

Between Idolatry and Virtue: Paul and Hellenistic Religious Environment

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Since the time of Emperor Constantine (fourth century AD) Christianity has been the dominant religion in large parts of Europe. This has gradually changed since World War II. Now Christianity faces a situation that, in many ways, resembles the situation of the first Christian generations who lived in a world of many faiths. The answers and solutions provided by the Church and Christian believers are no longer self-evident; rather, they are challenged and even questioned by adherents of other belief systems. Believers find themselves being pushed back into a pre-Constantinian era. It is, therefore, the aim of this article to seek some guidance by turning to the New Testament, and to Paul in particular. Some of Paul's first interpreters will help us glean information from his letters with regards to this problem.

Paul in a World of Many Deities

In what is possibly the oldest Christian source, Paul addresses his readers in Thessalonica as people who have "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God" (1 Thess 1:9 NRSV). This statement reveals that Paul's preaching included a view on idols, the deities of his time. Furthermore, the idols are implicitly presented as being unable to provide any help. Paul contrasts them with the living and true God, thus basing his statement on the Old Testament belief that God alone is active and real. Embracing the Christian faith implied, according to Paul, a transition from the idols to the One Living God, thus leaving behind the former loyalty and allegiance to the idols (1 Cor 12:2; Gal 4:8 cf. 1 Thes 4:5).

Although idols and obedience to them belong to the past of the believers, Christians are still challenged by them and their assisting forces. Ephesians 6:11-17 describes the spiritual warfare in which believers are involved. They participate in a continuous struggle against fourfold hostile powers (rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, spiritual forces of evil) which are described as surpassing human nature. By his resurrection Jesus defeated all these powers

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(Eph 1:21; cf. 2:2; 3:10), and the believers must now stand against them. In Ephesians it is explicitly stated that these powers are not of “blood and flesh”; that is, they are not human beings. It is, of course, another matter that human beings can be their agents in the world, as is probably the case in 1 Corinthians 2:6-8. Behind these somewhat puzzling descriptions of the powers are what scholars usually identify as astrological and magical traditions, their emphasis on the planets and astrological influence in human affairs. These are possibly associated with the role of the goddess Artemis in the city of Ephesus, or are used as a comprehensive designation for various evil forces and spirits.

The above-mentioned texts speak of idols and the powers in highly theological terms. But what lies behind these theological statements? Historical and archaeological research into the Hellenistic cities where Paul worked provides us with some information on this issue. To take Corinth as an example, archaeologists have uncovered a number of temples and shrines in this city of approximately 100,000 inhabitants. Pausanias, a traveller to Corinth and other cities in Greece around 170 AD., provides, in his *Description of Greece*, a full description of Corinth's many deities. For New Testament readers it is natural to fill in the picture given by Paul's theological statements by looking into the Book of Acts. This literature gives a vivid picture of the religious environment that caused Paul's theological statements concerning idols and powers in his epistles.

A survey of the Pauline mission according to Acts substantiates the fact that Paul met with the long-standing traditional cults of the Hellenistic-Roman period. Paul is twice exposed to magi. According to Acts 13:6-12, Paul confronts a sorcerer with divinatory powers. Similarly, Acts 19:18-19 mentions magical practices and magical books in Ephesus. In this city a confrontation with the cult of Artemis, whom the Romans called Diana, also took place. The story is given a significant place in the narrative of Acts (19:23-41). A huge temple was raised in Ephesus for this Olympian goddess connected with fertility and childbirth. According to Acts 14:8-18, Paul and Barnabas were mistaken for being Hermes and Zeus due to the miracle they had performed on a crippled man in Lystra: “When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in human form!’” (v.11). In this text we see a typical element in Hellenistic religion; there is no sharp distinction between men and the Divine. People who demonstrated extraordinary power or abilities were seen as heroes, something in between men and the gods. This is, of course, the logic that produced cults of various heroes, such as the emperor's.

Finally, in Philippi Paul met with Pythian divination according to the pattern found in Delphi. Modern Bible-translations speak here of a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination, but the Greek text is more precise, speaking of a Pythian spirit (Acts 16:16). Pythia is the name of the prophetess who gave

oracles in Delphi, the famous sanctuary of Apollo. In short, Paul met with a plethora of deities and religious practices. What was, then, the position taken by Paul towards his environment which was so full deities?

