

Week 11, 1 Corinthians 11

Hook



Main Point: Christian worship should be marked by unity, freedom and order that glorify God instead of self.

Historic Event: Queen Elizabeth I took the saying “dress to impress” to heart. The queen dressed lavishly at court, draping herself with colored thread, diamonds, rubies, sapphires and all kinds of jewels.¹ As she grew older, she required the other ladies of the court to dress simply in black and white, ensuring that all attention would be in its rightful place, directly on the queen.²

Research on the psychology of color suggests that certain colors elicit particular responses. Warm colors, such as red, are perceived as active and exciting while cooler colors such as blue are viewed as passive and calming. Those who desire to garner attention and be viewed assertively might consider red. Individuals hoping to be seen as dependable and trustworthy should consider blue.³

Does your mood affect the colors you choose to wear?

If you were dressing for a meeting in which you hoped to have a heavy, active voice, what might you wear? If you were hoping to be relatively unseen in a meeting, how might your attire change?

How does one’s attire when worshipping affect the experience for others in the congregation?

¹ <http://www.elizabethi.org/contents/wardrobe/>

² <http://www.historyextra.com/article/facts-elizabethi>

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/carole-kanchier/what-colour-to-wear_b_1556811.html

Transition: Today's passage will address attire in worship and how what we wear should bring honor to God and help to create an atmosphere that most fully promotes holiness.

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Book

Main Point: Christian worship should be marked by unity, freedom and order that glorify God instead of self.

Text Summary: 1 Corinthians 11

As he has previously mentioned in this epistle, Paul notices even more evidence of disunity and division in this Corinthian church, this time on the level of their worship habits in the gathered assembly. In this chapter specifically, Paul addresses the underlying issue of disunity among the Corinthian believers, from contention arising over head coverings to splits between the rich and the poor in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.⁴ As we saw in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul strongly instructed Christians to avoid pagan worship banquets. Now, in chapters 11–14, Paul shows the Corinthian believers what a *Christian* worship service should look like in contrast to these pagan worship practices.⁵ Instead of behaving like unbelievers in their worship practices, the primary thrust of this chapter is about how the Corinthian church can glorify God in free, unified and orderly worship.⁶ Paul again reminds these believers of their true identity to set them straight in their worship practices.

1 Corinthians 11:2–16 [Read]

Sub-point: Glorify and represent God properly in worship in how you dress.

This section of 1 Corinthians 11 is recognized among scholars as one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament.⁷ While most modern readers bristle when they come across this text, it is important to remember that this passage was never meant to be a proof text about women or gender roles, but about Christian versus pagan worship.⁸ Paul's primary concern is that these couples are praying and prophesying in a way that does not seek the good of the assembly or the glory of God; instead, it is focused on attracting attention on themselves.⁹ The husbands and wives in these worship services don't seem very Christian at all, and the passage in verses 2–16 is Paul's way of correcting both their internal thinking and their external attire.

⁴ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 252.

⁵ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 146.

⁶ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 195.

⁷ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 253.

⁸ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 146.

⁹ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 253.

During this time in history, Augustus the emperor built statues of himself throughout the Roman Empire, depicted with a toga pulled over his head. Having a toga pulled over one's head was the quintessential mark of a leading role in pagan worship rituals. Augustus' strategy behind erecting these statues was to communicate to his empire that he was now the imperial head and controller of all Roman activities—even religious affairs!¹⁰ These statues were Augustus' way of saying, "Consider me not just the head of the political empire, but the head of your religion, too." And as it is with any culture, as the leaders go, the people go, too. Eventually the social elite followed suit, wearing togas pulled over their heads ("head coverings") to communicate power and status within their culture, especially at worship services. Eventually, because of this cultural norm, Christian gatherings ended up looking like pagan worship events.¹¹

Once we understand this cultural context, Paul's instructions against male head coverings in verses 4 and 7 make sense. He is essentially calling out the men on their motive in worship services—by coming in with head coverings, they are obviously focused on their own reputation instead of building up the church. By dressing like leaders in the pagan community during a Christian worship gathering, these men were clearly revealing their true motive in coming to the assembly. By avoiding head coverings, these men could rightly and visually associate with the true God instead of the Roman gods. Freedom of attire is permitted in Christian worship, Paul says, but not at the expense of dishonoring God.

As it relates to wives (scholars note that while some translations use "women" and "men" in this text, the referent in these passages is actually married couples¹²), Paul instructs them the same way. In Roman culture at the time, women marked their availability by means of a symbol, much like we use wedding rings today. In Corinth, married women wore veils or head coverings, and unmarried women wore their hair down with no head covering.¹³ For a married woman not to wear a head covering wrongly communicated, "I'm available."¹⁴ In their excitement, these wives were engaging in worship with hair that communicated non-association, even *infidelity* to their spouse. This behavior was a distraction to the assembly at large and drew attention to the women instead of God. It would be much like all the wives in a modern worship service slinging off their wedding rings during the heightened enthusiasm of worship. By wearing the appropriate cultural symbol for marriage, these women could rightly

¹⁰ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 146.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹² Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 253-254.

