**REVERENCE IN WORSHIP AND FELLOWSHIP**

**(1 Corinthians 11:2-34)**

***“For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (v. 26)***

Welcome worshipers of God! Over the past couple weeks, we have learned so much from our 1 Corinthians studies about what it means to practice our Christian freedoms in a way that honors God. Chapters 11-14 continue this trend by zeroing in on various aspects of public worship and the church community. These include gender roles, Communion, spiritual gifts and various other things. Today’s passage focuses on the first two of these aspects. We will see that acceptable worship requires maintaining the spiritual order that God has established and loving one another deeply out of reverence for Christ. Let’s think about how we can use our freedoms to glorify God and edify the church.

1. **Maintain spiritual order in worship (vs. 2-16)**

Let’s start by looking at verse 2. ***“I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you.”*** Paul begins this section with a brief word of encouragement. It is important for shepherds to acknowledge the good, not only the bad, in those they lead. Still, there were several wrongs that needed to be made right in the Corinthians’ public worship.

The first involved women refusing to wear head coverings in worship gatherings. This topic has proven controversial throughout church history, as there is no other clear command anywhere in Scripture relating to this matter. It is probably best understood in the cultural context of ancient Corinth. It was a fairly universal custom throughout the Greco-Roman world for women to wear head coverings as a symbol of modesty and submission to their husbands. Women who refused were oftentimes labelled as rebellious or wayward (many prostitutes left their hair uncovered). This may thus be viewed as another matter of Christian freedom. Perhaps the women of Corinth were throwing off their head coverings as an expression of their liberation in Christ (*“I have the right to do anything”, 1 Co 10:23*). But Paul saw their actions as degrading, not liberating. As we learned, properly exercising our Christian freedoms means first considering what glorifies God and builds up the church before indulging our own desires.

Paul lays the foundation for his teaching on this issue in verse 3. ***“But 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.”*** This is often referred to as the “spiritual order” that exists among mankind and God. Here, the word “head” can be thought of as a position of honor and authority. When men and women willingly submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ, our Head, there is perfect order. When we rebel against Jesus’ authority, we fall into chaos and misery. Similarly, God appointed man to be the head of the household to bring order to the family unit. So, women should willingly submit themselves to their husbands, not because all men are perfect like Christ, but because such order is pleasing to God and is in accordance with his design.

Can such submission really be in our best interests? Our best example is Christ himself. Although he is in very nature God, he *“…did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage…” (Php 2:6)*. Rather, the Son willingly submitted himself to the authority of the Father, becoming a servant in human likeness, obeying the Father even to the point of death on a cross. As we see in the gospels, there is always mutual love and respect between the two, with Jesus loving the Father and doing what pleases him (Jn 5:30; 8:29) and the Father entrusting all things to Jesus’ hands (Jn 3:35). Submission rendered according to God’s spiritual order is life and joy and peace.

Now look at verses 4-5. ***“Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved.”*** In Paul’s eyes, breaking the cultural gender norms regarding head coverings seriously disrupted the spiritual order. Notice that in each of these verses, the second time the word ***“head”*** is used refers to that person’s head as described in verse 3. So, a man who covers his head in public worship dishonors his “head”, that is, Christ. Meanwhile, a woman who refuses to cover her head dishonors her “head”, that is, her husband. Choosing whether to follow gender norms is much more than a matter of personal choice; for our choices can dishonor one another and Christ. What we should be thinking is “What would be the Christlike thing to do?”

It might be hard at first to understand why Paul sees this particular issue as so troubling. So Paul puts it into its greater spiritual context of the creation order in verses 7-9. ***“A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.”*** Genesis 1 teaches us that both male and female were created in the image of God to glorify God (Gen 1:27). Genesis 2 tells the story in greater detail. When no suitable helper for Adam was found among all the creatures the Lord God had made, God took one of Adam’s ribs and made Eve from it. This shows us that men and women are intrinsically different from each other and possess complementary roles that give them their own unique value and honor. Men have the glory of being created first, the heads of God’s creation. Women have the glory of being the crowning achievement of God’s creation, the perfect solution to man’s longing. This is why ***“woman is the glory of man”*** (think of how Adam rejoiced when he first met Eve, captivated by her beauty!; Gen 2:23).

