

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

The Church, at Worship

(1 Corinthians 11)

Study #14

Introduction: Here we are to worship...

You got in your car this morning to drive to 8900 Guilbeau - and I'm glad you did. You made your way through the parking lot, came through the outside double doors, and entered this room to attend a "worship service."

Worship services can happen anywhere and at any time. But what, exactly, is supposed to happen in a worship service?

Over the years, you have given me freedom to serve Jesus on missions trips, so I've experienced worship services in lots of different countries.

These worship services have been, nearly always, times of rich connection with those present and times of heartfelt praise to God.

I've been to worship services in cathedrals (Belgium), in more humble buildings (Kenya, Russia, India, Uruguay, Chile), and in thatched huts in the jungles. (Guyana)

The intent of all of these worship services were to lift high the Name of Jesus AND to help every attender grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. Or, as we say it, "Take a next step with Jesus." I hope that is what happens for you this morning.

I have prayed that your heart is moved throughout this hour to praise and gratitude, to love and service, and to faith and obedience.

It is with that hope and prayer in mind that we now turn our attention to a new section in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

The passage for this morning is most fitting for a discussion of worship because here, Paul begins to address the theme of the worship and the work of the church. (1 Corinthians 11-14)

At no point in this section does Paul give us a Sunday morning "order of service" like what we have in our weekly program. But he does address important elements to any church's times in worship.

Today, we're considering two of them. We'll conclude with a consideration of the Lord's Supper. But we first listen as Paul deals with an issue about which some of you have never given a thought and some of you have long pondered.

I suspect that some you have wondered what I would say when we made our way to 1 Corinthians 11. Here Paul talks about head coverings and hair length for men and women in worship services.

Headship and Head Coverings (11:1-16)

Headship in God's Universe (11:3)

Intro to the section:

Before I even read the first verses of our passage, and out of a need for self-defense, I will read words from a source that I cannot now find about the first section of today's passage.

"This passage is probably the most complex, controversial, and opaque of any text of comparable length in the New Testament. A survey of the history of interpretation reveals how many different exegetical options there are for a myriad of questions and should inspire a fair measure of tentativeness on the part of the interpreter."

Well said. And given that, I approach this passage with a good bit of humility.

But we will pay close attention to what Paul writes here, because I have come to believe that what he writes here has tremendous application for our day.

Note: “Headship”

[3] But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

The biblical meaning of “headship”

So, what does Paul mean when he refers to someone being a “head” over someone else?

Well, to say that someone is someone else’s “head” is to say that they are that other’s *source* or that he is the *authority* over that other.¹

And Paul references three who serve as “heads” over others in today’s passage.

“Headships” in God’s universe

First, Paul writes that **“Christ is the head of every man.”** Christ is the ultimate sovereign authority over every man, even over those who don’t currently submit to His authority.²

Second, **“the man is the head of a woman.”** It seems most likely to me (especially given how the passage unfolds) that here Paul was making the point that the man (Adam) was the “source” of the woman (Eve), as we read in Genesis 2.

This would have been a new and crucial teaching for the Gentile members of the church at Corinth who had not grown up with the Genesis creation story.³

And, when Paul wrote, **“God is the head of Christ,”** he means that the Son is of the exact same essence as the Father, but that the Father is the “source” of the Son.⁴

Arising from the three “headship” comments are implications for men and women who attend the church’s worship services.

We’ll listen first, to what Paul says about the woman.

A Woman’s Head Covering (11:5-6, 10, 13, 15)

A woman’s covered head honors her “head” (vv. 5-6, 13, 15)

Shaming the woman’s “head” (v. 5)

[5] But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head; for it is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.

Here, Paul used the word **“head”** in two ways.

First, when he says that the woman should have her **“head”** covered, he is referring to her physical head. Her head should be covered with her hair or with some sort of a hat.

The second time, when he says that a woman’s uncovered head would disgrace (in a way that I don’t fully understand) her **“head,”** he is referring to the man, who is the source of the woman.

¹ In ancient times, the leader of a city or of an army was called its “head.”

² Paul probably is also saying that Christ, being the second member of the Trinity, was the agent in creation and is thus the source / origin for every man.

