

1 Corinthians - Commentaries by Paul Wilson

Christian Truth: Volume 3, Worship of Many Gods, The (8:5)

Polytheism (worship of many gods, see 1 Cor. 8:5) appeared on the earth sometime after the flood. There is no record or intimation that men made gods for themselves prior to the deluge. Wickedness was rampant, and corruption and violence filled the antediluvian earth, but the sin of idolatry was unknown between man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the judgment by water.

On the cleansed earth God put government into the hands of men that violence might be restrained "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed." Noah and his family knew God, both by witnessing His judgments and in being preserved by His grace, and from them was handed down a traditional knowledge of God; but of their descendants we read:

"When they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things." Rom. 1:21-23.

Satan, who at first pulled man down through his temptations and then led him into gross licentiousness and violence until the flood, now made himself into a god for man to gratify his passions. This enemy of God and man, together with his wicked spirits, hid behind the idols. Another has described the making of the many deities of the heathen in these words:

"Having lost God... man made a god of everything in which the power of nature showed itself, making of it a plaything for his imagination, and using it to satisfy his lusts.... Although man could not free himself from the consciousness that there was a God, a Being who was above him, and though he feared Him, he created for himself a multitude of inferior gods, in whose presence he would seek to drive away this dread.... Everything took the form of "God" in man's eyes; the stars, his ancestors... the powers of nature, all that was not man but acted and operated without him.... He made gods for himself according to his passions and imaginations, and Satan took advantage of it."

After a time God called one man out of this evil to receive communications from Himself—"The God of Glory appeared unto... Abraham." In him and his family God raised up a witness to the fact that there is only one God. Israel's distinct testimony was monotheistic, and is expressed in the call to Israel: "Hear, O Israel: Jehovah our God is one Jehovah." Deut. 6:4. They were given God's righteous laws for the ordering of their lives, and they were to be a display before the heathen of the greatness, goodness, and wisdom of Him who was their God. But, alas, they signally failed and fell into idolatry instead of witnessing against it, and finally did worse than the heathen who were in the land before them. The name of God was blasphemed among the Gentiles because of them (Rom. 2:24). Nevertheless there were individual heathen who found the true God in the Jehovah of Israel; for instance, Naaman the Syrian, Ruth the Moabitess, and Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon.

During the days of Israel's brightest testimony to the one true God, Satan brought forward a counterfeit. His lie was that there were two gods—that Ormazd was the god of light and goodness and Ahriman was the god of darkness, and that these carried on a ceaseless war, with man aiding one or the other. Needless to say, this dualism obscured the light of the God with whom man had to do as effectually as polytheism had. The Persians came under the influence of this evil-Zoroastrianism-almost entirely, so that when God, by Isaiah the prophet, called Cyrus the Persian king by name 150 years before he was born, He had to instruct him as to who He was. He told Cyrus what he was to do ill rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem and assisting the Jews, and then gave him a special word to reveal Himself in contrast with their false dual deities:

"That saith of Cyrus, He is My shepherd, and shall perform all My pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid. Thus saith Jehovah to His anointed, to Cyrus... I, Jehovah, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel. For Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel Mine elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known Me. I am Jehovah, and there is none else, there is no God beside Me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known Me; that they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that there is none besides Me. I am Jehovah, and there is none else. I form the light, and creat darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I Jehovah do all these things."* Isa. 44:28; 45:1-7.

It was important that Cyrus should know that his power was from the only true God, and that He (and not Ormazd and Ahriman) created both light and darkness, and sent peace or evil. There was no other God besides Him, whatever the Persians might believe to the contrary.

From that fateful day in the Garden of Eden until now, Satan has sought to come between man and his Creator; and today there are more false gods—the objects of desire and worship—than at any previous time. The god of this world is blinding the minds of those who believe not, just as efficiently today as he ever did with polytheism or dualism. What a powerful contrast to all this is expressed in the language of adoring faith! "We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true; and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life.

