

# NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

## *Lesson 42*

### I Corinthians – Part Four

### Worship Issues, Part One

### Chapters 10 – 11

## **I. BACKGROUND**

It is a bit unfair to call these chapters “Worship Issues” when those chapters we have covered thus far certainly pertain to the way the church related to itself in worship as well as everyday life. By the same token, some of these chapters deal with issues that make sense outside of corporate worship. Still, we are labeling these chapters “Worship Issues” because they more directly concern matters arising from corporate worship.

We will not rehash the last lessons beyond briefly reminding us of several important points:

1. Paul started the church at Corinth and stayed there its first 18 months;
2. Letters and messengers went back and forth between Paul and the Corinthians prior to this letter we call “1 Corinthians;”
3. Paul intimately knew the problems and practices of the church;
4. Paul wrote anticipating that he would soon return to the church;
5. The church had serious problems with divisions among the people. These schisms included a number who questioned both Paul’s authority and teaching; and
6. A number of people in the Corinthian church considered themselves “super-spiritual,” believing Paul and much of his teaching was below their “advanced state” of spiritual growth.

As we consider those factors, it is no surprise that the worship assemblies of the Corinthians were sickened from the same infection of selfishness and pride as much as the personal relations of the members. In chapters 10 through 14, Paul turns his attention to those public assembly issues.

## **II. PUBLIC WORSHIP ISSUES**

Whenever we get caught up in jealousies, issues of pride and arrogance, it is blind naiveté to believe that those sins do not affect all aspects of our lives. So it was the same in Corinth. The sins affected the way the Corinthians treated Paul, treated their families, and treated each other. Paul covered much of those issues in preceding chapters. Those sins also affected the corporate assemblies of the church.

Consider, for example, the transition Paul makes from chapter 9 to chapter 10. In 9, Paul had covered issues of the self-discipline and control he had and how it applied to his life. In chapter 10, he begins discussing the lack of self-discipline and self-control of some of the Corinthians and the effect it had on their lives together as a church.

More specifically, in chapter 10, Paul contrasts the significance of the Lord's Supper – a service for all Christians – with the pagan sacrificial meals before/in honor of the idols of the day. Paul teaches that Christians are NO LONGER to go to the pagan temples for pagan feasting. Our communion is with God alone! Before going straight into the issues, Paul starts by taking lessons from the Old Testament and God's relationship with Israel.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that the forefather's were miraculously brought through the sea with Moses, that the miracle food and miracle drink were not only physically nourishing, but spiritually nourishing as well. Paul goes another step in enlightening the Corinthians: the source for the spiritually and physically miraculous water was actually from Christ, our rock, himself.

Even though the fathers gained miraculous provision, their ending was not always so grand! Paul notes, "Nevertheless, God was not pleased with them; their bodies were scattered over the desert" (10:5). Paul saw this as an example for us not to set our hearts on evil like those of the Israelites. Indeed, the Israelites' evil was in essence a pagan revelry in eating and drinking that did not reverence God. Instead, it focused the people against God and was the platform to sexual immorality and grumbling against God and God's provisions (10:6-10).

So it often is with us. We are blessed, like the people of Israel, both physically and spiritually. Oftentimes this becomes a point of pride, as if it is due us or expected. We believe we have earned the blessings we enjoy. We should remember the advice, “take heed lest you fall” for devastating sin lurks around pride’s corner.

Paul urges the Corinthians to be attentive and learn from these examples. “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall” (10:12). Paul adds to his warning that people should not take the other extreme and fear that they might fall through weakness, adding “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so you can stand up under it” (10:13).

In this passage, like in so many others, we see Paul writing on both sides of an issue. To those who recklessly lived with no regard to God’s holiness, Paul sent a severe warning that just because they got nourishment spiritually and physically from God, they should not live without regard to the holiness God expects. At the same time, Paul assured those who feared an inability to please God by their actions that God himself provides a way out of temptation for them. God watches over and protects his children.

View this temptation in the context of going to a pagan temple/feast service. The meal was great; the meal was fun. The old friends were going. It had been a tradition since childhood. But, still for the Christian, “No” was a real answer in reach of everyone.

With this warning and instruction, Paul contrasts the pagan feast with our corporate worship and the Lord’s Supper. Paul’s lead-in pivots from the idolatrous worship of the Israelites that incited the pagan revelry noted in the Old Testament earlier. Paul wants the Corinthians to flee idolatry as they partake of Christ in the Lord’s Supper.