³ When he says, **“the man is the head of a woman”** he could be saying that a husband is, in some sense, the “head” of his wife, as he wrote in Ephesians 5. It does not seem to me that this is Paul’s point here.

⁴ The ancient creeds of the church say that the Son “eternally proceeds” from the Father.

Shaming a woman (vv. 6, 13)

[6] For if a woman does not cover her head, have her also cut her hair off; however, if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, have her cover her head...[13] Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?⁵

By saying this in the way he says it, Paul implies that EVERYBODY knows that there would be something wrong - morally or religiously - with a woman having short hair or shaving her head.⁶

Yet, here in 2025, what does it mean when a woman has short hair except that she doesn't want long hair?

In the South Texas heat many women wear short hair purely for comfort and convenience, with no moral or religious significance.

A woman's glory (v. 15)

[15] but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? for her hair is given to her as a covering.

I don't think that the point is that a woman is always to wear long hair (If so, how long? "**Long**" as defined by whom?) or that only a woman can have long hair (Men can grow long hair.)

His point is that, generally, hair length - and I think we can add hairstyle and hair pieces - very often differentiate the appearance of a woman from a man.

Paul also says, with an equal assumption that EVERYBODY knows this, something to which most of us respond with, "*Huh*"?

Then, there are the angels... (v. 10)

[10] Therefore the woman should have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

I've wrestled with this comment this week, as I have, off and on, for a long time.

I do suspect that there was something going on in Corinth that doesn't translate to us, here, in 2025 San Antonio.

But the remark about the angels raises the bar about this issue. It forces us to admit that there was something about the issue of a woman's hair that transcended first-century Corinthian culture. The length of a woman's hair matters to the angels.

Hold that thought.

Paul continued with the theme of hair length and head coverings, now speaking to the man. He says something very different to the man than he said to the woman.

A Man's Head Covering (11:4, 7-9, 11-12, 14)

A man's uncovered head honors his spiritual "head" (vv. 4, 7)

[4] Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head...[7] For a man should not have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.

In contrast to what Paul said to the woman, the man is to leave his head uncovered. Why? Because to cover his physical "*head*" would be to disgrace his spiritual "*head*," who is Christ.

⁵ I suspect that there was some widely recognized cultural thing present in Corinth that made the statement about the necessity of head coverings make sense to Paul's first century audience in a way that it doesn't make sense to us today.

⁶ It is possible that Paul was telling women that they should wear an external head covering (a hat or a shawl) over their hair, as many Greek women did in public. This would be in contrast to women who discarded their hair coverings during pagan worship to demonstrate a temporary shedding of human sexuality.

There was to be a distinction between the way men presented themselves, physically, during worship from the way women did.

And just Paul he related women's hair length to the angels (v. 10), here he says that men's uncovered heads relate to God's Garden of Eden masterpiece when He created the man and the woman.

Man and woman and the creation story (vv. 8-9)

[8] For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; [9] for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake.

In the Genesis 2 account of creation, God shaped the man (Hebrew - "adam") from the earth (Hebrew - "adamah") and then breathed life into Adam / the man.

The woman was drawn out of the man. She (Eve) was taken from his essential nature to be his strong helper. She was in every way equal to him - body, soul, and spirit - but was distinct from him.

While there is a difference, there is nothing in God's creative design that hints at any inequality of value between men and women.

In fact, Paul says exactly that.

Parenthetically, man and woman in Christ (vv. 11-12)

[11] However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. [12] For as the woman originated from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God."

In Christ, there is an interdependence between male and female.

Men and women stand equally dependent on God. In Christ, men and women stand in an equally lofty position. And in the church, there is to be partnership between the sexes.

Paul's point here, is that this distinction between men and women was engineered by God into the makeup of male and female at creation, and is to be reflected in life, generally, and especially at worship, because, you know, the angels.⁷

Now, as we asked in the case with women and their short hair or uncovered heads, let's ask here, too if there was some message sent in first century Corinth when a man had long hair that contradicted the spirit of Christian worship?

From the reading I have done, I believe there was and that to keep men from sending this message, Paul wrote this.

A lesson from nature... (v. 14)

[14] Does even nature itself not teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?

It was not universally believed that a man was dishonored or disgraced by having long hair.

Some among the ancient Greeks - like the Spartan warriors and some well-known philosophers - were famous for having long hair.

