

IN HOW YOU WORSHIP (Part 1)**1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-34**

Have you made any New Year's resolutions? According to a popular website a few years ago, these were the top ten New Year's resolutions: 1. Lose weight. 2. Get organized. 3. Spend less, save more. 4. Enjoy life to the fullest. 5. Stay fit and healthy. 6. Learn something new and exciting. 7. Quit smoking. 8. Help someone else achieve their dreams. 9. Fall in love. 10. Spend more time with family. What might be the best resolution for any and every follower of Jesus? To glorify God in everything we do.

Today, I want to return to a message series on 1 Corinthians we started last fall but didn't complete. You might remember the great Christian leader, Paul, wrote this New Testament letter to address some specific problems of the Corinthian Christians and to answer their questions. My title for this series on 1 Corinthians is "In Whatever You Do: Discovering What It Means To Glorify God." It's based on what I believe is the key verse for the whole letter: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." (1 Cor. 10:31 NLT) That's our greatest calling in this life. That's our greatest calling in this new year of 2021. When we glorify God, we acknowledge, reveal, experience, and demonstrate His greatness both to ourselves and to others. In whatever we do – anything and everything – we can honor and glorify God.

That first group of Christians in Corinth was an interesting bunch! Most of them were saved out of paganism and idolatry. Every adult was a baby believer trying to figure out what it meant to be a devoted follower of Jesus. They were definitely born again, but spiritual immaturity reigned supreme. Some were having a hard time giving up sinful lifestyles. Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, there was still a whole lot of Corinth in these Christians. From what we can discern in Paul's letter, worship gatherings in Corinth were never dull, to say the least. In fact, at times, it might have felt like a spiritual three ring circus! All kinds of interesting stuff happened – and, frankly, some of it made Paul wince. In chapters 11-14, Paul addressed several specific issues when the Corinthians gathered for worship. "This is good. This is not so good. Do this. Stop doing that." It was Paul's Holy Spirit-inspired advice on how to truly glorify God in the way they worshiped. Did you realize not all worship glorifies God? It should, by all means, truly God-glorifying worship isn't automatic. That's what concerned and even angered Paul. The Corinthians worship of God was uneven. Some of it was wonderful, rich, exuberant, and glorifying to God. But, sometimes their worship was weird, selfish, disorderly, and ineffective.

We actually know very little about how any early Christians in the first century worshiped the Lord when they got together. We don't know how often they gathered, how long the services lasted, what the order or format of those worship services looked like, or even what roles the church's leadership took in the services. We can make educated guesses, but we don't really know for sure. In chapter 11, Paul addressed several issues when the Corinthians got together to worship that troubled him deeply. We need to try and understand what was going on and then figure out how it might apply to our lives today. What does emerge is the simple fact that when we gather to worship God,

we can either glorify God or not glorify Him. I believe Paul presented at least three great truths we can hold on to today. Here's the first one. Let's....

CELEBRATE WHO GOD MADE US TO BE. (11:2-16)

Let's get familiar with vv. 2-16 first. If, about now, you're thinking to yourself, "What is THAT about?" welcome to the club! This has got to be one of the most confusing passages in all of the Bible. When I read that passage, it makes me ask all sorts of questions. When a man covers his head in worship, why does this dishonor his "head"? When a woman worships God with her head uncovered, why does this dishonor her "head"? What does the word "head" mean in this passage? What does wearing a head covering have to do with honoring God? What do angels have to do with a woman having authority over her own head or by wearing a head covering? Paul never answered any of my questions here! That's a dilemma we run into sometimes when we read the Bible. We're listening in on one side of a conversation. Paul knew what he was talking about. The Corinthians understood him. But we struggle. It was written in a different language – Greek. It was written 2,000 years ago. The culture was vastly different than our own. What's going on here?

