

THE LETTERS OF SAINT PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART III

ISSUES OF UNITY AND SANCTITY

I. Chapters 8 through 10 of the first letter to the Corinthians deal with the specific issues of eating meat sacrificed to idols and, in that context, the general theme of having a spirit of self-sacrifice for others and for holiness.

A. The overall issue was whether a Christian should eat meat sacrificed to idols, a theme that the fourteenth and fifteenth chapters of Romans may also have been dealing with.

1. There were at least three common occasions in which meat was offered for idols and then able to be eaten anywhere. First, there was a great deal of meat provided at pagan festivals, much of which would be uneaten by the end of the festival. That meat would then be sold in the marketplaces, often at a heavily reduced price because of the abundance. Second, on an ongoing basis, there would be some meat in the marketplaces that had been leftover from pagan rituals. Third, people would often use meat that was left over from pagan sacrifices at other meals for social and professional occasions.

2. Christians apparently had several views: (1) they could buy and/or eat any meat offered for sale regardless of whether it had been used at pagan feasts because the meat had not changed; (2) they should not eat and/or buy any meat when it had probably been used at pagan feasts; or (3) they should not eat or buy any meat sold in the city or offered by pagans because it could have been used at pagan feasts.

B. In chapter 8, St. Paul states the general position that Christians should not eat meat that had been used at pagan feasts, not because the action in itself is wrong, but because it gives scandal to others.

1. He begins by setting forth love, not knowledge, as the standard.

- He is addressing the argument that some Christians apparently made that their eating of meat from pagan feasts was not wrong because they knew enough not to be scandalized.

- St. Paul states that placing such knowledge as the standard is ignorance. The standard is love, which is what God

sees in us. St. Paul makes it clear that the more we love, the more we are the people God knows and loves. Cf. 1 Cor. 13:12; 1 John 4:10, 19. Jesus warned that, if one lived away from His commandments, God would send him away as one He does not know. See Matt. 7:21–23, 25:1–13; Luke 13:22–30.

2. In verses 4 to 6, St. Paul concedes that these pagan gods are objectively nothing, although he does say that there are "many 'gods' and many 'lords.'"

- By saying there are many gods and many lords, he may be saying that idols the people worship do stand for real things (e.g., Apollo for the sun and arts, Diana for the moon, etc.) or he could be referring to the angels as gods in the lesser sense, as early Psalms sometimes seem to do. See, e.g., Ps. 82:1–7 (possibly referring to human rulers as well), 95:3, 97:7–9, 135:5–6, 138:1.

3. In verses 7 to 13, he then points out that, even though eating the meat may not objectively be wrong, it causes scandal to those who believe that it is wrong or think that Christians are compromising with the pagans. And, because there is no advantage to eating the meat, the judgment should be clear that Christians should not eat the meat that has been sacrificed to idols.

- The overall principle is that even an objectively neutral (or perhaps even good) action should not be done if it will cause harm, especially scandal, and there is no need for it. See Matt. 18:6–9; Catechism 2284.

C. Then, to emphasize the need to go beyond the basic requirements of the moral law so that one is a good witness, St. Paul cites the example of his own ministry.

1. St. Paul points out that the other Apostles have helpers to deal with the regular aspects of life so that they can focus on their ministry. Cf. Acts 6:2.

- The reference to the other apostles and "brothers of the Lord" having the right to have "a family woman" (adelphan gynaika) with them could be referring to wives, but could just as easily mean maidservants. The term for brothers (adelphoi) in Greek was used by Jews to refer to cousins and other close relatives as well. Cf. Matt. 12:46–49.

- Barnabas seems here to be included among the Apostles, indicating that apostolic authority was already being

handed onto others.

2. St. Paul also uses some natural analogies. He compares himself to a soldier of Christ, spreading and defending the kingdom, to a planter who sows the vineyard of the Lord, and to a shepherd (pastor in Latin) of God's flock, analogies the Bible uses elsewhere. See, e.g., Jer. 3:15, 23:4; 1 Cor. 3:5-9; 2 Tim. 2:3-4; 1 Pet. 5:1-4. All of these professionals receive pay for their services to support themselves.

3. St. Paul also draws comparisons from the Old Testament, arguing that their enduring meaning is as an image for the reward of labor.

- In verses 9-12, he cites the rule from Deuteronomy that an ox had to be able to eat from the field as it was carrying the plow. See Duet. 25:4. He argues that the more important meaning was that people should be paid for their labor, and thus he has a right to pay for his ministry. See 1 Tim. 5:17-18.

