
THE CHRISTIAN PROSPECT

VOL. I, NO. 11 – JUNE 28, 2022

Greetings to the Seven Churches

Revelation 1:4-8¹ *“John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen. ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’”*

Having introduced the purpose of this letter, John sends his own greeting to the recipients, the seven churches of Asia. The hope for God’s grace and peace is included in the greeting of nearly every letter in the New Testament, so it is no surprise to find it here. These are essential ingredients to the survival of every Christian, and though we likely read over the introductions of these letters as a mere greeting, we would doubtless improve our lives if we did more to seek out the grace and peace of God.

John uses this greeting to introduce the source of his writing: God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ the Son. The manner in which he gives the introduction is interesting. He does not simply identify each as we ordinarily would, rather each is given a description that expresses their importance and purpose to Christians. The nature of God is vast and beyond our comprehension except where He reveals Himself to us. People have many perspectives on the nature and character of God. Atheists deny His existence all together. Deists reduce God to a creator who mostly ignores His creation thereafter. Because He is not physically present we may be inclined to think He is far away and uninterested in our lives. This could be particularly easy if you were facing constant persecution and threat to your life. This is not what we find here, particularly in the introduction of Jesus. Instead, each is seen in light of His purpose in man’s salvation. John wants every Christian to know that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not far removed from our lives. They have a significant investment in us and care about each of us.

The Seven Churches

The seven churches of Asia are listed near the end of the chapter: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. There were other churches in Asia, Galatia and Colossae for example, which are not included here, so it seems these seven are a sufficient representation of the whole.

Him Who Is, Who Was, And Who Is To Come

The Greek text behind this translation is something close to “the is and the was and the coming.” This relates closely with Exodus 3:14:

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Both passages express the eternal, unchanging nature of God: He is, He was, He will be. Exodus 3 marks the beginning of God’s deliverance of His people from Egypt. God made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:7-16) promising the land as an inheritance to his offspring. He begins the covenant with “I am the Lord (YHWH)”, a name used since Genesis 2. Moses’ question about God’s name in Exodus 3 seems to have been more a question of assurance. He wanted to know how to reassure the Israelites that God is who He says He is. In the end God continues using the name by which He was always known, “The LORD (YHWH), the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” and concludes with “This is my name forever” (Exodus 3:15). In other words, God had not changed, He is the same God known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Because He is unchanging, His covenant with Abraham would be fulfilled, and because He always will be, there is nothing to prevent its fulfillment.

Jesus reiterated the eternal nature of God in Matthew 22. There the Sadducees had asked a question regarding the resurrection, which Jesus answered by quoting from the scriptures, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Matthew 22:32). He continued by explaining that God is the God of the living and not the dead. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

¹ All scripture is taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

live in eternity because God is faithful to His word. Peter (Acts 3:13) and Stephen (Acts 7:32) repeated the phrase in their teachings.

The seven churches of Asia could be confident in God because He is unchanging. That He was, is, and will be, is an expression of His supreme power. He has complete control of all creation and will use His power to fulfill His word.

The Seven Spirits

It seems easy enough to identify the seven Spirits as the Holy Spirit given the relationship here with God and Jesus, but why use this description? Seven is a special number, generally symbolizing divine completion. In that sense this identifies the complete Spirit. At the time of this writing the Holy Spirit played a more visibly significant role in the lives of Christians. Many had spiritual gifts. Many congregations had inspired men who taught them God's word as it was being revealed by the Spirit.

This terminology is used three other times in Revelation: 3:1; 4:5; and 5:6. We will briefly consider Revelation 3:1 here as it has some bearing on this part of our study.

Revelation 3:1 *“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. ‘I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.’”*

In what way does Jesus have the seven Spirits? In John 7:39 we learn that the Spirit would be given to believers, but only after Jesus' glorification. Later in John 14 Jesus promised to send “another Helper” to them, “the Spirit of truth” (John 14:15-17). We find the fulfilment of this promise in Acts 2. During his sermon, Peter points out that the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles because “He poured out this which you now see and hear” (Acts 2:33). Jesus has the seven Spirits, the Holy Spirit, because they work in conjunction according to the divine will.

Emphasis is placed on what the Spirit does for Christians. While a complete study of the work of the Spirit is beyond the scope of this essay, we will mention a few specifics to complete our point. He was a teacher and reminded the Apostles of all that Jesus said (John 14:26). He provided the spiritual gifts that enabled the early church to function and spread the gospel in the absence of the written word. He stood with the Apostles when they faced trials and guided their words (Mark 13:11). He sometimes organized and sent men to accomplish various works (Acts 13:2). He provided comfort to the church so it could grow and multiply (Acts 9:31). Romans 8:26 indicates that the Spirit acts as a representative in Heaven for those who, in times of weakness and distress, are unable to put their needs into words. Alan Bonifay² writes, “When believers are only able to groan inarticulately because their suffering is so severe or the problem is so overwhelmingly complex, the Holy Spirit intercedes on their behalf?”

Modern Christians continue to enjoy the work of the Holy Spirit, even if less visibly. Now that the written word is complete, He indwells us through it. We use it to spread the gospel. We use it when we need guidance and direction. It organizes the positions of authority in the church that enable its proper function. There is no reason to believe that the Spirit has stopped interceding on our behalf when needed.

We sometimes view the work of the Holy Spirit as mysterious and beyond our understanding, but this is not the case. Certainly some of His specific work is outside our ability to know, but in general is practical and designed to help Christians accomplish their mission of spreading the gospel.

Jesus Christ

John then turned his attention to Jesus Christ, whom he identifies without ambiguity. But simply mentioning Him by name was not enough; the significance of Jesus' life to ours is profound, and deserves more consideration, and so John outlines the works Jesus accomplished on behalf of His people. This is a reminder for all readers that Jesus made a great and enduring investment in our lives, He will never leave nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

- 1) Faithful Witness

² Alan Bonifay, *A Commentary on Romans* (Yukon: Contending for the Faith Publications, 2016), p. 359.

The Greek word here translated witness, *martyrs*, is sometimes translated martyr (e.g. Revelation 17:6), a person who has been deprived of life as the result of bearing witness to his beliefs³. Stephen is called both a witness (ESV, NET) and a martyr (NKJV, NIV). Jesus lived a life of faith, doing the Father's will (John 6:38). The faithfulness of our Lord was ultimately demonstrated to us when He gave His life for our sins.