¹³ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 147.

¹⁴ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 196.

and visually associate with their husbands. Freedom and excitement in Christian worship is available, Paul says, but not at the expense of dishonoring your spouse.

Regarding these Corinthian marriages, verse 3 sums it up. Paul is essentially saying, “Everyone has a head and willingly submits to something—even Christ himself! Don’t conduct yourself in a way that would dishonor the one to whom you are submitting. Men, don’t dishonor God by wearing pagan attire that would call your allegiance to Christ into question. Women, don’t dishonor God and your husband by wearing cultural attire that calls your marital status into question. Don’t disassociate with the one you have given your life to. In doing so, you sever your head!”¹⁵

Lastly, and very importantly, is the view of freedom of worship and gender equality within this passage. Verse 5 assumes that wives pray and prophesy in Christian worship services. In contrast to the Jewish synagogue where women were not considered full members and were required to sit separately behind a curtain, Paul is saying something scandalous about women—they are full, complete and equal participants in worship!¹⁶

Also scandalous is Paul’s statement about gender interdependence in verses 11–12. By simultaneously reminding them of their Genesis-identity (namely, that woman came from the rib of man, but man *also* comes from the birth of woman), Paul is saying that Christianity recognizes the full equality and interdependence of the sexes. This idea of gender equality and interdependence would have been outrageous, even in a progressive culture like Corinth!¹⁷ Headship (the husband being the head of the wife) does not communicate the inferiority of the wife.

Paul desires both husbands and wives to participate in worship in a way that is freer than the rigid, ritualistic patterns of the Jews, but more God-centered, marriage-exalting, and orderly than the pagan worship banquets. He desires their attire and behavior in worship to draw attention to God’s glory instead of their own, and for their united marriages to reflect the triune God Himself. Unlike pagan worship, these participants are to be free, united, orderly and God-glorifying in their attire.

What would be the modern-day equivalent of a man covering his head during worship?

Describe the idea of submitting to one’s head. How does recognizing Christ as the head of the believer strengthen one’s relationship with Christ?

Why is headship vital to the health of one’s relationships with Christ and spouse?

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 197.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 197.

In verse 16, the churches have no such practice of what?

What does “in the Lord” mean in verse 11?

1 Corinthians 11:17–34 [Read]

Sub-point: Glorify and represent God properly in the Lord’s Supper.

When it comes to the Corinthian Christian worship services, prayer and prophecy were not the only behaviors that reeked of paganism. Their practice of the Lord’s Supper had also gone terribly askew, making Paul wonder if these believers understood their Christian identity at all.

In Corinthian culture at the time, dinner parties were the way to gain social status and prestige, and a place where one could clearly observe the social stratification between the rich and the poor.¹⁸ The *Lord’s Supper*, according to Paul, was supposed to display something diametrically opposed to the *culture’s* way of doing supper. One of the beautiful parts of the Lord’s Supper among believers is that it joins believers from all the social levels in which the culture works so hard to divide them. The point of the Lord’s Supper was to be a visual, nourishing representation of the fact that the common divisions and disunities of our world are overcome in Christ.¹⁹ One should be able to walk into the Lord’s Supper to see how God views both the rich and the poor and everyone else: as equals at the foot of the Cross.

However, the Corinthian believers had once again brought cultural patterns into their church practices, enough so that Paul accuses them of making the Lord’s Supper unrecognizable. Since the rich believers in Corinth had the affordability to host these suppers in their homes and had the leisure time to prepare a lavish meal, their version of the Lord’s Supper was much more extravagant than what an ordinary congregant could provide. The rich would arrive for the meal early and fill the primary dining area, eating the finest of the foods and indulgently drinking the majority of the wine. There was no legal day off in the Roman Empire, so the poor believers presumably arrived at the supper late and very tired from work, only to find themselves in a room or courtyard adjacent to the primary dining room, cut off from the rich believers who had been indulgently dining for hours. At this point in the evening, there was no food or wine left for the poor believers, as the rich were already drunk and engorged—a common Corinthian habit at dinner parties.²⁰

This cultural context helps us understand Paul’s harsh words in verses 21–22 and 33. These rich believers are humiliating the poor during an ordinance that was supposed to unite the two. In

¹⁸ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 203.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

²⁰ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 206.

verses 20–21, Paul warns these believers that they are clearly no longer celebrating the *Lord’s* Supper; their actions show that they have made it their own pagan meal!²¹ In essence, Paul is saying that this is obviously *Corinth’s* meal, not *Christ’s*. The very ordinance that was supposed to ground their unity and remind them of the Gospel that equalizes all had instead become the place where divisions were overtly and purposefully expressed.²² In yet another area of their life, like many other places in 1 Corinthians, these believers look like the culture instead of Christ.

