

Women, Men and God's Church

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[0 : 00] Everyone has their favourite part of the Bible, but my guess is the passage we read today is no one's. Would that be fair? It's the kind of passage that you kind of hope there's no visitors for.

I know there's visitors. I actually was, when I was preaching it this morning, just before I got up, the guy sitting behind me went over and went, good luck. But for the record, we're not a sexist church, but we are a church that works our way through books of the Bible and doesn't skip over passages that are either hard to understand or hard to accept because of our culture today.

And today's passage, lucky us, is both. So how about I pray for us, particularly given that it's going to be a slightly longer talk and I've been working hard on it and I haven't slept yet.

So let's pray. Gracious Father, we do thank you for your word. And we do pray, though, that you might help us with this passage today. Please help us to come to your word with humble hearts and open ears and minds that are ready to understand what you are saying and what you are not saying and the desire to put it into practice for the glory of your name.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, as I said, we're returning to 1 Corinthians chapter 11. And you might remember from our series in 1 Corinthians that it was a church that thought they were so spiritual that their bodies didn't matter.

[1 : 46] And so there was all sorts of sexual immorality in the church. And it seems it's kind of filtered through to even their perceptions of gender in the church. And so Paul's writing to them to remind them that there's actually order and headship in gender, which is point one in the outline.

But it actually begins with praise, verse 2 in your Bible. So 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.

Paul begins by praising them, doesn't he? It seems that despite getting lots wrong, and this church did get lots wrong, they get some things right. And one of those things, I suspect, is the fact that both men and women were praying and prophesying in church.

And that was revolutionary for women in that culture of that day. The culture of the day had a very low view of women and segregated men and women in worship.

Even today in Jewish synagogue, men and women are separated, and the women are not allowed to read the Bible. But the scriptures actually have a high view of women. And so in Christ, women were free to pray and prophesy with men in the public meeting in the church.

[3 : 07] And the Corinthians were doing this. So Paul praises them. Now, you might be wondering what prophecy is. I mean, we all know what prayer is, but very briefly, to prophesy means to speak a biblical word of encouragement.

And I say biblical because we can actually say to someone, oh, you look nice today and encourage them. But it's not quite prophecy, is it? It's different to Old Testament prophecy.

New Testament prophecy is not as authoritative. Old Testament prophecy was part of God's word. And so the prophet said, thus says the Lord. Whereas New Testament prophecy sits under God's word and must be tested by it and checked by it.

There's some other differences, and we see them in chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians. So we'll look at it when we come to that chapter. But just in terms of what it looks like on the ground, a biblical word of encouragement might happen over the coffee break.

If you run into someone who's going through a tough time and you encourage them from the Bible, that's prophecy. Or it might be during question time when someone, instead of asking a question, just says, I just want to share this thought that I had.

[4 : 15] And it encourages everyone. That's prophecy. Next month, we're having our Thanksgiving Sunday, which happens once a year. And we invite people up to give thanks for how God has worked in their lives.

And often I get people coming up after me afterwards saying, I didn't plan to do that. I just felt I should. And it encouraged everyone. That's prophecy. And Paul praises the Corinthian church that both men and women are doing this for the good of the church.

So the issue is not what they are doing. The issue is 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.

And so Paul now reminds them that there is an order between the genders, just like there is between the Trinity. And here we come to the controversial or one of the controversial verses, verse three.

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. The word head here that's repeated refers to headship, where there is order.

[5 : 26] The head has the authority and the responsibility over another, like the head of a company. Now, I realize this is very politically incorrect. And so much so that people today have searched for other meanings for the word head.

Some scholars suggest that it means source, like the head of a river is the source of the water. But God cannot be the source of Christ, as though Christ came from God, because Christ always existed.

He's always been the son. What's more, it's not how the Bible uses the word head elsewhere. So on the next slide is a couple of examples of the word head, where it clearly has the idea of headship or authority over other things.

And just because it's controversial today, I thought I'd go all in and mention the bottom passage, where it talks about submitting to headship. So headship there is clearly an idea of authority.

But notice the type of headship in that bottom passage there. It's a servant headship, where husbands love the wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her.

[6 : 40] We're to follow Christ's example of headship, where it's sacrificial, where you lay down your life for the other. And an example I often use, just to quickly give you a kind of picture of what it might look like, it's me saying to my wife Michelle, let me do the dishes, laying down my life, and her saying, okay, submitting.