Flee from Idolatry

In language taken from Old Testament texts regarding the abandonment of idols, Paul urges his readers to flee from idolatry (1 Cor 10:14). His Corinthian readers are tempted to partake of food offered to idols, as served in the many temples of the city. Paul then instructs them by reminding them of how the Israelites fell, while in the desert, because they were tempted by the feasting associated with the Golden Calf (Exod 32). They did not consider God a sufficient provider and this mistrust was the beginning of their apostasy. The temptation to participate in temple meals in Corinth works very much in the same way, according to Paul (1 Cor 10:1-13). This is the lesson that Paul wants his converts to draw from Israel's past.¹ The implication of this text is that Paul's attitude regarding many gods, the idols and their worship, is rooted in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament foundation for Paul's thinking on the issue allows him to draw on a set of arguments. The idols are to be avoided since they are unable to speak or bring any help (1 Cor 12:2). This corresponds to Acts 14:15 where Paul speaks of the empty, or worthless, gods. In the Septuagint the Greek word applied here (the adjective *mataios* and cognates) is a favorite term denoting the gods as unable to do anything (Jer 2:5; 8:19; 3 Macc 6:11). This argument is in accordance with the critique launched against the many gods as especially seen in the so-called Deutero Isaiah (e.g. 44:12-20; 44:6-7 cf. *Wisd.* 13:10-14:21). Idolatry is mocked here and becomes an object of ridicule.

Paul also draws upon the nexus between idolatry and immorality found in Old Testament texts: Worshipping idols paves the way for immorality (1 Thes 4:5; Rom 1:21-30). This connection is made in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 as well, when Paul associates craving with idolatry.

In Galatians 4:8 Paul denies the existence of idols; they are not gods. This implies by no means that Paul ignores idolatry. What we have seen so far contradicts such a conclusion, but the idols of the gentiles were for him not really gods at all.

At the end of the day, however, Paul's opposition to idol-worship is due to his conviction that it is inspired by the Devil and his demons and conveys

¹ Paul here applied a typological view on the Old Testament. He assumes an analogy between Israel and his converts which allows him to find patterns in God's dealings with Israel of relevance for his churches. For this way of reading the Old Testament, see Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: the Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

fellowship with them. The warfare against the spirits associated with the Artemis, and other cults in Ephesus, is, in fact, a battle with the Devil (Eph. 6:11). Nowhere is this more explicit than in 1 Corinthians 10:15-22. Christians who partook in sacrificial meals in temples associated themselves with demons. Fellowship with Christ and fellowship with demons are mutually exclusive. Although the many gods were unable to speak or bring any help, they nonetheless had supernatural powers. Thus the idols represented demonic spirits, and were therefore to be avoided. This is an idea which Paul takes from the Old Testament: "all the gods of the nations are demons" (Ps 95:5 LXX).² The worship of demons is involved in the plethora of gods Paul met in the narrative of Acts. In brief, Paul considered the many gods of the Greco-Roman world to be incompatible with belief in the One God. The danger of idolatry lurked everywhere in the culture surrounding the Christians. But did Paul's instruction to flee from idolatry necessarily mean withdrawal from the surrounding society?

The Need to Discern

In his instruction to flee from idolatry, Paul stands firmly in Old Testament traditions. In the Graeco-Roman world, social life and idolatry were intimately connected. According to the Old Testament, Jews were expected to live separated from pagans. Although the question of the relationship between Jews and gentiles runs throughout the Old Testament writings, and thus reveals that to draw a simple line of demarcation between the two was difficult, it was still much more difficult to distance oneself in the Diaspora where idolatry surpassed that of the Old Testament. To what extent was it possible to flee from idolatry when it was entirely interwoven into the fabric of social life? And even more so, was Paul himself unaware of this need to sort out good and acceptable from within the bad?

