

Women, Men and God's Church

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[0 : 00] Now, I realize that everyone has a favorite part of the Bible, but I'm willing to bet the passage we read today is no one's. In fact, when I got up to preach this morning, someone from 745 sitting behind me said, good luck.

And it is actually the hardest passage, I think, in the whole letter of Corinthians. It's the kind of passage where you hope there are no visitors at your church, lest they walk away thinking, another sexist church.

But for the record, we are not. But we are a church that works through the books of the Bible and doesn't skip passages, either because they're hard to understand or hard to accept.

And lucky us, this passage is both today. In fact, I have not gone to sleep yet. So why don't we pray for us all as we look at God's word together?

Let's pray. Gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. And we do pray that you might give us humble hearts as we come before it.

[1 : 11] But also ears to hear and minds to understand what it is and is not saying. And discernment to apply it rightly in our lives. And we ask this for the glory of your name.

Amen. Well, as I mentioned, today we're returning to our series in the letter of 1 Corinthians. And you might remember we said earlier this year that the Corinthian church thought they were so spiritual that their bodies didn't matter.

And so they're engaged in all sorts of sexual immorality. But it also seems as though they think their gender doesn't matter either. And so Paul writes from chapter 11 to chapter 14 about right order in the church.

And in today's passage, the order on view is the order between genders. And so he reminds them about this order and our head, which is our first point. But he actually begins with some praise, which is verse 2.

So if you've got your Bible there, please have a look at verse 2. He says, I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I pass them on to you.

[2 : 25] You see, Paul begins by praising them. It seems that despite getting lots of things wrong, they have got some things right. And that included the fact that both men and women were free to pray and prophesy in the church.

And we need to remember this was revolutionary for women of that day. The culture of that day had a low view of women. They segregated men and women in worship.

And often women were not allowed to speak. In fact, even today in the Jewish synagogues, men and women are segregated and women are not allowed to read the law, the Bible. But the Bible has a high view of women.

And so in Christ, men and women were free to pray and prophesy in the church. And the Corinthians were doing this, for which Paul praises them. Now, in case you're wondering what prophecy is, prophecy is to speak a biblical word of encouragement.

And I say biblical because saying to someone when you see them, oh, you look nice today, may be encouraging, but it's not prophesying. There's other things to say about prophecy, and we will say them when we get to chapter 14.

[3 : 35] But today's sermon is going to be long enough as we try and work our way through this. So let me just give you a couple of snapshots of what prophecy looks like. It might be giving a biblical word of encouragement over morning tea to someone who's sharing a struggle they're having.

Or sometimes when we have question time at 1030 church, instead of asking a question, someone puts up their hand and just says, I'd like to share something that struck me. And it encourages everyone. But that's prophecy, a New Testament prophecy.

Or we're having Thanksgiving Sunday next month. And on that day, we often invite people to get up and give thanks to God for how he's worked in their lives.

And in doing so, that encourages us. And sometimes people have said to me, I had no plans to get up, but I just felt I should. Well, that's prophecy. And Paul praises the Corinthian church, both men and women, for doing this for the good of the church.

And so the issue is not what they are doing. It's how they are doing it. They seem to be doing it in a way that blurs their gender differences and the ordered roles between them.

[4 : 40] And so Paul reminds them there is actually an order between genders, just like there is between the Trinity. So let's have a look at verse 3, one of the controversial verses.

He says, but I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

Now, the word head refers to headship, where there is order. And the head has authority and responsibility over the other person, like the head of a company. Now, I realize it's very politically incorrect to say this, so much so that some Bible scholars have looked for a different meaning for the word head.

Some say it means source, like the head of a river is its source. But God is not the source of Christ. Christ always existed.

What's more, it's not how the Bible uses the word head elsewhere. So on the next slide, here the word head is used in a couple of places, and it clearly refers to headship or leadership.

[5 : 49] Christ is head over everything, has authority over everything. In fact, in another controversial passage, I'm just going all out today, down the bottom, Ephesians chapter 5, where it uses that word submit, that very hated word submit.

It clearly refers to the husband having the headship. But you'll notice at the bottom, it's a headship that loves the wife just as Christ loved the church. In other words, it's a sacrificial headship.

