

Glorify Christ: Honor, Headship, and God's Design in Worship

1 Corinthians 11:2–16

BIG IDEA: *God-glorifying worship reflects His divine design—marked by Christ-centered authority, gender distinctions, and humble submission that points to the unity and beauty of the Triune God. Thus, Christian worship should reflect Christ's nature, and participants should display His character through their conduct.*

WHAT'S TRUE: Worship is not a neutral activity—it must reflect Christ's lordship, affirm God's created order, and honor the distinctions between male and female as part of the gospel's cosmic witness.

WHAT TO DO: Embrace your God-given role with joy. Men—lead humbly, as Christ. Women—submit joyfully, as the church to Christ. Let your worship—in form, posture, and attitude—communicate the nature of the Triune God.

BACKGROUND: If worship is about glorifying God, then everything in worship should reflect God's character. That includes not just *what* we do but *how* we do it. We often assume worship is just about sincerity or emotion—but in this passage, Paul insists that our outward conduct must align with the truth of God's design. Chapters 8–10 focused on individual conscience and idolatry, personal freedoms, and not allowing personal liberties to hinder the Gospel. Now, in chapters 11–14, Paul addresses corporate order in the church gathering. 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 tackles the issue of how men and women were presenting themselves in public worship, particularly concerning head coverings and hair—a topic that seems odd to us today but was highly significant in Corinthian culture. Corinth was a culture steeped in status, fashion, and pagan ritual. Worship gatherings were held in homes, where people often brought their habits from Roman society. For instance, men in pagan rituals covered their heads with their togas as a sign of honor to idols. Women unveiled in public were often signaling sexual availability, independence, or worse, mimicking pagan banquet practices where modesty was disregarded. Head coverings weren't about hats or fashion—they were about what your posture said about your God and your relationships with other people. So, in this passage, Paul isn't giving arbitrary dress codes. He's asking: *when you worship, do your actions reflect Christ and the order God has set in creation?*

1. Worship Must Reflect God's Relational Authority Structure (vv. 2–3)

Key Principle: *In corporate worship, there is voluntary submission to authority.*

A. Paul begins with an affirmation to frame his correction

- “Traditions” = apostolic teachings handed down (like vv. 23–26).

B. Paul outlines a divine pattern of headship (v.3, see 3:23, Eph. 5:22-33)

- God (the Father) is the head of Christ → Christ is the head over the church and has authority over every man → Man (*husband*) is the head of the woman (*wife*).
- “*God is the head of Christ*,” refers to the Father's authority over the incarnate Messiah, who, as the God-man, voluntarily submitted to God.
- “*Head*” (Greek *kephalē*) means *authority over*, or preeminence, and not *source only*. It refers to relational authority, not intrinsic value.

c. Christ's voluntary submission is the standard (also Jn 5:18; 1Co 15:27–28; Php 2:6)

- Christ submitted to the Father (Jn 5:18; Php 2:6), not because He was lesser (He is God), but to fulfill His redemptive role. Therefore, male headship does not imply superiority, nor does female submission imply inferiority. They have different functional roles.
- Thus, a wife's submission to her husband does not mean that she is inferior, for Christ submits to the Father but is also equal with him.

D. Worship must affirm God's authority structure

- Just as pagan worship embodied their false values, Christian worship must communicate submission to Christ and God's order and design.

Application:

- ✓ Men, submit to Christ visibly and joyfully.
- ✓ Women, reflect marital fidelity and humility in your public witness.
- ✓ The Trinity is our model—unity with distinction, submission w/o inferiority.

2. Worship Must Visibly Affirm Spiritual Allegiance (vv. 4–6)

Key Principle: *Worship includes outward expressions that symbolize our loyalty to Christ and distinguish us from the world's false worship.*

A. Men must not imitate pagan forms of piety (4)

- Roman men would veil their heads during pagan worship (pulling the toga over and alongside the head) to show reverence to false gods. This mimicked the imperial cult (e.g., Caesar Augustus) and dishonored Christ when it occurred in a Christian worship gathering.
- Covering the head like pagans in worship sent the wrong message—an association with idolatrous rituals. Paul says this dishonors their head, who is Christ. This is not just about hats or hair—wearing a toga alongside the head mimicked pagan worship practices and allegiance to a false God.

B. Wives must not imitate pagan or promiscuous forms of appearance (5–6)

- An uncovered head in Corinth suggested a woman was either unmarried, sexually available, or aligning with pagan religious practices. Some pagan women even shaved their heads in ritual devotion to false gods. Paul equates uncovering the head in worship with such shameful practices, which dishonored both her husband and Christ by blurring the lines between true worship and pagan ritual.

C. The veil was a symbol of covenantal fidelity

- In marriage ceremonies, the Roman bride was veiled to signify her exclusivity. And in worship, the act of unveiling blurred the clear lines between Christian marriage and pagan customs.
- Christian worship took place in house churches. Wives unveiled in their homes as a social norm, but in mixed church gatherings, it sent the wrong signal—especially if only society's elite women removed them.

Application:

- ✓ Christians must care how their appearance and conduct reflect Christ.
- ✓ Worship isn't private—it's a public testimony of allegiance and identity.
- ✓ Dress and behavior in church should point to humility, not status or self.

