



COMMENTARIES ON “I CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 10

St. Paul continues his argument from the last few chapters by looking at the example of the ancient Israelites (who, by being identified as “our fathers” (10:1), are thereby recognized as the forefathers of the Church). According to the apostle, all of these ancient Israelites received a form of baptism into Moses by passing through the sea (10:1-2; cf. Exodus 14); all ate spiritual food (10:3; cf. eating manna in Exodus 16:4); and all drank the spiritual water from the spiritual Rock (10:4; cf. Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:11). Despite these blessings, they displeased God (10:5) by engaging in idolatry (10:7; cf. Exodus 32:4), sexual immorality (10:7; St. Paul also quotes Exodus 32:6), tempting God (10:9; cf. St. Paul references Numbers 21), and complaining (10:10; Numbers 10); in other words, they did precisely the things being done by the Corinthian Christians.

These ancient events have a modern - both for the Corinthians, and for us - importance: they are an example of how people can receive tremendous spiritual blessings from God, and yet still fall away from following Him (10:11, 12). Christians are not immune from temptation to sin, but God nonetheless empowers us to overcome temptation and remain faithful to Him (10:13). St. John Chrysostom elaborates on the apostle’s meaning:

Paul implies that there must be temptations which we cannot bear. What are these? Well, all of them in effect. For the ability to bear them comes from God’s grace, which we obtain by asking for it. God gives us patience and brings us speedy deliverance. In this way the temptation becomes bearable.

After the strong rebukes he has given in most of the book to this point, St. Paul now demonstrates his affection for the Corinthians by calling them his “beloved” (10:14), and entreating them to flee from idolatry. The Corinthian Christians are believed to have continued attending pagan festivities after their conversion; here the apostle lovingly exhorts them to stop. Notice how he does this; while he previously referred to the Corinthian Christians as being spiritually immature (3:1-2), here he points out that he speaks to them as wise men (10:15). This is not contradictory: his point is that they have behaved like spiritual infants, but he knows they are capable of spiritual maturity and understanding mature apostolic teaching. Fr. Lawrence Farley notes that his exhortation is significant, because St. Paul now gives a deep spiritual reason for his specific exhortations: “They themselves can surely see that eating food offered to idols is incompatible with the sacramental Food they are already eating.”

The Corinthian Christians have partaken of the Holy Eucharist, drinking from the cup of blessing and breaking the bread: these things are the blood and body of Christ (10:16), and they are the source of union with God and each other (10:17). Just as when the Israelite priests sacrificed at the altar and ate the sacrifices, thereby becoming sharers of the altar (10:18), Christians become sharers of the altar when we receive Holy Communion. Even though idols are not real gods (10:19), to eat food that was offered to them is to share the altar with the demons who use the idols to deceive humans into ignoring the true God (10:21).

St. Paul pointedly asks the Corinthians why they partake of food offered to idols. Are they attempting to make God jealous, or show that they're stronger than Him (10:22)? Such an attitude, his question implies, would be absurd. St. Paul closes this argument by repeating his point from chapter six: it may be lawful for Christians to eat food offered to idols, but it is not beneficial (10:23). To eat food offered to idols indicates a lack of respect for God and Holy Communion (as he showed earlier in this chapter), and it is potentially harmful to other, weaker Christians (10:24; as he demonstrated in chapter six).

Understanding that the Corinthians would need guidance in enacting the principles he just gave them, the apostle then provides some practical advice for shopping and dining out in first century Corinth. These Christians could purchase without troubling their conscience meat sold in the marketplace, pointing out - using Psalm 24:1 - that all food comes from God (10:25-26). The Christians could also eat in the homes of unbelievers without questioning what is placed before them (10:27); Fr. Lawrence Farley says, "If it is offered as simple food, they should eat with peaceful hearts." If the host points out that the food has been offered to idols, however, the Christian should decline to eat because, if the host truly believes in the spiritual beneficence of the idols, the Christian will decline out of deference to that person's beliefs (while simultaneously not compromising Christian beliefs) (10:28-29).

Whatever the Christian eats, St. Paul concludes, he or she should give thanks and glorify God (10:31).

Repeating from chapter nine his desire to reach all people, St. Paul closes with a reminder that the Christian should, in all interactions and relations with non-Christians, avoid offending the non-believer, thereby supporting the possibility that this person might be saved (10:32-33).