What does it mean, in this context, that Jesus is a witness? There are various examples of Him bearing witness to His true identity. Jesus had explained to Pilate that He was, in fact, a king, but that His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:33-38). John 8 has the most thorough explanation of the witness He bore to the world. That explanation moves through its legality under the law and transitions to the practical point of salvation when Jesus declares that salvation is only possible when we believe He is the Christ (John 8:24). The chapter concludes with Him declaring His eternal nature, "before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58).

While these all were important, by the time John wrote Revelation the job of bearing witness to His life had been handed over to thousands of others who were eyewitnesses to Him. What then, would Jesus be a witness of? It seems to me we find that answer in Matthew 10:32, "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." When we follow His example, telling those around us about the King, the Christ, the eternal Savior, He is faithful to bear witness in Heaven that we belong to Him.

2) Firstborn Of The dead

After the death of Lazarus, Jesus discussed the resurrection with Martha.

John 11:25-26 *"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?'"*

Only God has power over life and death. In this statement Jesus asserted His divinity and made clear that death had no power before Him. In the opening of his gospel, John wrote "In Him was life" (John 1:4). While He lived Jesus repeatedly reversed the dying process, healing the sick and on a few occasions raising the dead. Sickness and death are natural, as the creator of all things He had full power and control over all of nature. But those He raised all died again. None were able to escape their final appointment with death.

Jesus was the first to be raised to never die again.

Colossians 1:18 *"And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent."*

The purpose of all that Jesus did was to provide salvation for fallen man so we might be freed from sin and death. In His death He accomplished a beginning: blood that could wash away sin, a body, the church, for believers to be a part of, and the defeat of death. The dead are often referred to as sleeping (Matthew 9:24, John 11:11, 1 Thessalonians 4:14) because one day the righteous will be awakened to live again.

When Jesus died many of the tombs around Jerusalem were opened (Matthew 27:52). For three days they remained open until after Jesus' resurrection, at which point the saints who had laid in them asleep were raised, following the firstborn out of the grave.

Paul assured the Corinthians of our hope. A life with no resurrection would be a miserable thing, but Christ is risen, and became the first fruits of those of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:20).

3) Ruler Of Kings on Earth

Paul said Jesus is "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Timothy 6:15). We may not understand why evil men are allowed to rule on the earth, but He knows. Jesus told Pilate, "You would have no authority over

³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), p. 235.

me at all unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11). All those who occupy positions of authority in this world do so because they serve God’s purpose.

4) Him Who Loves Us

Not much needs to be said here. There is nothing more obvious than the love of Jesus who gave His life for our sins and continues to mediate on our behalf.

5) Freed Us from Our Sins by His Blood

It follows logically that His love would bring about freedom from sin. This is the manifestation of His love.

Some translations (KJV, NKJV, H.T. Anderson’s The New Testament: Translated from the Original Greek) translate the passage “washed us from our sins” while others (ESV, NET, RSV, ASB) use “free” or “loosed” us from our sins. The difference is due to variation among manuscripts. The Greek words translated *wash* or *loose/free* are very similar:

Lusanti, λύσαντι – loose, untie, set free⁴

Lousanti, λοῦσαντι – wash, bathe⁵

The translation notes from the NET have a comprehensive discussion of the differences, which could include similarity of the spelling and pronunciation of the Greek words.

Functionally the translations are the same. We read of salvation as being washed (Acts 22:16, 1 Corinthians 6:11, Titus 3:5) and being made free from sin (Romans 6:18). In either case sin is removed.

The point is to remind us that Jesus died and shed His blood so that we might be saved from sin. Paul told the Ephesians “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Ephesians 1:7). His blood was the price paid for our salvation (1 Corinthians 6:20, 1 Peter 1:18-19). Jesus described His own life as “a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). The terrible cost of our redemption should never leave our minds, that the perfect Son of God should leave Heaven’s glory, suffer cruelly, and die so that we might be saved from sin.

6) Made Us A Kingdom

In Colossians 1:13-14 Paul wrote, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” The saved are made a part of His kingdom. John the Baptist and Jesus both taught the kingdom was at hand, and through His sacrifice we can be citizens of it.

7) Priests To His God And Father

When Jesus died the veil separating the most holy place in the temple was torn in two. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter. But now that barrier between God and man is gone. Jesus has become our High Priest (Hebrews 4:14), and all Christians are themselves priests (1 Peter 2:9). Our spiritual health and relationship with God no longer depends on fallible men.

Coming With the Clouds

The use of clouds in the Old Testament often expressed protection and deliverance for the righteous, and judgment for the wicked (See Deuteronomy 33:26-27, Psalm 68:4, Isaiah 19:1). A cloud guided the Hebrews in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21).

Daniel used this imagery when he foretold the kingdom Jesus would establish.

Daniel 7:13-14 *“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”*

⁴ Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 606.

⁵ Louw & Nida, *Lexicon*, p. 522.

The vision here is of Jesus going to God's throne with the clouds. Before His ascension Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18) and when He ascended "a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). This is just as Daniel prophesied. The angels standing by told the disciples that Jesus would return "in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

What significance would this have to first century Christians? For those who were familiar with its Old Testament usage it would remind them that God is with His people. There would be deliverance and the wicked would be judged. There were also the words of Jesus from Matthew 24:

Matthew 24:30-31 *"Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."*

Christians of every age can take comfort in the promise that one day we will be gathered home. As He ascended, so He will return, coming in the clouds to reward His people.

Every Eye Will See

The only time this can happen is at the final judgment, when, as Paul wrote, "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

All Tribes Will Wail

Someday an account will be made. For those who do not know God and have not obeyed the gospel, vengeance awaits (2 Thessalonians 1:8).

Conclusion

This introductory passage is much more than a simple introduction. John takes this opportunity to remind his readers that the Father, Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ have made a significant investment in our lives and continue to help in our time of need.

John is reminding every Christian about the great work that has gone into our salvation. There are three passages I want to consider here:

John 4:34 The disciples said to one another, "Could someone have brought him something to eat?" "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work," Jesus told them (CSB).

John 5:17 Jesus responded to them, "My Father is still working, and I am working also." (CSB)

Titus 1:1-3 Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness, in the hope of eternal life that God, who cannot lie, promised before time began. In his own time he has revealed his word in the preaching with which I was entrusted by the command of God our Savior: (CSB)

We learn from Jesus's words that God started a work, Jesus came to finish it, and at that time, both were still working. In Paul's letter to Timothy we learn that eternal life was a promise made before the creation of the world. To that end God has worked to fulfil that promise. When Jesus came to live among men He continued that work, accomplishing the things listed above, which are necessary for our salvation, and are beyond man's ability to do for himself. After Jesus ascended to Heaven the Holy Spirit came to finish revealing the word and help God's people continue the work of salvation among the lost of the world. Last, Paul ties his own work of preaching the gospel into the completion of this great promise.

