



COMMENTARIES ON “1 CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 11

The first verse in 1 Corinthians 11 concludes the main theme of chapter ten: the Corinthian Christians should imitate St. Paul, just as he imitates Jesus Christ (11:1). The verse also introduces a significant theme for chapter eleven: the importance of hierarchy in the spiritual life. In verse one St. Paul reminds the Corinthians that he has authority over them, and that Christ has authority over him.

The apostle begins by praising the Corinthians for remaining faithful to the traditions - meaning the teachings about Christian doctrine and practice - that he had given them when he had previously visited the city (11:2). The spiritual traditions delivered to the Corinthians by St. Paul were not, however, the only traditions that influenced the church: the people of Corinth were also influenced by the cultural customs of the Greeks, Romans, and others who were members of the local church. Modern scholars are not entirely sure as to what these specific customs were, but we can see from 1 Corinthians 11 that they at least partially dealt with relations between men and women. St. Paul therefore spends the first part of the chapter explaining the principle - to use the words of the Protestant biblical scholar Norman Hillyer - of “union in subordination.”

St. Paul gives a simple hierarchy for the life of the Corinthian church: God the Father is the head of Jesus Christ; Christ is the head of every man; and the man is the head of the woman (11:3). Therefore, in the spiritual life - which is what St. Paul is discussing in this chapter - the husband leads the family in worship of God, and the wife follows her husband’s lead. Modern individuals might read this passage and conclude, “Look! St. Paul is a sexist! He believes women are inferior to men!” In reality, however, St. Paul is not saying that women are inferior to men. As St. John Chrysostom explains,

The word head is used in two different senses here, since otherwise absurdity would result. The distance between Christ and man is far greater than between man and woman, on the one hand, or between Christ and God on the other, and is of a different kind. Christ and God are equal in substance but different in relationship, and the same applies to man and woman. But between God and Christ the Son on the one hand and man on the other, there is a vast difference of substance as well as of relationship.

In other words, women are not somehow inferior in their essence to men, just as Christ the Son is not inferior in essence to God the Father: the subordination is purely one of relationship, which is done in love.

St. Paul uses this hierarchical subordination as the basis for his approach to the issue of head coverings during worship. He concludes that, when praying, men should leave their heads uncovered, but women should wear a veil (11:4, 6). It is difficult to say why these specific rules were instituted. Some scholars point out that, because the priests of some pagan religions covered their heads as a symbol of their submission to their gods, St. Paul wanted Christian men to pray with uncovered heads to demonstrate that their prayer was to the True God rather than false gods. Fr. Lawrence Farley, among other scholars,

speculates that St. Paul was following contemporary Jewish practice, where men prayed with uncovered heads as a symbol of their role as head of their families. In any case, most scholars agree that St. Paul commands the Corinthian women to wear a veil while praying because, in Roman culture of the time, a woman with short hair or a shaved hair was considered to be disgraceful; in fact, shaving a woman's head was punishment for being caught in prostitution or adultery. Therefore, as a sign of subordination to her husband and their God, St. Paul wants the Corinthian women to cover their heads when they pray.

The apostle's reasoning for submission of wives to their husbands is not based solely on responding to the prevailing Roman culture; it is rooted in Holy Scripture. St. Paul asserts that the creation of Adam and Eve (see Genesis 2) influences the relationships between men, women and God. Adam, a man was the crown or glory of creation, and therefore does not cover his head as a sign of submission (1 Corinthians 11:7); since a woman is the glory of man (11:7) - because Eve was created by God from Adam as a helper and companion for Adam (11:8,9) - she wears a head covering as a symbol of her submission (11:10). Interestingly, St. Paul says that a woman wears this head covering "because of the angels" (11:10). Fr. Lawrence Farley explains this statement, "That is, the angels, as superintendents of God's cosmic order, also attend to the worship of the Church and would be offended if a woman so outrageously violated the established divine order."

Again, we should remember that, while God has established relations between men and women so that the man is the head of the family, this does not mean that men are inherently superior to women. St. Paul reminds us of this fact by pointing out that, even though the order of creation given in Genesis is the basis for the difference in relations between men and women, it is also a fact that men are now borne from women. Ultimately, all things are from God (11:12), and therefore neither men nor women are independent of each other in the Lord (11:11).