That's what it's meant to look like in practice. And Paul's point here is that there is order in these relationships where one is the head or leader over the other. But that in no way makes the other person inferior.

And biblical headship, as I just said, is servant headship, which seeks the good of the other. And we see this within the Trinity, within the Godhead itself.

So on the next slide, we read from John that Jesus said, Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing.

There's order there. And the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son. Why? Well, so that all may honor the Son. The Father works for the Son's good. Just as they honor the Father who sent him, I and the Father are one.

[7 : 55] You see, the Father sends the Son and tells the Son what to say and do. There's order, headship, between the Father and the Son. But that in no way makes the Son inferior, does it?

I mean, I keep on that verse, sorry, Paul. Jesus says, I and the Father are one. We're equal. And what's more, the Father who is the head works for the Son's good.

As I mentioned before, he gives all judgment to Jesus on the last day, so that all will honor Jesus as he deserves. The Father works for the Son's good.

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

They are equal but different. And the persons of the Trinity work together in their roles, complementing each other, both in creation and redemption.

[8 : 55] And so men and women were created to reflect this 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, aren't we? I mean, I saw this picture on the next slide, Paul, of men and women.

So wardrobe full, women says, I've got nothing to wear again, and there's one item in the men's wardrobe, this will do me all week. Now, I'm not going to tell you if that's true in my household or not, but there's clearly differences like that.

I mean, men cannot have children, women can. Men are wimps when it comes to pain. Women have a higher threshold of pain. I mean, you've all heard about the man flu, the man cold, haven't you?

It's a normal cold, but we just have to kind of make it sound worse because we can't cope. The point is we are clearly different because we were made to have different roles, just like the Trinity.

[10 : 02] And that's a good thing. It's a complementary thing. But like the Trinity, we are equal in worth and status. Our differences in no way mean we are inferior to each other.

In fact, often women are superior. Michelle got high distinctions throughout university, while I didn't. I won't tell you. The problem is our society attaches worth to role.

Let me see if I can illustrate. So on the next slide, we have a garbage collector and a CEO. Which does our society say is worth more, more valuable? They say the CEO, don't they?

They certainly pay it like that. They attach worth to role. Of course, society is not consistent because when you add a child on the next slide, then they say the child is actually worth more, even though they don't actually contribute anything to society and could well grow up to be a garbage collector.

But here's the real question. We'll leave those pictures there for a second. Here's the real question. Which one of them is worth more to God?

[11 : 15] It's a trick question. It's all of them, isn't it? Which one did Jesus die for more? It's all of them. You see, we are all equal in worth.

It's just that we have different roles like any team has, which complement each other so that we can work together in God's world. And Paul's purpose here is to remind them not to lose those gender differences and roles when they pray and prophesy in church.

Why? Well, because that is actually to dishonor the order that God has created us with. So have a look at point two, verse four. He says, 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, that is, her physical head and the one who has headship over her. 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.

[12 : 22] Now, it's a bit wordy and certainly foreign to us, but we need to remember, in order to understand what's going on here, that clothes communicate.

Clothes communicate. Again, to kind of illustrate, on the next slide, what do these clothes tell us about who this person is, what role they have in society? Who are they? They're a judge.

Yeah. Supreme Court judge here in Victoria. What about the next slide? What role do this person play? Doctor. Doctor. I mean, it's quite clear, isn't it? The coat, the stethoscope, it communicates.

What about the last one? It's in his name, isn't it? Bob the Builder. Yeah. 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. And so if you wore a shawl, kind of a cloak over your head, in public, like on the next slide, this is a statue of a lady, and you can kind of see the shawl over the top of her head.

[13 : 25] Then it was a sign, it communicated that you were a respectable woman. That's what the clothing communicated. In fact, this statue is of Livia Drusilla, the wife of Caesar Augustus, who was ruling when Jesus was born.

And she was held up as a model for all respectable women in the Roman Empire to follow. I'll take on the next slide, Plutarch, who wrote around the same time Paul is writing here.

He said, it is more usual for women to go forth in public with their heads covered and men with their heads uncovered. We've got these historical texts. This was part of normal society.

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

But notice how Plutarch says, it is more usual, which implies there are some exceptions. And one of those exceptions was when you were mourning or in grief.

[14 : 28] But the other exception was when a female wanted to throw off the headship of her husband or father and live a more promiscuous life and invite other suitors.

