

“TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER”

8. WORSHIP TOGETHER (2)

1 Corinthians 11:2-26; 14:33-40

Let me begin this morning with two or three snapshots, images to hold in your mind while we reflect on these passages together. Firstly, a situation that received a certain amount of news coverage recently: the American actor Richard Gere publicly kisses the Indian actress Shilpa Shetty on stage at a charity event and is immediately denounced and threatened with imprisonment. Secondly, a photograph that Iris Hartley sent back to us from her recent stay in India in which she was speaking in a church and the photo, taken from the back of the church, shows all the men sitting on one side of the church and all the women on the other. Thirdly, a Bar-Mitzvah service at the synagogue in Tottenham with all the men at the front and the women sitting behind a net curtain at the back, chattering away to each other as the service progresses. Different cultures, different approaches to relationships between the sexes.

Keep those images in the back of your minds while we look at two passages which have caused all sorts of debate in the Church down through the centuries. I say two passages, but, in fact, they are two parts of the same passage, in which Paul is writing about the ways in which the new Christian community is to go about ordering its worship. I know some of you have been eagerly awaiting this part of the letter to see just how we deal with what Paul has to say and to see how it should influence our practice today, twenty centuries later in a very different cultural climate.

As we've noted before, Paul is writing to a group of new Christians – most of whom could not have been believers for more than five years – trying to come to terms with a very new situation. There had never been any churches before, so they are pretty well writing the rules as they go along, adapting stuff from Jewish synagogue worship and adding newer things to take account a new situation. Remember, Corinth was a bustling, cosmopolitan seaport which a reputation for licentiousness and radical behaviour. The city was dominated by a temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, which was serviced by a huge number of temple prostitutes, and the rest of the community was heavily influenced by what went on up in the Temple. It was a very liberal, anything-goes kind of culture. Into that had come Paul, with a message that was preached first of all to the Jewish community (who tried very hard to keep to the Law of Moses), a message of liberty and freedom. There were no longer the same kinds of pressure to keep to the Law of Moses as Jesus had died to free humanity from its constraints.

The trouble was, many of the Christians were starting to exercise that liberty in ways that were very unhelpful. It meant that there was a strong current of sexual immorality in the church, as we saw in earlier chapters. Some of the old conventions about married life were breaking down and there was a feeling, even within the church, that anything goes. That had an effect on worship, too, and that is what Paul is responding to in these chapters. Back in *6:12* and *10:13* he tells them that, although everything may be permissible, it's not necessarily helpful or beneficial for them. So now he has to remind them that their regular worship is not a free for all, in which everyone can just shout out what he or she wants, but is to be done in a way which honours God and is helpful to those who participate. It's summed up in the last sentence of this section, the last verse we read this morning – *“Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”* Paul is very eager that the Christian community should be distinctive, but in a way that does not give unnecessary offence nor make them out to be just another bunch of weirdoes.

The main thrust of what Paul is saying here, then, is not to give a conclusive theology of the relationship between the sexes, but to encourage the Christians to worship in a way that will not give off the wrong messages to outsiders (as you would have seen last time when he was writing about prophecy and tongues). These chapters throw up all kinds of problems, some due to translation, some due to our lack of knowledge about certain local customs, some due to ideas which Paul and his contemporaries may have had but which have become lost in the twenty centuries of theology since he wrote. For example, we are not always sure whether Paul is writing about all women or just about wives. There are things he writes which seem inconsistent, but which are clearly not central to his argument. There are questions about

angels and their being and activity. Clearly we can't go into them all this morning. Thousands of books have been written about these chapters, all of them influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the time in which they were written and by the background of the people who wrote them.

