

**Socially Responsible Investing, Eating Meat Sacrificed to Idols, and
Insights from Two Scripture Passages: A Faith Integration Exercise for
Finance Classes**

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Purpose of Paper

Considering the topic of socially responsible investing is useful for helping students understand business from a distinctly Christian perspective. Depending on how one defines “socially responsible” and “investing” it is possible to argue that every decision a Christian makes is an exercise in socially responsible investing. In this regard, the study of Scripture helps one understand what it means to be socially responsible from a distinctly Christian perspective, with the Christian definition of socially responsible differing from alternative definitions. To the extent that investing is understood as applying resources toward a given venture and resources are understood to include both human and physical capital, most every decision is an investing decision.

A paper presented at the 2003 CBFA Conference by Young and Proffitt (2003) examined socially responsible investing by asking whether socially responsible investing required one to accept a lower rate of return on the investment. This proposal traces its beginnings to the session where Proffitt presented their results. While the question of differing rates of return is interesting, this proposal sketches a different approach: If Scripture clearly teaches 1) how to identify a socially responsible investment and 2) that Christians are to engage in socially responsible investing, then regardless of any rate of return differential, Christians have no choice but to engage in socially responsible investing.

This proposal focuses on the second of these two areas of teaching: Does Scripture provide guidance as to whether Christians are to engage in

socially responsible investing? A further scope limitation is that investing activity is limited to the standard finance understanding of investing: directly or indirectly investing wealth in stocks or bonds. These limitations keep the project manageable for use in finance classes. It is in this context that I have developed this as a faith integration exercise over the last two academic years.

Overview of Insights from Scripture

There is no need to use an exhaustive concordance to verify that the phrase “socially responsible investing” does not appear in English translations of Scripture. However, I have found that two New Testament passages on eating meat sacrificed to idols provide a relevant foundation for addressing this topic. Paul devotes the entire content of 1 Corinthians 8 to the topic of meat sacrificed to idols. He further develops this topic in chapters 9 and 10 and in Romans 14 and 15. Then, in the letters to the seven churches recorded by John in Revelation, in the letter to the church in Thyatira (2:18-29), the eating of meat sacrificed to idols is one of the relevant issues.

Within the context of varying knowledge and maturity among Christians in Corinth, Paul addresses the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols. Paul notes that for Christians who are weaker and/or have a history of idol worship it would at least create the potential for sin if they were to eat meat sacrificed to idols (v. 7). In contrast, those Christians who are mature in the faith and have the knowledge consistent with their maturity are free to eat meat sacrificed to idols (v.8). Paul notes that an idol has no real existence (v.4). It is ultimately just a piece of wood, stone or some other element. Given that and all other things

being equal, if meat sacrificed to idols represents the best value in the marketplace, then go ahead and buy the meat sacrificed to idols. This freedom to buy and eat meat sacrificed to idols is limited by the responsibility not to be an obstacle to weaker Christians who may observe your behavior (v. 10-11).

The church in Thyatira is commended for its works, love, faith, service and patient endurance (v. 19). However, the church is called to account for tolerating the false prophet Jezebel, practicing sexual immorality, and eating meat sacrificed to idols (v. 20). Of these three issues only that of practicing sexual immorality is mentioned later in the passage (v. 21), so Paul's teaching from 1 Corinthians 8 provides the basis for understanding why it was sinful for the church in Thyatira to consume meat sacrificed to idols. In general, it is useful to look for similarities between the churches in Corinth and Thyatira in the areas of maturity, knowledge, and history of idol worship.

In general, how do these passages provide insight on the issue of socially responsible investing? Eating is a basic part of life, something required of all people. All else being equal, it follows that Christians should purchase food that represents the best value. This is similar to people investing the wealth they have been entrusted with in the stock and/or bond markets. Regardless of other wealth endowments, many if not most people have funds in IRAs or 401ks. For this subset of the population deciding where and how to invest these funds is a basic part of life.

So, based on the insights from these passages, should Christians invest these funds in a socially responsible way? Within the guideline of clarity of

conscience for both the investor and the weaker Christian - who may observe this behavior and/or be influenced by it - the answer is “yes.” Making this more concrete, should Christians invest in companies that produce alcoholic beverages? The answer to this question will likely vary based on the characteristics of the individual Christian. A Presbyterian is more likely than a Nazarene to answer “yes.” Probing further, a Presbyterian who is not troubled by the consumption of alcoholic beverages in moderation may still elect not to invest in companies that produce alcoholic beverages because of convictions that these companies, at least indirectly, encourage unwise and excessive consumption of alcoholic beverages.

