

# Living in Eden

1 Corinthians 11:2-16



TheEdenPodcast.com

**Transcript of Season 4. Episode 1. 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.  
Getting this passage right, by Bruce C. E. Fleming**

**Intro:**

Welcome to **The Eden Podcast** where we think again about the Bible on women and men and we start with a correct understanding of what happened in the Garden of Eden back in the beginning.

I'm Bruce C. E. Fleming, founder of the Tru316 Project and a former Academic Dean and Professor of Practical Theology.

**The focus of this episode is:**

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Getting this passage right.

Here's some good advice. "Don't take verses out of context."

How can you do that? One way is to cut off the beginning of a passage. If you miss the beginning thoughts of a passage you risk missing the meaning of the following message. Sadly, this happens every time people skip over 1 Corinthians 11:2 and start at verse 3. And most people start after verse 2. They leave out this critical verse!

In verse 2, Paul begins a passage of praise. He praises the Christians at Corinth for resisting pressure to behave differently. He praises them for following exactly what he had advised them to do.

Only after the end of the passage of verses 2-16 does he begin to criticize the Corinthians. So, What were they getting right? They were applying what he summarizes in verses 10-12. Have you noticed?

**Wrong assumptions.** In 1962, Don and Carol Richardson risked their lives to share the Gospel with the Sawi people of New Guinea. Their book *Peace Child* tells their unforgettable story of living among a people group where treachery was valued as their highest virtue. They would fatten potential victims with friendship before betraying them for slaughter.

The very first time these pioneer missionaries tried to tell the Sawi headhunting cannibals of New Guinea the Good News about the cross of Christ things went very wrong! This occurred as they were telling about Jesus the night Judas betrayed him with a kiss.

Jesus, the good guy, was praying in the Garden of Gethemane on the hill across from Jerusalem where soon he would be nailed to a cross for our sins. In the night, Judas, the bad guy, came up to him in the darkness with a crowd with clubs and swords. He wanted to

make it clear to them who to arrest. He didn't want them to get the wrong person. He didn't want Jesus to get away. He told the brutal crowd, watch for the one I greet with a kiss. He is the one to arrest.

The listeners held their breath as the scene unfolded before them for the very first time. Up came Judas, the follower, to Jesus his teacher. "Teacher" the betrayer said to Jesus and then kissed him.

The listeners went wild! What a master stroke! What a fantastic betrayal!

The missionaries were horrified at the unexpected response their teaching produced. These headhunting cannibals saw *Judas* as the hero of that night scene. He had just betrayed his victim. To them, he had triumphed!

In the Sawi culture they valued treachery. They would deceive their enemies pretending to be friends. Judas for them was a master of betrayal. Jesus was just a witless target. Undoing the results of that session took lots of work.

In a less spectacular way, people have been getting wrong the message of 1 Corinthians 11. Coming to these verses with the wrong presuppositions, readers and translators alike have missed the message the passage. They have misread the key verses.

Let's start with the overall flow of thought which is:  
**Praise for Proper Practice 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.**

<sup>2</sup>**Now I praise you**, brothers and sisters, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. ...

<sup>10</sup>Therefore, a woman should have authority over her own head ...

<sup>16</sup>But if anyone thinks of being contentious, we have no other custom, nor do the churches of God.

<sup>17</sup>**Now I do not praise you** in giving these next instructions since you come together not for the better but for the worse. ...

**After Paul moved on** from Corinth in his missionary journeys, the church he had founded there continued the practices he had taught them to follow. They followed what he had taught them about women and men ministering to the congregation. God raised up both women and men to lead the congregation in worship and to teach God's Word.

Apparently there were grumblers who tried to restrict some people from leading the group. They wanted their old religious traditions to be followed and grew contentious about it. But the rest of the congregation maintained the course on which Paul had set them. They earned his praise for this.

Paul wanted them to continue what they had started together in Corinth. In every church he started, this was the way he wanted the believers to worship and teach.

**Incomplete or incorrect?** Paul learned from the visitors from Corinth (1:11) that the church had developed four distinct factions. Some people purported to be “of Paul,” others “of Peter,” and still others “of Apollos” or “of Jesus.”

In spite of all this, Paul was still their unquestioned spiritual parent, the one who first planted their church. Divisions of opinion had arisen among them on practical issues dealing with marriage (7:1) and idolatry (8:1; 10:14). Some wanted the church to follow the rules and regulations found in the Jewish oral law, for example in 14:34-35.

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul addresses those in the church at Corinth who wanted to limit the ways women were participating in ministry. Had Paul really meant that women should pray and prophesy along with men? Shouldn't the women have to submit to some extra regulations? Jewish tradition overflowed with restrictions on women. Shouldn't women have to follow these *extra* restrictions too?

In verses 2-16, Paul affirms that women are full members of the body of Christ and are fully gifted by the Holy Spirit to minister in the name of Jesus. Paul appeals to Genesis, and to reason, to restate his case. He is firm. There is no room for dissension on this point of doctrine and practice.