After all my study of this passage, here is my best guess. Apparently, the problem was some kind of breakdown in the distinction between male and female genders during worship gatherings in Corinth. There's evidence that some of them felt like, as Christians, they'd already become very much like angels who appear to transcend being male or female. Some of them wanted to downplay, ignore, or do away with gender distinctions. They were new creations in Christ; therefore, their gender no longer mattered! They were disregarding some very strong cultural distinctions between men and women in that day and time. Apparently, women having long hair and wearing some kind of cloth covering on or over their heads was a well-established and accepted practice in Greco-Roman culture. These practices were somehow being abandoned by some of these Christian women in their worship gatherings. Paul was concerned because whatever was happening in those services – and no one can be sure what it was exactly – it was likely considered disgraceful to many non-believers who might visit their services. Why open themselves to needless criticism from the outside?

I know I've probably raised more questions in your mind than I've answered, but I think it's more important for me to share some conclusions with you about this passage and others we find in the Bible. So here goes. If I can't always be certain how to interpret a specific Scripture, I need to be careful how I apply it directly to my life today. I believe the Bible is God's Word from Genesis to Revelation; therefore, it has authority over how I live my life. But, if I don't understand what's being taught or I can't be certain what's being addressed, it's wiser and better just to leave it alone. It's not a matter of refusing to apply it to my life, because I don't like what's written. If I honestly don't know how to apply 11:2-16 to my life today, I'm content to just set it off to one side and let it be. I can still believe it's God's Word – and I do. I just don't know how it's God's Word for me

today. Instead of trying to apply it to my life and getting it wrong, I'm content to wait until I get to Heaven to have it explained to me.

Because some Scriptural teaching is so conditioned by its original cultural setting, it's difficult to apply directly to my life today. The actual wearing of head coverings by women in worship was appropriate in the 1st century culturally to differentiate between men and women in worship gatherings. Head coverings for women were a very important symbol of femininity, modesty, and chastity. It was a cultural identifier. Something was being abused there in Corinth, but we don't know exactly what or how. That makes it very hard to apply to our lives today appropriately.

Over the years, various Christian groups – for example, old order Mennonites, the Amish, and some Orthodox communities in Russia and Eastern Europe – have fostered the practice of women wearing some sort of head covering in worship gatherings and, in some cases, all the time. While I would never question the sincerity of these fellow Christians, I don't believe what Paul wrote here is something we have to follow today. Paul was dealing with a situation that has long since ceased to have any exact relevance to us. It's almost impossible to transfer what Paul said into the diverse, multifaceted cultures in which the Church of Jesus Christ finds itself today even if we knew exactly what it was we were supposed to transfer or apply - which we don't!

But even when we can't apply a Scripture directly to our lives today, we can often detect transferable concepts or truths. The Bible is full of truths which can be effectively transferred or communicated from one generation of God's people to another over hundreds and thousands of years. Personally, I do hear some transferable concepts or truths in 11:2-16. I think sharing what I don't hear in this passage may be as important as sharing what I do hear. I don't hear Paul teaching women's subordination to men here. This passage has often been used to justify such an interpretation sometimes by very godly, sincere people. I believe they misunderstand Paul's intent. They understand the word "head" as meaning to be in charge, to outrank, or to have authority over someone in a kind of hierarchical arrangement. But the word "head" can mean the source of something. God the Father is the source of God the Son, Jesus. He is not in charge of Jesus, nor does He outrank Jesus. Men are the source of women because Genesis tells us God took Adam's rib and created Eve from it. That doesn't mean men outrank women or are put in charge over women.

Furthermore, I believe Paul was aware his comments could be misunderstood which was why he said here, "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." (1 Cor. 11:11-12 NLT) When it came to women wearing head coverings in worship, Paul was not calling for a hierarchical application of what he said here. In the Lord, men and women aren't independent of each other, but are to be dependent on one another as partners. Unfortunately, the symbol of wearing a head covering today tends to reinforce the idea that women should

be subordinate to men which was not Paul's point in this passage. Men and women need each other, so there is no place for a "lording over" of men over women.

But I do hear a transferable truth. I hear Paul underlining here the enduring value of recognizing gender differences and celebrating God-given masculinity and femininity. Paul wanted the Corinthians to recognize and celebrate the differences between men and women even in a worship setting. While it's true, as Paul wrote elsewhere, "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28 NLT), Christians remain created beings. God-given gender differences still exist. They're to be recognized and celebrated until we get to Heaven. I believe this passage – indirectly – actually addresses our culture's current insistence that gender differences are irrelevant at best and dangerous at worst. No, they are not! God Himself is the source of gender differentiation. Your gender is never something God wants you to be confused about. While we should treat every person as someone made in God's image and someone for whom Jesus died and rose again – in other words, with the utmost respect and Christ-like love - we are under no obligation to accept or buy into unbiblical beliefs or lifestyles.