Paul recognized that, as part of their daily life in a pagan city like Corinth, his converts had to associate with idolaters (1 Cor 5:9-10). A previous letter from Paul had caused his converts to disassociate with neighbors who practiced immorality and idolatry, and Paul now corrects that misunderstanding. He expects them to disassociate from Christians who continued to participate in idolatrous worship, not to keep away from all idolaters: "... since you would then need to go out of the world" (v. 10b cf. John 17:14-16). This is a very realistic statement of the apostle. He knows that it was neither possible nor an ideal to entirely avoid dealings with idolaters. His correction implies that he expects his readers to be able to draw some distinctions. In practice, things looked more difficult than his instruction to flee from idolatry might at first sight indicate. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul urges a distinction between idolatry and

² See also Ps 106:37; Isa 65:3.11 LXX; *Baruk* 4:7.

the idolater, the neighbour who practiced idolatry. This distinction is supported pragmatically; otherwise, they would have to leave the world.

In 1 Corinthians 10:26, however, Paul provides a theological rationale for the task of distinguishing between good and evil, virtue and error in the pagan environment: "... the earth and its fullness are the Lord's". In the midst of his discussion on eating food offered to idols, Paul quotes from Psalms 24:1. His belief in God the Creator created an opportunity for thankfulness, as well as legitimizing some practical use of even meat offered to idols. Since God is the ultimate source of all food, believers can eat all food presented to them, notwithstanding that the food sold in the market came from the temples. Due to God's creation of the whole earth, good and useful things were to be found everywhere, even in a context influenced by idolatry. But the fact that God's good gifts were embedded in a pagan society forced the Christians to make some distinctions.

Some of the criteria for this critical reflection appear in I Corinthians. We have already seen that Paul forbids his converts participation in meals in the temple or its precincts. His instruction to flee idolatry applies to this situation. Paul touches upon the need to distinguish between what is permitted and what is idolatry in two similarly sounding dicta: "Everything is permissible to me" (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23). Both texts render what is, in fact, a Corinthian slogan of permissiveness allowing Christians to practice sex freely, to eat excessively and to participate in temple-meals.³ Paul qualifies this slogan so sharply that he comes close to negating it: "- but not everything is beneficial." Nonetheless his reference to this slogan implies that believers have to find their way through many dangers. The result of the process wherein distinctions are made between what is permitted and what is to be fled from, cannot master or overpower the Christian. There is a danger of being taken captive or jeopardizing one's faith in this process. Furthermore, the result of this process should not jeopardize the faith of other Christians nor that of the Christian fellowship. Most commentaries on these Corinthian passages emphasize Paul's rejection of the slogan. No doubt, there is much to recommend such a conclusion. But taken together with 1 Corinthians 10:26 on God's gifts which are found even in the meat market, Paul's reference to them implies the need to distinguish good from evil in the permissiveness of the Corinthians. It is only when applied together with Paul's criteria that there is some truth in the freedom claimed by this slogan.

³ See Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth, The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), 76-109.

A Key-text: Phil 4:8

Paul trusted that there were elements of truth in the cultural and religious environment of his converts as well. These elements are to be distinguished from deceptive elements, and then to be retained in the Christian life. This trusting and thinking involves a dialectical and critical work. I think this is what Paul addresses in Philippians 4:8: “whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” This sentence – except from the introducing “finally, beloved” – appears to be more at home in Greco-Roman philosophers than in Paul. The adjectives and the nouns “that make up the sentence are as uncommon in Paul as most of them are common stock to the world of Greco-Roman morality.”⁴ Paul is not ignorant of the fact that virtues – if they were to be found – were deeply embedded not only in a pagan culture, but also in traditions and in literature promoting Greek mythology on the many gods and their immoral life, such as in Homer’s writings, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Nonetheless, the apostle here urges his readers not only to think highly of these virtues of their pagan past, but rather to take them into account. The two statements introduced by “if” imply that it is necessary to filter that which belongs to their pagan past from that which is morally excellent and praiseworthy. Paul urges them to embark upon a critical reflection in order to lead them to embrace the best of their pagan past. What criteria does Paul envisage here in this process of distinguishing between good and evil?