Because God cannot lie, the work will be completed. Every Christian can take comfort in the fact that your labor is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58), and neither is God's. What He has started will be finished, and we are the beneficiaries of it.

- **Lance Stallcop**

A New Translation of 1 Corinthians 11

“Learn to imitate me, just as I imitate Christ.

Now, I commend you, in that you have remembered me in everything, and that you have kept the traditions just as I gave them to you. However, I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, man is the head of woman, and God is the head of Christ. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered brings dishonor on his head, but every woman who prays or prophesies without a covering on her head dishonors her head, for it is one and the same as if she were shaved. If a woman is uncovered, she should also be shaved! Conversely, if it is shameful for a woman to cut her hair short or to be shaved, she should be covered.

This is because, while a man is under no obligation to cover his head — since he is the image and glory of God — woman is the glory of man; for man was not made from woman, but woman was made from man. Man also was not made for woman’s sake, but woman was made for man’s sake. For this reason, a woman is under obligation to have authority on her head for the angels’ sake. Nevertheless, woman cannot exist without man in the Lord, nor can man exist without woman; for just as woman was made from man, so now man is also made through woman, but all things come from God.

Decide amongst yourselves: is it right for a woman to pray to God while uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that a man with long hair is disgraced? Or that a woman who has long hair has her glory? This is because long hair has been given to her as a covering. If anyone wants to be quarrelsome, we have no such custom, nor do the people of God.

Now, with the next instructions, I do not praise you, because your assemblies do not make you better, but actually make you worse! First, when you come together as an assembly, I hear that there are divisions among you, and I believe some of it. There must be factions in your number; for this is how those of you who are sincere can be recognized. Therefore, when you come together in the same place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper, because each makes it his own meal when he eats it prematurely, so that one is hungry, while another is drunk. Do you not have houses, if your goal is to eat or to drink? Or do you consider the people of God to be beneath you, and put to shame those who are not able to share with you? What should I say to you? Should I praise you? In this matter, I cannot praise you.

This is because I gave you the same teaching that I accepted from the Lord. On the night when He was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took a piece of bread and, after He had prayed, He broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me.” In the same way, He took the cup after supper and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this so that, whenever you drink it, you will remember me.” Whenever you eat the bread and drink the cup, you are proclaiming the Lord’s death until He returns.

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord improperly will be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. Everyone should put himself to the test first, and in this manner eat some of the bread and drink some from the cup, for the one who eats and drinks brings judgment against himself if he eats and drinks without recognizing the body. This is why many of you have become weak and ill, and a considerable number have fallen asleep. If we had judged ourselves, we would not have been judged; however, since we are being judged by the Lord, we are being educated by Him so that we will not fall under the same final sentence as the world.

Therefore, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that you do not bring judgment against yourselves when you come together. I will address whatever else needs attention when I come.”

Notes:

1: “Learn to imitate me...” — The Greek phrase literally means, “become imitators of me,” which is how Alexander Campbell’s *The Living Oracles* translates this verse. Most translations render the phrase in a way that emphasizes an immediate response to the command, e.g., “be imitators of me” (NASB 2020, ESV, NRSV), “imitate me” (NKJV), or “follow my example” (NIV). In my translation, I have chosen to emphasize the long-term goal that Paul sets for the Corinthians. Practically speaking, they could not become a flawless reflection of Paul in a moment, but it was a target that they had to work toward. They were not currently imitating him. To my mind, this phraseology is the best way to express that kind of process.

3: “Man is the head of woman” — This phrase appears a little differently in the ESV, “the head of a wife is her husband,” and the NRSV, “and the husband is the head of his wife.” The root of this difference lies in the fact that the same Greek word means both “man” and “husband,” and likewise the concepts of “woman” and “wife” are expressed with the same word. Thus, the

word *γυνή* (gyne/gune) in isolation means “woman,” or “a woman,” while *γυνή μου* (gune mou) means “my woman,” or, better, “my wife.” The same can be said for *άνήρ* (aner), “man⁶.”

It is important for us to determine whether this verse has reference to a universal principle – which would mean that this passage has a universal application to every man and every woman – or if its frame of reference is limited to those who are married with an equally limited application. I believe the context gives us the best indication. Verses 7-12 in this chapter tie this principle of authority together with the circumstances and intentions behind the creation of both man and woman. While we can certainly make a connection to marriage – the first woman was made so that she could be married to the first man (Genesis 2:18-24) – we are all a product of the same creation, and the same procreative principle affects every one of us, whether we individually marry or not. As a result, the principle of creation applies equally to each of us, regardless of our marital status. The passage applies to all men and all women.

However, it is important here to note that a universal principle does not necessarily lead to indiscriminate application. This might be easier to understand by analogy: The scriptures teach us plainly that God has given authority to human governments (Romans 13:1-7). However, simply because a government possesses authority in abstract does not give it leave to exercise that authority without boundaries. The government of the United States of America (with allowances for modern global politics) may only exercise its authority on its citizens – wherever they are in the world – and on foreign nationals while they are in its borders. It would be inappropriate for that government to, say, levy a tax on a British citizen who is visiting the country of France. The US government’s authority is no less real because it cannot influence that individual, but it cannot use that authority indiscriminately.

In the same way, Paul is defending a universal principle that, based on creation, gives man authority over woman. However, this does not give every man leave to exercise authority over every woman. The scriptures apply this concept in terms of *family*, *marriage*, and *close community* (such as a congregation). Consequently, these passages cannot be used responsibly to justify misogynistic behavior, nor would it be appropriate for a husband to exercise the authority he has been entrusted with as a husband on any woman who is not his wife; for a father to use his familial authority outside of his family; or for an elder in a congregation to exercise this authority over non-believers or another congregation. Abstract authority must be applied responsibly.

6: “*If it is shameful for a woman to cut her hair short or to be shaved*” – There are two points in this sentence that bear a closer examination. The first has to do with the precise meaning of the word *κεῖρασθαι* (keirasthai), “to shear oneself,” which I have translated “to cut her hair short.” The second has to do with the contrast between the same word and *ξυρᾶσθαι* (xurasthai), “to be shaved.”

First, the word *κεῖρασθαι* (keirasthai) is in the middle voice; the word appears in dictionaries under the active voice form *κεῖρω* (keiro), which seems to primarily refer to “shearing,” as of sheep⁷. However, it appears in both the Septuagint and the New Testament with reference to cutting human hair. In most of these cases, it is unclear whether the individuals concerned cut off *all* of their hair, or only cut it short. For example, 2 Samuel 14:25-26 describes Absalom’s physical appearance. Verse 26 implies that his hair was a source of great vanity for him, and that he only cut his hair at the end of every year because it grew so heavy that it became difficult for him to endure it. In this case, it does not seem certain that Absalom cut off all of his hair, especially considering his vanity.