The way I often explain it to people is like this. It's like me saying to my wife, let me do the dishes for you. Sacrificial headship. And her saying, okay.

Submitting. That's what it's meant to look like. And Paul's point here is that there is order in these relationships where one is the head or leader over the other.

But this in no way makes the other person inferior. And as I said, biblical headship is actually about servant headship as well, which seeks the good of the other person.

[6 : 50] We see this even within the Godhead, the Trinity. So on the next slide, in John chapter 5, I think it is, Gwyneth. So, yep. Jesus said, The Father works for the Son's good.

Just as they honor the Father who sent him. And then Jesus adds a little bit later, I and the Father are one. Just leave that up for a moment, Gwyneth. You see, the Father sends the Son and tells the Son what to do.

There is order within the Trinity. Or as Paul says in verse 3, The head of Christ is God. But this in no way makes the Son inferior, does it?

Jesus says, down the bottom there, I and the Father are one. We are equal. What's more, the Father who is the head works for the Son's good. He gives all judgment to the Son, so that all people may honor the Son.

You see, it's a servant headship. So even in the Trinity, they are equal in status and worth, but have different roles, where the Father is the head over the Son.

[8 : 15] They are equal, but different. And the persons of the Trinity work together in these roles, complementing each other at creation and redemption.

We see the persons of the Trinity involved in those big moments. And men and women were created to reflect this character of God, this beautiful, complementary, working together character of God.

We are equal in worth and status as human beings, but we have different roles to complement each other. It's why men and women are different.

As much as our society wants to deny it, we are different. I saw this picture on the next slide earlier in the week about what to wear. The woman has a full wardrobe and says, I don't know what to wear.

The man has one thing and says, I'll do that all week. I don't know if it's true in your house. I'm not telling you if it's true in my house or not. But men and women are different.

[9 : 16] I mean, men cannot have children. Women can. Men are wimps when it comes to pain compared to women. I mean, have you ever heard of the phrase, the man cold?

It's a normal cold that a man has and just thinks it's the end of the world. The point is, we are clearly different because we were made to have different roles, just like the Trinity.

And that's a good thing. But like the Trinity, we are equal in worth and status. Our differences in no way means one is inferior to the other. In fact, often women are superior.

And my wife got high distinctions at university while I, well, I didn't. The problem is our society attaches our worth to our role.

And let me see if I can illustrate. On the next slide, who does our society say is worth more, a garbage collector or a CEO of a company? CEO, isn't it?

[10 : 14] They attach worth to their role. Of course, society is not even consistent because on the next slide, as soon as you add a child to the picture, then suddenly the child becomes the most important, most valuable, even though they contribute nothing to society and could well grow up to be a garbage collector.

But here's the real question. On that slide there, which of them does God love more? Yeah, it's a trick question.

All of them. Which one did Jesus die for more? All of them. You see, in God's eyes, we have equal worth. It's just that we have different roles.

Like, any team has different roles which complement each other so we can work together in God's world. It's just society has got it mixed up and attached worth to role. And that's why Christians have so many problems with passages like this.

And Paul's purpose here is to remind them not to lose these gender differences and roles when they pray and prophesy in church. Because to do so is actually to dishonor the created order and the ones that God had placed in headship over them.

[11 : 30] Instead, they were to honor their head. Point two, verse four. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head.

It is the same as having her head shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off. But if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.

Now, this is all a bit odd to us. And a little confusing. But we need to remember that even today, clothes communicate. Clothes say something about what role we play in society, who we are, what job we do.

Again, let me illustrate on the next slide. From these persons clothes, what role do you think they play in society? They're a judge. Supreme Court judge, to be precise.

Thank you, Mr. Manuel. Yeah, what about the next person? Who are they? What role do they have? Doctor. Clearly, the clothes communicate.

[12 : 41] Or the next one? Well, you know his name, Bob the Builder. The point is, clothes communicate something about who we are, what role we play in society.

And it was the same in Paul's day. So if you wore a shawl, or what was called a pallor, over your head in public as a woman, it was, on the next slide, I've got a picture of a statue, and you can just make out the kind of shawl that was draped over her head.

Then it was a sign that you were both female and respectable. In fact, this statue is of Livia Drusilla, the wife of Caesar Augustus, who was ruler when Jesus was born.

