

Eastwood Baptist (11/11/'18)

WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER (1 Corinthians 11:2-34, 14:33-35)

Introduction Is it a good thing for Christians to gather together? The obvious answer is “Yes, of course it is”. But Paul’s answer in the section of 1 Corinthians which begins in Chapter 11 is more like “Yes, but...”, or even “It depends”. Paul does not discourage the Corinthians from coming together, but he does say that this is only a good thing if they act rightly when they do come together. In this chapter and in Chapter 14 Paul talks about problems which arise in their gatherings. In between these chapters, he talks about how to exercise spiritual gifts and about the importance of love, both of which were relevant to their gatherings. This morning I am going to look at what Paul says about the participation of women in their gatherings and, more briefly, about the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. I am going to look separately at these, beginning with the participation of women (in both Chapter 11 and Chapter 14). The passage about this in Chapter 11 (vv.2-16) is one of the most difficult in the New Testament, so I will only be able to scratch the surface. I am happy to respond to questions later or lend anyone who wishes a good commentary.

Every Woman Who Prays or Prophesies What is the situation which Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16? It seems clear that in Corinth women were being allowed to speak publicly in church gatherings. They were allowed to pray publicly and to prophesy, and perhaps to speak in other ways as well. Paul implies that this is fine, since there would have been no need to regulate the behaviour of women who spoke publicly if he had been prepared to tell them not to do so. The problem was not that they spoke, but the way they behaved when they spoke, and particularly their appearance. It looks as though some of the Christian women in Corinth seized this opportunity to speak in public, an opportunity which they would not often have had outside the church, with great enthusiasm. But their enthusiasm was not accompanied by discretion or sensitivity. In particular, their refusal to cover their heads seems to have caused offence. So what does Paul have to say?

Cover Your Heads At a practical level, Paul’s response is plain. **Read 11:4-5.** But the way Paul says this and what he goes on to say after this make it clear that the physical act is not important in itself. Rather it is the meaning of head covering, or the absence of head covering, which matters, and from which we can learn. Unfortunately for us, it is precisely at this point that modern interpreters disagree. Paul’s original audience would have known what the absence of a head covering suggested, but we can’t be entirely sure. I think, however, that we can be confident that gender difference and gender identity were involved. Probably some assertive women in Corinth had taken hold of Paul’s declaration, recorded for us in Galatians 3:28, that there was neither male nor female in Christ, and acted on it in an exaggerated and insensitive way. By refusing to wear a head covering they were claiming that it no longer mattered that they were women, and they could ignore the expectations and feelings of others in the congregation. **Read 11:6.** What does this say to us today? I don’t believe that it requires women today to cover their heads in church, although this was once a popular view. The problem then was that when women wore hats to church it didn’t convey the meaning which covering the head did in first century Corinth. Women

today respect Paul's teaching when they act in a way which respects our understanding of feminine identity and propriety, and something comparable can be said to men.

Not Independent Paul's most straightforward statement of principle comes in **vv.11-12 – read**. It seems from this that the women who uncovered their heads were making an implied claim that they were independent of men. Probably they were going so far as to claim that now they enjoyed freedom in Christ they had no need of men any more. Paul rejects any such claim, but notice how he does it. He deliberately uses balanced language, insisting not only that women are not independent of men but also that men are not independent of women. And he connects both sides of this balance with God. He probably has in mind **Genesis 2:27 – read**. What does this say to us today? It says that women need to value the contribution of men, and men need to value the contribution of women. It says that men need to be sensitive to the needs and feelings of women, and women need to be sensitive to the needs and feelings of men. It says that we should try in every church to make sure that both women and men feel able to speak up and to be heard with respect. More indirectly, I think it also says that where there is disagreement about the roles of women in the church this disagreement should be handled with mutual respect and sensitivity.

Women Who Want to Enquire I want to look now at a much shorter passage concerning women in Chapter 14, because I think it is helpful to look at these two passages together. **Read 14:33-35**. This second passage has caused much debate, and sometimes ill feeling, partly because it has been discussed in isolation from Chapter 11. The problem addressed can't be simply that women are speaking, since Paul clearly allowed this, and regulated it, in Chapter 11. The context, especially the declaration in v.33 that God is a God of order, strongly suggests that these women are being disruptive. They may be interrupting men in general to challenge them and demand explanations, or they may be interrupting their husbands in particular, thus humiliating them. Paul is telling these women to behave in an orderly and respectful manner. This is not because they are women, but because they are disruptive. The significance of their being women is probably that they were less well educated than the men of their day, and that some of them were trying to assert their new status as Christian women in inappropriate ways. In our time and place, we all, both women and men, need to preserve good order and show respect toward one another in our gatherings. I believe that this includes members' meetings and other church meetings as well as church services.

And the Lord's Supper Since I preached on the Lord's Supper from 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 quite recently, I have decided not to spend much time on this passage. But I think that it will be helpful to look at it briefly in order to see how it reinforces the message of our other two passages without focusing on women. Paul is severely critical of the manner in which the Christians of Corinth have been celebrating the Lord's Supper, for two main reasons. First, their celebration fails to honour the Lord Jesus Christ, whose death for them they are meant to be remembering and honouring. **Read 11:26-28**. They think that they have been doing a good thing by eating the bread and drinking the cup, but Paul tells them that it is not a good thing when it is not done seriously and sincerely with reverence for Jesus Christ as Lord. Just

as Paul tells the women to behave in a way which honours God, here he tells men and women alike to honour the Son of God by celebrating the Lord's Supper in an appropriate fashion. Paul's second reason is closely related to the first. He says that they fail to honour their Lord when they fail to treat one another lovingly and respectfully as fellow believers. **Read 11:20-22.** Paul has directed the Christian women of Corinth to honour God by their behaviour in the gatherings of their church, and to show a proper concern for all those who are present in the gatherings. Similarly, Paul directs all the Christians of Corinth, but especially the Christians of wealth and high status, to honour the Son of God by their behaviour in the Lord's Supper and to show a proper concern for all those who participate, especially the poor Christians of low status.

Conclusion What is God saying to us through Paul? I believe that all of us, women and men alike, are being told to behave rightly when we come together. I believe that we are being told to honour God and care for one another in our gatherings. And I believe that this applies to all our gatherings. It applies to our celebration of the Lord's Supper; it applies to every part of every worship service; it applies to members' meetings; it applies to growth groups; it applies to our serving together in the ministries of our church. In every kind of gathering, and in our individual lives, let us strive to honour God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ in everything we say and do, and let us treat one another with love and respect.