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Going to Worship in Ancient Corinth

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A surprisingly large percentage of what the Scriptures say about worship is said to correct worship that is unacceptable. In some cases, the worship of Yahweh has been polluted by the incorporation of idolatrous practices or has given way completely to the worship of false gods. In other instances, it has been flawed by the worshippers' impure motives or the dissonance between their pseudo-piety in worship and their mistreatment of their neighbors.

Since so many of the Scripture texts about worship are aimed at correction rather than instruction, we are left with teaching that does not always directly and explicitly answer our own particular questions. In other words, though the Scriptures' teaching about worship demonstrates the importance placed by God on acceptable worship, its occasional nature leaves us with many questions not fully answered if our situation is not the same as the one originally addressed.

Faced with the dual reality of the occasional nature of texts about worship and the distance that separates a first-century Mediterranean occasion from a late twentieth-century North American occasion, we must explore the teaching of a particular portion of Scripture both in the context of its original historical and cultural setting and in the light of its author's intention. Since our goal in teaching and preaching the New Testament is to translate the first-century message into our century, it follows that the quality

of that translation can only be enhanced by a better understanding of what the Scriptures meant in their original setting. Without the compass provided by a historical starting point, the church runs the risk when it turns to Scripture of hearing only an echo of its own voice rather than the clarion voice of God.

Liturgical Aberrations in 1 Corinthians 11:2–34

Paul's instructions to the Corinthians about worship are clearly aimed at correcting assembly-related aberrations. The two units of thought in 1 Corinthians 11, namely, 11:2–16 and 11:17–34, seem to be linked in that they both relate to liturgical aberrations in the assembly (**ekklēsia* in 11:16, 18). The two issues are introduced by similar wording (11:2, "I praise you . . ." and 11:17, "I do not praise you . . .").

1 Corinthians 11:2–16

As the text of 11:4–5 states explicitly, the issue under consideration here is Corinthian liturgical practice that occurs when believing men and women pray and prophesy. Based upon these verses, there can be little doubt that Paul's concern arises fundamentally from gender issues as they relate to the worshipping assembly of believers. Nowhere else within the Pauline letters do we find such a concentration of the Greek gender terms *gynē* (woman, wife) and **anēr* (man, husband). Paul's use of Genesis

chapters 1 and 2 in 11:7–9 further supports the conclusion that for Paul the root of the problem has to do with gen-

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We must also note that Paul's comments about head coverings have nothing to do with a general dress code for believers. His only expressed concern is about what believers wear when they pray and prophesy (11:4–5). Thus the centuries-old custom of women's wearing hats and shawls into church buildings in deference to this text is flawed at its very foundation. Paul says nothing about what is to be worn to the assembly. Furthermore, the centuries-old interpretation based on the assumption that Paul's position is constructed in response to the lack of head coverings or veils on women of shame is likewise without support in either the text of Paul or the relevant ancient historical evidence.

A study of Greco-Roman culture reveals that there was no uniform practice regarding liturgical head coverings in the central and eastern Mediterranean basin during the period of the early Roman Empire. It was common practice for Romans, however—including men—to wear head coverings for liturgical settings of prayer and prophecy in both public and private devotional contexts. That Roman custom would presumably have found its way into the church of God at Corinth through its Roman converts. In the metropolis of Corinth, the Christian assemblies would have been composed of men and women from Greek, Roman, Jewish, Egyptian, Anatolian, and numerous other geographical and cultural backgrounds. With such diversity, to find a variety of customs regarding dress for practices and activities in those assemblies would not be surprising.

In the text under consideration, Paul has learned that (some) women are praying and prophesying with uncovered heads in the same worship assemblies where (some)

men are praying and prophesying with covered heads. That liturgical situation flies in the face of the divine headship arrangement, which Paul sets forth in 11:3, that is, that man is the head of woman. Thus the Corinthian head covering practice undermines, not primarily gender distinctions, but the gender arrangement of divinely ordained headship. Paul concludes his effort to dissuade the Corinthians from inappropriate veiling practice with the observation that neither he nor any of the assemblies of God condones such a practice (11:16).

