

# 1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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Date: 26 April 2009

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] This is one of those moments you really appreciate that our church's practice is to preach through a book. Our passage tonight is the one from 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 2 to 16.

A somewhat challenging passage. I was given some advice right before the service about how to make my sermon shorter. Just leave out the bid on gender.

It will be a short sermon indeed. But alas, I cannot do that. Let me pray and then if you want to turn to 1 Corinthians 11, we're going to be looking at verses 2 to 16.

Heavenly Father, give me your spirit that your words would be mine and that your voice would be heard.

In the name of your Son, amen. Seriously, if the musicians want to come up and play like four or five more songs, we can just skip this part.

[ 1 : 1 0 ] Now, any passage that delves into headship, submission, and the roles of men and women is going to be challenging. And it's going to be challenging for a lot of reasons. One is that our culture and even our own feelings about this passage are going to make us question whether or not God actually said this.

Whether or not we can actually trust God to have our best interest as his priority. It's passages like these that challenge most our commitment to the word of God as truth.

They challenge us, I think, at the most fundamental level of obedience. I had an epiphany on Thursday that a lot of the reason I've struggled with this passage is less that I don't think I understand what it says or means, but that passages like these are so difficult to actually apply to yourself.

And so, for the next 20-25 minutes, however long, I'm going to share my best understanding of this passage with you.

And then over the coming days and weeks and months and years, together as a church, we'll figure out how to best live out these words.

[ 2 : 3 7 ] Here's what I think is going on. In this passage, Paul is challenging the Corinthians to represent, when they come together to worship, a right understanding of various relationships, including the male-female relationship, so that God may be glorified.

Again, Paul is exhorting the Corinthian church to maintain a right understanding of gender, as created by God, so that he may be glorified in worship.

How does the passage work? I think verse 2 is a transition from what comes before. Verse 3 is a theological principle that Paul is going to defend.

Verses 4-6 are the actual problems he's trying to address, problems that actually come out of that principle. He lays out in verse 3. And then verses 7-12 and 13-16 are two premises, or presuppositions, on which he is making the argument of the whole passage.

So again, the main argument emerges from a principle, verse 3, a problem, verses 4-6, and two supporting premises, 7-12 and 13-16.

[ 3 : 56 ] So let's take a look at verse 2, the transition. Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.

Seems like a promising opening, doesn't it? I mean, you remember back in chapter 3, he called them spiritual infants, and in chapter 5 he rebuked them for a church discipline issue and called them arrogant.

And for the last four chapters he's been dealing with their contextualization into Roman culture. So, I commend you. Seems pretty positive. Seems like a much welcomed note as he transitions to what are actually going to be four chapters on public worship, some of which is going to be very difficult for the Corinthians to hear.

But notice, like any good orator, he is incredibly specific about which he is commending them. He's thankful that they remember him, probably meaning in prayer, and that they are maintaining the traditions he left them, however imperfectly they may be maintaining them.

So based on what Paul says next, it's also possible that he anticipates that they are actually over-interpreting a particular tradition.

[ 5 : 24 ] A tradition like what he relays in Galatians chapter 3, verse 28. Galatians was a letter written probably just slightly after this letter, but the tradition is there.

Galatians 3, 28. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

It's possible that the Corinthians are making the same mistake that so many modern interpreters of that verse make, and that is running over its actual context, the fact that it's referring to justification before God.

And in justification before God, neither gender nor race nor status make a difference. But Paul's not erasing gender here.

He's not erasing race or status. In Galatians or in 1 Corinthians. In fact, if you read Paul's writings, he specifically rejects that kind of interpretation of this tradition.

[ 6 : 32 ] And so, I think that's why it's so important we actually come to this passage understanding that he's going to defend certain kinds of relationships.

So let's look at the principle. Verse 3. But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

This is the main principle of the passage. Notice that Paul states it before he actually even turns to the problems, the potential problems highlighted by it, or the applications, or even defending it.