- In verses 13 and 14, he draws an analogy to the principle that priests in the Temple shared in the sacrifices as their compensation. Again, the enduring principle is that those who assist others in becoming holy have a right to compensation.

4. However, having made the point, he then says that he has voluntarily given up that right. Paradoxically, he considers the ability to give up that right itself compensation, for he receives much greater gifts as a result of his detachment. Cf. Mark 10:29-31. He then goes further and says that he has adapted to all of the practices of the people to whom he ministers so that he may win them over. And his ability to bring others to the faith benefits him because it allows him to share in the riches of the gospel.

5. St. Paul then concludes the reflection on his own ministry and introduces the next section with a comparison of the Christian life to athletics.

- He points out that self-discipline beyond the basic requirements is needed to win the fading glory of athletic contests (which were common in Corinth, especially with its biannual games.) He says that, for himself and others, it is more important to keep in spiritual shape to win the contest of life. Cf. Heb. 12:1, 2 Tim. 2:5, 4:7-8.

D. In order further to make the point about the need for self-sacrifice, St. Paul then draws an analogy in chapter 10 to the Israelites in the desert as they journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land.

1. He first compares the rescue from Egypt through the Red Sea (along with the cloud that kept the Egyptians from attacking the Israelites until they had gotten through) as like the baptism of Christians. He then compares the manna to the Eucharist.

- The "rock that followed them" is a reference to the fact that Moses was continually able to draw water from the rocks to provide for the Israelites. There was a Jewish tradition that it was the same rock that kept on following them. That water may also be a symbol of baptism, or of the cleansing and strengthening power of God that flows continually through Christ to the faithful.

2. St. Paul warns the Christians that most of the people in the desert died there. Initially the Chosen People were not meant to wander in the desert for 40 years, but rather to go straight from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land. However, when they lacked faith in God to proceed immediately into the Promised Land in the face of opposition, God condemned them to wander in the desert for forty years until the generation who led them had died off. See Num. 13-14.

- In addition, St. Paul refers to the worship of the golden calf at Mount Sinai and later rebellions in which the Israelites: (1) first complained about the "wretched food" and scarcity of water; and (2) at a later time intermingled with the pagans and worshiped their gods. See Ex. 32; Num. 21:4-9, 25:1-15. The message is that Christians should not be led astray by the desire for food and drink, or to get along with the pagans and thus be led into scandal. St. Paul may also be warning those who believe themselves to be above the potential for scandal to be very careful, for if the Chosen People could fall, so could they. After all, they have not been tested by anything beyond "what is human," i.e., beyond what humans ordinarily can expect. But the implication is that a more difficult time may be coming, and they must be disciplined and prepared.

3. St. Paul concludes by warning that what many of the pagans are worshiping is not nothing but demons (either literally or as a figure for sin, cf. Wis. 14:21-31), and that one should certainly stay away from anything that might, even symbolically, unite one with demons.

- Here, he introduces the notion of participation by common eating, which will be a theme of chapter 11 dealing largely with the Eucharist, referring to the sharing of a cup as the blood of Christ and the bread as the body of Christ.

E. St. Paul then concludes the section with some overall principles.

1. In general, St. Paul takes a middle view on the issue of meat. He says that, if the Christians know meat has been sacrificed to idols, and especially if someone has pointed it out, they should not partake because it would give scandal. But, because eating such meat is not inherently wrong, they do not have to worry about the possibility that the meat they eat was sacrificed at pagan feasts.
2. St. Paul then concludes this section with the overall principle that we should give glory to God in all things, and always seek the common good, even in the seemingly ordinary affairs of life. The controlling principle is to imitate the self-sacrificing love of Christ. Cf. John 13:34-35.

II. In chapter 11, St. Paul then turns to some liturgical issues that had arisen.

A. Initially, he must deal with the rather local issue of wearing head-coverings.

1. In Corinth, and in that area generally, there were differing customs. It appears however, that the more traditionally minded had the practice of having men speak and pray with heads uncovered and women with heads covered. The more "modernist" and sexually lax, who tended to think of sexual distinctions as irrelevant, tended to mix things up and even flout the customs.
2. In this context, St. Paul supports the usual custom to emphasize the point that there are real distinctions between men and women and to oppose sexual laxness.