Likewise, it seems likely that Jeremiah 52 describes an act of grooming and hygiene, not one of humiliation:

“And this happened in the thirty-seventh year in which Jeboiakim king of Judah was exiled, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-fourth day of the month: Evil-merodach, king of Babylon, in the year in which he began to reign, took the head of Jeboiakim, king of Judah, and shaved him and brought him out from the house where he was kept.” ³² *And he spoke well to him and gave him the seat above the kings of those with him in Babylon.* ³³ *And they changed his prison clothing, and he ate bread always at his face all the days that he lived.* ³⁴ *And the portion was given to him always from the king of Babylon, from day to day until the day that he died.”* (Jeremiah 52:31-34, Lexham English Septuagint (Second Edition)).

This particular reading of verse 32 differs from the Hebrew text, which may be represented by the NASB 2020, “Evil-merodach king of Babylon, in the first year of his reign, showed favor to Jehoiachin king of Judah and brought him out of prison.”

⁶ For more information, see Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 79-80 and 208-209. Logos

⁷ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, *Lexicon*, p. 538.

However, it provides good evidence for how this particular Greek word was used. Jehoiachin (Jehoiakim in the Greek version) had been poorly treated in prison, during which time he wore uncomfortable or worn-out clothes and his hair was probably left to grow wild. Therefore, when the new king of Babylon, Evil-merodach, decided to treat Jehoiachin with more kindness than his predecessor, he offered him a new home, new clothes, and a haircut. In this context, we can imagine that the haircut was designed to be aesthetically pleasing, not humiliating. This consideration does not preclude baldness, but it does not require it either.

Conversely, in the Septuagint version of Micah 1:16, the word *κείρω* (keiro) is paired with the word *ξυράω* (xurao; the active voice equivalent of *ξυράσθαι*) for poetic stress, emphasizing that the children of Israel should cut off all of their hair to the point of baldness to show their sorrow. This seems to be the meaning in Job 1:20 and Jeremiah 7:29 as well, where baldness is used as a sign of mourning. The act of shaving in these verses actually serves an opposite purpose when compared to Absalom and Jehoiachin, these people wanted (or should have wanted) to look miserable.

Similarly, when Paul cut his hair in Acts 18:18, it is very likely that he cut off all of his hair. It is uncertain precisely what kind of a vow Paul had taken, but it seems that he treated his hair the way a Nazarite would have. According to the principles taught in Numbers 6, all of the hair that a Nazarite grew while under a vow was sacred to God, so it was necessary for him to cut off all of his hair (and start the vow again) if he was ritually defiled while under the vow, and when he had completed the vow, he was required to cut off all of his hair and burn it at the temple.

All said, it is probably best to say that the verb *κείρω* (keiro) was used as a general term to refer to a short haircut for any reason. Someone who received such a haircut was not necessarily bald afterward, though some were.

This result is strengthened by the way that Paul contrasts the verb *κείρασθαι* (keirasthai) with the verb *ξυράσθαι* (xurasthai). The latter unambiguously refers to a shave that results in baldness⁸. *κείρεσθαι* (keiresthai) is certainly in the middle voice (“to cut one’s own hair/have one’s own hair cut”), while *ξυράσθαι* (xurasthai) may be in either the middle voice (“to shave oneself/have oneself shaved”) or the passive voice (“to be shaved (by someone else)”). This means that, grammatically, there are a few points that can be contrasted. These are as follows:

1. Degree, if *κείρασθαι* (keirasthai) refers to a longer haircut than *ξυράσθαι* (xurasthai) – “If it is shameful for a woman to cut her hair *short* or to be shaved.”
2. Definition, if *ξυράσθαι* (xurasthai) is meant to clarify the meaning of *κείρασθαι* (keirasthai) – “if it is shameful for a woman to cut her hair, *that is*, to be shaved.”
3. Agency, if the middle voice is being contrasted with the passive voice – “if it is shameful for a woman to cut *her own* hair or to be shaved *by someone else*.”

There may be other possibilities, but, in context with Paul’s statement in verse 5 that has already equated every shameful behavior in this case with a shaved head and considering our discussion of *κείρω* (keiro) above, I think that the first translation is most likely.

15: “*This is because long hair has been given to her as a covering.*” – It is both interesting and important to note that the word for a “covering” in this verse is different from the one that has been used throughout the chapter. Up to now, Paul has either used the verb *κατακαλύπτω* (katakalupto) or the adjective *ἀκατακάλυπτος* (akatakaluptos), meaning “to cover” or “uncovered” respectively. Here, he describes a woman’s hair as her *περιβόλαιον* (peribolaion). This word refers less to a head covering and more to an article of clothing that wraps around the entire body, like a cloak or a robe⁹. This word is used in the Septuagint for both ordinary cloaks (Exodus 22:27, Deuteronomy 22:12, Psalm 101:27) as well as rich, glorious clothing (Ezekiel 16:13, 27:7). It is also related to the verb *περιβάλλω* (periballo), “to clothe,” which is used throughout the New Testament with a similar range of meaning. Sometimes it refers to ordinary clothing (Matthew 6:31, 25:38, 43; Mark 14:51; Acts 12:8; Revelation 11:3), more often it refers to special, beautiful clothing, (Matthew 6:29; Luke 12:27, 23:11; John 23:11; Revelation 3:5, 18, 4:4, etc.).

⁸ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, *Lexicon*, p. 686.

⁹ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, *Lexicon*, p. 800.

If we carry the latter meaning into 1 Corinthians 11, then it seems that Paul wants us to picture a woman's hair as something that is both practical (it covers what needs to be covered) and beautiful (it is her glory). Every woman who wears her hair long is clothed with the glory and honor that God wants to show through her.

16: *"The people of God"* – Most translations have "churches of God" here (NASB 2020, NKJV, ESV, NIV, NRSV, etc.). For the reasons why I have translated it differently, see my note on 1 Corinthians 10:32, in Vol. I, No. 10, p. 14.

17: *"Your assemblies do not make you better, but actually make you worse!"* – The NASB 2020 has the most literal translation of this phrase, "You come together not for the better, but for the worse." I have translated it the way I have to help make it clear that the Corinthians were the ones who suffered because of their assemblies. Their assemblies were meant to be a time of learning and encouragement, but the divisions Paul is about to discuss made them miserable, thus discouraging their growth and productivity.

