

# Homiletics Analysis: 1 Corinthians 11

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## Content & Intent

### This Text — Content

First Corinthians 11 divides into two distinct but thematically connected sections. The first (vv. 2–16) addresses the practice of head coverings in corporate worship, grounding the instruction in a theology of ordered relationships: God–Christ–man–woman, with each relationship carrying its own glory and honor expressed through visible practice. The second and longer section (vv. 17–34) addresses the Lord’s Supper, where Paul moves from commendation to sharp rebuke: the Corinthians are not merely doing the Supper imperfectly — they are not doing it at all in any meaningful sense. Their gathering has become an occasion for social stratification, where the wealthy eat their own meal and the poor go hungry, destroying the very unity the Supper is meant to display and proclaim. Paul responds by restating the dominical institution of the Supper (vv. 23–26), defining its purpose as proclamation of the Lord’s death until He comes, and then issuing a solemn warning: eating and drinking without discerning the body brings judgment — even physical judgment already visible in their community in the form of weakness, illness, and death (vv. 29–30). The corrective is self-examination before participation (v. 28), proper waiting for one another (v. 33), and, where necessary, eating at home to avoid compounding guilt (v. 34).

### This Text — Intent

God’s intent through this chapter is to restore the Corinthians — and every subsequent congregation — to a right understanding of corporate worship as ordered, embodied participation in realities larger than the individual. The chapter’s two sections share a common underlying claim: the way the body behaves in gathered worship is not liturgical preference but theological statement. Head coverings and Lord’s Supper practices are not aesthetic choices — they are public enactments of who God is, what Christ has done, and how His people relate to one another. God is seeking to produce in the reader a sober, reverent, and corporate-minded approach to worship — one that honors both divine order (section one) and the unity of Christ’s body (section two), and that recognizes the serious consequences of treating sacred practices as mere custom or occasion for self-expression.

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**Subject Sentence:** Corporate worship enacts theological realities — dishonoring its order and unity brings judgment.

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**Primary Claim:** God is calling the church to treat its gathered worship practices with reverence and theological seriousness, because the way believers conduct themselves in worship either proclaims the truth of the gospel or contradicts and corrupts it — and He will not leave that corruption unjudged.

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## Interpretive Evaluation

### Head Coverings (vv. 2–16): Cultural Relative or Theological Absolute?

The most significant interpretive divergence in the chapter's first section concerns whether Paul's instruction on head coverings is a culturally conditioned application of an abiding theological principle or a timeless, universally binding practice. Egalitarian readings (common in mainline Protestant and some evangelical traditions) tend to read the entire section as culturally specific — the honor/shame dynamics of Greco-Roman Corinth made head coverings a relevant expression of appropriate gender distinction, but the expression itself is not binding today. Complementarian and broadly Reformed readings typically distinguish between the theological ground (the ordered relationships of God–Christ–man–woman, grounded in creation, not culture, vv. 7–9) and the cultural expression (the covering itself), arguing that while the specific form may be culturally situated, the underlying principle of visible distinction and ordered glory in worship is not.

The text itself resists a fully culturalizing reading: Paul appeals explicitly to creation (v. 8–9), to the angels (v. 10), and to the nature of glory relationships (vv. 7, 14–15) — not merely to local convention. At the same time, his closing appeal to “custom” (v. 16) and “nature” (vv. 14–15) introduces complexity. The Reformed reading is preferred: the theological ground (creation-ordered relationships expressed visibly in worship) is binding; the specific cultural expression (the covering) is applied differently across contexts. The error to avoid in either direction is collapsing the distinction — either binding the covering itself as timeless (which Paul's own “nature/custom” language does not support) or dismissing the entire section as culturally obsolete (which Paul's creation-grounded argument does not allow).

### The Lord's Supper (vv. 17–34): Sacramental, Memorial, or Proclamatory?

The second major interpretive divergence concerns the nature of the Lord's Supper itself. Roman Catholic interpretation reads Paul's “discerning the body” (v. 29) primarily in terms of the real presence of Christ in the elements — failure to recognize the body of *Christ* in the bread results in judgment. Lutheran readings affirm a real but non-transubstantiated presence, reading the warning similarly. Zwinglian (memorialism) readings treat the Supper purely as a memorial act — “in remembrance of me” (v. 24) is the controlling phrase — and “discerning the body” refers to recognizing the meaning of the symbol. The Reformed reading follows Calvin and is substantiated most clearly by the passage's own argument: the primary referent of “body” in verse 29 is the ecclesial body — the church as Christ's body — which is the very concern Paul has been addressing throughout the

chapter (the divisions, the failure to wait, the shaming of the poor). This is confirmed by vv. 33–34, where the corrective is not eucharistic precision but waiting for one another. The Supper is a real participation in Christ and a real proclamation of His death (v. 26) — not bare symbol — but the immediate problem Paul addresses is horizontal (the body of believers), not primarily vertical (the eucharistic elements).