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen." 1 John 5:20, 21.

Christian Truth: Volume 21, Building Materials: Very Good, Some Very Poor (3:10-15)

Every Christian is building, and in 1 Corinthians 3 he is exhorted to "take heed how he buildeth." The Spirit of God here uses the figure of building to express the testimony of Christianity in this world. We can easily visualize a wall or a four-walled structure in the making—bit is added to bit, as many workmen do their jobs.

The workmen mentioned in 1 Corinthians 3 do not all do good building; some of them evidently build with enthusiasm and zeal, but put very poor materials into the building. We can easily see that this is not the building that the Lord spoke of in Matthew 16, when He said that upon the Rock of Peter's confession—"Christ, the Son of the living God"—He would build His Church. Christ will never place any bad materials in His building, and nothing shall ever destroy what He builds. He is building His Church, and that work is entirely in His hands. It is composed of every true believer in Himself in this age.

Now there is that other building which men build in the world—Christianity as entrusted to the hands of men. There is no other foundation but Jesus Christ (v. 11). To depart from that foundation would be to leave Christianity itself. Each believer is within the scope of Christianity in this world, and each is building something into that testimony. We may not have seriously weighed it before, but we are adding something to that building. Now the scripture before us is "let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon" (v. 10). Why should there be any need for such an exhortation? Verse 12 supplies the answer by listing some of the materials being put into the building; these fall into two classes—"Gold, silver, precious stones," and "wood, hay, stubble."

The standard by which to test the building materials is a divine standard—that which will stand the test of fire. Every bit of material that goes into that building is going to pass through the fire, for we read, "the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is" (v. 13). So then only fireproof materials will be of any account. The Laodiceans were counseled to buy "gold tried in the fire" that they might be rich, and not to trust in what they called riches.

It is a solemn thought that each of us is day by day building something that is going to be tested by fire—God's fire that will consume everything that is not according to His mind and His Word. Such being the case, we may well inquire how we can build things that will withstand the heat of His discerning judgment in that day. We may ask, Just what are "gold, silver, precious stones" with which we should build? and what are the very combustible materials which we should avoid placing in this building of Christianity on earth?

In order to answer this we may notice first that the things that will stand the fire test are—comparatively speaking—very small in bulk. A bale of hay would make a sizeable contribution to any wall. Hay is very good in its place, and some hay is much better and higher priced than other hay, but none of it is suitable fireproof building material. Wood also builds quickly and soon makes an appearance before the eyes of man, but it is no good in this building. Gold, silver, and precious stones make little bulk; but after the fire has passed they will be left—and their builder will receive a reward.

Further, in considering what these figurative materials represent to us in our daily building, we need to remember that this chapter is not dealing with a Christian living for the world—trying to get rich, going after its pleasures, etc.—which is spoken of in other parts of the Word of God. The whole question here is what we are placing into our Christian testimony. Maybe you have not thought of yourself as such a builder, but if you will examine the scripture you will find that you are.

It is apparent then that things which make the greatest bulk and are best seen by men are most likely not to stand the fire test. Christendom is filled with materials being built into it (and by real Christians) which will be burned up. (There are also false doctrines that corrupt that are mentioned as being put in by bad builders, but our subject here is more what we as Christians build.) Men have always admired things that make a big display, and such things are highly accredited in Christendom. If we go back to Genesis we find building spoken of in the 4th, 6th, and 11th chapters. First, Cain built a city after he killed his righteous brother and then went out from God's presence. His city was popular, for he incorporated into it all that he could to make men who are away from God happy. The cities of today are basically the same; that is, they have everything that man can conceive to please the human heart which is apart from God. This first building mentioned appeared big and grand, but was destroyed in the flood. Second, Noah built an ark on dry ground at God's command, and "became heir of the righteousness that is by faith." His building was not approved but so scorned by his fellow men that not one beside his own family entered it. Third, the whole world banded together to build the tower of Babel, but God wrote confusion on the venture and scattered the people. This may give us some idea of what men naturally respect in the way of building in the world; that which is of God is never popular.