And on the surface, it seems pretty simple. These three relationships are brought here together to show their similarity. There is a pattern here. What's the pattern?

What can we actually say about this? This principle. I need to make a few observations. First, notice that it is not strictly hierarchical.

[ 7 : 33 ] He starts with man and Christ, finishes with Christ and God, and in the middle is man and woman. This order clearly does not emphasize some kind of linear hierarchy from God to Christ to man to woman.

Second, while I remain convinced that the challenge of this passage is its application to today, there are a couple of lexical difficulties, a couple of word problems we have to deal with.

One is the meaning of the word head. Head is an imperfect metaphor, and it has caused a great deal of debate. Dictionaries and commentaries that I looked at this week lay out something like, I think, 13 distinct semantic options for what head might mean at any given point.

The dominant one is one that includes overtones of authority and submission. The data on this, I think, is particularly telling.

A guy named Wayne Grudem did a study of 2,336 instances of this word in Greek literature from Herodotus to Plato to Philo to Libanius, including the New Testament and the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

[ 8 : 47 ] 2,004 of them are literal. Head means head. 49 mean something like authority or something to which one submits.

And of the other 283, I couldn't find anything like what the other favorite positions of the commentators was. So I think the data is fairly telling.

Whether you agree with Grudem's conclusions and applications, which I'm inclined not to always, his survey of the data is helpful. But even more helpful than the data is actually how Paul treats these relationships elsewhere.

The head of every man is Christ. Turn to Ephesians 1, 22 and 23. Capricorn 3, 23. Captures this notion clearly.

And he, that is God, put all things under his feet, that is Christ's, and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

[ 9 : 59 ] The church is under submission to Christ as its head. Christian men and women are under Christ as the head.

The head of a woman or wife is man or her husband. Again, Ephesians helps us. Turn to chapter 5, verses 22 and 23. Wives, submit to your own husbands as to the Lord.

For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church. His body and is himself its savior. Notice again, Paul has tied this male-female relationship in which one is the head and one is submissive to Christ and the church.

The head of Christ is God. This idea has already been mentioned in our letter. 1 Corinthians chapter 3, verses 21 to 23. Again, tying this Christ's relationship to mankind issue.

So, let no one boast in men for all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future. All are yours.

[ 11 : 18 ] Here are the words. And you are Christ's and Christ is God's. This idea comes up again later in the letter in 1528. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him, God, who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

Now, I want to pause here. That Christ might be in submission to God is actually not a problem for our doctrine of the Trinity. It implies no inferiority.

It implies, I think, a different kind of submission and I'm going to talk about that in a moment. But it's important here. This doesn't imply inferiority and neither does the man and woman statement here imply anything like inferiority.

So, if that's what you're taking away from this passage, I think you're wrong. each of these relationships, as I've suggested that they are actually held together by this kind of authority submission pattern, is a relationship of willful submission.

It is by virtue of being Christians that we are in submission to Christ as the head of the church. When a woman marries a man, it is by virtue of voluntarily entering into that relationship that she becomes submissive to her husband.

[ 12 : 52 ] And Christ willfully submits to the Father. I mean, this is what passages like Philippians 2, 5, and 6 are all about. Christ willfully submits to the will of the Father in giving up himself on the cross so that we might be saved.

It's also important to note that these are not three equal relationships. The woman's submission to the man is not of the same kind and same amount as Christ's submission to God the Father or the church's submission to Christ.

They are similar in some important ways, but they are also different in some important ways. Thankfully, this passage isn't about that. and we can turn to Ephesians 5 if you want to talk about it, but not right now.

Third, back to my observations, third, the other lexical difficulty revolves around the words for men or husband and woman or wife.

English translations are inconsistent on whether the male-female relationship in view in this passage is all men and all women on the one hand or narrowly construed as husband and wife on the other.

[ 14 : 09 ] Given Paul's understanding of Genesis 1-3 in other letters, also in this passage, I think certain kinds of male-female relationships are in view here.