But there was evidently something going on in Corinth that made long hair on men a problem, at least a problem of perception, just as short hair was perceived as a problem for women in Corinth.

He wraps up his comments on this topic with this.

⁷ The one distinctive he mentions in this passage (presumably out of many that he could have mentioned) was that of head coverings and hair length.

Summary: The essential message for us (1 Corinthians 11:3-16)

[16] But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God."

So, what is the essential message from Paul in this first part of 1 Corinthians 11. And what does it mean to us?

Like many who preach on this passage, I am not going to be dogmatic on the issue of head coverings or on the matter of long or short hair.⁸

But I think we can say that Paul's mention of the angels, his mentioning creation, and his saying here that what he has been telling us is what all the churches believe, puts Paul's point way beyond the level of simply being a cultural matter for first century Corinth.

The point is something for the ages. It is a trans-cultural thing. And that thing has to do with the equality of and the distinctions between men and women.

Who we are as men or as women is so core to who we are as God's image bearers that it is good and right and vital that we affirm male and female equality and uniqueness.⁹

Paul says that this is so important, that this equality and distinctiveness must be obvious as men and women come together to worship.

In saying this, I'm not out to be controversial, and Paul wasn't either. I am certainly not saying this to be political, and neither was Paul. This is intensely biblical and practical and personal.

⁸ This from John Stott, "The application of this principle to the situation at Corinth yields the direction that women must have their heads covered when they worship. The principle is of permanent validity, but we may well feel that the application of it to the contemporary scene need not yield the same result...the fullest acceptance of the principle underlying this chapter does not require that in Western lands in the twentieth century, women must always wear hats when they pray."

What Paul wrote he wrote to promote human flourishing and to urge that we reflect God's beautiful design by the way we live and by the way we worship.

This is all wonderful, good news.

To those who are male, God wants you to exult in your maleness. To those who are female, God wants you to exult in your femaleness.

We will bring the greatest glory to God when we each embrace the God-given gift of our maleness or our femaleness.

We will all find our greatest flourishing when we live in alignment with God's design. And from the beginning, God designated humanity ***[Genesis 1:27] male and female.***

We are all to present ourselves as the male or female image-bearers we are to God, while the angels delight to watch our worship.

The Corinthian culture was confused about these matters, so Paul gave them guidance from the foundational message of creation in Genesis.

And as our culture has its own confusions about sexuality, we're thankful for the guidance Paul's words provide us, as well.

We'll conclude our time together by turning to what Paul has to say about what has been a part of public worship in Christian churches for two thousand years.

It is that time when men and women come together to observe the Lord's Supper.

⁹ Bible scholar F.W. Grosheide writes that the point here (v. 6) is that the woman should not act or dress like a man by having an uncovered head; in v. 7, that a man should not act or dress like a woman. The point is the distinctiveness of the sexes. [Commentary on 1 Corinthians](#), pp. 249-262; [The New International Commentary on the New Testament](#).

And Paul has nothing good to say to the Corinthians about this.

The Lord's Supper (11:17-34)

[An Awful] New Testament Worship Service (11:17-23)

Prelude to a slap (11:17)

[17] Now in giving this next instruction I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better, but for the worse.¹⁰

Paul had received reports that when they gathered for worship, things were so bad that it would have been better if they had not even met. By the time they drove home around noon on Sunday, they were worse off.

What was supposed to be a time of equipping and building up was actually a time of tearing down. What should have been a time of worship was devoted to selfishness. What was to have been a time of love, wasn't.

Divisions - present in a church service? (11:18-19)

[18] For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. [19] For there also have to be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.

The world - ancient and modern - is filled with factions and party spirit. The church should be the one place in the world where we can escape that. Here should be the one place where we can give and receive love.

When this does not describe Sunday mornings, something is off.

Paul's concerns focus on the part of the church's worship time that centered on a sacred meal, the Lord's Supper.

Corinth and the Lord's Supper (11:20-22)

In the early church - and in many places today - a full meal called the AGAPE (or love-feast) went before the observance of the token meal of the Lord's Supper.

The idea was to provide a pot-luck supper and then to move toward a simple and meaningful remembrance of Jesus' death and resurrection.