But please keep in mind that woman’s submissive role in no way conveys the idea of inferiority! Paul goes out of his way in verses 11-12 to state, ***“Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.”*** Men and women, both made in the image of God, are totally *interdependent*. Before God they are equals; but they are not interchangeable. We desperately need each other if we are to carry out our God-given mission as families and as a church. This eliminates any justification for sexism or abuse on the part of males. Males and females are equally valued co-workers in the Lord.

In verses 13-15, Paul makes a final appeal to ***“the very nature of things”***; for it is almost universal that long hair, a type of head covering, is viewed as a feminine feature while short hair is viewed as masculine. Indeed, even though men and women’s hair grow at the same rate (1 cm/month), male hormones cause a man’s hair to shed faster than a woman’s. Thus, a woman’s naturally long hair is her God-given glory. Paul argues that the church is not the place for gender neutrality. It is a place for men to be men and women to be women. This truth is all the more important to uphold nowadays as young people are being taught that their gender identity is a matter of personal choice rather than the wisdom of their Creator.

How, then, should we apply these things? Should we enforce mandatory head coverings for women, as some churches do? Though we could, it probably wouldn’t convey the meaning Paul intended, as our cultural norms are totally different today. What we should do, above all else, is remember that our worship gathering is not a man-made institution. It is approaching the holy, living God! As we meet with God, our attitude, appearance and the way we treat one another should overflow with reverence and humility, embracing God’s spiritual order. This includes celebrating our unique gender roles and joyfully submitting to God’s will voluntarily. For men, this means dressing in a way that honors God and honoring wives with Christlike love. For women, this means exercising humble submission towards husbands and dressing modestly, in a way that doesn’t distract anyone from worshiping God. Newcomers who don’t yet adhere to these standards are to be welcomed, but also lovingly taught God’s purpose for them. In everything, the goal should always be to *“…do it all for the glory of God” (1 Co 10:31).*

1. **Celebrate the Lord’s Supper in a manner worthy of Christ (vs. 17-34)**

Paul now moves on to a second serious issue related to the Corinthians’ public worship. Look at verse 17. ***“In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.”*** What was supposed to be a time of joyful unity in worshiping God was marred by divisions and selfish behavior. Paul was particularly irked by the Corinthians’ attempt to keep the Lord’s Supper. Verses 20-22 read, ***“So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers.  As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing?  What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!”***

In addition to sharing the bread and wine in a traditional Communion ceremony, early church members also shared an “agape feast” with one another after the service. This potluck-style meal served as an extension of the Lord’s Supper. However, rather than embracing all their brothers and sisters in Christ, some of the wealthy believers formed cliques within the congregation. They reasoned that since they were bringing the largest portions of food and drink, it was their right to enjoy it amongst themselves. Imagine the “rich table” overloaded with lobster tails, honey-glazed ham, ribs, enchiladas, ice cream, wine and champagne. Meanwhile, there wasn’t even enough to go around at the “poor table”! Those who had little to contribute felt humiliated and alienated from the rest of the group, while those who dined to excess got drunk. One moment they were worshiping the Lord as one eternal family and the next it was like they were on different planets. It was a travesty.

Paul’s remedy was to point them back to the true purpose of the Lord’s Supper. Look at 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.’”*** During that Passover meal, Jesus got up from the table, wrapped a towel around his waist and shockingly washed the feet of his disciples one by one (Jn 13:1-17). It was a climactic moment in his humble service for them as well as the example of love they were to follow. Then during the meal, Jesus used the bread and wine to vividly portray his death on the cross. By offering himself in our place, Jesus atoned for all our sins through his broken body and shed blood. Through faith in his sacrifice, we enter into a New Covenant relationship with God, and Jesus’ blood washes away all our dirty sins. We become new creations in God’s sight. It is Jesus’ self-giving, self-sacrificial love that makes the Lord’s Supper the Lord’s Supper.

We thus find that our participation in Communion and our fellowship meals together are so much more than food and drink. Let’s read verse 26, our key verse, all together. ***“For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”*** A family of believers sharing meals together in Christ is a living sermon on what the gospel is and does! Before knowing Christ, we were all strangers living under the weight of sin. But then we met Christ who loved us and gave himself for us. Our worship and our fellowship proclaim to the world that Jesus really did die for the sins of the whole world, and that in him is reconciliation with God and man! We proclaim that Jesus rose from the dead and is coming again soon as King and Judge, our ultimate hope. We proclaim that just as we know we shall live and reign with him, we are right now ready to suffer, die and give ourselves for others along with him. Do you see how disunity and selfishness among believers ruins this proclamation? How our own petty human conflicts suck the spiritual life out of the body Christ and make us no better than worldly institutions? How can we be in Christ, the foot-washing, sin-forgiving, cross-bearing Savior, when we are only thinking of ourselves?