21: *"Each makes it his own meal"* – The way this verse is translated often reflects the translator's answers to the following questions:

1. Did the Corinthians' sin of partiality take place at the Lord's Supper or on another occasion?
2. Was the Lord's Supper celebrated as part of a regular, shared meal in the early church, or was it celebrated on its own?
3. Was the Corinthians' "own meal" something that they brought to the Lord's Supper, or does Paul's language mean that their misuse of the Lord's Supper had caused it to lose its meaning?

My translation is no more neutral than any other (in fact, it probably reflects my interpretation more directly than most), so it will be helpful for me to explain my answers to each of these questions:

1. As I read it, the language Paul uses makes it plain that the misconduct took place at the Lord's Supper itself. In verse 20, he informed the Corinthians (probably to their surprise) that they were not actually eating the Lord's Supper when they thought they were: *"οὐκ ἔστιν κυριακὸν δεῖπνον φαγεῖν"* ("It is not to eat the Lord's Supper"). He explains this statement in verse 21 by explaining that they were mishandling themselves *"ἐν τῷ φαγεῖν"* ("in the eating"). I do not see any grammatical or contextual clues that lead me to assume this was a different meal from the one mentioned in verse 20, so the most reasonable conclusion is that the problem took place when the Corinthians thought they were eating the Lord's Supper.
2. Simply because Paul was not talking about a separate meal does not mean that the misconduct had to do with ritual correctness in the communion either. Many translations imply that the Lord's Supper was part of a common meal, see the NIV for example: "For when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk." This approach implies that the problem centered around some wealthy Christians feasting sumptuously before or during the Lord's Supper while others who were too poor to feed themselves were forced to sit and watch.

I am not satisfied with that explanation, however, because it does not fit the directions Paul gives in the rest of the chapter to correct the problem. First, Paul reminds them of the procedure that the Lord's Supper should follow (vv. 23-26), then he encourages them to take the communion seriously in terms of both its symbolism and the relationship it expresses between Christians (vv. 27-34). In particular, Paul tells the Corinthians to wait for one another when they came together to eat the Lord's Supper, so that everyone would have an opportunity to participate, and that those who are hungry should eat at home ahead of time. What is particularly interesting for our discussion is the fact that Paul never encourages the rich Christians to share their food with those who were poor. In fact, he rather encouraged them to withdraw their feasting even further from their brethren to their own houses. This seems to imply that the problem was not a matter of hunger, but one of disregard. Paul wanted them to show common courtesy to one another, not to share their food.

What, then, are we to do with the end of verse 21, which tells us that some were hungry, while others were drunk? If we look at this statement through the lens of context, I believe it is reasonable to say that Paul is using a rhetorical exaggeration to describe the selfishness of those factions in the congregation who would *eat the whole communion before others could share in it*, as contrasted with the shame and indignation of those who had thus been left out. Those who ate and drank to excess probably were not literally drunk, but they must have looked like they were from the perspective

of those who sat by, realizing that their turn to share in the Lord's Supper would never come due to the excesses of their brethren.

3. If the scenario described above is the same one that Paul had in mind, then it is clear that the Corinthians' "own supper" became their own when they took what was intended for the Lord's Supper and used it selfishly. Their blatant disregard for God's people, who were meant to be honored in fellowship through the communion, meant that the supper lost all of its intended meaning and became something that could, at best, glorify those who thus misused it.

22: *"Those who are not able to share with you"* – This means, literally, "those who have nothing" (NASB 2020, NKJV, ESV, NIV, NRSV). See my comments on verse 21 above for context on why I have translated it this way.

28: *"Eat some of the bread and drink some of the cup"* – In an interesting turn of phrase, Paul changes the way he talks about partaking of the communion here. Earlier, such as in verse 27, Paul speaks of "eating the bread" and "drinking the cup" in simple terms, using a verb and direct object: *"ἔσθ' ἢ τὸν ἄρτον ἢ πίν' ἢ τὸ ποτήριον."* However, in this verse, he uses a partitive construction, emphasizing that the Corinthians should eat "[only] *some of the bread* and drink *some of the cup*;" *"ἐκ τοῦ ἄρτου ἐσθιέτω καὶ ἐκ τοῦ ποτηρίου πινέτω."* If the Corinthians' misconduct did, indeed, center around some members of the congregation eating and drinking too much, Paul's change of phraseology might be a subtle encouragement that they should be considerate not only in whether or not they are approaching the communion with the right attitude, but also if they are leaving enough for others to share with them.

- M. S.

She Has Her Glory

Comments on 1 Corinthians 11:1-16

The eleventh chapter of 1 Corinthians addresses two subjects that have been contentious throughout the history of Christian thought. For the sake of space and clarity, I will break the chapter into two pieces and consider them separately. For reasons that will become clear, I believe that we must be conscious of how the two halves interact with each other. Paul begins by praising the Corinthians for keeping some traditions that he had taught them, though it seems that they did not understand everything that they believed. In the second half of the chapter, Paul explains that the Corinthians had corrupted another tradition, the Lord's Supper, because they had failed to comprehend its significance. Paul applies the same principles in both cases, even though the specific traditions have relatively little to do with each other. The external expression of Christian traditions is inextricably bound together with the internal spiritual meaning behind it. It is important to do things the right way, but if we do not train our minds and our spirits so that we are also doing them for the right reasons, our efforts will become meaningless, and we will ultimately corrupt what is good to serve our misguided intentions. For this reason, Paul wanted the Corinthians to think about why they did what they did. At minimum, it would give them a deeper appreciation for their religion. At maximum, it would save them from judgment for despising the people of God.

For these reasons, it is essential that we not only consider *what* Paul wrote, but also *why* he wrote it. Even though Paul's teaching regarding head coverings has at times been considered outdated to outright offensive when confronted with modern western sensibilities, it cannot and will not suffice to simply ask whether the passage applies to us today or not. Through this discussion, Paul is trying to shape your worldview and your values – an impact that reaches much deeper than a superficial decision. Paul wants us to understand that it does matter how we present ourselves to the world around us and to God, because the decisions we make that shape our superficial appearance reflect the outlook our spirits take toward creation. How do we, as Christians, present ourselves as men and women, and how do we interact with other men and women? How does this reflect our self-understanding as men and women in God's creation, and how does it reflect our connection to the spiritual world? Even a decision as benign as whether or not to cut our hair can and should reflect our spiritual self-understanding.