It's been observed we can have a "Lego kit" view of the human body or an "art restoration" view of the human body. According to the "Lego kit" view, if we have just emerged from the primeval slime by chance, then there is no design whatsoever in how we happen to be. So if you want to change your gender, that's fine. The "art restoration view" acknowledges that we aren't machines; instead, we're flawed masterpieces. If you see a work of art – for example, a portrait of someone - and you're asked to restore it, you don't look at it and say, "Well, I think he would look much nicer with a pair of glasses." The job of the art restorer is to bring out the artist's original intention not to change it. They work at cleaning and restoring the vivid colors. They study the work and the painter, so they can carefully get it back to what it once was. They work so that people can see the original in all its glory. When it comes to our gender, our aim ought to be to restore God the Creator's intention, not to try to change it. That will certainly mean accepting the gender that He has given us. It can never glorify or please God to be confused about your gender or go through the process of actually changing your gender. If God made you a man, recognize and celebrate it. If God made you a woman, recognize and celebrate it. In every context – even worship gatherings. Let's celebrate who God made us to be! Here's a second great truth. Let's...

CELEBRATE OUR EQUALITY IN JESUS. (11:17-22, 33-34)

There was another problem when Corinthian Christians go together to worship the Lord. Understanding the situation or context here is easier to discern than the previous section about head coverings. Quite simply, poor Christians were being humiliated at worship gatherings by wealthy Christians. The first Christians gathered for worship in each other's homes. Since wealthy Christians had bigger houses, that's most likely where worship services were held. Apparently, one type of service was what I would call a "holy pot-luck." Everyone brought a dish to share. In addition, at some point in this worship service where Christians ate together, the Lord's Supper or Communion was

celebrated. At these worship gatherings, wealthy Christians might end up only eating next to other wealthy Christians. In addition, they brought more food and better food for themselves and their friends, and then refused to share it in any meaningful way with others – especially poor Christians many of whom, likely, were slaves. In fact, some of those poor believers might only have gotten a piece of bread and a sip of wine to eat when the entire group observed the Lord’s Supper, while rich Christians stuffed their faces and got drunk on too much wine.

Paul was incensed – just beyond angry! To do this at all was bad enough, but to treat one another like this while at the same time partaking of the Lord’s Supper was beyond outrageous. Essential spiritual unity in Jesus was being destroyed. When Paul said, “For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God’s judgment upon yourself,” (1 Cor. 11:29 NLT) he wasn’t referring to Jesus’ literal body. Instead, he was referring to the church – God’s people – being the body of Christ. They were making a lie out of their claims of unity which the Supper was intended to proclaim and affirm. They were failing to live out the fact they were God’s new community where your ethnicity, your status, and your level of wealth don’t matter. So far short of the mark did these worship gatherings come that instead of building up God’s people, they damaged God’s people. They would have been better off not meeting at all than having these kinds of gatherings!

The exact situation Paul addressed here may not be in danger of being repeated today – true enough – but, again, there are some important transferable concepts or truths to observe. Whenever we allow social or cultural differences to destroy our unity in the church, we dishonor Jesus. Whenever we gather together to worship the Lord, all those differences between human beings that the world thinks as being so important – so crucial - are no longer relevant. Your race or ethnicity. Your economic status. Your educational level. Yes, your gender still matters, but not in terms of one gender being better or more important than the other gender. None of those matter. A church where social and class distinctions exist is no true church at all. Instead, whenever we enjoy and celebrate God-established diversity, we honor Jesus. I love the diversity of the Karl Road church family. May it only increase! More people of all the races. More home grown Americans. More immigrants and refugees. More rich people. More middle class people. More poor people. More people who didn’t finish high school. More PhDs. More men. More women. More old people. More millennials. More kids and students. In Jesus, we don’t have to deny or obscure our differences. Instead, we can enjoy and celebrate God-established, God-honoring diversity. A third truth. Let’s...