- Thus, he says that if a woman prays or prophesies with her head uncovered, she may as well have her head shaved, which was the punishment for prostitutes, and also sometimes done as pagan festivals.

- He says that the distinction is for the sake of the "angels." St. Paul may be referring to the fact that angels stood for

purity and order. Or he could be using the term *aggeloi* in the more common sense as a messenger, as the Gospels according to Mark and Luke sometimes do. See Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24, 9:52; see also Gal. 4:14. If the meaning is the later, his point is that the Corinthians should not dress in a way that scandalizes messengers from other areas.

3. In saying that the man is the head of the woman, he means that the man is the source of the woman, insofar as Adam was created first.

- Part of the idea is that objective creation and structure, represented by the masculine Adam comes first, and then subjective love represented by Eve comes next to bring glory to the creation. In a similar fashion, the more masculine voice of prophesy was common in early Israeli history, while the feminine voice of Wisdom is more reflected in the later Jewish writings, such as Proverbs, Sirach, and Wisdom.

- There is not a notion here of superiority, for he grants that women may pray or prophesy in the church, that men now are born of women and that men and women are made for each other. Rather, there is an emphasis on a rightful structure that ensures respect for masculinity and femininity.

- St. Paul's provision that women may prophesy and pray in churches in verse 5 seems to be contradicted later on in this letter and in other letters by warnings against women speaking in churches. See 1 Cor. 14:34-36; 1 Tim. 2:12-14. However, these later references seem to be to speaking from positions of special authority, which would likely mean those we now say are clerics. The gift of prophesy would appear to be a special insight into the mysteries of God, which could then be interpreted by others. See 1 Cor. 13:2, 14:29; cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II questions 171-173.

4. St. Paul's final argument is that the universal church has the customs of head coverings for women, but not men in churches, and that they should accept the wisdom of the whole church.

B. St. Paul then turns to other more serious abuses that had denigrated the celebrations of the Eucharist.

1. St. Paul sharply criticizes several related abuses in the Eucharistic assemblies. It seems that the Corinthians were proud of the fact that they gathered together on a regular basis.

- First, as he warned about earlier, St. Paul turns again to the tendency toward factionalism, particularly here at what is supposed to be a unifying celebration.

- Second, the Corinthians were not keeping the Lord's supper as the focus, but seemed instead to see the event as an occasion for eating and drinking.

- On a related point, the class divisions were clear, reflecting a lack of charity.

2. In verses 23 to 26, he then recounts the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Because the Gospels were written later, this account is the first known description of the Eucharist.

- The focus is on the Eucharist as the "new covenant" in the blood of Christ and as the living memorial of Christ's sacrifice. Jeremiah had prophesied long before that there would be a new covenant in which God's people would now, forgiven of sins, come to a personal knowledge of Him, no longer at a distance, but with Him. See Jer. 31:31-34, 32:37-41.

- As with the Passover, in which the people ate a lamb whose blood marked them as God's people and saved them from death, the Eucharist is not simply a memorial of the past but a true living of it forever. See Ex. 12:14-27. The Mass does not simply reflect the covenant; it is the covenant lived in our presence. See Catechism 1348.

- St. Paul identifies the Eucharist as the memorial to be celebrated until Jesus comes again in glory.

3. In verses 27 to 32, St. Paul identifies the Eucharist with the body and blood of Christ and warns that one should never receive it unworthily.

- There is a notion that one should make an examination of conscience (a person "should examine himself" and should be discerning) that will lead to worthiness. The means here of the repentance leading to reconciliation is not as clear from this passage alone. The Gospels would later describe Jesus as giving His apostles and the church the ability to forgive sins. See Matt 16:19, 18:18; John 20:23.

- Because of this need to be made worthy to receive the Eucharist, the Mass begins with a penitential rite, reflecting

the desire for reconciliation; and the Church teaches that in general no one should receive the Eucharist in a state of mortal sin. See Catechism 1385.

- St. Paul indicates that illnesses have come because of the unworthy receipt of the Eucharist, illness that God gives as discipline so that people will turn away from this sin and be saved. Cf. Ps. 32:3-7; Heb. 12:5-11.

4. St. Paul concludes with a general admonition to charity at assemblies, and private meals away from them. Verse 34 also indicates that there were some other issues to deal with, but respect for the Eucharist and mutual charity at gatherings was the most important.

5. What is noteworthy is that already, within six years at most of St. Paul's first evangelization of Corinth, people seemed already to take the Eucharist for granted, a warning that indifference can easily set in.