This means that, as we work our way through the passage, we need to pay special attention to the points where Paul's worldview differs from our own. This may be uncomfortable at times, but it will be necessary if we want to truly understand what the passage has to say to us and how it should shape our lives today. This we will endeavor to do both thoroughly and thoughtfully.

1

There is good reason to believe that this verse should be connected with the end of chapter 10, not the beginning of chapter 11. Through the discussion of things offered to idols in chapters 8-10, Paul used his own conduct as an example of how to be considerate of others when we make decisions in our lives (see especially chapter 9). For this reason, the Corinthians needed to learn to imitate Paul's values and behaviors, especially because Paul's worldview was built on what he had learned from Christ (cf. 2:16).

The same idea applies throughout chapter 11. The scriptures are meant to educate us with the mind of Christ, but the Corinthians' behavior proved that they had not allowed their minds to be changed through the process of their conversion. They had learned to follow certain traditions because they felt they needed to – whether through fear of eternal punishment or for some other reason – but they had failed to develop a positive commitment to the guiding principles of Christianity. Paul's language in the next two verses makes this clear:

2-3

The Corinthians had, in some ways, kept to the traditions Paul had taught them. This was noteworthy in itself – their behavior set them apart from the other residents of their city – but it seems Paul had reason to suspect that they did not understand what they were doing. They were doing the right things, yes, but they did not understand why. Paul did not want them to remain in this state. He wanted them to learn and grow, to develop to the point that they not only understood why God wanted them to live their lives a certain way, but also agreed with Him. Paul did not want control over the Corinthians; he wanted to educate them.

The particular principle he chose to explain in this passage has to do with authority or headship – the hierarchy of the cosmos, so to speak. If we arrange it in a top-down fashion, it looks like this:

God
Christ
Man
Woman

In order to understand the message of this passage, we need to understand what is included in this hierarchy, especially in the context of our modern society. It is an unfortunate truth that the idea of man having intrinsic authority over woman has been misused and abused throughout history. This passage does not give men the right to look down on women or treat them as inferior in any way. In fact, quite the opposite, this passage defends woman as a unique and dignified part of God's creation as co-heirs along with Christ.

Consider first what this passage cannot be teaching, based on Paul's own testimony in other passages:

- It cannot teach that men are inherently more valuable than women. Paul rebutted this idea in Galatians 3:26-29. Men and women have an equal part in God's plan for His creation, and we all stand to inherit the same reward.
- It cannot mean that women must marry (enter into an authority structure) in order to find meaning and purpose in life. Paul encouraged those Christian women who could to remain unmarried in chapter 7 of this same letter.

The principle of authority exists, but it should only be expressed within the proper context. Therefore, if this principle is not meant to devalue or restrict those at the bottom of the hierarchy, what is it meant to accomplish? First, it gives us a sense of structure. God and Christ have found this structure to be helpful in their own relationship – the Father provides guidance while the Son acts (see the statements Jesus made about His relationship with the Father throughout John 12-16). Likewise, Jesus provides guidance for Christians, who act on His behalf. Finally, we, as human beings, find structure in community. If we bear in mind the fact that Paul is writing to a congregation of Christians, we can confidently say that every one of the letter's original recipients belonged to a community that would help guide their decisions. It did not matter if they were married or not, whether their parents were alive and present in their lives or not, or even whether they engaged in the civil life of their city to any great degree. Every Christian in Corinth belonged to the congregation of God's people in that city, so every one of them belonged to a community. That community had authority figures who determined the tone and direction of the community's life, and God has entrusted the responsibility of authority to the mature men of the congregation. We will explore some of the reasons why

men and women have a different standing with regard to authority, but it is enough now to notice that it is impossible to both live as a Christian and live free of authority. We must understand human authority if we are to live according to God's will.

4-6

The principle of authority appears prominently when we consider prayer, especially when we view prayer as an appeal to a higher authority. We all live under the authority and guidance of God through Christ, so a prayer offered to God by the authority or permission of Christ (in His name) respects that structure. However, the matter can become more complicated when we take human authority into account. Do I need to ask the elders in my congregation for permission to pray to God? Or, when I pray, do I need to pray in their name? Or does a wife need help from her husband to speak to her Creator? Certainly not! Every Christian has access to God through prayer, and there is nothing that human authority can or should do to disrupt that connection. That means that we need to amend or limit the authority structure in some way.

Conceptually speaking, this means that men have an immediate connection to God through their head (Christ), while women have an interrupted connection because of their head (man). Because men are unreliable, and because God's promise through Christ has been given to women without the need for men (generically speaking), then it is necessary for them to bypass their conceptual head to honor their direct connection with God through Christ alone. So far, Paul's purpose is clear; no man, no matter what authority he holds, has the right to come between any woman and her God.

This idea grows more difficult for us when Paul ties it symbolically to our physical heads. In Paul's view, a man who covers his head while proclaiming a connection to God is effectively trying to bypass his conceptual head – Christ. Theologically speaking, no man can have access to God without Christ. Therefore, a man who tries to reach God with his head covered dishonors Christ, his head. Likewise, a woman who demonstrates a connection to God (prays or prophesies) while her head is covered is symbolically showing respect for her direct connection to God *despite* her conceptual head. If she uncovers her head, she allows her connection to God to be disrupted and, symbolically, her honor (her right to speak with God).

In these verses, Paul already gives us a view of what it means, in his worldview, to be symbolically “covered” or “uncovered”. Paul views a woman being uncovered as equivalent to being shaved bald. Not all cultural worldviews would agree, but for Paul's view, it seems that a woman was only shaved bald as a form of humiliation. This was probably well understood by his audience¹⁰, so he does not spend time elaborating. The strong comparison Paul uses indicates that a woman being uncovered was not exactly the same as being shaved bald, but that the two were symbolically equivalent. This could either mean that Paul had an artificial covering like a veil in mind, or that he is speaking of varying degrees of cut hair. I think the latter is more likely, considering the positive image he builds in verse 15 indicates that a woman's long hair is her glory and her covering. Therefore, what Paul seems to be saying here is that a woman who has cut her hair short has already done as much damage to her covering as if she had shaved her hair off entirely. This is strengthened by the contrast he makes in verse 6 – if a woman is uncovered (cuts her hair short), she should also be shaved. Conversely, if it is shameful for a woman to cut her hair short or be shaved, let her be covered (have long hair).

What makes these verses difficult to understand and apply in the present day has much to do with the fact that Paul is linking a spiritual concept with a physical reality. How can my haircut affect my connection to God, when God is spirit and my connection to Him is spiritual? The physical cannot control the spiritual, can it?