This does not mean the elements are irrelevant to Paul’s warning — the institution narrative (vv. 23–25) and the proclamatory function (v. 26) establish that the Supper is much more than a meal. But the specific failure triggering the judgment warning in vv. 29–30 is the Corinthians’ treatment of one another, which is the Reformed reading’s primary contribution and the one most defensible from the passage’s own structure.

### **The “Dominion” Argument (vv. 10–12): Women, Authority, and Angels**

Verse 10 — “a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels” — generates significant interpretive diversity regarding both the nature of the authority (whose?) and the reference to angels (which?). Some readings (including some Pentecostal/charismatic traditions) read the angels as protective spiritual beings who require appropriate worship order. Others read them as witnesses to heavenly order being mirrored on earth. Still others read “authority” as the woman’s own authority to pray and prophesy (vv. 5, 13), not a sign of subordination. The Reformed reading takes “authority” as referring to the ordered relationship Paul has been describing, with the covering functioning as the visible sign of that ordering — the angels as witnesses to proper creaturely ordering before God. This reading fits best with the chapter’s overall argument and with the OT background of angelic witness to covenant worship (cf. 1 Cor. 4:9). Qualified acknowledgment of the “woman’s own authority” reading is warranted — it surfaces the important fact that Paul is not silencing women in worship (they pray and prophesy, v. 5) but ordering how they do so.

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## **Key Canonical Support**

- **Genesis 1:26–27; 2:18–25** — Paul’s own appeal to creation order in vv. 8–9 roots the head covering argument in the foundational differentiation and complementarity of male and female; the passage is unintelligible without this backdrop.
- **Exodus 24:3–11; Luke 22:14–20** — The institution of the Lord’s Supper in the Synoptic tradition and the covenant meal of Exodus ground Paul’s “received from the Lord” formula (v. 23) — the Supper is not a Pauline innovation but a received dominical tradition with deep covenant roots.
- **1 Corinthians 10:16–17** — Paul’s earlier treatment of the Supper in the same letter: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body.” This is the direct

theological statement that vv. 17–34 apply practically — eating together as one body proclaims the unity Christ has secured.

- **Hebrews 10:24–25** — The call not to neglect gathering together, with attention to encouraging one another, provides canonical grounding for the corporate dimension of worship that 1 Corinthians 11 assumes and defends.
- **Revelation 4–5** — The heavenly worship scenes provide the ultimate canonical frame for Paul’s concern with ordered, reverent corporate worship — earthly worship is a participation in and anticipation of heavenly worship, which is never casual, never self-serving, and always ordered around the Lamb.

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**Aim:** To lead the reader to treat every dimension of corporate worship — its visible ordering, its communal practices, and especially the Lord’s Supper — as theological enactment rather than personal preference, producing both reverence and genuine care for the body of Christ.

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## Content Table

| Verse(s) | Content                                                           | Notes                                                                                              |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1        | Paul’s transitional call: imitate me as I imitate Christ          | Bridges chapters 10 and 11; sets the standard by which all worship practice is measured            |
| 2        | Commendation for holding to the traditions as delivered           | Unique in the chapter — Paul commends before he corrects                                           |
| 3        | The theological ground: the head structure — God/Christ/man/woman | “Head” (kephalē) carries authority, honor, and source — not hierarchy of worth                     |
| 4        | Man dishonors his head by covering his head in prayer/prophecy    | The order is not cultural decoration but theological statement                                     |
| 5–6      | Woman dishonors her head by uncovering in prayer/prophecy         | Parallels v. 4; the social disgrace of the shaved head makes the point concrete                    |
| 7        | Man as image and glory of God; woman as glory of man              | Not a denial of woman as image-bearer (Gen. 1:27) but a statement of relational ordering and honor |

