

C. The Matter of Worship Practices

The next section of the epistle addresses two issues associated with the Corinthians' worship practice (11:2-34). The first is more general and has broad application in that it concerns the place of women in the church and their role in the church's corporate worship (11:2-16); the second issue is very specific, with Paul speaking to the church's practice of the sacrament of the Lord's Table (11:17-34).

Unlike the previous matter of "idol meats" (and the subsequent one), there's no explicit indication that the Corinthians raised these two issues in their letter. However, the nature of the first of the two (the one involving women) suggests that the Corinthians had likely broached the subject with Paul. While Paul's treatment of the Lord's Table gives the impression that, as a congregation, the Corinthians weren't consciously aware of – let alone concerned about – their abuses in partaking in the sacrament, that would not have been the case with the matter of women and their place and role in Christ's Church.

- Greco-Roman culture had its own notions, ethics and practices respecting women, and the personal convictions of individual Corinthian believers were layered on top of these.
- Added to all of this was Jesus' (and the apostles') instruction regarding women and their share in His salvation and status in His Church.

This clash of cultural, personal, religious and even gender sensibilities and convictions undoubtedly left the Corinthians differing from one another. And given the emotional intensity and wide-ranging implications attached to this matter, the difference of opinion among them had almost certainly resulted in disputes – disputes which quite possibly helped to further the factions that divided the church. Thus it's entirely reasonable to assume that the Corinthians had raised this issue in their letter. But if they did, Paul made no mention of it or of the nature of their inquiry; any conclusions in that regard must therefore be inferred from his treatment of the topic.

1. Thus it's important to approach this first context (11:2-16) by taking note of what *is* clear in Paul's instruction and then applying that understanding to the interpretation of the more obscure and difficult particulars. Toward that end, the following general observations help to lay the foundation for interpreting the passage as a whole.
 - The first is that Paul was addressing the place and role of Christian women within the context of the Church's corporate life and worship. He wasn't speaking to questions of male-female roles as such or the husband-wife relationship.
 - At the same time, Paul drew upon principles of male-female distinction in making his argument. His instruction concerns the narrow issue of church practice, but it is grounded in general considerations. This is consistent with all of Paul's epistles, which treat particular issues and concerns in terms of the larger principles which define and govern them. And the overarching principle is the nature, meaning and purpose of the Christian life: Whatever the issue, it can only be understood and properly addressed when it is interpreted and treated in terms of Christ's gospel.

- And just as the Corinthians’ resolution of this particular matter depended upon viewing and addressing it in the light of the gospel, so it was the failure to rightly apply the gospel that led to the problem in the first place. The implication of this is that the “women issue” in the Corinthian church was just one more manifestation of the one fundamental problem in that body: *The Corinthians were operating with natural minds rather than living into the mind of Christ*. Again, the natural mind is the mind of man in his natural state: estranged from God and therefore self-isolated and self-referential. It is the mind that operates out from itself and ultimately on behalf of itself; it is the mind of man as he perceives, understands, assesses and approaches all things from the vantage point of his own perspective, sensibilities, interests and desires.

- However the specifics in this passage are interpreted, the fundamental issue was the *autonomous spirit* that pervaded the church at Corinth. But this circumstance need not be construed as brazen or malicious; autonomy (“self as law”) is simply the natural human paradigm of *individualism* in which a person relates to all things through the grid of his own perspective, notions, values, judgments, etc. Whether spiritual arrogance, wrongful judging, immorality, the misuse of freedom and spiritual gifts, gender problems or the abuses of the Lord’s Table, all of the problems at Corinth could be traced back to this one core human malady.

- An autonomous mindset and orientation were affecting the Corinthian congregation at all levels, including the way women were viewing themselves and their place in Christ’s Church. This included their perception of their status as Christian women and their relationship to the men of the church (not just their husbands as some commentators argue), which itself was grounded in their sense of their new life in Christ and the new standing and freedom it afforded them.

Thus, however one concludes regarding the particulars of Paul’s instruction in this context, what must not be missed is that he was speaking to the same fundamental problem here as throughout the epistle: The women addressed in this context (and the other saints implicated in this issue – ref. 11:16) were guilty of thinking with natural minds; they weren’t despising or rejecting the truth of their new lives in Christ (ref. 11:2), but were failing to think rightly about the implications and application of that truth. For all their knowledge, confidence and zeal, the Corinthians had failed to grasp (in some arenas at least) the true meaning and significance of being “in Christ” and the obligations it imposes; though each in his own way, together the community of believers in Corinth was failing to do all things in the cause of the gospel.

These observations are critically important in that they frame the issue at hand. Many believe the problem Paul was addressing had its roots in a feminist mindset present in Corinth (as throughout the Greco-Roman world). The more militant feminists reportedly promoted their egalitarian and liberation doctrine by adopting male grooming, garb and behavior, and the supposition is that this sort of practice was infiltrating the Corinthian church. But viewing the issue in this way results in a particular understanding of Paul’s notion of *headship* (11:3); in practical terms, it becomes a call to female subordination.

