

1 Corinthians 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] 1 Corinthians chapter 11 Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. Now I commend you, because you remember me in everything, and maintain the traditions, even as I delivered them to you.

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. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.

For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short, but since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. For 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 was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor man of woman. For as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman, and all things are from God.

[1:15] Judge for yourselves. Is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is a disgrace for him? But if a woman has long hair, it is her glory, for her hair is given to her for a covering.

If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God. But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better, but for the worse.

For in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and I believe it in part. For there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper that you eat. For in eating each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What?

Do you not have houses 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 commend you in this? No, I will not.

[2:19] For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when 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 also he took the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.

Let a person examine himself then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. This is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined, so that we may not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

[3:27] If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come. 1 Corinthians chapter 11 begins with a verse tying up the preceding argument about eating idle food.

The Corinthians should imitate Paul, who, as he discussed in chapter 9, did not exert the rights that he had, accommodated to others for the sake of the gospel. And in this, Paul is imitating Christ. He has taken on the mindset of Christ that belongs to us in the spirit, the mindset discussed in chapter 2. And this verse is orphaned from the argument to which it belongs by the chapter break, but it does alert us to the fact that chapter 11 belongs in a letter where the themes of the previous chapters are still very much in play.

This is a dense and a difficult chapter, and there are a few principles that we could bear in mind throughout that might help us. First, when Paul moves on to new matters, the themes of the letter are still continuing.

It's crucial that we retain Paul's earlier discussion of the strong and the weak in mind when we move into this and the chapters that follow, for instance. Those principles remain extremely important, and Paul now relates those principles to the practice of worship.

[4 : 42] N.T. Wright has compared reading Paul to riding a bicycle. If you go too slowly, you will fall off. You need to follow the movement of the argument through the letter. The more that you follow the movement of the argument through an entire letter, the easier specific text will be to interpret.

Second, this chapter is about men and women. It's not just about women. It's often spoken about as women and head coverings. But yet it begins by treating men. It emphasises the need for gender differentiation for both sexes.

Third, Paul is bringing a number of interrelated themes of reference to play, not just one. He is concerned about the order of creation. He's also concerned about the customs of society, and not acting in a way that flies in the face of these.

He's also concerned about the order of the gospel, and the age to come that is inaugurated in it. These are different, and they shouldn't be collapsed into each other. They're always interrelated and playing off each other, though.

Fourth, key elements of his argument are derived from reflection upon the creation narrative of Genesis, and we should read this text alongside that one, going back to Genesis chapter 1 and 2, and seeing where he's getting this from.

[5 : 54] Fifth, when dealing with such difficult texts, especially texts that play such an important part in current debates, the temptation is to detach and to atomise. However, we need to recognise the way that such texts connect with other scriptures and are part of larger arguments, and build our cases accordingly.

Many people look to scripture for proof texts to act like pillars holding up systems, and others treat these texts as pillars to be chipped away at bit by bit. But we should see scripture's supporting of our theologies as functioning more like a great root system.

The entire weight of the tree does not rest upon a single root, but it is widely distributed among the many different roots that bear the weight together. Sixth, it is very easy to explain away difficult texts, to give interpretations that empty them of any unwelcome force, but you end up wondering why the writer would ever have written such confusing, unclear and seemingly unsettling words in the first place.

It's much harder to give a compelling positive explanation of the train of thought of the writer that led them to write the exact words that you are reading, especially if those words seem, on their surface, to oppose or threaten your position.

Seventh, knowledge of the cultural context will be decisive, or at least very helpful for certain questions, but scripture itself will generally prove to be the place where you will find the most revelation.

[7 : 19] Finally, Paul often plays with words and levels of meaning, and we should be alert for this. We shouldn't presume that he's always using the same word in the same sense. Often he'll be playing meanings off against each other.

From verse 2 of this chapter onwards, Paul is addressing public or gathered worship, and the instructions that he has given them concerning it. He approves of their behaviour, but there are some problems.

The first seem to relate to the disruption of appropriate distinctions between the sexes in worship. He writes, I have been persuaded by a number of writers, Andrew Perryman, Gregory Dawes, Anthony Thistleton, that in the metaphorical uses of the term under consideration, head does not mean one in authority over, or source, but rather, in Perryman's words, refers to the dimension of visibility, prominence, eminence, social superiority.