So I don't think this is necessarily all men and all women, yet I think it's broader than just husbands and wives. He uses man and woman here on purpose. So I think these are male-female relationships inside the church.

It applies to daughters and fathers, husbands and wives, and I think also unmarried women and the leaders of the church, the leaders actually given authority in Scripture, the elders.

Let me be very clear though, this is not every man and every woman or even any man and any woman in the church. It's a particular set of male-female relationships otherwise biblically established.

With those three observations on the principle in place, we now turn to the problem. And don't worry, I will pick up the pace. Verses four to six.

[ 15 : 22 ] Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head since it is the same as if her head were shaven.

For if a wife will not cover her head then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. Application is clear.

In first century Corinth, head covering matters. It matters a lot. The context is one of praying and prophesying, two spiritual gifts that are actually going to get some print here in chapters 12 to 14.

But it's a context of public worship, yes. But head coverings matter. Paul's first application is for men. Men, when praying and prophesying, should not cover their head.

Women, on the other hand, should. I don't want to explain this away in terms of first century cultural context. That's very easy to do. But some cultural context is important.

[ 16 : 28 ] In Roman culture, in the first century, there is considerable visual evidence, statues and drawings, as well as literary evidence, that lays out a scheme in which men and women wore head coverings to pagan worship services.

Men, I'm sorry, yes, men and women both. Women would wear a kind of shawl that goes over their head but doesn't cover the face when they would make sacrifices.

So this was the dress. Men and women of the time had distinctive and meaningful hairstyles also. A married modest woman would typically have long hair sort of done up on top of her head.

Younger unmarried woman would also have long hair but not done up, not styled up. This is important because this is how prostitutes also would dress or would have their hair.

So it implied a kind of sexual availability which in Roman legal codes also meant a kind of terrible double standard with regard to rape.

[ 17 : 42 ] If a woman shaved her head it implied some kind of shame or mourning possibly but usually some kind of disgrace because she has committed a crime like adultery.

So looking at the passage having seen how Paul exhorts the men to uncover their heads and the women to cover their heads I think it becomes clear that Paul's exhortations on hairstyle and head coverings to the Corinthians are exhortations to represent themselves with a kind of cultural respectability when they come together to worship.

They are to maintain the culturally agreed upon standards of what it means to dress and style one's hair as respectable men and women. Anything else in the church dishonors God.

If we look in our immediately preceding context this makes perfect sense. Paul's been arguing for two chapters that everything cultural should be oriented to God's glory.

Look at chapter 10 verse 31. So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do do all to the glory of God. The determining factor in every decision is God's glory.

[ 19 : 01 ] And Paul spends the rest of this passage explaining this. Grounding this. Here's where I really pick up the speed.

Seven to nine. For a man ought not to cover his head since he is the image and glory of God. But woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman but woman from man.

Neither was man created for woman but woman for man. That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head because of the angels. Nevertheless in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman.

For as woman was made from man so man is now born of woman and all things are from God. Here Paul goes straight to Genesis. He goes to creation. God created man and woman in a particular way and to have a particular kind of relationship.

What that means in the fullness of biblical revelation and how Paul makes use of this passage elsewhere is important but again outside the scope of this sermon.

[ 20 : 04 ] Rather he is very clear about what it means in this argument. There is a particular kind of relationship embedded in creation. How man behaves and represents himself as the image of God matters.

It reflects God's glory. Likewise how woman behaves and how she represents herself as the complement to man not only reflects on God but on man as well.

And this applies to the biblically founded male-female relationships I think. To marriage, to families, to churches. notice Paul actually I think anticipates one of our objections.

He's careful to explain that this does not give man superiority to woman. So while it is right and good for a woman in these relationships to visibly and represent and respect and honor her relationship with man, we are all to remember together that in the most important kind of interdependence, man from woman, woman from man, we are all from God, for God, and together should reflect our submission to God through Christ Jesus.

Genesis 1.27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. And created them he did to his glory.

[ 21 : 33 ] Paul doesn't stop with the Genesis argument. He goes on 13 to 16. Judge for yourselves. Is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that if man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him?