As a second example, what about investing in companies that produce firearms? Christians that come out of the Anabaptist or peace church traditions are much more likely to answer “no” than Christians who come from other traditions. I could cite other examples, but these two are sufficient to demonstrate the types of applications I have used in class.

Please note that the above is an overview sketch of how I use the material in class. To facilitate this exercise I require students to consult two commentaries by Morris, one on 1 Corinthians (1995) and one on Revelation (1994). These are paperbacks that are part of the Tyndale New Testament Commentary series, and they can be purchased at reasonable cost. I also distribute the section “Unity and Food” (p. 344-351) from Schreiner’s *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (2001). As the instructor, I also consult the following commentaries: Calvin (1996), Fee (1987) and Hodge (1994) on 1

Corinthians, and Mounce (1998) and Ramsey (1995) on Revelation. To accompany Schreiner I consult Machen (1976).

Outcomes and Extensions

My objective in including this project in finance courses is to provide an opportunity for students to consider a concrete business question from a distinctly Christian perspective. My experience is that this project achieves its intended objective. Thus, I am offering it to other instructors as something they might consider including in their courses. This project can be structured so that it is a relatively minor part of a course. Alternatively, it can be structured so that it is both a relatively significant part of the course and an ongoing part of the course over the entire semester.

My preference is the latter approach. Using this approach, the content of the two Scripture passages provides a basis for devotionals through a good portion of the course. Given that the devotionals are an integral part of the course, this helps me to avoid devotionals that have little direct correspondence to the rest of the class period that follows. The analysis of how these two Scripture passages inform a distinctly Christian perspective on investing is the subject of the course paper. As with any course paper, students are required to provide outlines, rough drafts and the like at various progress points throughout the semester. In general, student reception of and reaction to this project has been favorable.

Extensions to this project can follow two general paths. First, I have only used this project in finance courses, but I believe it could be incorporated with

minimal adaptation into capstone/seminar, economics, ethics, and/or management courses. Second, coincident with the project being incorporated into finance courses, I have limited the scope of the investment decision to choosing among the available means to invest in stocks and bonds. Expanding the scope of the investment decision would likely coincide with adapting the project for incorporation into non-finance courses.

Examples of potential extensions include: 1) Building on deciding whether to purchase the stocks or bonds of firms that produce alcoholic beverages or firearms, one can extend the concept from investing physical capital to investing human capital and ask whether Christians should work for firms that produce these products. 2) It is also possible to go beyond the decision to invest either physical or human capital to the decision to purchase goods or services. Following this extension, should Christians purchase other products from grocery stores that sell alcoholic beverages? Should Christians purchase other products from sporting goods and other stores that sell firearms? This extension gets at the issue of Christian consumer boycotts. 3) Pushing the above two extensions to their ultimate conclusions, what about firms that are key suppliers to firms that produce alcoholic beverages or firearms? Should Christians invest either physical or human capital in these firms? Should Christians purchase products from these firms? Note that this third extension could effectively prevent Christians from participating in the modern market economy.

Relevant Scripture Passages

1 Corinthians 8

1 Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. **2** If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. **3** But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

4 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.” **5** For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth - as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”- **6** 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.

7 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. **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. **9** But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. **10** For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? **11** And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. **12** Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. **13** Therefore, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. [English Standard Version]

Revelation 2:18-29

18 “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

19 “I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceeded the first. **20** But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. **21** I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. **22** Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, **23** and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. **24** But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of

Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. **25** Only hold fast what you have until I come. **26** The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, **27** and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. **28** And I will give him the morning star. **29** He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit say to the churches.’ [English Standard Version]

Schreiner on Unity and Food

Thomas Schreiner is a professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky who specializes in the study of Paul’s letters. Hence, most of his published works deal with Paul’s letters as a single body of work, systematizing themes that are common to more than one of Paul’s letters. This approach is helpful for studying the question of meat sacrificed to idols, as this topic is covered in two of Paul’s major letters: 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1 and Romans 14:1-15:13. Schreiner deals with these passages in *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ, A Pauline Theology* in a section titled “Unity and Food” (pp. 344-351).

During the first century unity of the church was put to the test over the topic of food: Was it permissible to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1)? Was it permissible to eat unclean foods (Romans 14:1-15:13)? Because of the similarities between the passages from 1 Corinthians and Romans some scholars are convinced that Paul is addressing the same basic situation in both passages. Though there are important similarities, Schreiner does not believe this to be the case.