And in fact, it was the role of prostitutes as well. They would go out in public with their head uncovered. Again, it is a sign of throwing off any male 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 by covering their head and some women were acting like men by uncovering their head, which also sent a signal that they wanted to throw off their husband or father's headship, servant headship, remember, as promiscuous and then be promiscuous.

And that brought this honour on their own physical head as well as on their metaphorical head, the one who had headship over them. It brought shame on the whole relationship. In fact, in Paul's culture, for a woman to uncover her head in public was, verse 6, as shameful as having her head shaved.

And shaving a woman's head was still a sign of shame at least until World War II because the Nazis used to shave 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, equal but different.

[15 : 55] That's the principle. And in that culture, this principle of gender difference and headship was expressed by men uncovered heads and women covering their heads.

But why should they uphold that principle? Why maintain their gender differences and roles? I mean, the Roman society thought they were pretty progressive themselves.

I mean, they ain't seen Melbourne, but they thought they were pretty progressive. So why keep it? Well, three reasons, which brings us to point three. The first reason is creation, verse seven.

Verse seven actually starts with the word because or for. He says, for a man ought not to cover his head, so this is the reason, since he is the image and the 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.

[16 : 57] Now, if you had trouble with verse three, you would have really had trouble with those verses, wouldn't you? But again, it's not saying women are inferior. So in verse seven, you'll notice that Paul does not say that women were made in the image of man.

He doesn't say that, does he? He drops the word image because like Paul, we know from Genesis chapter one that both men and women were made in the image of God.

We are equal worth in his sight. But it is saying that God created men and women in different ways with different roles that reflected glory to their different heads.

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

And this came with authority, like the authority to name the animals. But it also came with the responsibility of upholding God's word, you know, don't eat from fruit of that tree, and caring for God's world.

[18 : 08] In other words, he had an authority to serve. It was a servant headship. But because he had the role of headship in ruling creation, then as Paul says in verse seven, he reflects God's character of the ruler of creation.

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 to speak at a women's group in New Zealand on this very topic of headship.

And he was very nervous, but the lady said to him over the phone, don't worry, we're not women's livers, 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, but it also meant she shared his character.

She reflected his glory. That's what Paul means here. And what's more, she also reflected Adam's character by sharing in Adam's job of ruling creation. Only her role was as the helper.

Remember, Adam could not do the job alone. He needed a helper suitable for him. And Eve was the perfect person. The only person, actually. As the old saying goes, behind every great man is an even greater woman.

[19 : 34] That's what Paul is getting at in verse nine, being made for man. Not as his servant or slave. No, no, no. But as his helper in the job of ruling creation together.

Now again, our world attaches our worth to our role. So they think the role of helper is inferior. But it's not so in God's eyes.

In fact, do you know who is called helper more than anyone else in the Bible? God. Well, God, three persons, Holy Spirit, yeah, God. And helper is not a derogatory term then, therefore, is it?

I mean, if it applies to God, it's not derogatory. It's just a different role. But because Adam shared, sorry, because Eve shared Adam's substance, bone of my bone, and Adam's job as 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 to not deny it in our church. Rather, we are to uphold it.

[20 : 42] And in Paul's culture, that meant men should not cover their heads but women should. That was the cultural sign. Now, of course, our sinful nature means we have let, men particularly, have let their role go to their heads, pardon the pun, and instead of servant headship, which seeks the good of others, we have sadly seen in our society abusive headship, which has led to all sorts of issues including domestic violence.

But that's not God's design. That's sinful nature. That's sin that God hates. So Paul reminds them, unless it goes to their heads, that God's design is meant to function as a loving partnership where we need each other.

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

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

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 look after God's world.

[22 : 10] And this pattern is stitched into our creation. It's not dependent on culture. Well, Paul adds two more reasons why we should stick with this principle and I'll move a lot quicker now.

The first is actually a reason from his culture. So, have a look at verse 13. He says, Judge for yourselves. Is it proper in their culture?

Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not the very nature of things tell you that if a man has long hair is it 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. Now, here Paul says that they should uphold the gender differences and order in church because of the nature of their culture.

In verse 13 he says, Is it proper? That is, does not our society think it is proper etiquette for a woman to cover her head like the statue of Drusilla?

[23 : 11] Does not the nature of his society say it's disgraceful for a man to have long hair? And it did. In fact, I think on the next slide Plutarch also writes about hair. He says, It is usual for men to have their hair cut and women to let it grow.

It's a comment about the nature of his society. And in that society it was actually disgraceful for a man to have long hair because it was a sign of femininity not masculinity.