**Five keys to understanding.** A number of people find 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 difficult to understand. Whenever a passage seems difficult, it is important to look at the surrounding context of the passage to see if some tips to its meaning may be found. In this case, the *immediate context* will give us two helpful keys to unlocking the meaning of the passage: **praise** (key #1), and Paul's **three-fold focus** (key #2).

To unlock the meaning of a passage it is also helpful to look for *internal key words* that give insight into the historical context. In this case there are key words in the last and first verses of the passage: “**contentious**” (key #3 in verse 16), and “**traditions**” (key #4 in verse 2).

The most basic key to understanding the meaning of a Bible verse is a clear translation from the original language into modern language. It will be especially helpful to make a **fresh translation** from the Greek of the key action verse in this passage, verse 10. And that's key #5.

**Key to understanding #1: Praise.** Paul praised the Corinthians in verse 2:

<sup>2</sup>I praise you, brothers and sisters, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. ...

Apparently there was difficulty for them in keeping his traditions because, in verse 16, he refers to some who were “contentious.” In spite of these contentious ones, the church at Corinth had remembered what Paul had taught them to do and they had done it.

He did not always praise them. In the next section of his letter he gave them some energetic criticism:

<sup>17</sup>I do not praise you in giving these instructions since you come together not for the better but for the worse. ...

What were the Corinthians doing that earned them the praise or the criticism of Paul? In verses 17 and following it is clear that they were criticized for not conducting themselves properly when they celebrated the Lord’s Supper.

As for verses 2-16, what they were doing that was praiseworthy is often misunderstood. This is where a basic rule of interpretation is helpful:

Whenever you see the word *therefore* in a passage, check to see what it is *there for*.

In this case, a “therefore” occurs at the beginning of verse 10:

<sup>10</sup>therefore, a woman ought to have authority ...

Apparently, the verses leading up to verse 10 argued in favor of what he affirmed in verse 10. Paul had taught, and most of the Corinthians had agreed with him, that a woman *ought to* have authority.

Some people in Corinth had been contentious about this. Paul praised the rest (Key #1) and encouraged them to keep following what he had taught them.

**Key #2: Three-fold focus.** Immediately before writing the words of chapter 11, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:32, “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God....”

It is helpful to note that Paul was sensitive to the needs of these three overlapping groups:

1. Jews
2. Non-Jews (also called Greeks or Gentiles)
3. All Christians without regard to their background

In 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Paul focused parts of the passage on each of these three groups in the church:

- Verses 3-9: to the converted **Jews**.
- Verses 11-12: to everyone in **church**.
- Verses 13-15: to the converted **non-Jews**.

In these three sections, there are details appropriate to each group. Paul's appeal to Nature, in verse 14, is a case in point. The non-Jews would have related to an appeal to Nature, but not the Jews. Paul had to appeal to the Jews on other grounds.

In the verses not addressed to any specific group – verses 2, 10 and 16 – Paul deals with the real business of this passage. He *praises* the Corinthian Christians (verse 2). He *gives instructions* on how to behave (verse 10). He *dismisses* any who want to be contentious (verse 16).

**Key #3: Contention.** A third key to understanding this passage has to do with Paul's reference in verse 16 to those who had been "contentious." The ones who were the most contentious about Paul, his teaching and his practice were *those who promoted Jewish legalism*.

As the early church spread across the Roman Empire there was confusion as to whether Christianity was something new, or whether it was just a subgroup of Judaism. This confusion was understandable since the promises of a coming Messiah had been given to the Jews. Jesus was a Jew. And the first converts were Jews.

When non-Jews began believing in Jesus as their savior it seemed logical to the Jews who had become Christians that the new Gentile believers should become practicing Jews as well. But there were two main reasons why this logic was incorrect.

First, many of the practices required of Jews in the Old Testament served to represent spiritual truths that only pointed to the promised Messiah. The blood sacrifices of spotless animals in the Temple pointed to the ultimate blood sacrifice that would be made by the sinless Messiah. The regulations that guided the behavior of the priests on duty all worked to keep the symbolism of the future spotless Lamb of God perfectly clear.

These practices and these rules were made obsolete with the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The early church dealt with these regulations and discarded them early on. They were famously discussed in depth in the meeting of the church in Jerusalem described in Acts chapter 15.

Second, there were other lesser regulations and rules that had been built up during the hundreds of years that passed between the ministry of the last Old Testament prophet, Malachi, and the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus.

This system of case law and regulations obscured the message of the Old Testament. At times it contradicted it altogether. Jews at the time of Jesus, including Paul, practiced these legalistic regulations to a greater or lesser degree in their daily lives. These regulations were scrupulously followed by the Pharisees. The Scribes were teachers of this law.

