

# FIRST CORINTHIANS

## Chapter 11

### Introduction

There is a verse in chapter fourteen of First Corinthians that you must keep in mind as we begin our study of the next four chapters. It is verse forty of chapter fourteen where Paul said,

1 Corinthians 14:40 Let all things be done decently and in order.

“All things” refers to the activities of the public worship service of the Church. Paul talks about things like prayer, prophesy, partaking in the Lord’s Supper, and participating in the exercise of various spiritual gifts. These should all be done “decently and in order.”

In Corinth, *the Church service was anything but orderly!* Their services were so **disorderly** that, in chapter fourteen, you will read about visitors who attended for the first time going away thinking they were insane!

In verse thirty-four of chapter eleven Paul promised to “set” things “in order” when he arrived in Corinth. But some things couldn’t wait; he wrote to them about certain disorderly behaviors that needed immediate attention.

In chapter eleven, there were two such disorderly behaviors that needed immediate attention: Head coverings and the Lord’s Supper. We’ll organize our thoughts around these two points: #1 Don’t Let Your Disorderly Appearance Be A Source Of Distraction In Church, and #2 Don’t Let Your Disorderly Actions Be A Source Of Division In Church.

#1 Don't Let Your Disorderly Appearance  
Be A Source Of Distraction In Church  
(v2-16)

Head coverings were causing a problem. Men *were* wearing them; women *weren't* wearing them. You won't understand the problem unless I give you some background.

Some **men** were wearing head coverings. They were veiling their faces during public worship. Why would they appear this way in Church? They were doing this because of a misinterpretation of an Old Testament passage. In Exodus 34:29-35 you have the account of Moses on Mount Sinai receiving the Law from God. His face shone from being in the presence of the glory of God – so much so that he wore a veil when he came down from the mountain and spoke with the children of Israel.

In Second Corinthians chapter three you read about the Corinthian men wearing veils due to their misinterpretation of this Old Testament passage! You can read it in full later; the point Paul makes is that the veil symbolized a barrier between God and mankind. If you are a Christian, that barrier is removed! He says,

2 Corinthians 3:16 Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.  
2 Corinthians 3:17 Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty.  
2 Corinthians 3:18 But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

It was out of order and distracting for men to wear a veil. It promoted the awful idea that a barrier still exists in the worship of God!

What about the women? Some **women** were *not* wearing head coverings during public worship. Here is what you need to know about the women. In the first century culture of the Bible, all women were expected to wear head coverings. The covering varied, but it was commonly a part of the outer garment drawn over the head as a hood. The only women who did not wear such a head covering in public were those who had committed adultery and those who were prostitutes! Their uncovered head, even to the point of having their hair shaved off, was a sign of their sexual immorality or sexual availability.

Godly Christian women in Corinth were coming to public worship with their heads uncovered. They believed that they had the liberty in Jesus Christ to be set free of the prevailing custom, and that they were now on an equal par with men in the Church. But it was out of order and they were causing a distraction.

Now we can understand these verse in their proper context.

1 Corinthians 11:2 Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered *them* to you.

The “traditions” Paul is speaking about are the activities of public worship. He had established them as a Church and had established a certain order to their services.

1 Corinthians 11:3 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.

Before he corrects them, he instructs them. There is a proper order in God’s Church. Although Jesus is equal with God, and Jesus **is** God, for the purpose of redeeming lost men and women Jesus submitted Himself to His Father. In the Church, Jesus is the “Head.” Men are to submit to Jesus, and women are to submit to men. This is the order established by God Himself in the Church. Thus there is equality, but differences of function and ministry.

1 Corinthians 11:4 Every man praying or prophesying, having *his* head covered, dishonors his head.

1 Corinthians 11:5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with *her* head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved.

1 Corinthians 11:6 For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered.

Men who wore a veil “dishonored” their “head,” Jesus Christ. They dishonored Jesus because of what we read in Second Corinthians 3:16-18. They were putting a symbolic barrier between themselves and Jesus. This was disorderly and distracting because it conveyed the terrible thought that you are separated from Jesus and cannot look full in His wonderful face!

Women were set free by Jesus Christ to pray and prophesy in the services of the Church. But they should not take their freedom so far as to throw-off their customary veil. When they did so, it was disorderly and distracting because people confused them with

adulteresses and prostitutes; and because it distorted the relationship between men and women.

Verses seven through twelve cause some measure of controversy regarding the custom of head coverings outside of the Corinthian culture:

1 Corinthians 11:7 For a man indeed ought not to cover *his* head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.

1 Corinthians 11:8 For man is not from woman, but woman from man.

1 Corinthians 11:9 Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man.

1 Corinthians 11:10 For this reason the woman ought to have a *symbol of* authority on *her* head, because of the angels.

1 Corinthians 11:11 Nevertheless, neither *is* man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 11:12 For as woman *came* from man, even so man also *comes* through woman; but all things are from God.

This is pretty straightforward stuff for most Bible-believing Christians. It looks beyond the Church to creation and says that God has a divine order for the roles of men and women. Men are neither superior or inferior to women; women are neither superior or inferior to men. They are equal and are intended to compliment one another spiritually. But in terms of order and function, men take the responsibility of leading.