So what we're going to do this morning is look at the two issues which Paul raises and I'll try to distil the views for you. I've used seven different commentaries in preparing this and read a whole load of other books as well – all of them from what you might call conservative evangelical authors, people who take very seriously the divinely prompted and Spirit-inspired nature of the Bible. They all survey the various views about Paul's words here and all come down to the same conclusion (except one of the commentaries). I'm not going to bore you with the "working" this morning (some of which is very obscure and some a bit speculative), but just cut to the conclusion, the things that they all seem to agree on. And we're going to deal with the issues that are presented here in these verses, which are, I believe, specifically to do with order in worship. So I'm not going to go into the things Paul says about headship in marriage (that's dealt with more fully elsewhere and we might look at it some other time). Nor am I going to look at the other place where Paul writes about women speaking in church (in his letter to Timothy), because that is a very different context and not part of following through what Paul is writing to the Corinthians. If you ask me about that, I believe that that too is very much tied to the culture of the day and is not a blanket all-places, all-time prohibition on women speaking in church, but it's not where we're concentrating today. (If you're interested, I can point you in the direction of some other reading.)

1. WOMEN'S HEADCOVERING

The first issue is one which these days is not quite such a problem as it was even twenty years ago. Paul writes about women covering their heads in worship. I can remember when I was a small child (actually quite a big child) and the efforts my mum took in ensuring she had a hat for Sundays. In the church in which I was brought up all the women wore hats, most of them looking like things that had fallen randomly from a great height on to their heads. It has to be said, to put this into context, that in those days most men wore hats a lot of the time too. Nowadays it just doesn't seem to be an issue. So why was Paul (and, indeed, my mum) so anxious about it?

The first problem, as we've already mentioned, is translation. Depending on which version you use, the issue is about hats, head-coverings, hair or veils. The NIV has a long note at the bottom of the page giving an alternative translation. Some suggest that it was to do with the way they had their hair – up in a bun, encased in a veil, flowing free or cut really short. Others think it is about an actual hat – not quite like ours but more of a headsquare or shawl. We'll stick with the rather ore vague term "*head-covering*", which could mean any of those things really, as we're no really sure which it is.

The problem Paul is addressing is that many of the women coming into worship were sending out quite the wrong signals by what they had on their heads. By and large, all women in Greek society would have covered their head in some way – either by wearing something or by arranging their hair carefully. The people who went around without their heads covered were the "*hetairai*" (high-class mistresses and courtesans) and prostitutes. Those who had their hair cut short were women who had been proved to be adulteresses, especially in the Jewish community, so it wasn't a fashion you really wanted to adopt, unless you were, as some of these Corinthians were, flaunting your liberty. And the women who were usually seen with their hair flowing freely and pretty unkempt were the devotees of pagan religions.

Now different authors and scholars will quarrel with some of the details of that, but all agree that leaving their heads uncovered was a clear signal of either sexual misconduct or pagan worship and that was definitely not the kind of signal Paul expected Christian women to give. It doesn't really have the same kind of significance in our culture, does it? It's a bit like that kiss that Richard Gere gave Shilpa Shetty: in modern western society it is a sign of friendship and fun – in Indian culture a demonstration of sexual impropriety. Hats or hair-dos no longer send out such signals, so our worship is not in any way disturbed by those who come in without any form of head-covering, with their hair flowing freely, or even with

their heads shaved. For us, the contemporary equivalent might be ultra-short skirts, plunging necklines or T-shirts with suggestive slogans or advertisements for products clearly at odds with Christian morality.

What we have done, then, is look at what Paul's concern was and re-interpret that in a way which makes it relevant and helpful for today. Craig Blomberg, in his commentary on these words, sums it up like this: "*In any culture, believers must strenuously avoid whatever forms of dress or grooming potentially communicate to the non-Christian world sexual misconduct or idolatrous worship.*" Not only are you coming into church to worship God, so you should want to express that sense of worship in your dress, but you are coming to worship in the company of others who may well be offended or, indeed, unhelpfully attracted by the things you wear – which applies to men as well as to women.