St. Paul turns to nature to reinforce his argument, pointing out that the naturally longer hair of women serves as a head covering, and thus reinforces that the Corinthian women should cover their heads when worshipping God (11:14-15). This teaching is concluded by St. Paul emphatically stating that, if some people in the church in Corinth ignore what he has just taught, they are being contentious (remember his warnings against being divisive in chapters one and three) and are going against the standard practice of all the Christian churches at that time (11:16).

What about our time? Should Orthodox Christian women today cover their heads during worship? You may notice that, while some Orthodox women wear head coverings, most women - at least in North America - do not. Are women who do not cover their heads today violating this teaching by St. Paul? Fr. Lawrence Farley answers:

In St. Paul's day, the veil was the universally acknowledged symbol that a woman was respectable and in godly domestic order. Rightly or wrongly, it bears no such symbolic value now. No one thing that a woman appearing bareheaded in public must be rebelling against any cultural restrictions. Thus it is precarious to simply apply St. Paul's words directly to our situation.

I would suggest, however, that although the application of his words may change from culture to culture, the underlying principles of his words remain timeless and capable of application in any cultural

setting. His underlying point was that women should dress and deport themselves in such a way as to express a difference of gender roles and to show that they were in godly submission to their husbands. In his day this meant the use of the veil. In our day, there may be other applications - such as the retention of the wedding ring and the adoption of the husband's surname.

After concluding this point, St. Paul again refers to the problem of contentiousness and divisiveness in the Corinthian church (11:18-19). The problem is so pervasive that it has corrupted the way in which they celebrated the Holy Eucharist (11:20). The practice of early Christians was to gather together for a full evening meal, where they would eat and socialize, sing hymns, and then conclude with receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in Communion. Unfortunately, two problems arose in Corinth. First, there was rivalry and unfairness in the meal, where certain people or factions would receive more food and drink than others (11:21-22). Second, the Corinthians adopted the practices of the pagans and turned the meal into a riot of gluttony and drunkenness (11:21).

This is decidedly unholy behavior, prompting St. Paul to remind the Corinthians of the holiness of the meal that culminates in the Eucharist. He relates to the the Corinthians the works that he received directly from Christ: the order to "take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you" and "This cup is the new covenant in My blood" (11:23-24). St. Cyril of Jerusalem similarly emphasizes the holiness of the Eucharistic feast by reminding Christians that we can have full assurance that the Divine Mystery of the Eucharist is in fact the body and blood of Jesus Christ:

The teaching of the blessed Paul is of itself sufficient to give you full assurance about the divine mysteries by admission to which you have become one body and blood with Christ...When the Master Himself has explicitly said of the bread, 'This is My body,' will anyone still dare to doubt? When He is Himself our warranty saying, 'This is My blood,' who will ever waver and say it is not His blood?...With perfect confidence, then, we partake as of the body and blood of Christ.

The apostle continues that receiving the Holy Eucharist is a proclamation of the Lord's death (11:26), and therefore eating or drinking in the unworthy manner practiced by the Corinthians is be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord (11:27). In this context, the warning about eating or drinking unworthily refers to the divisiveness within the church in Corinth: if a Corinthian Christian were to eat and drink the Body and Blood, while at the same time hating his or her brother or sister in Christ, then that Christian would engage in an act that would bring judgement upon the person, because he or she would not have recognized that the despised person is also a member of the body of Christ (11:29). Fr. Lawrence Farley quotes Blessed Augustine of Hippo to explain this point:

From this it is apparent that there is an organic connection between the sacramental Body of Christ we receive and the mystical Body of the Lord, the Church, in which we receive it. As St. Augustine said, 'You are the Body of Christ and His members, your Mystery is presented at the Table of the Lord: you receive your Mystery.'

Verse thirty underscores the importance of this point: because the Corinthian Christians in their divisiveness have unworthily received the Body and Blood, God has punished many of them by allowing them to become sickly and weak, and even allowed many - not just a few, but many - to "sleep" (meaning that they died) due to their attitudes (11:30)! The Corinthian Christians should therefore

examine their attitudes to avoid God's judgment (11:31); but, if they find themselves being judged now by God, they can at least know that they are being chastened by Him now in order to avoid ultimate condemnation later (11:32).

St. Paul concludes that the Corinthian Christians should "wait for one another" when they gather for their meal because, as Ambrosiaster says, "They may make their offering together and serve one another" (11:33). If someone is particularly hungry before the meal, and thus would be too hungry to behave properly during the meal, he or she should eat at home beforehand in order to preserve the holiness of the meal (11:34).