Remember the word, "That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). This is an important principle, and should make us wary of anything that has popular approval.

Another Old Testament scripture that will throw some light on men's thoughts is found in 1 Samuel 4. Israel had been beaten by the Philistines and instead of owning their sin as the cause, they sent for the Ark of God—that which spoke of Jehovah's presence—in order that it might save them. That sounded good, and all the people thought so, for when it came into the camp they all shouted "until the earth rang again." Surely this was a great work of God, they must have thought if not said. And so today, if men would gather thousands of people together and shout out the truth of Christianity until the earth would ring, it would be praised as a great work of God; but God's work is not done in that manner. Men would have organized a great campaign to introduce Christianity on the continent of Europe, and sent advance agents to prepare the way with great advertising; but God sent Paul and Silas over there with no such human agency to help, and the first thing they did when they landed in Macedonia was to speak to some women at the riverside. Later these faithful servants landed in jail in order that the jailor might be saved. How differently men would have opened such a program! Yet from that lowly beginning the gospel spread all over Europe.

It is very easy for us to have men's thoughts in the things of God, for they abound all around us; but if we are to take heed how we build, how we contribute to the testimony of Christianity in the world, in view of the judgment seat of Christ, we need to dislodge human thoughts and seek divine guidance. This will be found in the Word of God.

If we go back to 1 Samuel, we find that even the uncircumcised Philistines could value and appreciate such a crowd and such a shout; they understood human thoughts and pretensions, and they were terribly afraid. Their fears, however, were groundless; for God was not in that great shout, and He allowed His Ark to be taken by the Philistines. But if the Philistines could value human pretension, they could not

understand human weakness which counts on God to work in His way. In the 7th chapter of the same book, Israel came together to mourn, to confess their sin, to put away strange gods, to pour out water as a symbol of their weakness. This the Philistines did not understand and fearlessly went into battle against Israel, to be smitten when God thundered from heaven. And so today, even the unsaved will join in and applaud any great movement that can garner thousands and make the earth ring. Even the prophet Elijah could understand fire, and wind, and earthquake, but not the "still small voice" that does wonders.

Now to go to the last book of the Old Testament, we read that of the small remnant of Israel that returned from Babylonian captivity many had turned to their own ways, and away from God. They were saying, "It is vain to serve God." Is not this heard in the land today? But, fellow Christian, is it really vain to serve God and walk carefully before Him? of course not! However, in such days as Malachi describes, there were some who feared the Lord and thought upon His name; and these came together often to speak about the Lord and His things. It was not all Israel—days were gone when all Israel could be gathered together—or great crowds gathered together to speak of the Lord. It was not anything that man would consider great; it was what was despised according to human judgment. But God approved it, and He hearkened and heard. He stooped, as it were, especially to listen to their conversation; and He had a special record written before Him about this little thing that He greatly valued. Surely in the language of 1 Corinthians it was "gold, silver, precious stones" in His eyes. When conditions were bad they did not say, "It is all over," or, "It is vain to serve God"; nor did they fold their hands in self-complacency, but were actively engaged to encourage one another in a simple and faithful testimony to their Lord. They were in that sense building, but not with the hay of greatness and man's approval.

Then when we come to the book of Revelation (chaps. 2 and 3), we find the ruin of the church on earth described (not what Christ is building, but that committed to men), and we find great boasting at the end and great deeds mentioned; but what especially received the Lord's greatest commendation is, "Thou... hast kept My word, and hast not denied My name" (Rev. 3:8). And to whom was this spoken? To those who had "little strength." No great deeds! No crowds that could make the earth ring! No approval of men, but rather the contrary. Others might boast of great bales of hay, great efforts to revive the testimony of Christianity. "Wood, hay, stubble" may be built very high and receive acclaim on every hand, but what will stand the test of fire are those things done in simple obedience to the Word of God, and faithfulness to Christ's name. This is the "gold, silver, precious stones" that will stand the test at the judgment seat of Christ.