A. *The Lord’s Supper (10:14-11:1; 11:17-34)*

Paul’s writing on the Lord’s Supper falls into two sections in two different chapters, 10 and 11. In between the sections, Paul writes a bit more on eating meat sacrificed to idols and a word about men and women praying and prophesying (These sections, along with other seemingly out of context sections, has led some to believe that we are reading a composite of letters that Paul wrote that were later put into one letter we call 1 Corinthians).

In Chapter 10, Paul asks the Corinthians to consider some of the obvious implications of the Lord's Supper as a teaching lesson on participating in pagan feasts. Paul calls the cup a "cup of thanksgiving" or a "cup of blessing." Paul says the basis for the thanksgiving or blessing is our participation in the blood of Christ. Similarly, the bread we break is a participation in the body of Christ. We are thus united in Christ, much as many grains are united in one loaf of bread (10:14-17).

Paul wants the Corinthians to see that this partaking, this union, is why the Corinthians are not to participate in pagan rituals of sacrifice and eating. Remember that Paul has already said that the Christians can eat meat without regard to whether it was sacrificed to idols. That action is different from the Christians actually participating in the pagan ritual or meal that is directly part of the sacrifice itself. The Corinthians are to understand from their own practice from the Lord's Supper that the sacrificial meal creates a mystical and real union. The Corinthians should not have this union with pagans and demons!

Again, Paul returns to his previous points about "everything being permissible" but everything not being constructive or beneficial.<sup>1</sup> So, Paul sums up this practice with instructions that meat from the market can be eaten without concern. Similarly, meat offered in meal from pagans may be eaten. However, if the pagans specify that the meat is the celebratory result from a sacrifice to an idol, then the meat should not be eaten.<sup>2</sup>

This practice is not only for the sake of the Christian involved, but also for the sake of the pagan! Paul saw everything to be done to God's glory, including what and how we eat and drink. Everything Paul does is with an eye towards ministry and towards saving those who are lost (10:31-11:1).

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<sup>1</sup> Here we again see Paul taking a quotation from most likely those challenging him in Corinth ("Everything is permissible") and turning it for use against them.

<sup>2</sup> This illustrates why it is hard to give a clear delineation between sections being "corporate worship" as opposed to personal practice and lifestyle. This section really references both to some extent.

This point brings us to the interlude about men and women in worship (11:2-16). We will deal with that section now, and then we will look at the further issues of the Lord's Supper in 11:17-34.

*B. Men and Women in Worship (11:2-16)*

1. The Core Message

Paul writes early in Chapter 11 that Christ is the head of man, and man is the head of woman. Women WERE NOT to pray or prophesy<sup>3</sup> with their heads uncovered. Contrarily, men WERE to pray and prophesy with heads uncovered. Paul says this would reflect the relationship between God, men, and women. The covering on the woman showed she was created for man, while the lack of covering on the man showed his creation in God's image and glory (11:7-10).

Clearly, most churches today do not follow Paul's perspective and literal instructions, although there are a number of smaller churches that do! Why not? Because the thrust of Paul's message is that women and men are to show respect to God and his creation in their praying and prophesying.

Using the cultural practices of a first century Greek Church would not communicate to our world the same message it did at the time of Paul. This passage, then, becomes a classic example for the importance of understanding writings in their original context first before applying them to our lives. We show the respect in how we act and dress, but our culture dictates that differently than the culture of 52 A.D. Corinth.

2. A Possible Reading.

Early Christian writers saw this passage as an emphasis on the relationship between man and woman more so than as

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<sup>3</sup> The Greek word for "prophesy" is *propheteuo* (προφητεω). It means, "to be an interpreter of God," "to expound publicly," or "preach on God's behalf." This Greek word frequently translated the Hebrew *nabiya* which conveyed speaking on God's behalf. Biblically, the emphasis on a prophet or one prophesying is one the words of God as spoken, not on the one doing the speaking.

merely setting up a practice in church. Ambrosiaster (writing between 366 and 384)<sup>4</sup> said:

*Although man and woman are of the same substance, the man has relational priority because he is the head of the woman. He is greater than she is because of cause and order, but not by substance (Bray at 107).*

John Chrysostom (347-407) wrote on this passage:

*No governor should come before the king without the symbols of his office...and in the same way, a man who approaches the throne of God should wear the symbols of his office, which in this case is represented by having one's head uncovered (Bray at 107).*

These writers read Paul as concerned for the way men and women, who differ in their relational priority, approach God with various symbols of office. To the extent that Christ is the “head” of man, while man is the head of woman, it seems a fair interpretation that man should approach God with his “head” uncovered.<sup>5</sup> Man should no more cover his head in the cultural sense (such covering was viewed unnatural) because man should never cover Christ, his head in a spiritual