To bring them back to a proper understanding of the Lord’s Supper, as is his pattern, Paul points these believers back to Christ Himself. Verse 24 is Paul’s way of telling the Corinthians that they have taken the Lord’s Supper—an observance designed by God to remind believers to glorify Jesus because of His self-sacrifice—and turned it into an event for glorifying themselves.²³ What was designed to distinguish *Jesus* as the true God, the Corinthians transformed into something that made *them* feel distinguished. To repent of this, in verses 28–29, Paul urges these believers to “examine themselves” and find if they actually care about the unity of the church at all.²⁴ If so, both the rich and the poor are to take the bread and the cup in a humble, unifying, equal way. If not, they will face judgment for their actions that misrepresent the God who offers the Gospel freely to any type of person. The bread and the cup are not about satisfying one’s desire, but visually proclaiming the unifying message of the Gospel of Christ. Indeed, verse 34 maintains that if a believer comes to the supper with any other goal than that in mind, it would be better for him to stay at home than drink judgment on himself.²⁵ The Lord’s Supper is not about satisfying one’s desire, but exalting God and His Gospel.

According to Paul, the primary purpose of the Lord’s Supper is to proclaim what (verse 26)?

How are the believers in Corinth to view this harsh judgment from the Lord (verse 32)?

Now understanding the context of what the Corinthians were doing regarding the Lord’s Supper, what does Paul mean by “unworthy manner” in verse 27?

²¹ Ibid., p. 204.

²² Ibid., p. 206.

²³ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 154.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 155.

²⁵ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 155.

Week 11, 1 Corinthians 11

Took



Main Point: Christian worship should be marked by unity, freedom and order that glorify God instead of self.

Current Event: When constructing Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom, the first section of the park that was built consisted of 392,040 square feet of tunnels. These tunnels, known as "utilidors," are the first level of the park—the layer that patrons see and enjoy is actually the second floor. Legend has it that Walt Disney himself was the major influence in this revolutionary design; he wanted the customer's experience to be uninterrupted by distractions of necessity. Utilidors shield children from seeing Disney employees milling about the park, the movement of equipment, the disposal and collection of trash, and the normal necessities involved in operating such a large theme park. The Magic Kingdom was designed to create an atmosphere conducive to enjoyment and escapism. Anything distracting from achieving that goal must be rooted out.²⁶

Paul was concerned that distractions were morphing Christian worship into something it was not intended to be; he challenged them to conduct themselves in such a way that their worship experience reflected their complete devotion to Jesus. Like the recipients of the letter, we, too, are called to rid our worship of things that would distract others from Christ—whether this be our attire or bias toward particular kinds of people.

Lesson Conclusion: Paul yet again rebukes the believers in Corinth for their divisions and misrepresentation of Christianity. It seems everything they are doing in the life of their church looks pagan—from the way they pray, to the way they prophesy, to the way they are doing the Lord's Supper. Their divisive, distracting, and self-absorbed behavior reveals that they have forgotten what true Christlikeness means. The practice of head coverings among the men, the lack of head coverings among the wives, and the lack of social equality at the Lord's Supper all expose the Corinthian believers for their loyalty to their culture instead of Christ. In reminding them of both their Genesis-identity and their Gospel-identity, Paul reminds them of who they

²⁶ <http://mentalfloss.com/article/67485/inside-disney-worlds-secret-tunnels>

truly are—interdependent human beings made in the image of God who have been saved by a great savior, Christ. They are *first* Christians, *then* Corinthians. This primary identity should change everything about them, including their attire, their treatment of one another in worship, and their habits at the Lord’s Table. By offering Gospel-focused advice, Paul pushes these believers away from self-glorifying pagan worship practices and toward a God-glorifying worship practice that is marked by unity, freedom and order.

Challenge

Assess your attire. While head coverings may not be the symbol of the pagan elite or being married in our day, we have plenty of modern social norms regarding our attire. What part of your attire in worship communicates disloyalty to God or to your spouse? What are ways our attire can be distracting for those trying to concentrate in a Worship Service? List the habits you exhibit during a church event that do not make much of God or your spouse. Make a plan to change those habits this week.

Repent of social biases. Like the church in Corinth, the modern church can unfortunately be one of the typical places to see the divide between those of different socio-economic statuses when it should be a place the two are united. While we may not withhold the Lord’s Supper from the poor, there are many places in our church life that reveal that we like to “stick to our own.” Take time to think and pray about the people you normally engage with during your weekly Worship Service. Are they usually in the same economic bracket as you? Are they roughly in the same phase of life? Are you only rubbing shoulders with those who are just like you? What would repentance in this area look like for you by the time you arrive at church next week?

Reorder your identity. It is easy to see how these believers put their identity as Corinthians above their identity as Christians. It is harder yet to see how we, too, do this as Americans. If a foreigner observed you on a monthly basis, in what habits would they deem you an American first and a Christian second? Where in your life have you taken on your culture as your primary identity instead of Christ? List these habits and pray for the Lord to create a heart in you that desires allegiance to Christ over your country, preferences or cultural habits.