Certainly our physical expressions alone cannot accomplish anything in the spiritual world, but our spiritual lives must affect our physical expressions. Paul has already shown in chapter 6 that our physical bodies are members of Christ's spiritual body, and there are certain physical actions we can take that constitute a betrayal of that spiritual connection. In other words, the things we do with our bodies cannot accomplish our salvation, but our spiritual salvation must effect a significant change in how we lead our physical lives. Therefore, it is not inconsistent with the spiritual nature of the gospel for Paul to ask the Corinthians to handle their own bodies in a certain way to better reflect their spiritual status in Christ.

The reality is that Christianity has much to do with our physical bodies. It is built on a spiritual foundation, yes, but that is only the foundation. We must see the world through spiritual eyes, but it would be incongruous for us to neglect that perspective

¹⁰ The German commentator Luise Schottroff finds good evidence to believe that Roman society considered a shaved head as dishonorable for a woman, based on comments made by the ancient Roman historian Tacitus in his treatise *Germania* (19.2). See Luise Schottroff, *Die erste Brief an die Gemeinde in Korinth* (Stuttgart, W. Kohlhammer GmbH: 2013). Logos.

when it comes time to make decisions for ourselves. Our physical lives must reflect our spiritual lives. Sometimes, this includes symbolic actions. Even if these actions do not themselves accomplish a physical good, they do reflect our identity within our worldview. This, I believe, is the glue that binds the two halves of chapter 11 together. The communion is a symbolic action that expresses our individual reliance on Christ and our identity with our brothers and sisters in the same assembly. If we do not understand that depth of meaning, our observance of the Lord's Supper will lose its value, and our practices will reflect our incomplete or corrupted worldview. Likewise, our self-expression through our hair should reflect a deeper understanding of our relationship toward God in light of the structure of creation. If we do not understand that relationship correctly, our self-expression can only coincidentally match Paul's.

7-12

In these verses, Paul digs a little deeper into the reason behind the authority structure he just cited. Ultimately, the question revolves around the structure and purpose of God's creation. Consider the statements Paul makes about both man and woman in turn:

Man:

- *Is the image and glory of God* – It is, of course, quite the philosophical exercise to ask why God created the universe in the first place. Nonetheless, it is clear what role He intends for humanity to play in that creation. Psalm 8, for example, shows how mankind was created to fill a role of authority, to act as God's agents and co-regents. For this reason, God designed us to be like Him – able to judge right from wrong and to choose what is right.
- *Is not from woman... nor created for the sake of woman* – This is not meant to say that men can or should lead an existence separate from or elevated above woman (see the next point below), it is merely a comment on birth order, so to speak. Man was created directly for God's purposes, so he is the firstborn. This gives him immediate proximity to the person of God (hence the image and glory), but he was not able to fulfil his role alone. Therefore, woman was created because of man's deficiency, not her own.
- *Neither is man independent of woman... man also comes through woman* – Firstborn status does not convey on man any greater importance or independence from woman. When we understand a spiritual worldview, it is a mistake to emphasize one part of our social system to the exclusion of another. There is a difference between man and woman, but neither is anything less than invaluable to God's plan for His people.

Woman:

- *Is the glory of man* – This does not mean that woman has a lesser glory when compared to man, but again refers to the structure of God's creation. Man was created to represent God and accomplish His purposes in the universe, and therefore, when he lives faithfully, he accomplishes God's glory. Woman was created to help man accomplish the purpose given to him by God, and therefore accomplishes man's glory. Note that it is not man's prerogative to determine what woman should be or to determine her purpose. This must be done in line with God's authority.
- *Is for man... created for the sake of man* – As second-born, woman has a different role to play in creation. This is no more a statement of value than to recognize that one child in a family is older than another. In most cultures throughout history, the firstborn son has been expected to follow in his father's footsteps, while the subsequent children are free to pursue the kind of life they would like. This places the responsibility of the family name on the firstborn, but the others have not been disowned. There is only a difference of *responsibility* and *expectation*.

It is also worth noting that Paul, as God's representative, views the creation of man as a separate event with a separate purpose from the creation of woman. Again, this does not make any statement of relative value, nor does it make woman subservient to man in general. All it means is that woman was made to help man achieve his divinely given task.

- *Is not independent of man... came through man* – Our social system, made up of both men and women, is irreducibly intertwined. Neither man nor woman can exist without the other, so both are necessary to complete God's work.

Taken altogether, we can develop a good understanding of Paul's worldview: The differences between man and woman are not accidental. Each was created at a separate time to address a separate need. Nonetheless, each has the same intrinsic value, and each has the right to speak with God without interference from the other.

In this discussion, we have not yet considered verse 10. This is one of the more cryptic verses in the Bible, but I think our study has given us the foundation we need to understand it. First, what does it mean that a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head? The context indicates that this symbol is the same as the covering mentioned above – that is, long hair. However, we must pose the question: whose authority does long hair symbolize? I would propose that it is a symbol of woman's own authority. Paul has used this passage to show how, by nature of being the second-born, woman falls under the authority of man, and her purpose is meant to accomplish man's glory in God's purpose. Nonetheless, in Christ, she has been given authority and glory of her own. She wears, as it were, a crown on her head to proclaim this honor to the world. Her covering is not a symbol of her shame, but a symbol of her triumph.

As far as the comment about the angels goes, it is important to remember the context in which this chapter was written. The only substantial discussion of angels so far in 1 Corinthians 6:3. There, Paul made reference to the fact that God has entrusted the judgment of angels to humanity. Unless we read this verse exclusively to refer only to Christian men, then woman has also been given authority in the cosmos. Perhaps Paul's reference to the angels in chapter 11 is meant to remind us of that earlier statement to show that woman unquestionably has authority of her own, though only in Christ.

13-16

Now that Paul has taught the Corinthians how to view the question of glory and authority through spiritual eyes, he commends the question to their maturing judgment. If they want to portray woman's elevated role in Christ, does it make sense to do away with the symbol of authority? Certainly not!

Paul's appeal to nature probably does not mean that he considered the whole matter to be self-evident, but rather that the view of human nature that he has just explained *made* the answer self-evident. Given that man was created with the glory of God, and given that woman was created with the glory of man, and further given that the covering or baring of the head represents our self-understanding relative to that reality, then yes, nature does teach us plainly how we ought to act. Paul says that a woman's long hair has been given to her as a covering, though the word here is different from what has been used before. This language may imply a glorious cloak or a royal robe, like what Solomon, king of Israel, wore (Matthew 6:29). Woman's hair is her crown, and what queen would throw her crown away? It is her glory.

