**Reverence in Worship and Fellowship**

March 14, 2021

1 Corinthians 11:2–34

Key Verse 11:26 “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

Thus far in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul has dealt with the problems of church division in chapters 1-4, and with sexual immorality in chapters 5-7. Then in chapters 8-10, he taught the proper use of Christian freedom through food sacrificed to idols. Chapters 11-14 are about practical problems in church meetings. In dealing with them, Paul lays down principles. Namely, we should follow social customs and traditions of the day in order not to be distracted from the gospel. If we defy social customs, people’s focus will be not on the gospel, but on defying the custom. In Corinth, it was about women covering their heads. The custom was for a woman to cover her head as a sign of submission to her husband. Paul says to the Corinthian women to follow the social custom. The second problem Paul mentions is the Lord’s supper. Some Corinthians were not taking the Lord’s supper seriously. Paul teaches them clearly that when we gather together as a church, we are in the presence of the holy God. We need to show reverence in worship and fellowship.

I. Reverence and order in worship (2-16)

Notice in verses 2–16 how Paul uses the word “woman” 16 times. To understand why he spends so much time on this, it is good to look at how he addresses women elsewhere in this letter. In chapter 7 in his teachings on marriage, he uses the word “woman” another 6 times. There he addresses a group of women in the church who thought that being married and having relations with a man was unspiritual and unnecessary. These “super-spiritual” women thought they were brides of Christ, full of the Holy Spirit, and didn’t need men. They were encouraging others either to divorce or refuse to get married, so that they could be fully spiritual. Paul taught that being married and intimate with one’s spouse please God and protect us from immorality.

These “super-spiritual” women were defying the normal custom of women covering their heads in public. Typically, Greek women covered their heads as a sign of submission to their husbands. If a woman did not cover her head, it was a sign of disrespect or promiscuity. When they refused to wear the normal head coverings, they were making a statement and drawing attention to themselves. They said, “Men do not have to cover their heads. Why should we? It is unfair. It is a sexist idea.” Because of this, there was a disorder in worship. Paul gives several reasons why they should cover their heads.

**First**, women should cover their heads to keep spiritual order (3-6). Look at verse 3. “Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” Here, “head” signifies the one in authority. Jesus Christ is Lord of all and he has the authority over every person in the church. The same word, “head,” describes the position of a husband in a family. The husband is the head of the family. His wife should submit to him to keep spiritual order in the family. Verse 3 ends, “...the head of Christ is God.” Christ is not only our Lord, but also our example of submission to God. The Father and Christ are equal; they are both God. Their relationship is one of absolute love and respect. Jesus loved the Father and always did what pleased him (Jn 5:30; 8:29). The Father loved the Son and placed everything in his hands (Jn 3:35). Yet the Son submitted to the Father in everything. Christ did not try to grasp equality with God, but submitted to God through his death, even death on a cross. Through Jesus’ submission we are saved. So we willingly submit to him in everything (Rev 5:13). Christian husbands gladly love their wives with life-giving sacrifice. Christian wives are happy to submit to their husbands with genuine respect. The Christian church, as the bride of Christ, submits joyfully to her Husband and Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. Spiritual order is not a synonym for Confucian hierarchy or another way of saying “dictatorship.” It means there is mutual love and respect, necessary authority and willing submission.

Would Paul expect ladies to wear head coverings in churches today? No, I don’t think so. Why? Because a head covering doesn’t have the same connotation today as it did in the first century. The head covering signified submission in the first century. Today it is not. If you wore a shawl over your head this morning, no one would equate that with submission. People would probably ask you if you are cold or just having a bad hair day. So what would be a 21st century equivalence to a 1st century head covering? One tangible way to demonstrate submission is to take your husband’s last name when you get married. Some women refused to take their husbands’ last name, in order to show that they are independent. That doesn’t demonstrate godly submission. It does not mean that women are inferior to men in terms of essence, and in terms of intellect. They simply have different roles. Many of you work at a job. You are not in any way inferior to your boss. In your intellect, you might even be more intelligent. All he has over you is a different title because he has been there long enough. But in order for your corporation to function, somebody has to take charge.

**Second**, women should cover their heads to keep natural order (13-16). In verses 13-15, Paul makes another appeal, this time to the “very nature of things.” It is natural for a woman to have hair longer than a man. Historically, a woman’s long hair has been the symbol of her glory, and there have been relatively few bald women. Since this distinction is inherent in nature and in creation order, it should be respected during public worship. In Corinthian culture, it meant that women must cover their heads, even if they did not like it. Only prostitutes cut their hair short in that culture. So if Christian women cut their hair short, many unbelievers and newcomers would misunderstand. Even though they have freedom in Christ, they should deny their freedom for the sake of fellowship. There was one shepherd in Chicago who had a mustache. He was proud to have it as a symbol of his rebelliousness. Dr. Samuel Lee encouraged him to shave it. He could have refused, saying, “It is my body. I can do whatever I want.” But he obeyed. After that he looked a lot younger and married a missionary from Germany.