Of course, in many instances where we do see this term used, authority over may be contextually connoted, but this is not what the term itself actually means. The shift in translation or interpretation of this term may suggest further changes in our understanding of the relationships being discussed in this verse.

When head is interpreted as one in authority over, it typically functions as a polarising term. It sets one party over against the other. In verse 3 then, one party exercises authority over the other.

[9 : 03] Christ over the man, the man over the woman, and then God over Christ. For instance then, the statement, the head of every man is Christ, would mean that Christ hierarchically exercises authority over every man.

However, if you slightly shift the meaning of head, as I described, suddenly, rather than placing Christ over against every man, Christ may be set forth as the preeminent among us. He's the firstborn of many brethren.

He's the firstborn from the dead. He's the one man who works on our behalf. He's the one who represents us in human flesh in the heavenly places. He's the one in whose name and power we act.

There is still undoubtedly an authority involved here, but the change is a very significant one. Head becomes a term describing an empowering union, not just a hierarchical relation.

The temptation to read 1 Corinthians 11.3 in terms of a chain of hierarchies as well is also a real one. But this temptation is challenged by the ordering of the text itself, which disrupts any such chain by listing the pairings out of the expected sequence.

[10 : 07] In verse 3, Paul is probably not merely referring to wives' relationships to their husbands, but broader relations between women and men. Gender relations more generally are at issue here, not just between married partners.

What might it mean to call man the head of the woman? Well, we could start off by thinking about what it means to call Christ the head of the church. In Ephesians chapter 1 verses 20 to 23 we read, He raised Christ from the dead, and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

And he put all things under his feet, and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. The character of Christ's headship in these verses doesn't primarily seem to be authority over.

Rather, it's the fact that Christ has authority and rule in the world, and he exercises that authority as the preeminent one of the church, the one who stands on our behalf, the one who represents us, the one who is the firstborn of many brethren, the one who's the bridegroom of the bride.

Rather than Christ's headship functioning in a sort of binary face-to-face relationship, where he is over the church as his partner, Christ's authority is primarily exercised out into the world for the sake of the church.

[11 : 30] This directionality is very important, and we see the same thing in the story of Genesis. The man is created first, given a mission and a calling within the world, and then the woman is created after him to be a counterpart to help him.

The man, however, is the one who will lead the way out into the world. He's Adam, who stands for Adamic humanity. He's the one who represents humanity. He's the one who's primarily commissioned with the calling to go out into the world.

He leads the way in that. He's the one who's equipped with the greater strength. In all these ways and more, he is the one who's created as the head. Note that he's not told to be the head.

He just is the head. When Paul's talking about this, he's just talking about a fact of reality. In human societies the world over and across time, it is men who tend to be preeminent, and God created things that way.

Paul is here then describing a fundamental natural asymmetry between the sexes. He turns to men first, talking about praying or prophesying with their heads uncovered. What sort of prophecy is in view?

[12 : 32] It's not necessarily ecstatic or spontaneous speech. It could be a sort of exhortation or encouragement or some other thing like that. We should note the way that the word head is already functioning now in different but interrelated senses.

One's treatment of one's physical head, whether covered or not, has implications for one's relationship with the one who's foremost in relationship to you. It is not entirely clear whether Paul is here talking about a head being covered or a head having long hair.

Whichever it is though, the way that people dress or wear their hair is meaningful and communicative. It can vary from culture to culture. But those differences between cultures aren't merely arbitrary.

No two societies distinguish between men and women in exactly the same way, but every single society distinguishes between men and women. Also, although there are many different ways of distinguishing between men and women, if you were put into any random society and the men and women were mixed up, it would not take you long to realise that something odd was afoot.

The way that cultures distinguish between men and women is not arbitrary. If Paul has long hair in mind here, he is probably referring to effeminate customs in men, the way that men can dress or act in a way that breaks down the distinction between men and women, a created distinction that is good and appropriate.

[13:49] Such opposing or erasing of gender differentiation is shameful, it's contrary to nature, and no more so than in the context of the worship of God. This wouldn't be the same thing as the long hair of the Nazarite.

It's quite possible that Paul himself was under a Nazarite vow when he visited Corinth. We see this in Acts chapter 18 verse 18. Just as we can tell the difference between a Scotsman wearing a kilt and a woman wearing a dress, the hearers of this letter could easily tell the difference between someone with a Nazarite vow and someone breaking down gender distinctions.