One of the things these regulations required was the covering of the head both by women and men. This covering symbolized that sin caused an ongoing separation of the

worshipper from God. Covering the head, hiding the head of the sinner from the holy God, was the appropriate thing to do. Perhaps you have seen movies with an actor playing the role of Jesus covering his head just as he was about to pray to God.

Jesus fought against baseless legalistic Judaism during his earthly ministry. He confounded self-righteous sinners who followed these rules.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus identified and rejected their regulations. Six times he said: “You have heard it said, ..., but I say to you ...” (Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43).

As a Pharisee, Paul had been a scrupulous follower of these laws. But as a Christian, Paul left behind these empty practices. Jesus the Messiah had fulfilled the Old Testament Law and gave each and every believer full status as a child of God (see Galatians 2:14).

During the years following his conversion, Paul became skilled at discerning and discarding the dry husks of legalism. He excelled in teaching truths straight from the Old Testament, especially how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the coming Messiah.

After Paul’s first missionary journey, legalists came and tried to impose Jewish regulations on the converted Gentiles. Paul opposed their teachings.

Acts 15 records that the church in Jerusalem supported Paul in his work and agreed that Christians did not have to convert to Judaism. Nevertheless, Paul continued to face direct opposition from Jews outside the church and frequent contradiction from legalistic Judaizers inside the church.

A number of times, Jews *outside* the church opposed Paul and denounced him publicly. This resulted in beatings, stonings and imprisonments. At other times, Judaizers *within* the church visited places Paul had ministered. They contradicted his teachings to modify them to fit more or less with the oral law.

Here is Paul’s own description of the havoc wreaked by unbelieving Jews who were hostile to the Christians in Thessalonica. This was the church Paul planted in northern Greece before he started the church at Corinth:

<sup>14</sup>For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus. You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, <sup>15</sup>who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. These displease God and are hostile to all people <sup>16</sup>in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved....  
1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

**Key #4: Traditions.** If some of the Corinthians were “contentious,” as Paul said in verse 16, what were they contending for and what were they challenging? Verse 2 tells us. They challenged “the traditions” Paul had taught the Corinthian believers.

What might they have wanted to change? Since, in verse 10, Paul focuses on women, it can be assumed that they were challenging Paul on what he had taught about the status and ministry of Christian women.

There were numerous regulations in the *Jewish oral law* that applied to women *in the synagogue*. These regulations implied, or said outright, that the nature and status of the women was not on a par with the men.

Much like some modern non-Christian religious regulations that require women to cover their heads differently from men, so the ancient Jewish regulations required women to cover their heads in a way different from men. While the Jewish oral law said that men and women both had to cover their heads, there were *many more reasons* given for why women had to cover their heads.

Paul never passed on such legalism to his spiritual children in Christ. If the Jews had their reasons for restricting women, Paul had his for ensuring their full participation in ministry. No wonder people flocked to hear Paul's teaching! He presented a vibrant counterpoint to the dead legalism of his day.

As we will show, Paul's words in verse 10 confronted those who wanted to impose regulations on women believers. Both men and women believers had the right to discard any covering hinting at sin. No one had the right to tell them to do otherwise and it was obviously wrong to do so.

**Key #5: Translations.** In 1 Corinthians 11:10, Paul restated his position. A look at the Greek words in which the New Testament was written makes this quite clear. But modern translations of this passage make it look as if Paul is saying something here *opposite* to what he originally wrote!

Before taking a look at what Paul said these in 13 Greek words, here is a sampling of what translations present verse 10 as saying:

Good News Translation (GNT)

On account of the angels, then, a woman should have a covering over her head to show that she is under her *husband's* authority. (24 words)

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

And so, because of this, and also because of the angels, a woman ought to wear something on her head, as a sign of *her* authority. (26 words)

Living Bible (TLB)

So a woman should wear a covering on her head as a sign that she is under *man's* authority, a fact for all the angels to notice and rejoice in. (30 words)

New International Version (NIV)

It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her *own* head, because of the angels. (20 words)

English Standard Version (ESV)

That is why a wife ought to have a *symbol* of authority *on* her head, because of the angels. (19 words)

Clearly, something is going on here with all these differences from translation to translation.

However, in Greek, verse 10 is made up of just thirteen easy words. The following is a word-for-word transliteration of the Greek of 1 Corinthians 11:10:

- |                         |                  |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| 1. "therefore" or "for" | 7. "to-have"     |
| 2. "this" ("reason")    | 8. "over"        |
| 3. "ought"              | 9. "the" ("her") |
| 4. "the"                | 10. "head"       |
| 5. "woman"              | 11. "because-of" |
| 6. "authority"          | 12. "the"        |
|                         | 13. "angels."    |

The verse can be translated simply as follows in 14 English words:

Therefore, the woman ought to have authority over her head, because of the angels.

Although it rearranged the words, one version translated clearly the original Greek text. It was the TNIV or *Today's New International Version*:

"For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have authority over her own head."

Thus, Paul affirms that a woman is in charge of her own head. How this meaning fits with the verses around it is what we will address next.

End