Paul gives us clear directives in verses 27-29. ***“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. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.”*** These truths apply not only to the celebration of Communion, but to any and all aspects of public worship, including shared meals.

The first step is self-examination. This doesn’t mean being self-absorbed. It means examining ourselves before the holy God in the truth of his word. When we come into God’s presence to worship him, we should always be struck with a sense of our own sinfulness. Apart from God, we are utterly depraved in sin and in desperate need of his grace. Confronting this reality is the purpose of our Call to Worship. This is meant to be a time of sincere self-reflection and personal confession of sins. Only after we acknowledge who we are as sinners and empty ourselves of all worthless things can we be filled with the love of God! His Spirit will remind us that we are God’s redeemed children, created in his image to glorify him. We will remember that every good thing we have and are has come to us from God.

The second step is to discern the body of Christ. This may actually have a double-meaning. The first, literal meaning, is that “the body of Christ” refers to Jesus’ physical body given for us on the cross. Whenever we gather to worship God, and especially during Communion, we must deliberately discern Jesus’ sacrifice for us. This invariably begins with solemn reverence as we think of all that Jesus endured in our stead. But this always gives way to joy and love for Jesus as we reciprocate God’s amazing love! To discern the body of Christ is thus to hold on to the grace of God, keeping the cross of Jesus close to our hearts.

Finally, the third step is, again, to discern the body of Christ. But there is an important second meaning here. When Paul says “the body of Christ”, he may mainly be referring to the body of believers—the church. This would be in keeping with his main point that believers need to love and embrace one another rather than despising one another. Notice that if we carry out the first two steps, acknowledging our sinfulness and remembering God’s grace towards us, this third step happens naturally! With the power of the gospel of love flowing in our hearts, we will see our fellow believers as precious family members and co-workers in the Lord for whom Christ died. God’s love will bear fruit in us to make us considerate of their needs, and we will begin to value our unity in the same way God does, as a testimony to the world. Remember what Jesus taught about worship in Matthew 5:23-24. *“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”* God does not accept the worship of those who harbor bitter anger against a brother or sister. To honor God, we must first be reconciled to our fellow believers.

Participating in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner has serious consequences, as detailed in verses 30-32. Paul saw weakness, sickness and even death among the Corinthians as evidence of God’s judgment on them for their sins against the body and blood of the Lord. Our God is the same God as the God of the Old Testament, who righteously judged those who profaned his holy name. But at the same time, the solution was very simple and straightforward. Look at verses 33-34. ***“So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further directions.”*** By simply considering the needs of others, valuing their unity and planning ahead, this kind of discipline from God could be avoided.

Personally, this passage taught me how important my attitude and my relationships are within the realm of public worship. When we gather together as one body to worship God, it is all too easy for me to sink into the routine and just go through the motions. I too often miss the fact that we are gathering in the presence of the Holy God, and that our fellowship is a proclamation to the world about what the gospel is and does. Even our lunch fellowship should be full of the power of the Holy Spirit! In our worship service, there are so many elements purposefully designed to help us know and approach our amazing God. I confess that I haven’t maintained reverence for God and appreciation for Christ like I should at these moments. I easily overlook times devoted for prayer, heartfelt praise, personal reflection and simple thanksgiving to God because my mind is on other things. I also see that the way in which I treat my precious brothers and sisters in Christ at every moment speaks volumes about what I think of the gospel. I thus want to do a better job of building up our beautiful community of faith with reverence for God, self-giving love and a stronger sense of unity.

We serve an amazing, holy God! It is a miracle that we have all been called out of this world to know the one true God and worship in his presence. As we learned, acceptable worship can only be achieved when we maintain the spiritual order that God has established and love one another out of reverence for Christ. Hebrews 12:28-29 say, *“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire.’”* Our amazing God has an amazing plan and purpose for this community. So, let’s follow Jesus’ lead and offer God our very best!