And she was held up as a model for all respectable women to follow, to dress like her, because clothes communicate. On the next slide, take Plutarch, who wrote around the same time as Paul, a few years later, he said, it is more usual for women to go forth in public with their heads covered and men with their heads uncovered.

You see, in that culture of the day, respectable women covered their head in public. And it communicated your gender as a woman, but also your role as respectable.

[13 : 55] But notice there that Plutarch says it is more usual, which implies that there were some exceptions. One of those exceptions was when you were mourning in grief, but another exception was when you wanted to live, or particularly the females wanted to live a promiscuous lifestyle or take the role of a prostitute, they would deliberately uncover their head in public to signal that they had thrown off their husband's or father's headship in order to attract all sorts of other men for

money.

And it seems that when the Corinthians got up to pray or prophesy, some men were acting like women covering their heads and some women were acting like men by uncovering their heads. and also sending the signal that they wanted to throw off their husband or father's servant headship and be promiscuous. And that brought dishonor on their own physical head, but also their metaphoric head, the one who had headship over them.

In fact, in Paul's culture, for a woman to uncover her head, he says, verse 6, it's just as shameful as for her to have her head shaved. And shaving women's heads was still a sign of shame at least until World War II because the Nazis shaved the heads of Jewish women to humiliate them.

And so while Paul wants them to enjoy their freedom, to pray and prophesy together as equals, he wants them to do it in a way that upholds their gender differences and roles.

[15:30] That's the principle. And in that culture, that principle of gender difference and headship was expressed by men uncovering their head and women covering their head with a shawl.

But why should they uphold this principle? I mean, even in Roman culture, they thought they were pretty progressive. Why maintain their gender differences and roles?

Well, here Paul gives three reasons, which brings us to point three. The first reason is creation, verse seven. Verse seven actually starts with the word for or because. Because 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 did not come from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her head because of the angels.

Now, if you thought verse three was controversial, then these verses up the ante, don't they? But again, it's not saying women are inferior to men.

[16:43] So in verse seven, you'll notice that Paul does not say women were made in the image of man, does he? He drops the word image out there. Because like Paul, we know from Genesis one that both men and women were made in the image of God.

We are equal in worth. But it is saying that God created men and women in different ways with different roles which reflect the glory of different headships.

by glory, he just means character. So in our first reading from Genesis two, we heard how God created Adam first, gave him the job of looking after creation.

And this came with authority, like the authority to name the animals God brought to him. Do you remember? But it also came with the responsibility of upholding God's word and caring for God's world.

In other words, he was to use his authority to serve. It was servant headship as we've seen before. But because he had the role of headship in ruling creation, then Paul says in verse seven, he reflects God's character as the ruler of creation.

[17:58] And Eve, on the other hand, reflected Adam's character. Why? Well, because verse eight, she was created from Adam, from his rib, if you remember our first reading.

In fact, I heard about a preacher who was invited by a women's group in New Zealand to speak on this topic of headship and he was very nervous about it, actually. And then the lady from the group phoned him and said, don't worry, we're not women's libbers, we're Adam's ribbers.

But because Eve was made from Adam, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, then not only was she equal with him, made of the same stuff, she also reflected or shared his character.

And what's more, she also reflected Adam's character by sharing in Adam's job of ruling over creation. Only her role was as the helper. Remember, Adam could not do the job alone, he needed a helper suitable for him.

This is our first reading again. And nothing was found, but then Eve came and she was perfect. It's an old saying that says, behind every great man is an even greater woman.

[19:09] That's what Paul is getting at here in verse 9, where he says, woman was made for man, not to be his slave or servant, but to be equal and help in the job of ruling creation together.

But again, our world attaches worth to role, so as soon as they hear the word helper, they think inferior. But not so in God's eyes. In fact, do you know who is called helper more than anyone else in the Bible?

God. It's not demeaning. It's just a different role. But because Eve shared Adam's substance, bone of my bone, and shared in Adam's job as the helper, then Eve reflects Adam's character or glory.

But Paul's big point here is that this pattern of order, this equal but different roles, is stitched into our creation. And so we ought not to deny it in our church. Rather, we are to uphold it.

And in Paul's culture, that meant men should not cover their heads while women should. Now, of course, our sinful natures mean that men have let their role go to their heads.

