

## **Worship and social climbing** **I Corinthians 11:2-16**

The church exists in culture and culture always affects the church: hence Karen Baptists take off their shoes when they go into church (they take off their shoes whenever they go into a building) but their churches have benches (a gift from our culture via missionaries as their homes don't have chairs at all!). I Corinthians 11 is baffling until we grasp two things: the gospel and first century Corinth

### **1) under new management:**

**i) Good news:** King Jesus reigns and as we come under his rule, our lives change in every way: devotional, work, home, shopping, politics. We're new people in Jesus, called to live in a new way to a new agenda: our king's glory

**ii) Gathering together:** the message is earthed in small communities of believing people – maybe 100 in total in Corinth – meeting to build each other up: 14:3-5, 12, 26. In the church we learn how to live for Jesus in world and we model the lifestyle of the kingdom to those outside looking on

### **2) in the same old world**

The trouble is, the Corinthians brought their old attitudes and aspirations into the church: the rich are superior to the poor; one is either a patron or a client, ethnic differences cause tensions, etc. How can we live according to King Jesus' pattern in the world, if we're hopelessly divided in church? This is Paul's theme in 11-14: Division between rich & poor at Lord's table (11:17ff); division between the elite and rest in the body (12-13); division over spiritual gifts (14)

There are three things to note about 11:2-16:

**i) Husbands and wives** NOT men and women – same Greek words. Although Paul bases his teaching on Genesis 1-3 and so could be generally talking about 'Adam' and 'Eve', the likelihood is he's being more specific. This is likely because...

**ii) Home churches:** the community met in homes – about 25 in each: for example, Chloe (1:11) and Stephanus (16:15). Within the household wives would have had more freedom than they had in public – but what happened when a public gathering happened in their private space: which rules apply? This matters because:

**iii) Honour & shame in Corinth.** This was a society with very strict rules regarding honour and shame and a new movement risked great danger if it disregarded those rules:

- ✓ messengers (10) – not 'angels' but people coming to see if this regular meeting was treasonous and reporting back to their patrons or even those charged with ensuring women obeyed the dress code when in public. This was the usual meaning of the word 'angelos' in secular use. The Houses of wealthier people where most of the congregations in Corinth met – because they were only spaces big enough to house a gathering – were open to the public; indeed these people would have been patrons to clients who came calling every day and milled about in the open vestibule at the front of the house.
- ✓ mission – outsiders mustn't be repelled by what they see – see key verse 14:23. Paul's concern is that people meet Jesus. In Nepal Christians take off their shoes and men and women separate to the right and left of the building, so that non-

Christian Nepalis aren't repelled by any 'shame' in the gathering – this the tension of 9:19-23 in action

### 3) A distinctive way of life

With that in mind, what Paul says is fairly clear!

**i) women and men/husbands and wives are equal:** 11: key verse 'in the Lord' means 'from a Christian point of view' or 'in church' as in 2 Cor 5:16; see Gal 3:28

**ii) women play a full part in ministry** prophesying and praying in public along with men – this is part of the 'custom' (v16 applies to whole shooting match). So Phoebe, Priscilla and all other women mentioned in Romans 16; Euodia and Syntyche in Phil 4:2f. And no doubt Chloe and other women in Corinth

**iii) good order:**

- ✓ wives – in accordance with the accepted social norms of the day should have their heads covered when praying **because** they are in public gathering. That gives her authority to pray because with her head covered she reflects God's glory not her husband's (7bf after Genesis 2)
- ✓ husbands shouldn't have their heads covered (Paul says as much about them as the wives) – why? Elite men cover their heads if praying at a pagan shrine: Paul's point here is that we are all equal in the church, social divisions do not belong in body of Christ – worship is not a forum for social climbing. As Tom Wright says: 'Let us not settle for a gospel which allows the world's power games to proceed without challenge'

**iv) the glory of God** 'heads' in context: what does **kephale** mean? Clearly linked to 'glory' and hence 'honour' – because so much 'dis-honour' attends improper covering/uncovering of the head – so perhaps the best sense here would be 'Pride and joy' – what brings honour to the other party and hence what the other party delights in

- ✓ women with their heads uncovered in first century Corinth were either prostitutes, promiscuous 'new wives' or pagans in some ecstatic ritual
- ✓ Men with their heads covered at prayer were social climbers

Neither commended God's glory in the church and that was Paul's overriding concern. Of course, both are cultural concerns – it is probably true that in today's western culture outsiders would be put off the gospel more by the lack of participation by women in what we do than by them participating bare-headed! All we do should honour Christ, the head of the church and the focus of our worship and commend him to the watching world: 10:31-11:1

### 4) A word for the wise

Why does Paul address this here? He's relating a key theme of the letter – Corinthian divisions because of their immaturity – to worship life of church: key verses: 3:1-4 seen here in men flaunting their status in church and women abusing their freedom. Rather they should be seeking to build one another up and commend the gospel to the outsider.

The question for us is how much is our worship driven by similar attitudes: the desire to look good? wield influence? flaunt my knowledge? Is that all I've done: prove I'm better the next guy? Or is my overriding concern when I come to worship that God is glorified and my brother and sister are built up to better live for king Jesus this week?