O fellow Christian, whose approval do we want? Do we want to make a show and impress men, or simply to please God, and leave the results with Him? Far be it from me to speak one word against one being faithful in giving out the gospel to those around us; we should remember the unsaved all around and be ready to speak a word for Christ. It is to our shame that we are not more faithful, but let us not seek popular appeal or that which has human approval. Let us seek to communicate "spiritual things by spiritual means" (as a better translation of 1 Corinthians 3 says). Men may act on the principle that the results justify any means used, but God's Word says, "A man is not crowned except he strive lawfully"; or in other words, "wood, hay, stubble" will be burned up and only "gold, silver, precious stones" survive the fire. The one who built with the latter will receive a reward, or be "crowned," as in the illustration of an athlete (see 2 Tim. 2).

May the Lord grant us each grace to seek more and more to witness for Him in this world, and in everything to do all according to His Word and in devotedness to His name. Then it will not be a matter of seeking to do great things before men, even ostensibly for His sake, but doing all in view of the day which shall soon declare of what "sort" the work was—not how "much." Each of us can seek to encourage others and speak often of Him. If we follow the little remnant from the days of Malachi to the days when the Lord Jesus came (see Luke 2), we find a very aged widow speaking of Him to all that looked for redemption in Jerusalem. And cannot we speak of Him? We should remember that even our presence in the little Bible reading, or prayer meeting, is helping to maintain that little testimony to His name, and will surely receive its reward.

The Remembrance of the Lord: July 2005, His Request (11:26)

"As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till He come" (1 Cor. 11:26).

If the Lord had not requested that we remember Him in death according to His own prescribed manner, Christians might still have wished to commemorate His death in some fashion. But if we were left to ourselves to devise a way to do it, there would probably be as many ways or variations as there have been Christians who had such a response kindled in their hearts. Even as it is, with the Lord's direct and implicit direction in our hands, there are many innovations and inventions added to or taken away from its beautiful and meaningful simplicity—a loaf of bread and a glass of wine, the "fruit of the vine."

If saints on earth had been left to conjure up some method of remembering Him, some might have set up ways that only the rich could keep—as with Mary, whose precious ointment would cost about a year's wages for a workman. Most of us could not do such a thing. Caste and society might have entered into it in other cases. But it is blessedly simple and not costly to take a loaf—that which unbroken reminds us of His body now composed of all true believers on earth, Himself the Head in heaven—and thus remember Him in His body given for us in the simple way He ordained. The loaf when broken reminds us of His body, the body prepared for Him, in which He suffered on the accursed tree. We also simply take the cup, that which reminds us of His precious blood that flowed from His wounded side as the cost of our redemption. We sometimes sing:

When blood from a victim must flow, This Shepherd by pity was led To stand between us and the foe, And willingly died in our stead.

In keeping up this remembrance of Himself in this way, we know we are doing that which He would have us do, for He Himself instituted it just before He went to the cross and confirmed it to us by a direct word from heaven through the Apostle Paul, who said, "I have received of the Lord" those very instructions. What a privilege it is to thus remember Him according to His own prescribed manner, knowing that it is most surely according to His mind and will.

Then a question arises about when it should be done. The Lord has left the matter open, by saying, "As often as ye eat this bread." It is not laid down by legal requirements as the Jews under the law were required to keep the Sabbath. Years ago when certain ones were engaged day after day in the examination and careful study of the prophetic scriptures, they broke bread every morning in remembrance of Him in His death. They feared that the study of prophecy might get them away from the personal enjoyment of Christ and His death, although they considered the perusal of the prophetic word very important.