[20 : 20] Pardon the pun. And instead of servant headship, which seeks the good of others, we've sadly seen abusive headship. which has led to domestic violence.

But that's not God's design. That's sin, which God hates. And so Paul reminds them that God's design is meant to be, they're meant to function as a loving partnership where they need each other.

See verse 11? Nevertheless, in the Lord, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman.

But everything comes from God. You see, we need each other equally. We are dependent on one another. Eve may have come from Adam, but every other man since has come from a woman.

man. So one is not better than the other. Instead, our genders are a gift to each other from God so that we can work together in complementary ways and rule his world.

[21 : 29] And this pattern is stitched into creation. It's not dependent on culture. Well, Paul adds two more reasons why we should stick with this pattern and I'm going to move much quicker now.

So the next reason actually is a reason from his culture. Verse 13, he says, judge for yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?

Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.

Here Paul says they should uphold their gender differences and order in the church because of the nature of their culture. Notice in verse 13 he says, is it proper? That is, does society think it's proper etiquette for a woman to cover her head or to uncover it?

You know, what about the emperor's wife Priscilla? Then he says, does not the nature of his society say it's disgraceful for a man to have long hair? In fact, Plutarch again says of his culture on the next slide, I think it is, I've got another quote, he says, it is usual for men to have their hair cut and women to let it grow.

[22 : 50] This is the culture of the day. And so it was disgraceful for men to cover their heads with long hair. In fact, it was often a sign that they were feminine. But for women in that culture, long hair was part of what people considered beautiful.

And it was her glory, says Paul. It acted like a head covering. Now, of course, in our culture today, long hair on men doesn't mean they are feminine necessarily. I mean, I dare you to ask a biker with long hair, are you a girl?

See what happens. What's more, lots of women have short hair and are very respectable. Though even the nature of our society still considers it unusual for women to shave their heads, especially, well, unless, rather, they're going through chemo or something sad like that.

But it is quite usual, though, for men to shave their heads, especially if they are going bald. And if that's you men, just remember the old Chinese proverb, loss of hair means gain of face.

You've got to think about that one. In the Corinthian church, men and women are to both equally pray and prophesy, but in a way that upholds their gender differences in order, firstly, because of creation, that's the big reason, secondly, because of the nature of their society, and thirdly, because of church practice, verse 16.

[24 : 09] If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice, nor do the churches of God. What does all this mean for us, point four? It doesn't mean that women are not allowed to do anything in the church, or that they should be wearing hats again.

Not at all. We've already seen that both men and women can pray and prophesy in church, which was revolutionary for the day. In fact, Paul praises them for doing that. But it does mean the way we need to do things is in a way that upholds our gender differences and roles.

Why? Wasn't it just cultural? No, that was one reason, but the main principle is based on the Trinity, verse 3, and stitched into our creation, verse 7 to 12.

And so the principle of equal but different, servant headship, still applies to us today. And so does that mean women have to cover their heads and wear hats again?

Well, no, because while the principle applies, the expression of it varies depending on our culture. I mean, if women started wearing hats today, it could simply communicate that they're off to the

racers soon.

[25 : 25] It's kind of like Paul's command on the next slide, where he writes in 1 Thessalonians to greet the brothers with a holy kiss. The principle is really to welcome each other warmly.

And in Paul's culture in the Middle East, it meant even blokes kissing each other cheek to cheek. But the only person I want kissing me, thank you very much, is my wife. Because in my culture, doing that's a little bit awkward.

And so the warm greeting amongst men in my culture is expressed by a holy handshake, if you like. And the point is sometimes biblical principles are expressed differently depending on culture.

And here the principle of upholding gender differences and roles still applies, but we'll just express it differently. How? Well, first, our clothes can still communicate something about our gender.

I mean, if I turned up in a dress next Sunday, which I'm not going to do, just for the record, you'd start to wonder what I was saying about myself, wouldn't you? And so men are to dress as men and women as women, as recognizable by our culture.

[26 : 35] Now, I realize we do this intuitively anyway, and it doesn't seem like a big deal, I mean, that's pretty obvious, but our society is slowly eroding gender away. I mean, if you sign up on Facebook now, as of May last year, there are now 71 different gender options you can choose for yourself.