Because long hair is a symbol of God's special care for His daughters, it is entirely inappropriate for a man to claim it as his own. Paul warns women elsewhere against usurping what God has entrusted to man; here, he warns men from usurping what rightfully belongs to woman. We must all act according to our own identities within God's creation.

Paul's final note declares this to be a universal truth. All of God's children must work within the creation He has made. Any contention is rebellion against our Maker.

- M. S.

“Wait for One Another”

Comments on 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

The change in subject may seem rather abrupt, but I believe the two halves of the chapter deal with the same central principle: our spiritual self-understanding is inseparably tied to our actions. Paul established the principle using a subject that was fairly well understood in Corinth, or at least was not controversial. To the Christians in Corinth, it made sense that men should present themselves one way, and women should present themselves another way. Paul did not want them to misunderstand why that was important, but they were already conducting themselves appropriately in this regard, and Paul evidently expected them to receive his instructions well. By contrast, the Corinthians had failed to think of themselves as members of the body of Christ, and their conduct showed how that oversight was destroying their identity as a congregation. Before, Paul could praise them for remembering who they were. Now he could not.

17-19

The first and most obvious clue to their failure was the fact that their assemblies were divided. There were some who identified themselves as better – or at least different – when compared to the rest. There were multiple such factions, meaning that their assemblies had likely devolved into an opportunity for each faction to prove their superiority over the others. Little, if any time was spent on education or encouraging a healthier congregational culture.

Paul seems to have been reluctant to believe that the situation had deteriorated as much as it had, but the presence of some who refused to involve themselves in such petty infighting unfortunately proved that it was taking place.

20-22

The fighting between factions had caused some to be disregarded in the communion. Different translations and commentaries have taken a variety of views on exactly what kind of situation Paul is describing in these verses. Based on the phrasing he uses, I consider the following situation to be most likely:

When the Corinthians came together to celebrate the communion, one or more factions had taken to excluding the others by consuming the entire loaf of bread and drinking all of what was in the cup before everyone had had a chance to share. It is important to remember that the earliest congregations shared a single piece of bread and a single cup. Paul has explained this as a way of building fellowship with one another (10:16-17), but the factions in Corinth had turned it into a weapon; they decided who they wanted to admit into their fellowship and who they wanted to exclude, and they enforced their decision by eating up the bread and drinking the entire cup before those they deemed undesirable had had their share. What could the others do? Whichever faction had the communion first excluded all others.

In this way, some became metaphorically drunk because they gorged themselves to exclude others, while others went hungry. Paul was so appalled by this idea that he would not even call what they ate the Lord's Supper. They made it their own meal when they excluded other Christians.

Verse 22 is likely a well-placed use of sarcasm. If the factions were gobbling up the bread so quickly, they must have been famished! Maybe it would be better for them to eat at home before they came together, so that their hunger would not become a problem.

23-26

Since the Corinthians had forgotten what the communion was meant to symbolize – the spiritual reality behind their physical actions – Paul wanted to remind them. This is exactly what he did earlier in the chapter: help them understand the Lord's worldview so that, when you choose how to express yourselves as individuals or as a group, your behavior will reflect the person God wants you to be.

Paul received instructions from Christ regarding the Lord's Supper. The fact that Jesus, after His ascension, felt a need to instruct Paul, who was not present at Jesus' last meal, about the communion speaks volumes about this meal's significance to early Christianity. Jesus wants to commune with every one of His people – yet the factions in Corinth had taken it upon themselves to decide *for* Jesus who really deserved the honor. This was not how Jesus had arranged the communion from the beginning.

What Jesus had intended was a simple memorial. He took bread to represent His body and invited His disciples to share with Him. He had taken His most personal human belonging – His own body – and He made it freely available to those who trust Him through His sacrifice. Further, He took a cup full of grape juice to represent His blood – His life (Leviticus 17:10-12). He gave up His life so that He could share it with us in His covenant. The concept of a covenant is quite simple, much like a contract. Jesus has signed over His eternal life in exchange for our child-like trust and devotion to Him. Every time we drink the cup of the Lord, we are reminded of what we have committed to Him and what He has committed to us. The Lord's Supper is meant to be a simple memorial that keeps these things fresh in our minds. Every time we commune, we pledge our allegiance to Christ anew.

27-32

Therefore, whenever the factions in Corinth used the communion as an opportunity to exclude others, they missed the point entirely. The memorial did not remind them of Christ, nor did it bring a closer bond of fellowship between the Christians in Corinth. All that Paul could say is that they had eaten in an unworthy manner. Their conduct aspired to neither the memorial of Christ's death nor His love toward His brothers and sisters.

Therefore, every Christian should take care to put himself in the right frame of mind before eating the communion. This means that he needs to be humble, to recognize his own reliance on Christ. We also needs to recognize the Lord's body. Most likely, this means that each Christian needs to recognize that he is only a single part of Jesus' spiritual body, which is the church in general and the local congregation (see 10:16-17, as well as chapter 12). No part of the body has the right to exclude another. If we do not recognize the right of every disciple of Christ to sit with us at the table of the Lord, then we do not understand how the body of Christ works. Worse still, we are claiming Christ's authority as the head of the body.

Paul changes his phrasing a little in verse 28 to reflect the importance of this idea. Up to now, he has spoken of "eating the bread and drinking the cup," but now, after encouraging the Corinthians to examine their frame of mind, he encourages them to eat "*some of* the bread" and drink "*some of* the cup." It was wholly inappropriate for them to eat or drink all that was available, and a proper frame of mind would teach them that.

In a general sense, it is clear what Paul means when he says that those who eat or drink unworthily eat and drink judgment against themselves. If we grant that God's intention is to create a society devoted to spiritual living and fulfilling His original hopes and intentions when He made us, then it becomes plain that anyone who works to break that society down will be opposed by God. There is some discussion to be had as to whether the sickness and death mentioned here were physical or spiritual – i.e., was God using His providence to push the worst offenders away from the congregation in Corinth by challenging their faith and allowing it to crumble, or had He sent a physical plague to remove some from the Corinthians' society? Whichever was the case, God was not inactive in this matter. He was protecting His people.

This is why it is important for us to judge ourselves (see chapter 6). If we can control ourselves and resolve any disagreement that arises in our number, then God would not need to step in to correct our course for us. Nonetheless, even when God does intervene, His goal is ever the same: to save His people from humanity's self-destructive path.

33-34

The end of the whole matter was quite simple: the Corinthians needed to give up their factional mentality and make room for one another when they ate the Lord's Supper. Anyone who felt a need to eat more than his fair share should eat first at home. If there were any lingering questions or concerns after those measures were put in place, Paul would talk them through it personally.

- M.S.

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