1 Corinthians 11:17–34

No Pauline letter contains as many references to food and eating as 1 Corinthians. In the world of Paul and the early church, “the dinner” served many functions besides simply providing nutrition for those who partook. Dinners retained a social significance that has been lost in contemporary America; they retained a religious significance that in America has never been known. It is no wonder, then, that ancient men debated both in words and deeds the etiquette appropriate for meals. Three particular areas of disagreement about appropriate mealtime comportment provide an important background to the Corinthian meal problem.

1. *Arrangement.* The arrangement of ancient meals was very hierarchical. The high degree of social and economic stratification (rich/poor; free/slave) that prevailed in the Greco-Roman world was imported into arrangements for dinner. Accordingly, the best seats, the best food, the best wine, the best company, and the best entertainment were reserved for the affluent, the noble born, the free, and the prestigious. Several pagan philosophers and rhetoricians complained about that practice, arguing that meal experiences should be communal, free from societal concerns for “rich and poor” or “free and slave.”
2. *Conduct.* Ancient meals were often characterized by disruptive speech and argumentative cliques. We have testimony in both the literary and the epigraphical records from antiquity that religious guilds and fraternal organizations had to adopt “Rules of Order” to keep a sense of orderliness, especially at their symposia or evening meals.
3. *Consumption of wine.* The wine served—both its quality and its quantity—was so important to ancient men and women that it was often placed in

the charge of an attendant (cf. John 2:8–10). Drunkenness was a regular problem at Greco-Roman meals and banquets. Greco-Roman authors whose values included moderation in drinking criticized their peers who regularly became intoxicated at those functions.

As we look at Paul's strong language against the Corinthians and their abuses of the Lord's Dinner, it is important for us to see that those abuses were part of the cultural baggage that the Corinthians brought with them into the church of God. Not only were certain of the believers getting drunk at the Lord's Dinner (1 Cor 11:21), but they were importing social stratification from Corinth into that communal meal. Explicit references to "his own meal" (11:21) and to despising the "have nots" (11:22) make best sense when seen in the light of the widespread practice of basing seating and food distribution upon one's

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place in society.

Some of Paul's strongest language of condemnation against the church of God in Corinth is found in his treatment of abuses of the Lord's Dinner. He issues strong warnings against those Corinthian believers who have violated the very heart of the horizontal dimension of the Lord's Dinner (11:30–34). Since virtually every problem that the Corinthians had at the Lord's Dinner was horizontal (with their fellow believers) and not vertical (with God), it is easy to understand why many interpreters view the word "body" in 11:29 as a reference to the assembly as the body of Christ, meaning the participants who break the one bread (cf. 10:17). To be sure, Paul's corrective for the Corinthian abuses comes from Jesus' words of institution (11:23–26)—words that introduce the terms bread and

blood (11:27–29)—but there is no internal evidence that the Corinthian problem was one of profaning the elements of the bread and the blood themselves or of failing to meditate appropriately upon the cross of Jesus during the meal.

Parting Ways With Culture in Worship in 1 Corinthians 12–14

Christian assemblies will always mirror to some degree facets of their surrounding culture. The vital question is, which facets are acceptable and which are not? As Paul must warn the Corinthians, some facets of worship are in direct opposition to the "command of the Lord" and are ignored only at great risk (14:37–38).

1 Cor 12:1–3 serves us well in informing us about the cultural and spiritual background of the church of God in Corinth, from which the issues treated in this section (chapters 12–14) arose. In particular, 12:1–2 makes it obvious that the spiritual misinformation and distorted perspectives held by some of the Corinthians on these problems arose from their idolatrous Gentile heritage. It is crucial to remember that most of the Gentile church members addressed in this section had been rescued from the jaws of paganism only within the previous four years. It was the residual spiritual values and worldviews they had brought into the church that kept them in a state of spiritual confusion. The more we perceive the connection between the introductory comments of 12:1–3 and the remainder of this three-chapter section, the more accurately we can understand Paul and his message.

