



1 CORINTHIANS

1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-34

INTRODUCTION

So far, Paul has written to the Corinthians about divisions (1:10-4:21), sexual immorality (chs. 5-7), and Christian freedom (chs. 8-10). In this next section of his letter (chs. 11-14), he turns to address how the Corinthians should conduct themselves in the context of public worship, beginning with their conduct regarding head coverings and the Lord's Supper.

MAIN POINT

Christians should honor God's creation and the salvation he offers through Christ by celebrating gender distinctives and appropriately taking the Lord's Supper.

REFLECT

Christians have long struggled to understand how to interpret and apply the passage on head coverings. What exactly was happening here? Paul had likely taught the Corinthians what he also taught the Galatians, that "there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ" (Gal. 3:28). That is, men and women have equal worth and standing in God's eyes (Gen. 1:26-28).

Many in Corinth, however, argued that equality between the sexes meant that gender distinctions could be done away with, which in that time and place had the effect of women in the church doing away with "head coverings" (most likely a hairstyle rather than a veil). Women in the ancient world generally wore their hair long and had it put up when they went out. It was considered culturally shameful for a woman's hairstyle to look like a man's (and vice versa), whether by cutting it short or shaving it off completely. Long hair put up was probably also a sign of marriage like a wedding ring is

today, so married women who did not do this were presenting themselves to be unmarried and so dishonoring their husbands.

Paul's point seems to be that differences between the sexes are something to be celebrated rather than blurred, and the church should honor these differences in culturally appropriate ways. The Corinthians were not only flaunting social norms but going against the way God created the world. Though there is full equality between the sexes (vv. 11-12), there is still order (or gender roles) to be maintained. Husbands are the "head" (authority) of their wives, who in turn are to honor that authority (vv. 3-6). Husbands, likewise, are to honor their head, Jesus. What men and women did with their *physical* heads in that culture indicated their posture toward their *spiritual* head, which is why Paul feels the need to address this issue.

Two additional comments should be made. First, this topic is controversial in our day, and a big reason for that is the assumption that equality and submission are incompatible. But Paul's inclusion of "the head of Christ is God" (v.3) disproves this assumption. Jesus declared both his submission to God the Father (John 14:28) *and* his equality with him (John 10:30). Second, in Ephesians 5, Paul says that husbands and wives are to demonstrate in their marriage the relationship between Christ and his church. To maintain gender roles then is to maintain a picture of the gospel to a watching world.

Paul is clearly frustrated as turns to address the Lord's Supper (v. 17). The Corinthians observed the Lord's Supper in the context of a full meal provided by the wealthier members. The poorer members of the church would've had difficulties getting there on time, and the rich members weren't waiting on them (vv. 21,33). By the time the hungry poor arrived, the rich had already eaten the best food and gotten drunk. Thus, a meal meant for unity had become a means of fostering division along economic lines.

After reminding the church of the meaning behind the Lord's Supper (vv. 23-26 - remembering and proclaiming Christ's death), Paul reminds the Corinthians (and us today) to "examine" ourselves and discern the body. That is, we are to be on guard against making the Lord's Supper an empty ritual that we do without examining our motives as well as our attitudes toward others in the church. To "judge" ourselves in this way is to avoid God's judgment (v. 31).

- What are some culturally appropriate ways of expressing maleness and femaleness today? Why is it important to do so? What stereotypes of masculinity and femininity tend to distort our understanding of each?
- What does it mean to take the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner? What steps can you take to ensure you take it appropriately?

MEMORIZE

1 Corinthians 11:3 – *“But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.”*