Regarding the similarities between the passages, Paul addresses weak Christians in both passages (1Corinthians 8:7, 9-12; Romans 14:1-2; 15:1).

Christians were debating whether they should eat certain foods. In both instances Paul instructs Christians to behave in a way that edifies and builds up fellow Christians. They should avoid behaving in a way that causes a fellow Christian to stumble or be destroyed (1 Corinthians 8:1, 9, 11, 13; 10:23-24, 32-33; Romans 14:13, 15, 19, 21; 15:2).

The above similarities notwithstanding, there are important differences between the passages. In the passage from 1 Corinthians the topic is food offered to idols, while the issue of idols does not appear in the passage from Romans. In the passage from Romans the question of whether it is proper and helpful to refrain from eating meat and drinking wine for the sake of other Christians is considered. This topic does not appear in the passage from 1 Corinthians. While weak Christians are considered in both passages, they come from different backgrounds. The weak in the passage from 1 Corinthians came to Christ out of pagan backgrounds. Hence, they had previously partaken in pagan idol worship that included eating meat as part of the worship ritual. The weak in the passage from Romans came to Christ out of Judaism. The Levitical food laws that were a part of Judaism prohibited the consumption of unclean foods.

There is no evidence that the weak Christians in Romans had any previous association with pagan idol worship. That the weak Christians in the passage from 1 Corinthians came out of pagan idol worship explains why the concept of "conscience" is important in this passage (1 Corinthians 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25, 27-29). The concept of conscience is at best implicitly present in the

passage from Romans. Additionally, the question of whether it is permissible to eat in a pagan temple is covered in the passage from 1 Corinthians but is missing in the passage from Romans.

The call to mutual acceptance is found in the passage from Romans (Romans 14:1, 3; 15:7), while this call is not found in the passage from 1 Corinthians. Additionally, while the controversy in the passage from 1 Corinthians is limited to food, the controversy in the passage from Romans also includes the question of whether certain days should be observed (Romans 14:5-6). In the end, based on the above, Schreiner concludes that the passages from 1 Corinthians and Romans refer to different situations.

Weak (i.e. theologically immature) and strong (i.e. theologically mature) Christians view idols and hence the eating of food previously sacrificed to idols differently. A weak Christian remains falsely convinced of the reality of idols, while a strong Christian – based on the truth that there is only one, true God – understands that an idol is nothing more than a block of stone, wood or some other element. So, while a weak Christian may be temporarily emboldened by watching a strong Christian eat meat previously sacrificed to idols, the very act of doing so destroys the weak Christian. This destruction happens because the weak Christian's conscience is violated (1 Corinthians 8:10-13; 10:28-33). This weak-strong dichotomy and the problems that can flow from it also appears in the passage from Romans (Romans 14:13, 15, 20-21). It is important to note that the destruction referred to is not a mere failure to mature as a Christian. Instead,

the destruction referred to is that of eternal damnation. This is how the underlying Greek word is understood throughout Paul's letters.

If it is proper and permissible for strong Christians to eat meat sacrificed to idols, how is it that this same behavior results in the eternal damnation of weak Christians? Paul's answer centers on the importance of faith. When a Christian goes against his/her conscience, that Christian is no longer living by faith. Going against one's faith destroys that person's foundation on which to live. Schreiner notes that "the Christian life cannot be sustained when people begin to transgress what they *believe* are moral norms" (p. 347, emphasis added). Eternal destruction results not because eating food sacrificed to idols is inherently wrong. Instead, eternal destruction results for those who have no moral standards of their own. Without moral standards of their own, these people rely on the moral standards of others, standards that can be revised as new people with new moral standards continually come into view.

Given the significance of eternal destruction one can understand why Paul encourages strong Christians to accommodate weak Christians (Romans 14:1; 15:1). Paul particularly emphasizes that strong Christians should be careful of causing weak Christians to stumble, with the potential consequence of lost faith for the weak Christian (1 Corinthians 8:9; Romans 14:13). This is an application of Christian love that seeks to build up and please other Christians (1 Corinthians 8:1-3; Romans 14:19; 15:2-3). Love of this sort does not require unanimity on every issue. Instead, it accepts different viewpoints on issues that are *negotiable* or *nonessential*.