The controversy is whether or not these verses are to be taken *literally* or *spiritually*. In other words, should Christian women – even today – wear head coverings of some kind? Let's read further before we comment:

1 Corinthians 11:13 Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?

1 Corinthians 11:14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?

1 Corinthians 11:15 But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for *her* hair is given to her for a covering.

Not only head covering, but hair length is discussed. One key is the word "nature." We immediately think in terms of the natural world; that by nature females have long hair or other ornamentation, while men have short hair and are very plain. *But that's not really true!* It is often the male of the species who is more ornamented. Compare a peacock with a peahen... A lion with a lioness... So I dismiss the idea that Paul is appealing to the natural world.

“Nature” can also refer to *your own human nature* which has been affected by **custom** and **habit**. I believe this is what Paul has in mind. It was their nature – their custom and lifelong habit - for women to wear head coverings.

What about hair length? Well, some men *did* have long hair and it was **not** a dishonor to them. Nazarites like Samson and John the Baptist had long hair. So Paul *cannot* mean that long hair is always a dishonor. It must be a type of long hair that he has in mind. It is long hair that is arranged like a woman’s hair. It is what I call “Little Richard” hair!

Paul is saying is that men should appear as men, and women should appear as women, in whatever cultural setting they find themselves. I **do** take these verses as cultural; and the teaching on head coverings as spiritual. You should follow cultural practices in terms of your appearance so as not to cause distractions that lead to disorder.

1 Corinthians 11:16 But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor *do* the churches of God.

This is a kind of sanctified sarcasm. Paul had just told them to keep their customs regarding head coverings. Instead, they were causing “contentions,” which was a new “custom” associated with them as a Church and nowhere else!

Your appearance in the public worship of the Church should not be a distraction to others. Dress in the custom of the culture, and more to the modest, undistracting side of things. Fit in and you won’t cause disorder.

## #2 Don’t Let Your Disorderly Actions Be A Source Of Division In Church (v17-34)

It was the custom of the early Church to share in the Lord’s Supper after a Church potluck called the Agape Feast. The Corinthians were behaving horribly at the Agape Feast prior to the Lord’s Supper. Their disorderly conduct is the subject of these verses.

1 Corinthians 11:17 Now in giving these instructions I do not praise *you*, since you come together not for the better but for the worse.

1 Corinthians 11:18 For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it.

1 Corinthians 11:19 For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.

Their actions were dividing the Church during a celebration that was intended to promote unity! Paul is not excusing their sin by saying “there must be factions among you.” He is encouraging those who are being sinned against to persevere, knowing that God will use the divisions to “approve” them as His faithful servants in a way that spiritually minded people will recognize.

1 Corinthians 11:20 Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper.

1 Corinthians 11:21 For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of *others*; and one is hungry and another is drunk.

1 Corinthians 11:22 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*.

The wealthier believers were refusing to share their food with those in greater need; in that sense it wasn’t a true pot-luck. They were indulging themselves even to the point of getting drunk on their own wine! Then, blitzed and belching, they were taking Communion.

Paul reviews his teaching on the Lord’s Supper:

1 Corinthians 11:23 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the *same* night in which He was betrayed took bread;

1 Corinthians 11:24 and when He had given thanks, He broke *it* and said, “Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”

1 Corinthians 11:25 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.”

At the Lord’s Supper we look *back*. The night before His crucifixion, Jesus celebrated the Passover meal by changing it into the Lord’s Supper. The bread represented His body offered on the Cross; the cup represented His blood shed to establish a new and everlasting covenant. The local Church is free to partake of the Lord’s Supper “as often as” it feels is appropriate. We look back to what Jesus has done for us.

At the Lord’s Supper we look *forward*:

1 Corinthians 11:26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

Though you celebrate His death on the Cross, **Jesus is not dead!** He is alive forevermore and returning for you! We look forward.

At the Lord's Supper you look *within*:

1 Corinthians 11:27 Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks *this* cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

1 Corinthians 11:28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

You need to partake in a "worthy manner." You do so by "examining [your]self" and getting right with God. If you are unsaved, **Get saved!** If you're not right with God, **Get right!** Then partake of the elements.

1 Corinthians 11:30 For this reason many *are* weak and sick among you, and many sleep.

1 Corinthians 11:31 For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged.

1 Corinthians 11:32 But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.

Lack of looking within is the "reason" many were "weak," "sick," and "[a]sleep." "Sleep" is a reference to physical death. God was disciplining them by allowing them to become sick; and some of them were even *dying* as a result.

God's discipline seems severe; but it is better than "being condemned with the world." In other words, these believers were saved and God took them home by divine intervention. It is those the Lord loves that He disciplines.

Paul's gets practical regarding your actions:

1 Corinthians 11:33 Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

1 Corinthians 11:34 But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come.

Don't let your disorderly actions be a source of division in the Church. Esteem the other believers ahead of yourself. Don't come to Church to indulge yourself; see that the needs of others are met first.

You *can* and *should* apply this way of thinking to everything you participate in at Church. You should judge your actions to make sure they don't become a source of division.

## Conclusion

“Order” is the key concept in this chapter, and in chapters twelve, thirteen, and fourteen. “Let all things be done decently and in order.” Christians won't always agree on the exact order of a Church service; but we should strive to never let either our *appearance* or our *actions* be disorderly.