I don't even know how they get to 71. one. And our society is slowly eroding gender away. You can be whatever gender you like, but no, it's stitched into our creation, who we are, and so we are to dress like it.

But second, while there's no clothing that expresses our gender roles, or that servant headship, our deeds and words can. And in our culture, whether we are married or not, it will generally mean men stepping up or taking the initiative to serve, you know, servant headship, and the women letting them.

And the reason I say this in our culture is because we've been greatly affected by feminism, I think, for good and bad. Good because women got the vote and they are getting paid better.

I still don't think it's quite equal out there. I think we still need to do some more work on that. But there have been some good things from feminism. But it's also led to some bad things that has convinced women that they need to do everything to prove they are equal with men.

[28 : 04] And so women are pressured to have a career and a family and be involved in school and keep looking good and on it goes. Instead of sharing the roles.

Now, of course women can do each of these things. Of course they can. But feminism has pushed women to do all of them, lest anyone say they're inferior or can't.

But that has then taken responsibility away from men, which in turn has led women to be exhausted and men to become disengaged and lazy. I mean, when you picture a person sitting on the couch with TV remote in hand, is it male or female?

Don't tell me. Or how many times have children come to a father to ask for something and the father responded with, oh, go and ask your mother.

One time I opened the door for a lady and my head was bitten off. Can't I open my own door? And so I withdrew and thought I better not open any doors for a while.

[29 : 13] You see, feminism has put pressure on women and caused men to withdraw. And so in a culture like ours, whether we are married or single, men need to step up and take the initiative to serve.

That's what the headship is about, to serve. And women need to let them, without thinking, they'll be inferior. And so let me finish with some examples.

First of servant headship that I've seen in our church, and then secondly of women respecting that headship. So the first example was from a husband whose child did come to them and ask them a question, and instead of saying, go and ask your mother, he said, look, let me finish this conversation, which was with me, and then I'll go and we'll ask mum together.

So he's not ignoring the wife, he's still valuing her input, but he's not shirking his responsibility either. He's taking responsibility. Or another guy at 1030 church said to his wife, let me look after the kids so that you can talk to your friends.

And then she said, okay. That's what it's meant to look like. Another time, a member from this congregation, his wife was to read the Bible, but she was a bit unsteady on her feet, and so he just kind of held her elbow and guided her up to the lectern and then sat down.

[30 : 44] You know, no fuss, no muss, but I thought, isn't that a lovely picture of servant headship. And for the women, in terms of respecting that headship, there's a single girl at 1030 who was moving house, and instead of trying to do it all for herself, to prove that she could, that she was equal, she decided just to ask some blokes at church for some help.

And we helped her move together, working together, and it went really smoothly. Or another time, a member from our 745 congregation, whose husband is unable to leave because of mental health issues, and yet instead of saying, okay, let's go, and dragging him away, I've heard her say a few times actually, well, do you think we should go, dear?

And I thought, isn't that lovely? I mean, she knows he's going to say, oh, yes, and then walk out, but she does it to include him and show respect for him as her husband.

I thought, that's lovely. One other time, we had a question time at 10.30, with a panel down the front here, there was two blokes and one girl, she was also single on this occasion, and they were answering questions from the floor, and they were giving what they thought the Bible said, which that's prophecy, that's another example of prophecy, and the single woman there was actually, waited, she actually waited to be asked what she thought by the male compere, instead of pushing in to speak, even though what she said was actually better than what the two guys said combined. But then this is, again, respecting headship of men, even though she was not married to any of them. So these are little examples of what it might look like for us to uphold our different roles, our different genders in church.

[32 : 31] It's not going to be easy because our society tells us something completely different, doesn't it? And so if we need help, then look to Christ, who was both. He was the servant headship who'd laid down his life for us, and he was also the one who respected his father's headship and submitted to him.

He's the role model for both men and women. And so look to him and follow his example. Let's pray. Gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for even this difficult to understand and difficult to accept passage.

but Father, we thank you that it speaks truth and when practiced properly, it actually works. Help us not to buy the lie from our society which says our worth is tied to our role, but to remember that we are equal but different in your sight and that we are to use our differences to work together for your glory and our good.

Help us to remember these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.