Whether it's someone who's wearing something over his head, or someone who has covered his head with long hair, he shames his head. And this is his own head, his physical head, he's bringing dishonour upon himself, but also his metaphorical head, the fact that Christ is his head, he's bringing shame upon Christ.

Dressing in such a way draws inappropriate attention, and in worship attention must be focused upon the Lord. Paul now turns from men's head covering to women's. For women, loosed hair signals sexual availability.

It would distract from Christ and would also dishonour herself and her man. The way that women wore their hair and dressed reflected upon the men who were related to them. Wearing a veil or a head covering signaled modesty and respectability.

[15:06] And any sort of erasing of the differences between men and women was shaming and dishonouring. Paul holds two things alongside each other as equally wrong. Women drawing attention to themselves in worship by their dress, and women being stripped of the glory of their hair and being treated as if sexless.

Some have discussed the way that lesbians would have worn their hair within the ancient world, in a way designed to convey androgyny. All of this is about the importance of social signals.

One can imagine the Corinthians rejoicing in their newfound freedom, dressing in a way that was scandalous. The background for this may have been women enjoying more of a speaking and worshipping role within the church than the roles that they enjoyed within their previous communities.

And now perhaps they feel liberated to drop customs they were once bound by. However, Paul teaches in this context that those things must be retained in a proper way. Gender difference is very important.

It's part of the goodness of creation. And it must be signalled within worship from both men and women. An emphasis upon freedom that does not take consideration for the other is not Christian freedom.

[16:13] Christian freedom is very concerned to bring glory to the other, to honour the other, and not to bring dishonour as this sort of practice seems to have done. Paul draws attention to the differences between men and women in the creation.

Man is the image and the glory of God. Image language is applied particularly to the man. In scripture, image language is not applied to men and women in exactly the same way. Rather, the man is the image of God in a special and particular way.

He represents God's rule and authority. The male symbolises the dominion of God within the world in a more powerful and immediate sense than that of women. The man also represents humanity as a whole, as Adam can represent the entire human race.

However, the woman is the glory of the man. She is the one in whom the human creation reaches its height. She is the pinnacle and the end of the human creation, the capstone.

Her glory is what animates the man to action. And she is the one who takes the work of the man and brings it to its proper completion. What Paul is describing here is not any sort of straightforward hierarchy, but an asymmetric relationship between man and woman, in which the two are bound up in a mutual and reciprocal relationship.

[17 : 26] The man was not made from the woman, but the woman from the man. Again, he goes back to creation and looks at the pattern there. The man was not created for woman, but woman created for the man.

There is once again a priority here. That priority does not mean superiority over. Rather, there is an order and a pattern. The man establishes, but the woman completes. We can see one way of thinking about the glory of women in 1 Esdras 4, verses 14-17.

Gentlemen, is not the king great? And are not men many? And is not wine strong? Who is it then that rules them, or has the mastery over them? Is it not women?

Women give birth to the king, and to every people that rules over sea and land. From women they came. And women brought up the very men who plant the vineyards, from which comes wine.

Women make men's clothes.

They bring men glory. Men cannot exist without women. Paul goes on to make points like these. His point is not to argue for our hierarchy, but to argue for an asymmetry that must be honoured, and must be honoured in the customs that are appropriate to our time and place.

[18 : 32] Recognising this, it is dangerous if women's glory becomes an object of attention in worship. He says that this is because of the angels. Perhaps he has in mind the fact that they are heavenly witnesses to our worship.

But I suspect there is more to consider here. When we read of the angels, they are invariably described as male. They are, as it were, a band of brothers. They represent the image of God in certain respects, his authority and his rule.

What makes humanity stand apart is not so much men as women. Redeemed humanity is described as the son, but more importantly, as the bride. Angels can be like sons of God, but they could never be the bride.

The glory of humanity as a whole is seen in the fact that we are male and female, and that glory is most especially found in the woman. This might help us to begin to consider why the angels are spectators upon worship, and the comportment of women in relationship to them is so important. Paul now proceeds to show the mutuality and reciprocity of men and women in the gospel. The woman is not independent of the man, nor the man of the woman. The man may be the head and come first, but every man is born of a woman.

[19 : 41] Woman is from man, but man is of woman. There is an asymmetry here, but one that binds us together. Neither party is exalted finally over the other, but is rather bound together in mutually implicative relationships.

