

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
1 Corinthians

VI. 1 Corinthians 11:2-34
The Lord's Supper and Women at Prayer

Paul uses the language of “commendation” somewhat sneakily in this chapter. In 11:2 he says “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you.” However, he goes on to show the ways in which he thinks the Corinthians are not maintaining tradition very well when it comes to the role of women in leading prayer. When it comes to writing to them about the Lord's Supper Paul is much more direct. “Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.” (11:17).

Both these issues are issues of how the Corinthians are to conduct their common life of worship.

We look briefly at the question of women at prayer, because the issues remain murky and because this passage is probably not so directly relevant to contemporary Christian practice.

Note that there is here no question about the right of women to lead in public prayer. The problem seems to be that when women lead in prayer some of them are praying with their heads uncovered. The solution is that they should cut this out. Paul employs a variety of warrants to make his case.

We are not sure whether women are simply praying without wearing a veil or some kind of head covering, or whether the issue is that they are letting their hair down—so that it no longer sits in a seemly fashion as a cover for their heads.

The issue is in part hierarchical. God is the head of Christ who is the head of the man who is the head of the woman. Christ would do nothing to shame God; a faithful man will do nothing to shame Christ; a faithful woman will do nothing to shame her husband—and by implication to shame God and Christ as well.

Then Paul interprets Genesis 1-3 suggesting that males are made in the image of God, while women are presumably not God's image in the same way. Again she reflects the man who reflects God. Then he insists that a man wearing long hair is unnatural and while for a woman it is gloriously natural. (We are bound to wonder whether what we sometimes argue is "natural" is more about what's culturally acceptable.) Finally, like an exasperated parent Paul pretty much throws up his hands—do what I tell you, he says, and behave like your Christian brothers and sisters.

The issue at the Lord's Supper is in part a theological issue and in part a socio-economic one. The Lord's Supper is celebrated in the house of a wealthier Christian and it looks as though other wealthier Christians are either going ahead and eating a meal before the hard-working laboring Christians get there; or they are devouring their meals without sharing food with those who have less.

In either case, says Paul, save the banqueting for private parties. At the community feast we come together as equals.

As equals we "remember." Remembrance probably means more than "think back kindly on Jesus" and suggests that we bring him to remembrance and therefore into the presence of the community.

And we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. It may be that the Corinthians are so excited by Jesus' resurrection that they think that the communion table is a place to receive the heavenly banquet. Not yet, says Paul. For now, remember; for now, wait.

Paul also insists that no one should come to the meal without self-examination. In this context the examination seems to raise one question: How have I treated other members of the community? In other words, how have I discerned the body. There are practical consequences for liturgical unfaithfulness: this failure to observe the brother and sister at the communion table has led to illness and death. A sharp warning; an essential lesson.

Questions for Further Study:

1. Some scholars think that Paul is especially concerned about a whole group of women prophets who are praying with their heads uncovered, living as if they were already in the last days, and generally making life difficult for Paul. Do you see any evidence of such a designated sub-group in the Corinthian community?
2. The material about the Lord's Supper in 11:23-25 is one of the few places where Paul draws on words attributed to Jesus himself. How is this important for Paul's argument?
3. The suggestion that some of the Corinthians have become ill and others have died because of mistaken communion practices seems both harsh and strange to us. Are there ways to make a link between Paul's kind of spiritual "realism" and our frequent division between spiritual matters and bodily consequences?

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do Paul's distinctions between what is appropriate for a male and what is appropriate for a female provide any guidance for appropriate socialization in the church today—or is he simply hopelessly hierarchical?

2. Where are the specific places where class, economic and educational distinctions in our churches are evident today?

3. If you were to rethink the practice of the Lord's Supper in your church on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11, what—if anything—would you do differently?

For further study:

Troy Martin, "Paul's Argument from Nature for the Veil in 1 Corinthians 11:13-15: A Testicle instead of a Head Covering," *JBL* 123 (2004) 75-84 or <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=5&hid=105&sid=9cb1b54a-ce84-4fbc-a41e-e2a3d31d2806%40sessionmgr109>

Jason David DeBuhn, "Because of the Angels?: Unveiling Paul's Anthropology in 1 Corinthians 11," *JBL* 118 (1999) 295-320 and <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdf?vid=22&hid=105&sid=9cb1b54a-ce84-4fbc-a41e-e2a3d31d2806%40sessionmgr109>

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, "Corinthian Women Prophets and Paul's Argumentation in 1 Corinthians," in Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklēsia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) 103-9