The following v. 9 brings out the basis on which one can discern the difference: “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” Paul refers here to the gospel he has taught them and transmitted to them. This must imply that he urges his converts to perform their critical evaluation of the traditions found in their environment in light of that which is conformable to Christ. He wants the believers to “read” the Greco-Roman religious culture in the light of what they have learned through his preaching and example. The crucial criterion thus becomes what is conformable to Christ.

Furthermore, it is important here to note that Paul asks them to take him as their example: “what you have seen in me.” This echoes Philippians 3:17 where he instructs his readers to imitate him. This instruction closes Paul’s own story told in 3:4-16. What, then, does his story bring to the question of critical evaluation of their environment? Paul’s story highlights precisely the criterion which he urges his readers to practice in evaluating their environment. Paul

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 415. See also John Ferguson, *Moral Values in the Ancient World* (London: Methuen & Co., 1958).

was also forced to re-think and to re-define his life. What was formerly a gain to him, he came to regard as a loss because of Christ. After Christ had appeared to him outside Damascus, he viewed his life in a new light. Just as his life was being conformed to Christ, and his death and resurrection (v.10), so should his addressees likewise evaluate religion and culture in Philippi in light of what was conformable to Christ. It is only when they are conformed to Christ – as also Paul himself also seeks – that they will be able to distinguish between virtue and vice in their environment. It is thus possible to find virtuous traditions and convictions in the Greco-Roman religious culture. But this naturally implies that if something is not conformable to Christ, and what Paul has taught them, it is, accordingly, not praiseworthy.

“The Right Use” according to Early Interpreters of Paul

We have seen that Paul urges his converts to make distinctions in their dealings with their environment. We noted that he made a difference between idolatry and the idolater, that he urged his converts to seek that which edifies the fellowship of believers, and to avoid being empowered by the threat inherent in pagan cultures. The theological rationale for this project was, of course, his belief in God the Creator. Philippians 4:8 is probably the text where he provides a somewhat foundational treatment of the need to make a difference in dealings with the environment. But Paul’s letters were occasional writings, and we therefore seek in vain for a full and coherent treatment of this burning issue. There are, however, sufficient pieces and fragments which, when collected, provide a broader picture. I think that some early Christian writers, writing a while after Paul, might help us put the pieces together.

Paul and his Christian contemporaries struggled to find their way to live as God’s holy, elect and dearly-loved people in the midst of a pagan culture. As we have noticed, this challenge is addressed in Paul’s letters, as well as in the New Testament in general. For a number of centuries Christians had to grapple with this same situation, finding their way between idolatry and the good, between abandonment and participation, in the pagan culture in which they lived. In this context, some Christian writers developed arguments and scriptural interpretations which shed some light on the more occasional and fragmentary letters of Paul. In particular, they addressed the question of Greek education and the pagan literature which made up the content of education in antiquity.

Origen (185-251 AD) wrote a letter to his student Gregor, who was called *Thaumaturgos* (Wonderworker).⁵ The theme of this letter concerns how his

⁵ The Greek text with a German translation is found in Peter Guyot and Richard Klein, *Das frühe Christentum bis zum Ende der Verfolgungen*, Band 2, Texte zur Forschung 72 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994), 87-93.

student is to deal with the pagan literature which formed the basis for all instruction and education in antiquity.⁶ Origen's advice takes, as its point of departure, an allegorical reading of Exodus 11:2 ("Tell the people that every man is to ask his neighbour and every woman is to ask her neighbour for objects of silver and gold") and of Exodus 12:35-36 ("The Israelites had done as Moses told them; they have asked the Egyptians for jewelry of silver and gold, and for clothing, and the Lord had given the people favour in sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians"). By making reference to the silver, gold and clothing of Egypt, Origen is using a common interpretation which was in development at an early stage among the Christians. The silver and gold of the Egyptians symbolizes the wisdom and literature of paganism. This logic probably originated already in the first or second century since it draws upon Acts 7:22 where it is told that Moses received training in the wisdom of the Egyptians.