What Paul is teaching here should not be difficult to understand. We should have an instinct for it. These are things that we should know from nature. And Paul speaks to the Corinthians as those who should already know these things.

He's not teaching them something new. They should have an instinct for this stuff, by nature. A man who dresses or tries to wear his hair like a woman is bringing dishonour to himself, while a woman's hair is her glory.

He finally closes down the conversation by making clear that if people are going to cause a fuss about this, they will find that there is no custom for such gender neutralisation in the life of the other churches.

Paul now turns to deal with another issue, the Corinthians' practice of the Lord's Supper, which is woefully deficient. He has already described the divisions within the Corinthian congregation in chapter 1, the different parties and dissensions that were between them.

[20 : 45] And now he describes the way that that is playing out within their celebration of communion. Rather than being brought together, some parties are eating ahead of others and leaving others with nothing to eat.

Rich and poor are being divided. This is another division between the strong and the weak within the congregation of Corinth. The very meal that should be the time when people express their unity

in Christ is a time when some people are going hungry while others are getting drunk. People are eating their meal without regard for the other. And all of this expresses very clearly what was the problem in the life of Corinth. People who are strong insisting on their own rights and pushing themselves ahead of others.

Rather than taking regard for each other and seeking to be built up together with their neighbours as one body in Christ. The result is that they despise the church of God and they humiliate those who are poor and weak among them.

While all of this helps to reveal who are faithful and who are not, it's certainly not a proper celebration of the Lord's Supper. Indeed, in Paul's eyes, it's no celebration of the Supper at all.

[21 : 48] In response to this situation, Paul recounts the tradition of the Lord's Supper as it was delivered to him. He emphasises the background of the cross. The Lord's Supper was established on the evening of the Last Supper.

The Supper isn't any old meal. It's the meal that proclaims the death of Christ until he comes. It's the covenant meal. It's the meal in which the blood of the new covenant is sealed to us. It's the meal in which we are joined together as one body, as we share in the same bread and cup. It should be becoming clear to the Corinthians by this point that they have celebrated in a totally unworthy fashion.

The Supper was to be celebrated in remembrance of Christ, or perhaps better, as Christ's memorial. We think about remembrance as a very subjective thing. But this is a more public and objective thing.

It's to memorialise the Lord's death, to publicly proclaim it. It's memorialised in part before God, calling God to act on the basis of the sacrifice of his Son. Every time we celebrate it, we're calling God to see and act.

[22 : 51] It's an enacted prayer. And this is done until he comes. In the Supper, we're caught between the event of the past, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and the coming of Christ in the future.

And between those two events, we celebrate this meal as this regular, weekly memorial of what he has done. Like a great stone dropped into the lake of history, Christ's death ripples out throughout the ages.

Each week, we are hit anew with one of the ripples of Christ's death, and driven further toward the expected shore of the age to come. The Last Supper was instituted in a context of peril.

It was on the night when Jesus was betrayed, and it was a night when the disciples will be tested and sifted. In a similar manner, the Corinthians need to celebrate in a mindful way, recognizing both the light and the shadow, the promise and the danger.

They must eat and drink in a way that discerns the body. What does Paul mean by discerning the body here? Not, I believe, recognizing the body of Christ in the bread, but rather recognizing the body of Christ in their brothers and sisters around them.

[23 : 56] It is communion. It is communion with Christ and each other. Christ and each other. Christ in each other. The point here is not deep introspection. It is recognizing your neighbor, and not eating before them, not ignoring them, not trying to put yourself ahead of them, but recognizing the unity of the body in Christ.

When this does not take place, judgment is to be expected, and that seems to have been what happened in Corinth. There were even people dying as a result of their unworthy participation in the supper. Yet the Lord was judging them, not to destroy them, but to bring them to repentance, so that they might be saved at the last.

In the supper, we participate in the cup of blessing, but if taken in an unworthy fashion, it becomes a cup of curse. Here we should recognize the test of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5 in the background.

God comes to inspect his bride for faithfulness each week. The assumption is that the bride will be faithful and be blessed, but if she is not faithful, she brings curse upon herself.

The supper that serves as a memorial calls God to act towards us. Ideally, this should be for blessing, but if we are acting in a way that dishonors God and dishonors each other, it will be for judgment and curse.

[25 : 14] A question to consider. How does Paul's teaching about the weak and the strong earlier in the letter help us to understand what's taking place in Corinth here and how the root problems underlying this could be addressed?