While this approach to the passage is attractive for various reasons, it owes more to conjecture – and the patriarchal patterns of human culture – than to the context and careful exegesis. Paul wasn't calling for the subordination of women, either as wives or as female Christians; *he wanted the Corinthians – men and women – to rightly discern the divinely designed distinctions between men and women and the crucial role of those distinctions in human authenticity and therefore in the Christian's fulfillment of his/her obligation to bear authentic testimony – i.e., to “do all things for the sake of the gospel.”*

- This is evident from the passage itself and also from Paul's consistent instruction throughout this epistle and all of his writings.
- More specifically, it's evident from Paul's use of the relationship between the divine Father and Son to explain and exemplify his notion of “headship” and its meaning for the relationship between men and women.

And so, though Paul has here moved his discussion to a new topic, the heart of his instruction remains the same. He wasn't bringing a new insight and proposing a discrete instruction set devised for a unique situation. Paul was doing what he always did; he was applying the same fundamental gospel principles to yet another problem.

- a. Paul notably introduced the change of topic by *commending* the Corinthians (11:2). At first glance this commendation might appear to be two-fold, with Paul praising them both for “*holding him in their remembrance*” and for “*holding firmly to the traditions*” he delivered to them. But a closer look reveals that the two phrases comprise a single thought.
 - Paul wasn't commending them for merely thinking about him from time to time. Neither was he expressing his gratitude for their fond and respectful recollections of him. (Indeed, with at least some of the Corinthians, there was no such fondness or respect.)
 - Paul's commendation was his acknowledgment that the Corinthian saints were holding fast to the things he'd imparted to them (the teachings or “traditions”); it was in this sense that they were holding fast to him in his absence. A more literal rendering makes this clear: “*I praise you because you keep me in mind as concerns all matters – even that you hold fast to the teachings just as I delivered to you.*” (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 3:6)

This introductory commendation is critically important to the context, for it shows that Paul regarded the particular issue with women in the church as arising from their concern to honor and uphold the things he'd taught them. *These ladies weren't insubordinate rebels seeking liberation from male authority, but were acting with the conviction that they were conforming to the truth as Paul had communicated it to them.* However one interprets the situation and Paul's corrective, they must be seen in this light. And what the context suggests is that these women believed they were honoring the freedom that was theirs in Jesus.

Paul had surely taught the Corinthians that in Christ there is no male or female, but that all are one in Him (cf. 12:12-13 with Galatians 3:26-28; Ephesians 4:4-6). They'd come to understand that, in Himself as the first fruits of the new creation, Jesus has inaugurated a profound egalitarianism that contrasts and contradicts the myriad divisions and hierarchical distinctions that mark human societies and cultures. And certainly Corinthian society was filled with such distinctions.

- In the Greco-Roman world (as indeed in most of the world throughout history) women were regarded as little more than property. They had no political or civil rights and were entirely subject to the authority of male figures, whether fathers, husbands, a male relative, etc.
- But one of the glorious truths of the gospel – one which Paul insisted upon but Christians to this day still struggle to grasp and rightly apply – is that all believers have equal status in Christ's kingdom. There is no inferiority and therefore no subordination for the simple reason that all alike share in Christ's life by His Spirit. Every criterion by which people are ranked in their status and rights – gender, ethnicity, class, wealth, social standing, etc. – is nullified in Christ. All who are joined to the Last Adam are fully and equally participants in His glorified humanity and are therefore Jesus' brethren and children of His heavenly Father.

The Christian faith confronts culture in a myriad of ways, but not least because it confronts and exposes as illegitimate the hierarchical form of human social structures. The gospel reveals that these structures are grounded in the fall and man's sense of himself and his own interests in contradistinction to others. Human society (at all levels) reflects and expresses man's innate sense of personal superiority – superiority which he will attach to any sort of distinction, whether gender, ethnicity, bloodline, class, education, even vocation and appearance.

Paul had arrived in Corinth proclaiming a gospel that falsifies and rejects all such distinctions even as it holds forth a new form of human existence, society and culture: the *kingdom of God* that is the new creation. Paul proclaimed this gospel to all who would listen and disciplined those who responded in faith. For a year and a half he imparted the "traditions" of Christ's gospel to the Corinthians and they were eager and faithful disciples (cf. Acts 18:7-11; 1 Corinthians 1:4-9).

Thus, as the prelude to his instruction, Paul was careful to convey his confidence that this situation with some of the women in the Corinthian church was the result of *immature* faith and an *imprecise application* of it, not the absence of faith or rebellion against it. ***This issue, like the previous one involving "idol meats," seems to have been one of misunderstood and misapplied freedom.*** These ladies weren't wrong about their freedom in Christ and the egalitarian nature of His Church as His one unified body; their error lay in the way they viewed distinctions in the context of Christian equality and how these dynamics bear witness to Christ's gospel in the Church and the world.