We must remember that coming to worship is coming to meet the holy God. We join the holy angels in worshiping him. We are in God’s presence right now. We must honor God from our hearts through our appearance. These days many people say, “God sees my heart. As long as I am sincere, appearance does not matter.” Some young men wear a t-shirt, shorts, and a baseball cap to church. Yet they would never go to a job interview dressed in such a way. We should not be legalistic about this. However, as a general principle, we should wear our best clothes to worship service. Women should not be uncovered in church so that they may not become a distraction. Women should dress modestly to worship God. If you have a tattoo or nose piercing which may be a distraction, you should cover them. Let’s remember that God is the God of order who wants reverence and order in worship. Here we should have a balanced view of tradition and adapting to culture. In order to serve modern young people we should adapt to their culture. But we should not abandon our tradition. For example, there are no such things as one to one Bible study and testimony writing in the Bible. They became traditions in our ministry based on Jesus’ ministry of teaching one person at a time. If some say, “We don’t need testimony writing. It is not in the Bible,” then the spiritual order in our fellowship cannot be maintained. Unless there is a better way to study the Bible, we should stick with our tradition.

II. Reverence in the Lord’s supper (17-34)

The second problem Paul deals with is celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Look at verse 17. “In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.” In the early church people gathered on Sunday evening to eat dinner called “Agape,” and celebrated the Lord’s Supper to commemorate the Lord’s death. It was a potluck dinner, namely, each person brought one dish of food to be shared. But there was a problem. Some rich people brought beef steaks, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes and gravy, and fresh apple pie. They also brought fine wines and premium beer and ate first and drank freely. So by the time they celebrated the Lord’s Supper, some were drunk. Meanwhile, the poor looked on with growling stomachs and watering mouths. At that time, Sunday was not off day. Some people had a worship service early in the morning and went to work all day and came back late in the evening. They did not have time or money to prepare a dish of food. They were very hungry. The rich did not wait for them. They did not feel that they should wait for the late comers. Paul was upset that the poor were humiliated in such a way. The division in the church became deeper and deeper. Paul rebuked them sharply in verse 22, “Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you for this? Certainly not!” Their meetings were doing more harm than good.

Paul reminded them of the true meaning of the Lord’s Supper in verses 23-25: “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper, he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

**First**, the bread and cup symbolize Jesus’ body on the cross and Jesus’ blood shed for us. Isaiah 53:5 says, “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Jesus gave his own life for us. We must accept Jesus’ sacrifice with sincere repentance and faith. When Jesus said, “This is my body which is for you,” he wasn’t saying that this was actually his flesh. The Jews mocked that idea in John 6, saying, “Is he telling us to eat his body and drink his blood? Are we like cannibals?” Jesus said, “This cup is the new covenant.” The new covenant was God’s promise to take away sin, to forgive, take away the stony heart of the sinner and give him a heart of flesh, to plant the Holy Spirit in him. The new covenant was the covenant of salvation, the covenant of forgiveness, the covenant of grace. The new covenant wasn’t a cup, but the cup symbolized the new covenant in the blood of Christ, and the bread symbolized the body of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “This is my body which is for you.” The two most beautiful words in this verse are “for you.” Why did God become incarnate? For Himself? No, for you. Why did Jesus come into this world and suffer what He suffered? For you. Why did He die on the cross? For you. What an unbelievably gracious, loving and merciful God! You may say, “But I don’t deserve it.” You are right. But it is still for you. You may say, “But I don’t want it.” But it is still for you. If you don’t choose to take it, that is your problem, but it’s for you.

**Second**, we proclaim the Lord’s death through the Lord’s supper. Look at verse 26. “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” Every time we eat the Lord’s supper we proclaim the gospel. We proclaim it to ourselves to sustain faith, and we proclaim it to unbelievers, who may be watching, to awaken faith. Look at verse 26 again. The words, “until he comes” don’t come out of nowhere. They assume and are built on the resurrection which is implicit in the Lord’s Supper itself. Through the Lord’s Supper we commemorate Jesus’ death when he came the first time to take away our sins, and we express our longing for his second coming to bring salvation.

**Third**, we should examine our hearts before the Lord’s supper. Look at verses 27-28. “So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.” Here eating the Lord’s supper in an unworthy manner means treating it lightly rather than treating it seriously. We are all unworthy sinners. That’s not what Paul is talking about here. We are all unworthy sinners. That’s why we come to show our gratitude to the Lord for forgiveness. The unworthiness that he is talking about here is not our unworthiness as sinners. It is coming to participate in the Lord’s Supper in a shallow and superficial way. If you come to the Lord’s supper with any bitterness toward another Christian in any way; with any unconfessed sin; living in any kind of sin that you will not repent of and turn from; if you come with anything less than total love for the brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, then you are eating it in unworthy manner. When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper with sincere hearts and receive the love of Jesus, God can use us to proclaim the Lord’s death in a powerful way. It is most important that we remember the grace of Jesus on the cross, repent of our sins and receive the love of Jesus in our hearts.

Let’s remember what kind of church we must have. First, we must keep spiritual order based on

God’s words and truth. Second we must remember Jesus’ grace on the cross to renew our love relationship with God and to practice the love of God with brothers and sisters. As we do so, may God build a healthy church.

Big Idea: Reverence in worship and fellowship