But we have a precedent for doing so each first day of the week, given by divine inspiration. In Acts 20 we read, "Upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread." What a fitting time to remember Him — the day on which He who lay in death came forth in triumphant power. But for many saints, once in three months, for others, once in a year, will suffice. In that case, we would almost need to read that verse thus: "As seldom as ye eat this bread."

It would be a poor response to such great love to be satisfied to do it on rare occasions, and what is so calculated to warm our own hearts and keep us fresh in the enjoyment of what He accomplished as the weekly observance of this remembrance of Himself in His death? Surely our poor hearts need to have Him thus brought often to mind.

And how long did the Lord intend that this commemoration service should be kept up? The answer is precise: "Till He come." Right up to the very time of His coming to take the church to Himself, this feast is to be observed. Now as the end is at hand, and the moment of His coming for His own may take place at any moment, how important it is that each Lord's Day, unless unavoidably detained (in which case He knows all about it), we respond to His own blessed request, "This do, in remembrance of Me." What a privilege it would be to remember Him, as it is written, the last Lord's Day before His coming! Some will do it; may none of us be willing to let anything else take precedence over that one thing which He has asked us to do.

Some people, even real Christians, may account it "waste" to spend the time on a Lord's Day to go aside from the world and remember Him in death. The disciples called Mary's action, in breaking that alabaster box of costly ointment and using the contents on Him, "waste," but He approved of her devotion. Do we wish His approval?

In the days of Malachi the prophet, things were at a very low ebb. The Jewish remnant that had returned from captivity in Babylon in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah had grown cold, and they even said to God, "Wherein hast Thou loved us?" They called the proud happy and set up tempters of God as examples to follow. In such a condition, there was a feeble remnant who thought upon the Lord and called upon His name. Whatever the rest of the Jews thought of them, they had His approval. He, as it were, stooped to listen to their conversation as they spoke of Him, and He caused a special book of remembrance to be written of them. No special book of remembrance was written for godly Jews in the days of Solomon when it was comparatively easy to be a godly Jew. We are now living in days comparable to those in which Malachi prophesied; may we then take courage from God's word of encouragement written at that time.

P. Wilson

Because of the Angels, Woman's Hair Not Her Covering (11:6-7)

Some, in resisting Scripture, have wrested it by seeking to prove that a woman's hair is the covering that is required. The attempt to misuse the divine instruction should be so plain as to scarcely deserve comment. But for some who may have been misled by this strange twisting, it is well to call attention to some points. If a woman's covering could be deduced to mean her hair, then a man's hair would be his covering also. Now this evidently could not be the meaning in his case. What man would have his head shaved to be devoid of a covering? Even nature indicates only "short hair" for him. And he, who is supposed to have "short hair," is not "to cover his head" when speaking to God or for God.

"For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God." v. 7.

How could "not to cover" possibly mean to not let his hair grow long like a woman's when he is praying? The words of this verse express action or lack of action at the time of prayer. It is an act which he is not to do when praying. He may cover his head at other times, but these instructions refer to the time of "praying or prophesying." How could anyone think otherwise? Therefore, we see that in a man's case his hair is not the covering spoken of; he is not to put a hat or other covering on his head at this designated time.

Notice again the sixth verse. To make a woman's hair her covering, instead of a hat or some other object, would make something quite ridiculous out of it. Such reasoning would make that verse say that if a woman did not have any hair on her head, then her hair was to be cut off — an obvious impossibility. The folly of seeking to prove that a woman's hair is her covering, should be apparent. In verse 15 it should read, "in lieu of a veil." Her long hair simply marked in nature a certain subordinate, retiring place.