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                           | Notes                                                                                                                                     |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 8–9      | Creation order grounds the instruction: woman from man, for man                                   | Direct appeal to Genesis 2 — the argument is not cultural but creational                                                                  |
| 10       | Woman to have a symbol of authority because of the angels                                         | Most debated verse in the section; angels as witnesses to proper creaturely worship ordering                                              |
| 11–12    | Corrective: in the Lord, neither is independent — mutual interdependence                          | Paul immediately qualifies against any misreading of male dominance; both are from and through the other                                  |
| 13–15    | Appeal to nature: long hair as natural covering for women                                         | “Nature” functions as a secondary corroborating argument, not the primary theological ground                                              |
| 16       | Final word: no such other custom exists in the churches of God                                    | Closes with ecclesiastical consensus — not Paul’s novel rule but universal church practice                                                |
| 17       | Transition: from commendation to rebuke — coming together for worse                               | The sharpest rhetorical pivot in the chapter                                                                                              |
| 18–19    | Report of divisions (schismata) at Corinthian gatherings                                          | Paul partially believes the reports; divisions may serve to reveal who is genuine                                                         |
| 20–21    | The fundamental failure: it is not the Lord’s Supper they are eating                              | Each eats his own meal; the poor go hungry while others are drunk — the meal has become self-serving                                      |
| 22       | Rhetorical rebuke: do you despise the church of God and humiliate the poor?                       | Sharp: this is not a minor liturgical infraction but an act of contempt for the body                                                      |
| 23–24    | Dominical institution restated: bread — “This is my body, broken for you; do this in remembrance” | Paul “received from the Lord” — apostolic tradition, not innovation; “in remembrance” is anamnēsis — active, proclamatory re-presentation |
| 25       | The cup — “This cup is the                                                                        | Covenantal framing: the                                                                                                                   |

| Verse(s) | Content                                                                                                                                 | Notes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 26       | new covenant in my blood;<br>do this as often as you<br>drink”<br><br>The Supper as proclamation<br>of Christ’s death until He<br>comes | Supper is participation in the<br>new covenant established<br>by Christ’s blood<br><br>The Supper is<br>eschatologically framed —<br>“until He comes” gives the<br>meal both backward<br>reference (the cross) and<br>forward reference (the<br>return) |
| 27       | Warning: eating or drinking<br>unworthily is sin against<br>Christ’s body and blood                                                     | “Unworthily” (anaxiōs) is<br>adverbial — it describes the<br>manner, not the worthiness<br>of the person                                                                                                                                                |
| 28       | The corrective practice: self-<br>examination before<br>participation                                                                   | Not self-disqualification but<br>self-evaluation — “examine”<br>(dokimazō) implies<br>discernment and then act                                                                                                                                          |
| 29       | Eating without discerning<br>the body brings judgment                                                                                   | “The body” — most naturally<br>refers to the ecclesial body<br>given the chapter’s<br>sustained focus on divisions                                                                                                                                      |
| 30       | Evidence of judgment:<br>weakness, illness, and<br>death among them                                                                     | Startling — divine discipline<br>is already visible in the<br>congregation; Paul’s<br>pastoral concern is urgent                                                                                                                                        |
| 31–32    | Self-judgment prevents<br>divine judgment; divine<br>discipline distinguishes from<br>condemnation                                      | The distinction between<br>discipline (chastening of<br>sons) and condemnation is<br>theologically crucial                                                                                                                                              |
| 33–34    | Practical correction: wait for<br>one another; if hungry, eat at<br>home                                                                | The corrective is communal<br>— the solution to Corinthian<br>Supper failure is genuine<br>fellowship, not mere<br>liturgical precision                                                                                                                 |

## Divisions Table

| Division | Verses | Label                        |
|----------|--------|------------------------------|
| 1        | 1      | Bridge and Standard: Imitate |

| Division | Verses | Label                                                                         |
|----------|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|          |        | Christ                                                                        |
| 2        | 2–16   | Ordered Glory: Head Coverings and the Theology of Worship Embodiment          |
| 2a       | 2–6    | The Practice and Its Violations                                               |
| 2b       | 7–12   | The Theological Ground: Creation Order and Mutual Interdependence             |
| 2c       | 13–16  | Corroborating Arguments: Nature and Universal Church Practice                 |
| 3        | 17–22  | The Failure Named: Corinthian Supper Practices as Anti-Gospel                 |
| 4        | 23–26  | The Standard Restated: Dominical Institution and Proclamatory Purpose         |
| 5        | 27–34  | The Warning and the Corrective: Examination, Discernment, and True Fellowship |

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## Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

**Subject Sentence:** Corporate worship enacts theological realities — dishonoring its order and unity brings judgment.

**Primary Claim:** God is calling the church to treat its gathered worship practices with reverence and theological seriousness, because the way believers conduct themselves in worship either proclaims the truth of the gospel or contradicts and corrupts it — and He will not leave that corruption unjudged.

