

Truth for Today

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The Church, the Body of Christ and Its Hope: 1 Corinthians 11

"The most difficult thing about preaching is knowing how to start", I once heard a speaker say. That's how I feel about today's new series of talks on 1 Corinthians 11-16. It's about how the church should function as the Body of Christ. Therefore, let me start as the evangelist and apologetic, John Blanchard, writes in chapter 1 of his book '*Is God Past His Sell-by Date?*': "Before we go any further, let me put my cards on the table, face upwards". It's perhaps not the ideal expression for a Bible teacher to use, but it enables me to say that these writings of Paul are as much Scripture as any other part of God's word.

Sadly some members of the Corinthian church were allowing Greek culture to colour their thinking and conduct. Paul wrote to counteract such worldly influences. By writing this letter, he not only corrected the wrong ideas and practices within the Corinthian church, but he also recorded valuable instructions about how a New Testament church should operate. The letter is addressed to: "...all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours", 1:2. What Paul, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, directed the Corinthian church to do is no different to what he taught other churches, and so applies even to us today! Let's notice that point in 14:37: "*If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that **the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord***". I would encourage everyone who is listening to me to accept and adopt this view of these writings.

Chapter 11 is about the headship and the Lordship of Christ. The former is introduced by the words, "*I praise you*", and the latter by the opposite sentiment, "I do not praise you".

First of all then, Paul commends this Christian church for their readiness to accept his apostolic ordinances or directions: "*Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you*", verse 2. He was confident that, just as they followed his oral instructions, so they would put into practice this teaching about headship. It seems from the text that they were ignorant about this universal truth. Before he explained what was required of them "in church", Paul needed to correct this more fundamental issue. Therefore, verse 3 begins with the word, 'but': "*But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.*"

God set up this order of authority when He created man. The Son of God became man, so He must be, and is, "*the firstborn over all creation*", Colossians 1:15. Overall, the ranking is:

- God is head of everything (because He's Deity);
- Christ is next (because He's God's chosen, ideal, anointed Man);
- then man (because he was made in the image and likeness of God to rule over creation); and
- finally woman (because she was created from man and for him).

Verses 14 and 15 teach that it's natural for a man to have short hair because he, especially his head, reflects the glory of God his Maker. By contrast, a woman should have long hair, because she reflects the glory of man. Her hair is her peculiar glory and special beauty because she is different from man.

Paul teaches that this natural order has a spiritual dimension, which is very practical in its application. A man, as God's representative, must always pray or prophesy with his head uncovered. For a man to pray or prophesy with his head covered would be for him to dishonour himself, Christ - the person who controls and directs him - and God to Whom Christ is subject. Again, any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours herself, men, Christ and God. Verses 5 and 6 imply that she's to recognise her subjective position by veiling her hair, so that her natural glory isn't seen. However, verse 10 introduces something else: "*For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels*". Angels are God's highest order of created beings. According to Ephesians 3:10, they're privileged to take account of the working out of God's wisdom within the church. Verse 10 states that women should appreciate the fact that, when they're praying or prophesying, angels are looking on - another reason that women should exhibit God's order in headship by covering, or veiling, their heads. (To pray is to speak to God. To prophesy is to speak from, or on behalf of God. As such, they're practised by believers at any time in any place, as well as when they're "in church".)

Paul was sensitive to the prevailing attitudes in Corinthian culture. Therefore he wanted the Corinthian church to appreciate that he wasn't selecting them out for special prohibitions. Rather, they were to understand that neither the apostles, nor any other Christian church, did otherwise: "*But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God*", verse 16. Paul also wrote as the apostle to the Gentiles, and the following quotations reinforce the fact that he consistently and authoritatively applied his doctrine to all the churches of God:

- "*Moreover, brethren, I declare to you **the gospel which I preached** to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved...**which I also received**: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...so we preach and so you believed*", 15:1, 3 and 11.
- "*According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder **I have laid the foundation**,*" 3:10.
- "*For this reason...Timothy...will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere **in every church**,*" 4:17.
- "*In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...I have **written** to you*", 5:4 and 11.
- "*Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me...so I ordain **in all the churches**,*" 7:1 and 17.
- "*Do I say these things as a mere man? ... Am I not **an apostle**,*" 9:8 and 1.
- "*Now concerning the collection for the saints, as **I have given orders to the churches** of Galatia, so you must do also*", 16:1.