Some in Christendom have written, in an effort to turn aside the plain directions, saying that it means "her long hair" is the covering, and that it simply amounts to a ban against having her hair cut short. Now it is sad when a Christian woman cuts her glory, and in doing so is "conformed to this world." But how could she have short hair the rest of the time, and make it long when praying? It is a question of her showing and acknowledging her divinely appointed place when speaking to God or for God. This is to be done by placing a covering on her head at that time. Obviously if she has long hair all the time, there is still something to be done when praying. As we noticed in the case of a man, God spoke specifically about an act not to be done at the time of prayer. A woman already has a place of retirement in nature, already has long hair which marks her position, and now is to place a covering on her head to signify her subjection in that place. Is not that simple enough? For her to be without a covering would be a sign of her having taken the place of authority, and having left her own position. It would be confusion of God's order, witnessed by angels. God has gone to great lengths to show the reasons for such a rule. Why should any labor to make something else out of it? It is to be feared that the refusal to show the outward mark of subordination is merely the indication that the God-given place itself is refused.

Now in verse 3 the Spirit of God through the Apostle says that “the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.” This then is God’s order of power. God has a place for each (man and woman) and surely it is not grievous to abide in that place. Man has his place as God’s representative on earth — “the image and glory of God.” The woman also has a distinctive place — not the place of prominence, but the place of subjection according to God’s order. She can, however, glorify God in her appointed place. Man can, and alas does, sadly fail in properly filling his place, but he is in it just the same. He should seek to act before God in his place, and she should be happy to fill hers. Each should deem it a privilege to occupy the place assigned by God.

God has established a certain order throughout His creation. Christian men and women are not to neglect this order, but to remember that they are a divinely appointed spectacle — yes, a spectacle even to angels (v. 10). Angels are learning the wisdom of God, being spectators of His ways. The fact that they witness God’s ways down here is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 4:9 and Ephesians 3:10.

Now there is a very simple rule to follow which will demonstrate the place the man has. He is not to pray or prophesy (communicate the mind of God to others) with a covering on his head. To have his head covered would spoil the demonstration before others of God’s appointed place for him. It would be the mark of his abandoning the place of authority, and would leave no visible head.

The rule for the woman is just as simple; she is not to pray or prophesy without having a covering on her head. If she prays without a covering on her head, she dishonors her head. It would be disorder, to be witnessed by angels. The covering on her head is the outward sign of her subjection. A sister’s prophesying, of course, is restricted by other scriptures. She must not do so in the assembly (1 Cor. 14:34), neither is she to teach nor to usurp authority over the man (1 Tim. 2:12).

The fact that the simple direction about covering the head is generally disregarded in Christendom does not excuse any from following it. Some turn this portion aside by ascribing its authorship to Paul, but the Spirit of God was the divine Author, and Paul only the penman. He said that the things he wrote “are the commandments of the Lord.” 1 Cor. 14:37. If this be true, then it is a serious matter to resist them.

Listen to the strong language used:

“For if a woman be not covered, let her hair also be cut off. But if it be shameful to a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, let her be covered.” v. 6 JND.

What woman would want her head shaved! She would be publicly disgraced and would hide herself. Well then, says the Word of God, let her put a covering on her head when praying or prophesying.

It is not a matter of superiority and inferiority but of relative positions in the creation. God in His wisdom has assigned a place to each as it has pleased Him, and blessed are they who acknowledge such and seek wisdom and direction from His Word for becoming conduct in that place.

The Apostle, by the Spirit, went back to the creation to establish God’s order from the beginning. The order and purpose of the creation is set forth as the ground for woman’s subjection to man (vv. 8,9). Then in verses 14 and 15 he appeals to what we learn from observing nature. This shows the appropriateness of a woman’s having her head covered when praying. Nature teaches that long hair is a glory to a woman (how sad when Christian women cut it to be like the world), and signified a certain place of retirement. She was not to show herself with the boldness of men. Her hair was given her “in lieu of a veil” (v. 15 JND). It marked a retiring, subordinate place in God’s creation. This was God’s doing, and has its own blessing where it is not set aside by the will of men. We must remember that in the “new creation” there is neither male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus. That, however, is not the point here, but the respective places of each in this world before the eyes of others — even of angels.