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## Applications (Five)

**1. Examine what your worship practices are actually saying.** (*Mind/Belief*) Paul's argument in both sections of this chapter rests on a single premise: worship practices are not neutral — they communicate. The head-covering argument assumes that visible bodily practice in worship makes a theological statement about order and glory. The Lord's

Supper argument assumes that eating together either proclaims Christ's death or mocks it. The application is not first behavioral but cognitive: stop treating worship forms as matters of personal preference and begin asking what your practices are actually saying about God, about the gospel, and about the nature of the church. Most contemporary Christians have inherited a thoroughgoing aesthetics-first approach to worship; Paul insists on a theology-first approach. The question is not "does this feel meaningful?" but "is this true? Does this practice tell the truth about who God is and what Christ has done?"

**2. Let the eschatological frame of the Lord's Supper recalibrate your participation.**

*(Affections/Worship)* Paul's defining statement in verse 26 — "you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" — places the Supper between two poles: a past event (the cross) and a future event (the return). Most Christians approach the Table looking backward (remembrance) but rarely with the forward-leaning urgency of "until He comes." Every celebration of the Supper is a covenant meal on the way to the wedding supper of the Lamb — it is the church living in the in-between, sustained by the promise of return. Let that eschatological horizon reshape what you feel when you take the bread and cup. This is not a somber memorial — it is a proclamation, and proclamations are public, urgent, and pointed at the future. Come to the Table as someone waiting for a promised arrival, not merely commemorating a past death.

**3. Bring genuine self-examination to the Lord's Table — not self-disqualification.**

*(Mind/Belief)* The misreading of verse 28 that keeps sincere believers away from the Table — "I'm not worthy to take Communion today" — is precisely not Paul's point. The word translated "examine" (*dokimazō*) is the word for testing something to see if it is genuine, then acting on the finding. Paul is not calling the Corinthians to a purity test that only the most spiritually advanced can pass; he is calling them to the kind of honest self-assessment that makes participation meaningful rather than mechanical. What he warns against is not unworthiness of person but unworthiness of manner — approaching the Table without discerning what it means and what it demands. The corrective to Corinthian failure is not abstention; it is awareness. Examine yourself, then come.

**4. Treat the gathered body of Christ as a body — not as an audience sharing a space.**

*(Affections/Worship)* The Corinthian failure was not primarily liturgical — it was relational. They came to the gathering and ate their own food, drank their own wine, and left the poor members hungry and humiliated. Paul's verdict: this is not the Lord's Supper. The Supper requires that the members actually function as a body — which means awareness of, concern for, and active regard for every member present, especially the most vulnerable. In contemporary church culture where anonymity is normalized and "attending a service" has replaced "belonging to a body," Paul's rebuke lands with particular force: are you despising the church of God? Are you humiliating those who have nothing? The application is not a program — it is a posture: when you gather, gather for the others, not for yourself.

**5. Submit your personal worship preferences to the theological standards of the gathered church.**

*(Will/Behavior)* The Corinthians' failure in both sections of the chapter has a common root: they treated corporate worship as an extension of personal

preference and social habit. The wealthy brought their own food; the culturally comfortable dispensed with the covering convention; neither group considered what their practice communicated or whom it harmed. The concrete application is the same in both cases: submit. Where the church has established practices of worship based on theological reasoning — not mere tradition — the mature believer submits those preferences in service of the body's unity and clarity of witness. This is not uniformity for its own sake but the recognition that corporate worship is not about you. Identify one area of your approach to gathered worship where personal preference has displaced theological intentionality, and bring it under the discipline of the Primary Claim.

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## Theological Importance

**Theological Importance:** First Corinthians 11 makes a claim that cuts against the grain of every age's tendency to treat worship form as secondary: how the church conducts its gathered life is not liturgical housekeeping but theological statement. The doctrine of the Lordship of Christ extends into the physical, embodied practices of worship — the arrangement of bodies, the ordering of relationships, the way bread and cup are received or abused. Paul's theology of worship is irreducibly incarnational: truth must take bodily form. The Lord's Supper in particular is revealed here as a proclamatory act — an oral-visual sermon delivered by the gathered body every time it meets at the Table, declaring Christ's death and awaiting His return. The judgment warnings of vv. 29–32 establish that God takes the integrity of these enacted proclamations with a seriousness that the church must match — He disciplines His children when they corrupt the worship He has instituted, precisely because He is jealous for the truth His worship is meant to communicate.