The exodus-event is, to Origen, an analogy of how also Christians must leave paganism. But they should not leave behind the gold of the Egyptians. This silver and gold could be disastrous, something which was demonstrated in the incident of the Golden Calf (Exod 32). It could, however, also be "useful" when applied in the service of God. According to the Old Testament, some of the gold was used to adorn and equip the Temple. How can Christians then identify the silver and gold in paganism? The criterion applied by Origen is "usefulness," meaning pagan wisdom which is conformable to the Christian faith. The criterion of "usefulness" (Greek: *chrêsimon*/Latin: *utilitas*) emerges in many Christian texts as the main criterion with which to deal critically and selectively with paganism. As demonstrated by *Christian Gnilka* this criterion is taken from the contemporary debate on how to separate good from evil in Homer's writings.⁷ Origen and many with him now make use of it in a Christian setting; usefulness refers to what is conformable to Christian faith and tradition.

Gregor of Nyssa (ca. 331-395 AD) in his *Life of Moses*⁸ also refers to Exodus 12:35-36. His interpretation concurs with that of Origen, but he emphasizes that the silver and gold from Egypt adorned the Holy place (*Life of Moses* 2:116). Similarly, the true wisdom of the Church will be adorned by pagan wisdom. Also worth noticing is Augustin's (354-430 AD) comment in his *Confessions* 7:9:

⁶ See Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁷ See Christian Gnilka, *CHRËSIS, Die Methode der Kirchenväter im Umgang mit der Antiken Kultur. Der Begriff des "rechten Gebrauchs"* (Basel, Stuttgart: Schwabe & Co AG, 1984).

⁸ For a text-edition with English translation, see Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, *Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses* (Paulist Press, New York, Ramsey, Toronto, 1978).

*And I myself had come unto thee from among the Gentiles; and I set my mind earnestly upon that gold which thou willedst thy people to take from the Egyptians ... wheresoever it were. And to the Athenians thou saidst by the Apostle, That in thee we live, and move, and have our being, as certain of their own poets had said. And surely it was from Athens these books came. But I set not my mind towards the idols of Egypt, which they made of the gold.*⁹

Of special interest to us is the last passage implying that “where there is gold, it also rightly belongs to the Lord.” This clearly echoes Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 10:26 where Psalms 24:1 is quoted: “the earth and its fullness are the Lord’s” (cf. Sir 1:1: “All wisdom is from the Lord”). Belief in God the Creator demanded that paganism not only be fled, but be critically judged by “what is useful and helpful” in interpreting the Christian scriptures (*De Doctrina Christiana* 1:7-10), in other words, judged by the Christian faith.

This allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament offered help in a dilemma many Christians faced. This dilemma led to this creative reading of Old Testament texts. Nonetheless, they substantiated this reading with scriptural arguments which – at least some of them – are not far off from Paul’s logic in 1 Corinthians 10:26 and Philippians 4:8. Finally, we turn to two early Christian writers to support this claim.

Clement of Alexandria’s (150-215 AD) writings witness intense debate among the Christians on how to deal with the pagan culture surrounding them. He was himself an advocate of involvement, participation, and to some extent acceptance. He fights fellow Christians who wanted to have “faith alone and naked,” as he puts it (*Strom.* 1:9/43:1). In *Strom.* 6:11/89:1-3 he gives a description of how he views the debate on pagan literature and education. His description starts from the well-known story of the Sirenes in Homer’s *Odyssey* (*Od.* 12:37-73). From their island, the Sirenes enticed seafarers by singing so beautifully that they could not resist the temptation to visit the island. The meadow on which the Sirenes sat while singing was, however, full of dead bones from those who had been tempted. Homer says that Odysseus and his companions also faced this temptation. It is told that his men stopped their ears to avoid being enticed. Odysseus himself chose another strategy, aiming at enjoying the beautiful song while resisting the temptation to visit the island: he had himself tied to the mast of the ship. Thus, he could safely listen to the song and not miss it, as his own men did. Clement offers an allegorical interpretation of this classical story. The Christians who are afraid of being enticed by the pagan literature resemble Odysseus’ companions. They missed the beautiful song of the Sirenes, which is an analogy for pagan education and wisdom. But Odysseus himself was able to enjoy the song while being safely tied to his ship (cf. *Od.* 12:155-164).