CELEBRATE WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US. (11:23-32)

Let’s hear what Paul said in this final section we’re considering today. While he was on the subject of the Lord’s Supper, Paul reminded them of the sacredness of what they were doing every time they celebrated the Lord’s Supper together. It went all the way back to the words and instruction of Jesus Himself. It was an important way of remembering deeply and profoundly the significance of who Jesus is and what Jesus

had done for them. Every time they observed it, they announced or proclaimed the importance and significance of the cross and the empty tomb.

How appropriate it is that we're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper today at the close of this service! What is it we're celebrating? First, the Lord's Supper celebrates a new covenant. Paul quoted Jesus' words when He inaugurated the Lord's Supper at the Last Supper. "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood." (1 Cor. 11:25 NLT) A covenant is an important agreement or contract between two people or two entities where promises are made to each other. Because of what Jesus did on the cross, we can have a new covenant relationship with God. It's no longer about animals being sacrificed for our sins, because Jesus – the Lamb of God – died once and for all for us. It's not about earning God's acceptance by trying to be good and moral through our own efforts. It's all about a new, much closer relationship with God made possible through the Holy Spirit. It's about forgiveness of our sins and an ongoing inner transformation made possible through the Holy Spirit. The Lord's Supper celebrates the reality that a new covenant now exists between God and us.

Second, the Lord's Supper celebrates a new community. All over the world today in great cathedrals, in humble storefronts, and even in private homes – like many of you today – because of the pandemic, people are gathered to worship God in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus. We come from every ethnicity, every age bracket, every economic and educational status, every language and culture, and both genders. There has been some unfortunate misunderstanding of this passage over the centuries. What does it mean to partake of the Lord's Supper "unworthily"? What are we supposed to "examine" before partaking of the bread and cup? This is not about being "unworthy" to partake of the Lord's Supper today because you sinned last night or even going through some sort of rigorous self-examination to see where there is sin in your life. While it's always appropriate to ask God to forgive us of our sins – and Communion is an appropriate time to do that - the fact is we will never be worthy of God's grace, God's forgiveness, or God's love. Instead, the context suggests that treating any fellow Christians in a humiliating way makes you spiritual unworthy of the Lord's Supper. Paul wanted the Corinthians to examine their attitudes and behavior toward their fellow Christians there in Corinth. Were they demonstrating their essential spiritual unity and equality in Jesus by how they treated one another? Were they loving? Were they generous? The Lord's Supper celebrates God's new community.

Finally, the Lord's Supper celebrates what Jesus has accomplished. God's Word says here, "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Cor. 11:26 NLT) That word "proclaim" can be translated "preach" in other places. Did you know that when we partake of Communion in just a few minutes, we're preaching a sermon to God Himself, to Satan and all his allies, to our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, to the world which watches, and to ourselves? Every time we declare the good news of salvation through what Jesus accomplished at the cross and the empty tomb. Every time we announce that when it comes to getting into Heaven, we have transferred any trust in ourselves to trust always and forever in

Jesus alone. Every time we underline the simple fact we have not gotten what we deserved – God’s mercy – but we have received what we didn’t deserve – God’s grace. What a wonderful way to begin a brand new year!

Author, Tony Campolo, remembers sitting with his parents at a Communion service when he was very young, perhaps six or seven years old. He became aware of a young woman in the pew in front of them who was sobbing and shaking. The pastor had just finished reading the passage of Scripture we considered today about partaking of the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner. As the Communion plate with its small pieces of bread was passed to the crying woman sitting in front of the Campolos, she waved it away and then lowered her head in despair. It was then that Tony’s Sicilian father leaned over her shoulder and, in his broken English, said sternly, "Take it, girl! It was meant for you. Do you hear me?" She raised her head and nodded—and then she took the bread and ate it. Even young Tony knew that at that moment some kind of heavy burden was lifted from her heart and mind.

The Lord’s Supper is an invitation to draw near to God – never a rebuke to keep your distance from Him. On this first Sunday of a brand new year, I invite you to celebrate with me what God has done for us through the Lord Jesus Christ. If you will do that, then we will fulfill our destiny to glorify God in yet another way – in how and why we celebrate the Lord’s Supper and in how we worship.