interests of particular times and places. The writers God inspired wrote about things that interested their hearers, or at least things God wanted those hearers to hear!*

# Not an issue today!

Some of those interests are still with us, but some are not. Few today worry about whether Rock Badgers are acceptable food, but Leviticus 11:5 reasons it out: “The rock badger, even though it chews the cud, does not have divided hoofs; so it is unclean for you.”

Paul’s audience were also troubled about acceptable foods. What, they seem to have asked, about food that’s been offered to an idol, is eating that OK? 1 Cor 8 begins to focus on that tricky question. Not so vital, though, for most of us. When was the last time you were asked to eat food that had been offered as a sacrifice?

Does the fact that the Bible is time-bound mean that large parts of Scripture are no longer relevant? By no means! Jesus declared that none of the Old Testament could be written off (see Matt 5:17ff.), so we “modern” people can hardly write off the New Testament! Yet Scripture come to us, shaped by people and times long past. The words, and even what is said, are time-bound, but the God who inspired them is not. God remains faithful, the same yesterday, today and forever.

This means that as we read Paul’s advice about responding to the difficult issue of food offered to idols we can’t just say: “Not a problem, I’m never offered any!” and move on to the next passage. For Paul’s understanding of God (“theology”) is still true for us. How he responded to that question can show us how to respond to equally tricky issues of Christian practice that face us today.

## 1 Corinthians 8-10

The passage is a complicated one, with the issue running through the whole centre of the letter. There seem to be (at least) two positions on the issue. The “strong” claimed “there

is only one God” and that “idols have no reality” (1 Cor 8:4) and went on to argue that eating such food was OK. Thus “knowledge” (of the true God) makes us strong, and frees us from clumsy and inconvenient rules.

However, this free behaviour can seem to compromise the unique claims of Christ. Paul calls those who were troubled by this “weak”. Despite the “strong” using arguments that sound solid (only one God, idols are nothing, Christ sets us free) Paul defends the weak, for the behaviour of the “strong” may cause others to stumble. For Paul, the significant issue is not what we know, but how we love one another (1 Cor 10:23-24). Paul put the principle of love into practice (1 Cor 9) by foregoing his “rights”.

## **God does not change**

There are many parallels to this situation in today’s world where the theological principles Paul uses can be put to work! The Bible is not only clothed in ancient and foreign language, it addresses issues that are not ours. Yet God can be trusted today, as then. What the Bible writers said about God, their grasp of theology that underlies the issues their hearers faced, remains true and applicable today.

Paul’s advice about shopping and hospitality (1 Cor 10:25-33) may not be arguments against becoming Vegan, or much direct help in deciding whether to accept an invitation to an Eid party. His theological principles, though: asking whether our behaviour makes faith difficult for others, and how it impacts the proclamation and reception of the gospel, remain powerful and important today!

## **Spotting timeless truth in time-**

## bound texts

At this point we return to the previous topic. Spotting the timeless truth, means first spotting the point the author was trying to make to their hearers. In this case, Paul's point was something like: Although your knowledge (only one God, idols not real) means you can see that there is nothing wrong with eating food offered to idols, you should restrain your freedom for the sake of others.

This summary is already on its way (compared to the practical advice in 1 Cor 10:25ff.) to theological principle. We can take it the last step by generalising the mention of idols: Although your knowledge makes you free, it is important to restrain your actions, so that someone else's chance of salvation is not compromised. Or more sharply: *The gospel is more important than your freedom.* Now there's a challenge today!

## Homework

Go back to the previous article and review your conclusions about the "points" being made in Ephesians 4:1-6 and John 5:1-19. Check that you expressed these in time-bound ways (past), so they clearly address the issues the early church faced. Then look for the timeless truth about God, the theology, that underlies those points or that they express. Again, try for just one simple sentence.

*[If you are worried that the theology we get seems often a bit vague, wait for the next thrilling installment! There I'll suggest how our application of Bible truths can be sharp and precise. In the meantime explore the website and if you want more help ASK!]*

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**1 Cor 10:23ff. Meat offered  
to idols?**