As we now turn to the subject of Lordship, I want to point out that at 11:17 Paul introduces a new section of teaching about how believers should conduct themselves when they assemble together in church. The phrase "when you come together [in church]" in verse 17 is repeated in verses 18, 20, 33 and 34; then again in 14:23 and 26. Other terms, such as 'the church' and 'the body' are also used to describe gatherings of believers. The words "*when you come together in one place*" in verse 20 show that a church is an assembly of believers, not a building.

However, the very sad fact was that there was serious disorder within the Corinthian church: "*Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse*", verse 17. Their carnal condition (that is, their behaviour as controlled by the flesh - and not by the Spirit of God) was dominating all of their church meetings. Everything they said and did was being spoiled by internal factions within the church. Although Paul has thoroughly dealt with this issue in the opening chapters of this letter, he alludes to it again as something they must deal with, first and foremost, for they didn't experience any true fellowship when they met together. Rather, they were worse off afterwards! As the Lord's guests, they should have enjoyed real Christian fellowship at their communion services. "*The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread*", 10:16-17. But they'd so drastically changed the way they conducted it, that Paul said it was no longer recognisable as the Lord's Supper: "*For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk*", verse 21. How different to those early days of the Christian church when the historian, Luke, recorded: "*they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers*"! Acts 2:42.

This abuse of the communion service came about as a result of the church introducing social feasting activities, copied from idol temple worship. This had terrible consequences:

- there was no real Christian fellowship for it was a 'bring-your-own-meal' affair, and no one knew which part of the feast was the actual bread and the wine to be shared in the way that the Lord had instructed
- at these feasts some didn't have any food at all, whilst others over-indulged
- over-indulgence in drink resulted in some becoming drunk
- the poor were both neglected and degraded
- the church of God, the place where He should have been dwelling, was held in contempt. There was no recognition of the holiness of His house
- the disorder was so serious that the Corinthians were bringing judgement upon themselves - they didn't appreciate the significance of what they were doing
- as a result many of them were weak or sickly, and some had even died!

The apostle's indignation was roused: "*What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you*", verse 22. The repeat of "*I do not praise you*" in verse 22 introduces the positive instruction about this central activity of church life.

Paul received this, and other truths about the Christian faith, directly from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Evidently this teaching had been part of Paul's verbal teaching, spoken to them when he planted the Christian church in Corinth: "*For I received from the Lord that which I also **delivered to you***", verse 23. The synoptic Gospels (i.e. Matthew, Mark

and Luke) record the institution of the Lord's Supper but the truth of it was separately, and personally, revealed to Paul (mainly for the benefit of Gentile believers).

The primary Scriptural requirement of any local Christian community is to meet together in assembly to eat the Lord's Supper, verses 18 and 23. The Lord Jesus Christ is the host, who graciously invites us to participate: "Take, eat ... drink". Thereby we commune both with Christ Himself and with each other.

The teaching about this communion service is outlined in verses 23-34:

- Its regularity and continuance are clearly stated in verse 26: "*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes*". An acceptable frequency suggests itself from Acts 20:7: "*Now on the first day of the week ... the disciples came together to break bread*".
- Verse 23 states that the Lord Jesus made this special appeal from His ascended position in the glory, via the apostle Paul. This appeal is also enhanced by the fact that it was originally made in the circumstances of the Lord's deepest distress, sorrow, and suffering - on the night in which He was treacherously delivered up and betrayed.
- The remembrance is simple to observe. It uses commonly available food materials, bread and wine. Each believer, after a separate giving of thanks for each of these symbols, participates. "*[The Lord Jesus] ... said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me'*", verses 24-25.
- The attitude of each church member participating in the Lord's Supper is all important. First of all, it's necessary for each person to carefully consider the manner in which he, or she, takes communion. He, or she, must understand the meaning assigned by the Lord to the bread and to the wine - that, respectively, they represent His body broken in death and His blood shed for sins. To take of the emblems for any other reason is to render oneself guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, verse 27. Self-judgement is a necessary precursor to attending church communion. A disciplined, consistent Christian lifestyle is required. This self-preparation should be approached in a positive way: "*But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup*", verse 28. These self-checks aren't to find an excuse for staying away from communion!
- But in a negative sense, natural appetite must be avoided. That ordinary requirement must be satisfied beforehand at home, verse 34.
- There also should be a mutual dependence between believers, a godly waiting of members, one for the other, verse 33. (And here we can notice a special point from verse 11: "*in Christ's fellowship woman is as essential to man as man to woman*" (New English Bible))
- Believers are to "eat together", that is, they're to experience the reality of true Christian fellowship for: "*The cup of blessing which we bless is...the communion of the blood of Christ. The bread which we break is ... the communion of the body of Christ. For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread*", 10:16-17. From 10:21 we learn that Christians have fellowship at the Lord's Table. There we're able to worship God - we bless the cup. There, too, all the spiritual blessings of Christianity are available to be enjoyed in the same way as food and drink are enjoyed at any supper table.
- Verse 26 explains that the communion service is a means of proclaiming the Lord's death. By breaking the bread and drinking from the cup, an announcement is made to the fact that Jesus came and died. Paul doesn't say to whom the statement is made, so we have to think of this in the widest sense possible - it's to all - the entire spiritual realm as well as to all the universe!

I must now finish with some practical implications for twenty-first century Christians with respect to this teaching on headship and Lordship from 1 Corinthians 11.

Headship is essentially a personal matter, although it does have knock-on effects. Therefore I can only speak for myself, and for my wife. When I pray, either privately or publicly, I make sure that I recognise this order of control that God has authorised. I ensure that my head is uncovered. I also do this whenever I'm preaching or teaching the word of God. By contrast, my wife covers her head when she prays or she prophesies. And, although not mentioned in this chapter, we also follow the instructions of Paul in 1 Timothy 2, which states that only the men should pray or prophesy in any mixed gathering of men and women.

Lordship in 1 Corinthians 11 is about the Lord's desires - that His people should give Him the supreme place in their midst. It's about you and me in our church life. Whatever may be our own church tradition, or our own personal inclinations, fundamentally it's the Lord's rights at His Supper and His commandments to us via His chosen apostle, Paul. Therefore we all have to ask ourselves:

- Do we, in our local church, carry out the communion service according to these apostolic directives so that it's recognised as the Lord's Supper?
- Is the prime purpose and order of service such that it's essentially to do with the remembrance of the Lord's death? Or has it been either diminished or elaborated in some way?
- Is there an identifiable giving of thanks for the bread and the wine during the service?
- Do I go to the service in a state of self-readiness following self-judgement?
- Do I discern, in the symbols of the bread and the wine, the Lord's body and the Lord's blood?
- Is there mutual fellowship with fellow-believers, or are divisions, etc., visible in the church?
- What's the attitude of each participating church member?
- Is the Lord's Supper one of the regular services of my church?
- Is it given the prime place in our programme of church meetings?
- Is the Lord given the response from each of us that He really wants?

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus, we ask that You will help us to properly apply these important issues that we've talked about today. That each of us, individually, may take his or her proper place in God's administration of mankind. That we may respond to Your request to remember You at the Breaking of Bread service in church, as the hymn states:

*Jesus, Lord, we come together
In the bonds of Thine own love;
Thou hast drawn our footsteps hither,
Its deep meaning now to prove.*

*Closed the door - we leave behind us
Toil and conflict, foes and strife
And within Thy love doth bind us
In one fellowship of life.*

*Here together we recall Thee,
In Thy presence break the bread;
Never more can grief befall Thee,
Thou art risen from the dead.*

*But Thy love remains that entered
Into death to make us Thine;
In that death all love was centred-
Thankful now we drink the wine.*

Amen

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