Weak Christians abstain from certain food (including meat sacrificed to idols) and observe certain days because *they believe* such behavior honors God. They should be embraced as fellow Christians because they desire to honor God. In contrast, strong Christians *believe* that they are free to eat such foods and that there is no longer any significance attached to the observance of certain days. They see their behavior as being equally God honoring. Thus, weak Christians should not judge strong Christians for being licentious (Romans 14:3-4, 10). Just as strong Christians are to learn to be tolerant of weak Christians, weak Christians are to learn to be tolerant of strong Christians. Both weak and strong Christians are living and behaving according to the dictates of their consciences. Thus, they are both living by faith, and that is the issue of primary importance. Here, Schreiner considers Romans 14:23 to be a universal statement (p. 348).

In both passages Paul makes the point that whether Christians are eating or drinking, they should do everything – including eating and drinking – for God's glory. Pursing God's glory is closely linked in both passages with a desire to please fellow Christians instead of ourselves, a desire to build up fellow Christians instead of satisfying our own interests, and a desire to see others grow and mature in Christ instead of having their faith destroyed (p. 349). As one can conclude from the above, Paul gives Christians significant liberty to arrive at their own conclusions when it comes to food in general and meat sacrificed to idols in particular.

Paul, however, agrees more with the strong Christian than the weak. Strong Christians are correct in their belief that it does not matter what food Christians eat (1 Corinthians 8:8). This is so because idols do not really exist, and there is only one, true God (1 Corinthians 8:5-6). Buying food offered to idols at the local market is permitted, provided that one does not feel contaminated in conscience (1 Corinthians 10:25-27). The food in question – good meat offered at a good price – is God's gift to his people (p. 349). In the passage from Romans Paul also agrees with the position held by the strong Christians. Paul no longer believes that he is bound by Levitical food laws.

Since the Christians in Corinth were to leave their former pagan ways of worship behind, it follows that they were to no longer participate in any form of pagan idol worship. Thus, eating meat that was being sacrificed to an idol as part of pagan worship in a pagan temple is prohibited. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians Fee concludes that eating meat previously sacrificed to idols that is purchased at the market is permissible, while eating meat in a pagan temple as part of pagan idol worship is always wrong. The latter is idol worship.

Morris on the Church at Thyatira

Were one to compile a list of easily understood books of the Bible, it is doubtful that Revelation would make the list. Morris gives testimony to this fact in his remarks on the Church at Thyatira. This is the longest of the letters written to the seven churches, yet Thyatira was the smallest and least significant of the towns hosting these churches (p. 69). Thyatira was well positioned for trading and had become a center for business (p. 69). Consistent with the practice of

business in the first century, there were a large number of trade guilds (p. 69). Lydia, a trader in purple cloth mentioned in Acts 16:14, came from Thyatira. Beyond these facts, little else is known about Thyatira. Far more is known about the other towns mentioned in the letters written to the seven churches than there is about Thyatira (p. 69). Because of this Morris observes that “This makes it difficult to be certain on some points and we must interpret this letter with due caution” (p. 69). For purposes of this paper, however, there is sufficient clarity on the topic of interest: the eating of meat sacrificed to idols.

Verse 20 references a woman named Jezebel, a self proclaimed prophetess. She is guilty of “teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (v. 20). Here, these two practices are related, as they are both part of pagan worship rituals. The trade guilds in Thyatira were intertwined with the practice of idol worship. For example, one of the items routinely produced by craftsmen were the idols that served as objects of worship. Hence, it would be very difficult – if not impossible – for a Christian to be a member in good standing of one of the trade guilds without also partaking in pagan worship rituals. The Christian craftsman did not have to go to a pagan temple. These pagan worship rituals were incorporated into trade guild banquets, banquets that guild members were required to attend.

Given the above, study of Paul’s instruction in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14-15 is helpful. Recall that Paul instructed that Christians were to leave their former pagan ways of worship behind. As such they were to no longer participate in any form of pagan idol worship, even pagan idol worship at a

trade guild banquet. Thus, eating meat at the banquet as an integral part of pagan worship is prohibited. Similarly, engaging in sexual activity at the banquet as an integral part of pagan worship is prohibited. Regarding the meat served at the banquet remember Fee's conclusion that eating meat previously sacrificed to idols that is purchased at the market is permissible, while eating meat as part of pagan idol worship is always wrong, as the latter is idol worship.

Apparently, Jezebel – while rightly observing that an idol was of no real consequence – incorrectly concluded that it was permissible for Christian craftsmen to participate in trade guild banquets that were essentially pagan worship events. Most likely Jezebel's teaching was appealing because it allowed people to claim they were followers of Christ without leaving behind their pagan ways of behaving. Please note that there are a variety of applications to the modern workplace in this passage that extend beyond the scope of the current paper.

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