The fact that so much of Paul's corrective discussion in chapters 12–14 is carried on under the rubric of the Spirit may well reflect his deference to the preoccupation of some of his formerly pagan converts with "spirit." For instance, in Paul's two other treatments of "gifts," in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4, he does not devote this kind of attention to the Holy Spirit. However, even here in 1 Cor 12:4–11 he avoids the polytheistic practice of attributing different divine workings to different deities; he retains a triune Godhead with the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God (12:4–6). Paul's deeply rooted theocentricism (8:6) is behind his affirmation that it is God the Father who owns responsibility for all the activity among all the believers (12:6)! Because of the God-centered nature of his religion, Paul would find direct address, direct praise, and direct worship of the Holy Spirit totally unacceptable.

The partial list of gifts presented in chapter 12 is certainly at home in both the Christian assembly and the Greco-Roman world. Students of the New Testament know of charlatans such as Bar-Jesus and Simon Magus; students of Greco-Roman culture know of the many claims in that world of miracles, exorcisms, tongues, and prophecies. It is little wonder that new converts, fresh from the active world of polytheism and animism, could be confused about when and how the one true God was at work (cf. 12:3).

Since a factious and judgmental spirit has impacted the Corinthian's understanding of the working of God's gifts (e.g., 12:24–25), Paul's first order of business is to remind them of the supremacy of love in their interactions and in their ideas regarding each other and each other's gifts. In 13:1–3 Paul argues that all gifts, even miraculous ones, are of no virtue if not performed in the context of *agape*. Then, perhaps because of the strife at Corinth, Paul lists some of love's obvious characteristics (13:4–7). Finally, he demonstrates the superiority of possessing love over possessing gifts by using a temporal argument—that is, love is eternal, while gifts are temporal and will cease into nothingness at God's eschatological perfection (13:8–13).

Paul's eulogy of love is directly supportive of his teachings in chapter 14. The term edification (14:3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 26) is used by Paul in 14:1–5 to show what love demands toward the assembly of fellow believers. Paul's preference for prophecy over tongues stems directly from his preference for *agape* over self-satisfaction in matters of the Christian assembly.

In 14:6–19 Paul takes his stand against the influence of the pagan cults of his day, whose adherents placed greater confidence in the experiences of their "spirits" than those of their minds (14:14). Paul expresses neither support nor sympathy for an assembly where a piety based on religious experience and feeling is promoted at the expense of one based on rational engagement (14:15–19). Paul's view here does not stem from any anti-emotional conviction; he himself, after all, is a tongue-speaker (14:18). Rather, Paul knows that self-focused religious experiences have no place in the assembly (14:16–17).

One of the cardinal beliefs of the pagan world from which many of the Corinthian believers were converted

was that prophecies could occur only when a prophet was completely possessed by the deity, losing all personal control. Some Christian prophets—young converts who may have still held that view—were likely not amenable to Paul's teaching on the silence of prophets (14:29–32). Nevertheless, Paul demands that Christian prophets realize that the individual prophet does have control over his own spirit in prophecies given by the one true God. Moreover, the "loss of control" approach to Christian prophesying, according to Paul, conflicts with the very nature of God. The Christian's God, whose reputation is at stake during each assembly, should not be implicated in the pandemonium so typical of Corinthian assemblies. In fact, Paul argues, God is the author of peace and order in all the assemblies of all the saints everywhere (14:32–33).

Summary

The first letter of the apostle Paul to the believers in Corinth addressed a number of issues arising from their worship assemblies. In each case, Paul admonished the Corinthians to correct the abuses that had crept into their otherwise appropriate forms of worship. Speaking in tongues, one of the Spirit's good gifts that was meant to be a vehicle of praise to God—one that Paul himself possessed—had become for many a sign of spiritual superiority and was being practiced in a climate of disorder and without interpretation. Table fellowship at the Lord's Dinner, the horizontal dimension of the meal, was being mocked by the believers' importation of the worst excesses of their society's meals and banquets: social stratification, arguing, and drunkenness. The head covering practice of women and men who were praying and prophesying in the assembly was at odds with the divinely ordained headship arrangement. Not one of those particular worship practices is an issue for us today. But understood in their historical context, the abuses and Paul's corrections of them can give us direction in examining and evaluating our own worship practices—both comfortable customs of long standing and attractive new forms.

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