But if a woman has long hair it is her glory. For her hair is given to her for a covering. If anyone is inclined to be contentious we have no such practices nor do the churches of God.

He appeals to pragmatics. He says, of course you know that in your culture a man with long hair is disgraceful. Culturally speaking it indicated probably some kind of effeminacy or possibly homosexuality.

Men throwing off gender markers, women throwing off gender markers, it's not glorifying to God. This is pragmatic. And the idea I think is actually that simple.

Men with short hair and no head coverings. Women with long hair and head coverings. This is how Roman culture works. This is how Genesis works.

[ 22 : 42 ] This is how all of the Pauline churches work. Come on Corinthians, figure it out. I think is the tone here. And that's the message.

Gender distinctions matter. And reflecting them in worship, and I would think the rest of life too, matters. They show our attitudes to glorifying God as he created us.

And so the difficult question remains, how does this work for us? Let me be clear, I am not suggesting that the men here need to get haircuts, though some of us probably do.

I'm not suggesting that we should be handing out doilies at the door to all the women before we let them in. Not at all. That's actually, I think, a reductionistic reading of this passage that takes the theological principle and reduces it to Paul's first century application.

Paul's not aiming at rigid legalistic sets of practices, but an attitude for God's people that rejects genderlessness and that embraces the right willful relational submission religion that glorifies God.

[ 24 : 00 ] Now, don't make a mistake here. I think our culture, or at least some people within our culture, also have an agenda. From the iconic and stereotypical styles of dress and hairstyles in some groups who would destroy the notion of gender, to the advent of things like unisex bathrooms and unisex dormitories, to the responses of some to still inherently chauvinistic segments of our working environments, gender blindness is here.

It's a factor of our culture that we have to deal with. Now, to be clear, I don't care if women have short haircuts. I kind of like my wife's short hair. I don't care if we have a unisex bathroom.

Again, that's a, I think, a reductionistic application of this. Some gender blindness, practically speaking, is helpful. But some of it, theologically speaking, dishonors God.

Paul here is urging the Corinthians to adhere to culturally constructed set of gender distinctions because God created distinct genders. Now, of course, society is corrupt.

The femininity and masculinity of today or of the 1950s is no less corrupt than that of the 1990s or the 1920s.

[ 25 : 33 ] We absolutely need to weigh our cultural understanding of gender against what the Bible holds. But we also need to examine our own attitudes toward gender distinction.

in our age and what reflects our attitudes toward God. So, consider it for yourself, Christian men. Consider whether or not how you represent yourself in church and in society with respect to your gender is glorifying to Christ Jesus.

I'm not talking about this present fascination in our church with machismo as the defining characteristic of modern manhood. We're not all Gary Cooper and Chuck Norris.

But at the same time, do we gray out part of what it means to be a biblical man in how we present ourselves? Men, how do you relate to the women in your life?

Your wife, your daughter, other women in the church? Do you demand submission while doing something other than submitting to Christ Jesus?

[ 26 : 47 ] Christian women, how's your attitude? Do you do things that demonstrate an attitude of disrespect to the men in the church, your husbands, your fathers, the elders? Does the way you present yourself reject gender distinction that God created for our good?

Or does your attitude betray a mistrust of God and the way he created gender and ordered the church? It's worth considering. And I think for all of us it's worth conforming.

Willful right submission to the way God created us, including gender distinction and how we portray this in worship and to the world is important. And as Christians, obedience and submission to Christ in this is gospel.

Because if Christ did not willfully submit to the plan of his Father, there is no atonement for sin. So if you don't believe that Christ saved you through his death and resurrection, consider that first.

If you do believe that, consider the rest of this as a matter of obedience. And I exhort you to the joyful obedience that brings glory to God in the highest.

[ 28 : 07 ] Let me pray. Heavenly Father, as your Son submitted to you, that we may be saved, so may we submit to you that you would be glorified.

We pray this in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.