3. **Worship Should Reflect God's Good Design in Creation (vv. 7–10)**

Key Principle: *The created order of male and female reflects God's glory and wisdom; worship must not confuse or reject these distinctions.*

A. Man is the image and glory of God (v.7a)

- Man reflects God's authority and stewardship as the first created.
- Covering the head in worship obscures that glory and mimics paganism

B. Woman is the glory of man (vv. 7b–9)

- Not in value but in relational purpose: she was made from man and for him. Her role completes creation and brings honor to her husband.

C. The head covering displays submission to God's structure (v.10)

- "Authority on her head" likely refers to the veil as a visible cultural symbol of voluntary submission to her husband and, by extension, Christ.

D. "Because of the Angels" (v.10b)

- Worship is a cosmic event. Angels observe the church (Eph 3:10; 1 Pet 1:12). Disorder or rebellion dishonors the God whom they praise.

Application:

- ✓ Celebrate God's design for men and women in creation—not as restrictive, but as purposeful and glorious. Ask: *"Does my life and worship affirm God's design, or do I unintentionally blur it?"*

4. **Worship Must Be Grounded in Interdependence, Not Individualism (vv. 11–12)**

Key Principle: *Gender roles reflect God's design and creative order, not independence. Men and women depend on each other and glorify God together in mutual love and purpose.*

A. Paul balances his argument with interdependence (v.11)

- Man reflects God's authority and stewardship as the first created.
- In the Lord, male headship never justifies arrogance or oppression.
- Both genders are essential to God's purposes and church health.

B. Woman came from man, but now man comes through woman (v.12)

- Adam's rib formed Eve, but every man since has been born of a woman.
- *All come from God—none can boast.*

C. Christian worship must reflect this balance

- Authority without love is tyranny.
- Equality without order is chaos.
- Worship holds both truths in tension: distinction and mutual need.

Application:

- ✓ Men, lead in Christ's love (spiritually and in the home). Women, submit in Christ's strength. Churches, uphold God's design/order w/o distortion.

5. **Worship Should Respect God's Witness Through Nature and the Church (v.13–16)**

Key Principle: *God uses nature, conscience, and church practice to reinforce gender distinctions that honor Him in worship.*

A. “Judge for yourselves” (v.13)

- Paul appeals to Corinthian instinct and propriety.
- Worship should reflect what is proper, not what is provocative.

B. Nature teaches gender distinction (vv. 14–15)

- In that culture, long hair on men signified effeminacy or homosexuality; short hair on women undermined femininity.
- “Though Paul addresses the man’s headship role in marriage (v. 3), which is rooted in creation (v. 8), he also says men and women are not independent of one another. Woman was formed from man (see Gn 2:21–23). But through childbirth, man also comes through woman. And all things come from God—including gender distinctions.” (CSB Study Notes, p. 1827)
- While “nature” here refers to cultural norms to some extent, it reinforced the idea that worship should not blur gender identity.

C. Churches should maintain visible practices that uphold God’s design (v. 16)

- This isn’t just Paul’s opinion—it’s the shared practice of faithful churches.
- Today, the exact symbols may differ—veils, hair length, head coverings—but the underlying principle still applies: *Worship should never blur gender distinctions, dishonor Christ, or mimic worldly rebellion. The church is not free to invent norms that contradict the meaning God intends to communicate through creation, gender, and public order.*

Application:

- ✓ Don’t treat worship as a free-for-all. Respect what Scripture, tradition, and conscience affirm. Worship distinguishes believers from the world.

Paul’s timeless principle in 1 Cor. 11 is this: *In public worship, visible conduct—especially concerning head coverings—should reflect and not obscure God’s created order, especially gender distinctions and authority structures.*

Applying the Principle Today: We live in a very different cultural context. So the key is to preserve the underlying principle, even if the symbolic form has changed.

For example: Is it OK for -Christian- Men to wear their Cowboy Hats in Worship?

Answer: 1) If the hat doesn’t communicate dishonor in the gathered church context. **2)** If it doesn’t disrupt the meaning of the gathering. **3)** If it is removed when in prayer, or if preaching, or in times of reverence. **When Is It Not Best? Answer: 1)** Even if you mean no dishonor, if it causes other believers to stumble or it distracts from the humility and order of worship, it may not be loving (1 Cor. 10:23–24). **2)** If it resists appropriate submission or signals pride (someone insists on wearing it because no one tells me what to do). That attitude violates the very principle Paul defends. **3.)** If you’re leading worship or praying publicly. Paul’s focus in v.4 is on men praying or prophesying/proclaiming the inspired revelation of God. Those in visible roles should be especially cautious that nothing outward distracts from Christ’s authority. **If you are unsure, err on the side of reverence**—especially when leading, praying, or preaching in gathered formal worship. Paul’s instruction against head coverings for men was about rejecting pagan, gender-confusing, and prideful associations. Men who wear hats today don’t generally carry those connotations. Therefore, they’re not inherently inappropriate—but context, humility, and love should help guide whether or when they’re worn in worship and if Christ honoring or not.