That wasn't at all what was happening in Corinth. The Lord's Supper wasn't a holy and loving event. It was abusive and humiliating.

[20] Therefore when you come together it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, [21] for when you eat, each one takes his own supper first; and one goes hungry while another gets drunk. [22] What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What am I to say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I do not praise you.

The rich ate their fill of the food they brought, while the poor looked on, hungry. People actually got drunk in the meal prior to the Lord's Supper.

In the way they approached and conducted the Lord's Supper, they were contradicting what the Lord's Supper was to be all about.

We'll skip to the end now, to hear Paul tell us in what spirit we should go about taking the bread and the cup to avoid the event becoming a travesty.

In this instruction, Paul never says how often to take the Lord's Supper. Only that it is an important and holy event, and one that should be taken seriously.

¹⁰ Paul had praised the Corinthians for keeping to the traditions of the faith. (11:2) With respect to how they took the Lord's Supper, he offered no praise.

How to Take the Lord's Supper (11:27-34)

[27] Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy way, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. [28] But a person must examine himself, and in so doing he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup. [29] For the one who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not properly recognize the body. [30] For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number are asleep. [31] But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. [32] But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world. [33] So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. [34] If anyone is hungry, have him eat at home, so that you do not come together for judgment. As to the remaining matters, I will give instructions when I come.

When we take the elements of the Lord's Supper, we are to not take it in an unworthy way by having an unbelieving heart, a rebellious heart, or an apathetic heart.

If you believe in Jesus and yet there is no overwhelming sense of gratitude for what Jesus did for you on the cross, it would be better to let the bread and the cup pass...
...unless you repent of your apathy, reflect on the sacrificial love of Jesus for you, and eat and drink with heartfelt gratitude.

If you believe in Jesus but are living with a fist raised in God's face, it's better to not eat and drink...
...unless you repent of your rebellion and humble yourself before God.

If you don't believe in Jesus, the piece of bread and the drink isn't for you...
...but it can be.

If you will see a trustworthy Jesus who died and rose again for you, hear His promise of the free gift of eternal life, and believe Him for that gift - no good works needed or accepted. You will receive that gift and will be welcomed to take the Lord's Supper.

A few moments before we take the bread and the cup we take time for reflection. To examine ourselves.

In those moments, often when a song is playing, someone who has never understood what Jesus is all about, may come to understand and will believe in Jesus. Or a believer will admit that all is not well with his soul and will confess sin.

We make preparation to worship at the Lord's Supper.

There are two parts to the Lord's Supper. First, we eat the bread.

The Significance of the Lord's Supper (11:23-26)

Taking the bread (11:23-24)

[23] For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night when He was betrayed, took bread; [24] 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."

We believe that the letter of 1 Corinthians was written before any of the Gospel accounts were written. Thus, this is the earliest account we have of the Lord's Supper.

Paul says that he himself personally received this tradition, direct from Jesus.¹¹

¹¹ Thus, sometime after Paul was saved, the resurrected Jesus taught him about Himself, gave him visions of glory, and gave Paul this description of the first enactment of the Lord's Supper as it was done at the Last Supper.

Jesus and His disciples were eating a Passover meal on the night before His death. At a certain point, He led them in a memorial meal that His followers would repeat through the ages.

Since the Last Supper Jesus hosted for His disciples was during the Passover season, the bread that was available at the first Lord's Supper was unleavened.

So, as we take the unleavened bread, we remember that Jesus' body was broken ***"for us."*** He died ***"for us."***

After taking the bread and distributing it to His disciples, Jesus passed around the cup at the Passover meal. (It would have been the third cup.) And so the church ends the Lord's Supper by drinking the cup.

Taking the cup (11:25-26)

[25] In the same way He also 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." [26] For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

The shedding of Jesus' blood on Good Friday ushered in what we call *"The New Covenant."* (See Jeremiah 31)

This Covenant provides full and complete forgiveness of sins and promises the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The whole Jewish system is replaced by the Christian system under the New Covenant.

There are church traditions that hold that the bread and the drink turn into the body and blood of Christ at the Lord's Supper.

We believe that at the Lord's Supper nothing happens to the physical elements. Rather, something important happens to us. We are drawn to worship our crucified, resurrected, and soon-to-return Savior.

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