Clement’s ideal is the attitude manifested by Odysseus. Clement is fully aware of the danger inherent in the pagan literature and culture, but he urges

⁹ Quoted from the Loeb Classical Library edition.

the Christians to adopt Odysseus' strategy rather than that of his companions. Christians who act like them do so, according to Clement, because they are unable to distinguish between what is "useful" and "helpful" in the pagan culture. He mentions an example. When the catechumens are Greek, knowledge of the pagan culture and literature will certainly be useful and contribute to a better teaching in the Christian faith. What is needed is the ability to discern the useful from the useless – both in relation to the Christian faith. Clement also adds scriptural proof to his opinion by quoting Paul's citation of Psalms 24:1 in 1 Corinthians 10:26.

In his commentary on Paul's letter to Titus¹⁰, Hieronymus (ca.345-420 AD) works out some hermeneutical principles for dealing with classical pagan literature. His presentation starts from the appearance of dicta taken from pagan writers in Paul (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33; Tit 1:12). Of special interest here is Titus 1:12: "Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons." This is taken from a hymn praising Zeus.¹¹ In its original setting the proverb about the Cretans being liars is used because Cretans claimed to know the grave of Zeus, who was immortal. Since Zeus is alive, the Cretans must be liars when they speak about his tomb! Hieronymus addresses this citation of Paul since some Christians accuse the apostle here of maintaining that the Cretans lied about Zeus. Hence Paul, here, becomes a witness to the immortality of Zeus. Hieronymus defends Paul, and is thus led to present a hermeneutic of how to deal with paganism. The key word in his commentary is the Latin *usus* which refers to the "right use" or "usefulness". Paul is selective; he chooses that which he can make use of. Hieronymus, therefore, argues that the apostle, by selecting some passages from a pagan writing, in no way accepts the context from which they are taken. Hieronymus contrasts "the whole comedy," "the whole book," "the whole writing," "the whole song," with "one verse," "a part of the book," "something good," "some truth," thus emphasizing the selective use Paul makes of pagan writers. The nouns "good" and "truth" bring to mind Philippians 4:8 where Paul uses the corresponding Greek terms.

Hieronymus adds an illustration: What Paul does is comparable to what bees do when producing honey. From a number of flowers they pick only the best, and thereof they produce something new – sweet honey. This illustration became commonplace in early Christian texts on dealings with pagan culture and literature.¹² The Christians found this illustration in pagan philosophers who referred to the practice of the bees in order to emphasize the need of discerning between useful and vice in Homer's writings. Thus, the Christian discourse on how to deal with the pagan culture is indebted to a critical tradition in this culture itself. The logic of this illustration is the process of

¹⁰ PL 25.589-636.

¹¹ Christian Gnilka pp.124-127.

¹² Christian Gnilka pp.102-133.

adapting pagan traditions into a new setting – that of the Christian faith. From this it follows that the Christian faith defines what is useful or helpful in paganism.

Our sources are considerably later than Paul's letters. There is, however, no doubt that the challenge they address remains more or less unchanged since Paul's days. It is likely that they have developed strategies and arguments which were not there in Paul's epistles – at least not in full. But we have good reason to assume that Paul would not fundamentally object to this development. After all, we have observed logic in his own writings which points in the direction followed by some of his interpreters.

Summary

Present-day Christians who find themselves in a market full of religious alternatives, options and claims have a spokesman in Paul the apostle. His letters as well as the narrative about his ministry in the Book of Acts show him at work among many deities. His letters disclose an ambivalent attitude towards the Greco-Roman culture which was so marked by this plethora of divinities. The title of this article, "Between idolatry and virtues," is an attempt to formulate the two sides of this ambiguity. In line with Old Testament traditions Paul urges his converts to flee from idolatry. The Devil and the demons are lurking in paganism, but the culture is still more than paganism. Recognizing this, Paul is led to speak of the need to make distinctions. It is necessary to separate good from evil, truth from error, honorable from dishonourable etc. A key text for this critical dialogue with the pagan culture is Philippians 4:8. Finally, I have argued that this text forms an embryonic expression of what some of Paul's early interpreters addressed as "making right use of" pagan literature. The pagan culture is not rightly seen only as an arena for the Devil and demons. Believing in God the Creator demands that pagan cultures be critically judged by finding what is useful and conformable to Christ and Christian faith.