2. WOMEN'S SILENCE

And I believe we apply the same criteria to the second passage, which concerns Paul's rather stark injunction that "*Women should remain silent in the churches.*" What lies behind this? Clearly Paul does not forbid women from taking part, as *11:5* makes clear. And there are examples throughout the New Testament, particularly in *Acts* of women speaking out. Those who insist that we should, indeed, take this at face value and apply it literally need to be consistent. If Paul says "*silent*", then silent they must stay. No singing, no praying, no speaking of any sort. I used to go to preach at a fairly strict Brethren Assembly in North London, and my brother used to go too – we called it "The Waxworks" because of the lack of response we got. (I've no idea why they kept inviting us back!) One occasion I went and the congregation was even smaller than usual and when I asked where everyone was I was told that they'd had a split over whether women could announce the hymns in church. Now that's consistency!

So let's look at what was going on in the church at Corinth that led Paul to say this. The context seems to imply that this is to do with asking questions. *V35* says, "*If they want to enquire about something ...*" Now remember, the first believers were drawn from the Jewish community – and were still seen as a Jewish sect at this point in Church history – so some of their conventions would have been taken from Jewish synagogue worship. They would have sat with men and women in separate places, like the photo Iris sent back from India. Also remember that women tended not to be educated as men were – in fact, they weren't educated at all – so the temptation was for them to call across and ask their husbands what on earth the preacher was on about. It may also have been a bit like the synagogue in Tottenham, where the women at the back continued their conversations and gossip as the service went on nearer the front. It could get very noisy indeed and was not helpful for worship.

Now Paul is very concerned that worship in the Corinthian church was degenerating into a bit of a cacophony with everyone doing and saying just what they wanted when they felt like it. Look at what he writes in *14:27-32*. That's the context for this advice. It's not to do with women, but with noise during worship. It just so happens that a lot of the noise was generated by the women calling out to their husbands. Our situation is quite different today. Men and women sit together. Women tend to know what's going on just as well as the men do. We don't have the same kind of free-for-all in worship that the Corinthians had. If we were re-writing this for today we might want to ask people not to hold conversations during the worship or wander round giving out rotas and leaflets – while the offering is being received, for example. Or we might ask parents to ensure that their children aren't running around noisily in a way that distracts from worship during prayers.

Now both these passages, as we have seen, are to do with orderly worship – it's the beginning and end of a longish section in which Paul is obviously concerned at the way the Corinthian Christians are behaving when they're together in church. The two things he focuses on here are not included because he has anything against women: he is just using them as examples and they happen to involve women. There is no suggestion whatsoever that one is more important than the other, so if you really do think that Paul is prohibiting women from any speaking in church, then, to be consistent, you have to argue for women

wearing some kind of head-covering on the basis of what is written here. And, as we've already said, silence means silence!

The message for us today, I believe, is that we should approach worship together in church in a thoughtful and serious way. We should not send out the wrong signals by what we wear, so that those outside the church can see that, in our contemporary culture, we resist the blatant sexualising of fashion which so many accept and we want to distance ourselves from the vulgarity and profanity of so many slogans and designs which are carelessly worn by many (particularly young) people. And in our worship we should conduct ourselves in a way which does not distract others from worship and enables what we do to be acceptable to God and helpful to one another. It's all summed up in that last sentence – *“Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”*

(Discussion notes on the next page)

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Paul is writing to a group of new Christians: there had never been any churches before, so they are pretty well writing the rules as they go along, adapting stuff from Jewish synagogue worship and adding newer things to take account a new situation. Corinth had a very liberal, anything-goes kind of culture. Into that had come Paul, with a message of liberty and freedom. The trouble was, many of the Christians were starting to exercise that liberty in ways that were very unhelpful. Paul has to remind them that their regular worship is not a free for all – *"Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."* He wants to encourage the Christians to worship in a way that will not give off the wrong messages to outsiders.

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Questions for discussion

1. To what extent is it legitimate to say that the Bible is to be understood in its context? Shouldn't we just take it all literally? Why/why not?
2. What does Paul mean by *"because of the angels"* (11:10)?
3. Are Paul's words about long hair (11:14,15) still relevant? Why/why not?
4. How do you square what Paul says about women being silent with what he writes in 11:5?
5. Is there any reason to assume that what Paul says about silence is more or less important than what he says about head-coverings?
6. Are there things about our church that are not *"fitting and orderly"*? What are you going to do about it?