

Meat, Metacognition, and Mindfulness: A Reinterpretive Framework Using 1 Corinthians 8–10



by TODD STRYD

As Christians, we live “in the world” but are not to be “of the world.” As a result, we are frequently confronted with complicated decisions. In our age, the intersection of culture, technology, and worldview presents an inevitable quagmire of questions to navigate. Should Christians consume alcohol? Should Christians utilize reproductive assistance? Are certain styles of music off-limits? Is it ok for Christians to use social media? Attend church online? And the list goes on. This article is intended to participate in the debate by considering one complicated question in particular: Is it permissible for Christians to practice mindfulness, or does it conflict with our faith?

If you’ve been part of mainstream culture over the last decade, you’ve heard phrases like “be in the present moment” or “be mindful of the here and now.” These are phrases of a culture captivated by mindfulness. My first exposure to this phenomenon was when Phil Jackson, the coach of the Chicago Bulls, encouraged Michael Jordan and other players to

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practice mindfulness meditation. What seemed like a one-off eccentric fad has now become the norm.

Mindfulness is everywhere. Smartphone apps remind us to be mindful. Advertisements idealize the contemplative and serene individual. Schools and businesses set aside time for students and employees to learn and practice mindfulness. And mindfulness is currently one of the most popular counseling interventions in the field of psychology.

As individual Christians, we have very different reactions to the mindfulness craze. For some, mindfulness is dangerous and Christians should stay away from it. For others, mindfulness is pointless and silly. Why in the world would anyone want to engage in it, or worse, *need* to? Others are confused and conflicted, unsure of how to think about it, and some just use the technique and don't think much about it either way.

Is it permissible for Christians to practice mindfulness, or does it conflict with our faith?

Regardless of what individuals might think, however, the mindfulness question is a prominent one because it represents a collision of Eastern culture, Christian faith, and the field of psychology. It has emerged as a potential flash point. Therefore, the practice of mindfulness becomes a proxy for a whole range of similar questions related to psychology and proper Christian engagement with the field, its techniques, and findings.

How then should a Christian think through these matters? And how do we determine the Christian stance on any number of issues and situations where similar questions arise?

Throughout history, the Christian church has faced questions like these and has sought biblical guidance in addressing them. An excellent example of this is the question about meat sacrificed to idols posed in 1 Corinthians 8–10. While not a question we currently entertain in Western culture, it was of major relevance to the early church. Therefore, there is good reason to glean whatever guidelines and principles are present in these chapters to assist us in constructing a comprehensive framework for decision-making about mindfulness.

Thankfully, Paul was not satisfied to give the church a simple yes/no answer on the meat question. Rather, Paul's gift to the church was the

biblical-theological principles he used to govern and structure how he thought about important questions like these. Paul gave us a framework to approach the hard topics and issues of life with fidelity and grace. His legacy enables us to separate the wheat from the chaff on a matter such as mindfulness.

With Paul as our guide, we will study the principles he established when he answered the Corinthians' question about eating meat sacrificed to idols. Paul walks the ridgeline of parsing out God's good creation and general revelation from the distortions and borrowed nature of human cultural practices and advancements. Paul's answer provides a general framework and points a way forward to answer our question: Does practicing mindfulness conflict with our faith?

An Ancient Question: Can Christians Eat Meat Sacrificed to Idols?

Here is the context for 1 Corinthians 8–10. The church at Corinth asked how to follow Christ while being surrounded by paganism, a question that is relevant for us as well. Idol meat was an important concern because almost all of the meat available in the city would have been offered to idols at some point. There was no easy way to skirt this question. And not surprisingly, trying to deal with this situation led to extreme stances in the church: Do we separate from the culture or do we assimilate to the culture? It is in this context that Paul goes to work theologically. He understands the complexity of a question like this in part because he understands how reality is constructed. Therefore, Paul focuses on how, as Christians, we are able to see the true composition of what we encounter in the world.

Paul's argument is based on the premise that our experience of the world is always a package deal that includes our interpretations and our intentions. Everything we encounter we interpret according to our worldview and everything we do is intentioned according to our purposes. In this teaching moment with the Corinthians, we see Paul working out his convictions and his conceptualization using these principles. The result of these chapters is a reinterpretive framework that can be broken down into three parts: the creational connection, the starting point, and the endpoint.

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