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## Reformed Theological Significance

**Reformed Theological Significance:** This chapter is foundational to the Reformed understanding of corporate worship as the regulated service of God — the regulative principle does not appear here explicitly, but its logic is assumed throughout: God has prescribed how He is to be worshiped, and deviation is not a matter of taste but of obedience. The head-covering section grounds ordered relationships in creation rather than culture, reflecting the Reformed insistence that the creational order is not abrogated but redeemed and honored in Christ. The Lord's Supper section provides the biblical anchor for the Reformed understanding of the Supper as a real means of grace, a covenant meal, and an ecclesially-constituted act — not a private devotional exercise but a corporate proclamation that requires and produces genuine fellowship. The discipline warnings (vv. 29–32) undergird the Reformed practice of fencing the Table — not as elitism but as pastoral care — and the covenantal framing of “new covenant in my blood” (v. 25) ties the Supper directly to the Reformed understanding of redemptive history as

covenantally structured, with Christ as the covenant mediator whose blood establishes and seals the new covenant community.

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## Main Takeaway

The Lord's Supper is not a ritual you attend — it is a proclamation you make with your body in the company of the body, declaring that Christ died and is coming again. When you eat carelessly, you lie. When you eat without regard for your brothers and sisters, you contradict the unity Christ died to secure. Come to the Table examined, attentive, and expectant — and never come alone in your mind, even when the room is full.

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## Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the two sections as disconnected.** The most common homiletical failure with this chapter is preaching two separate sermons — one on head coverings, one on the Lord's Supper — without surfacing the theological unity beneath both: corporate worship practices are theological statements, not personal preferences. The chapter's coherence is lost when the sections are siloed. Preachers should name the connection and let it strengthen both halves of the exposition.
- **Avoiding the head-covering section entirely.** Many expositors skip or heavily abbreviate vv. 2–16 because the cultural complexity feels unresolvable or the gender dynamics feel politically hazardous. This is a failure of nerve that leaves the congregation without Paul's foundational theology of ordered worship and its creational grounding. The text must be engaged, even if with appropriate pastoral care about application to specific cultural expressions.
- **Preaching “worthiness” as the barrier to the Table.** The phrase “eating and drinking in an unworthy manner” (v. 27) is among the most misapplied in the NT. Applied as a personal purity standard, it keeps the most conscientious believers — the very ones Paul is not addressing — away from the Supper, while the ones Paul is addressing (the careless, the indifferent, the socially stratified) continue to participate without a second thought. The passage must be read with care: “unworthy” modifies the manner of participation, not the worthiness of the person. Faithful preaching assures the genuinely penitent and solemnizes the careless — not vice versa.
- **Reducing “discerning the body” to eucharistic doctrine alone.** Feeding a sacramental theology debate into verse 29 without attending to the passage's immediate context (the divisions, the poor going hungry, the social stratification) misses Paul's primary concern. The body being discerned is first the ecclesial body — the community of brothers and sisters present at the Table. Preaching that

focuses only on the presence of Christ in the elements without addressing the presence of Christ in the people seated around the Table gives the Corinthian church a pass on the very failure Paul is addressing.

- **Failing to preach the eschatological frame.** Verse 26 — “until He comes” — is almost never the center of a Lord’s Supper sermon, but it is the phrase that gives the Supper its full meaning. The Table is not only backward-facing (memorial) but forward-facing (anticipation). Preaching that stops at “do this in remembrance” produces a melancholy, retrospective piety; preaching that includes “until He comes” produces the urgent, expectant, eschatologically-alive posture Paul intends.
- **Soft-pedaling the judgment warnings.** Verses 29–30 — weakness, illness, and death in the congregation as divine discipline — are among the most sobering statements in the Pauline corpus. Preachers frequently soften or spiritualize them to avoid uncomfortable territory. But Paul’s argument requires the warnings to land with their full weight: God is not indifferent to the corruption of His worship, and His discipline of His children is real, present, and can be severe. Faithful preaching honors the pastoral urgency Paul himself displays — not to frighten but to awaken the congregation to the seriousness of what they are doing every time they gather at the Table.