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<sup>4</sup> “Ambrosiaster” authored the first full-length work on 1 Corinthians that we have still today. It is a very important early commentary that shows great scholarship. It is a pity that we truly have no idea who wrote it! It was written from Rome in Latin sometime between 366 and 384. For centuries through the Middle Ages, a man named “Ambrose,” an early church writer of some note, was assumed the author. Renaissance scholarship (and that of today as well) readily demonstrated that Ambrose was not the author; so, Erasmus (a great renaissance scholar of scripture) made up the name “Ambrosiaster” to more properly ascribe this and other early commentaries by this unknown author previously assumed to be Ambrose. Bray, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, 1-2 Corinthians*, p. xx.

<sup>5</sup> “Head” in the Greek is *kephale* (κεφαλη), which means a physical head but also “head” in the sense of “source,” much like we speak of the “head” of a river. We also use “head” to reference one’s “authority.” In Hebrew, the word for head (*rosh*) can also mean “authority,” but that meaning is very rare for the Greek word Paul uses here. To the extent Paul is using “head” symbolically, he is most likely talking about the “source” and not the “authority.”

sense. Since Christ is the “head” or “source” of man, man approaches God **SHOWING** Christ, not covering Christ.

Similarly, to the extent that man is the “head” of woman (or the “source” of woman), when a woman approaches God, she does so with her “head” covered. This approach was culturally true because a woman brought shame on her activities if she conducted them without her physical head covered. This approach, however, was also spiritually true by a woman approaching God without “covering” her human head/source, man. Women do not relate to God or approach God through men. They approach God straight through Jesus Christ the same as man.

C. *The Lord’s Supper, Concluded (11:17-34)*

After the slight detour into the issues of men and women approaching God in prayer or prophesy, Paul returns to the issues of the Lord’s Supper in much more detail than earlier. Paul’s return to the subject is not with praise but with stern direction. Paul notes that when the church was coming together, the divisions (of which we know a good deal from the earlier part of the letter) were tearing the heart out of the communion service.

These divisions seemed to stem not as much from who followed which teacher (Paul, Apollos, or Peter), but from class divisions. Paul forecasted his concern here in the earlier passage on the Lord’s Supper in chapter 10, where Paul writes that we are “one loaf” even though many people.

We understand the passage a bit more if we recognize two aspects of life in Corinth versus life in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America. First, eating at that time was frequently a part of a feast or festival to a deity. It is reasonably clear that for the earlier church, the communion service was at least frequently, if not always, a part of a larger meal (some call it an “agape feast”). In fact, when Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, it was as a part of the Passover meal, as opposed to an isolated consumption of wine and bread.

Second, archeology has demonstrated that the dining rooms (*triclinia*), even of the larger and wealthier families in Corinth, would not accommodate more than 10 or so people. While a select few might have enjoyed the feast and Communion in that room, most would have to eat the meal in the larger atrium/entry courtyard which could hold 30 – 50 people.



Both of these factors give some background data that help us understand how the problems Paul addresses could arise. Some were coming together and eating/drinking (even to the point of drunkenness!) before everyone else even arrived! The richer were eating their bountiful meals (in the dining room?) while those of lesser means might not even have food for the meal (in the courtyard?).

Paul found this despicable and hypocritical of the very point of the service. Paul pulls the Corinthians back to the core and inception of the service. Paul reminds the Corinthians that when Christ ordered the communion, he did so proclaiming the wine and bread as his blood and body. When the Corinthians (or the church today) would eat or drink, they were proclaiming the death of Christ as well as his promised return. In light of that, should any see the meal as a means of sating hunger to the exclusion of others?

Paul orders the church to contemplate the body of Christ in the meal. It is not a pagan opportunity to carouse around good food. It is a solemn recognition (yes, with joy as well) that we are all joined into the body of Christ, crucified and coming again. We should contemplate that and leave the hunger satisfaction to more normal meals at home.

It is worthy of note here that Paul urges the Corinthians to recognize the “body of the Lord” in this communion service as a means of expressing church unity. The “body of the Lord” for Paul is not just the crucified Christ, alone at Calvary. Christ crucified is seen in the church itself. Communion is meant for more than personal reflection on the death of Jesus. It includes focus on each other in the church as many parts of the one crucified savior.

### **III. POINTS FOR HOME**

1. God Gives Strength to Do Right.
2. Honor God in All We Do.
3. Church is Not About Us.
4. Church is About God First.
5. Church is About Each Other Second.