But for women in that culture long hair was part of what people considered beautiful. It was her glory and acted like a covering. Now, of course, in our culture today long hair on men doesn't mean they are feminine.

I mean, I just dare you to ask a bikey with long hair are they a girl and see what happens. What's more, lots of women have short hair and they are very respectable. Though even the nature of our society still considers it unusual for women to shave their heads unless, sadly, they're going through chemo or something like that.

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

[24 : 24] Yeah, it takes time that one. Well, in the Corinthian church, men and women are to both equally pray and prophesy but to do it so in a way that upholds their gender differences and roles.

Firstly, because of creation, that's the big reason. Secondly, because of the nature of their society or culture and thirdly, because of church practice. See verse 16? He says, if anyone else wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice nor do the churches of God.

Well, what does all this mean for us today? Our final point. It doesn't mean that women are not allowed to do anything in church. Well, of course not. We've already seen that both men and women pray and prophesy and Paul praises the Corinthian church for that.

It was revolutionary in that day. But it does mean the way we do it needs to uphold our gender differences and roles. Why? Was it just cultural?

No. The principle of servant headship, of equal but different, reflects the Trinity, verse 3, and is the pattern stitched into creation, verse 7 to 12.

[25 : 33] And neither of those depend on culture. And so the principle still applies to us today. And so does that mean then that women should come to Holy Trinity and cover their heads, you know, wear hats like women used to do?

Well, no. Because while the principle applies, the expression of it varies depending on the culture of the time. And today, wearing hats could simply communicate that you're off to the races or something like that.

It's kind of like, if I can use an illustration, on the next slide, here's another command from Paul, and he says, greet the brothers with a holy kiss. And so the principle here is to welcome the brothers warmly.

And again, in Paul's Middle Eastern culture, it meant giving the blokes kisses, you know, cheek-cheek kind of thing. But the only one I want kissing me is my wife, just for record. Because in our culture, it's not normal, it's awkward.

And so the point is, sometimes biblical principles can be expressed differently depending on culture. And here, the principle of upholding our gender differences and roles still applies, it's just that we'll express it differently than head coverings.

[26 : 48] How? Well, first, still by what we wear, actually, because our clothes still communicate something about our gender. I mean, if I turned up in a dress next Sunday, you'd all be going, what on earth are you doing?

What's going on? Now, I realise that we, so sorry, so the first application is men to dress as men and women to dress as women, recognisably as women and recognisably as men, according to what our culture recognises.

Now, I realise we do this intuitively anyway and it doesn't seem like a big application, but our society is actually eroding gender more and more, aren't they? Just to give you an example, if you sign up to Facebook now, as of May last year, there are now 71 different gender options you can choose.

I don't even know how they get 71. And so it is actually an application. We need to uphold our gender differences by the way we dress. Second, though, while there's no clothing that expresses our gender roles or headship, our deeds and words can express them.

And in our culture, whether we are married or not, it will generally mean men stepping up or taking the initiative to serve, serve and headship, and the women letting them do that.

[28 : 14] Now, why do I say this? Well, because in our culture today, it's been greatly affected by feminism for good, you know, getting the vote, equal pay, although I think women are still underpaid.

so it's affected our culture for good, but also for bad. Because it has convinced women they need to do everything to prove they are equal with men.

And so women are pressured to have a career and a family and be involved with school or PTA and keep looking good and everything else instead of sharing the roles.

Now, of course, women can do each of those things and often better than men. But feminism has pushed women to do all lest anyone dare say they're inferior to men.

And that meant taking responsibility away from men and it has led to women becoming exhausted and men disengaging from family life and from society and becoming lazy.

[29 : 17] I mean, when you think of a person sitting on the couch with a TV remote watching TV are they male or female? And when kids come to their fathers to ask for something, how many fathers have you heard respond with, go and ask your mum?

One time I opened a door for a lady and my head was bitten off because how dare I imply she couldn't open her own door and so I withdrew and thought, I'm not opening doors for a while and I didn't.

You see, femininity has done some good things but it's also done some bad things to our culture. It's pressured women and caused men to withdraw. And so in our culture, whether we are married or single, I think we express our gender roles, our gender differences by men stepping up, taking the initiative to serve, to engage, to engage, not disengage and women letting them without thinking they have to do everything lest anyone call them inferior.

And so let me close with three examples of a servant headship that I've seen here at Holy Trinity and three examples of females respecting that headship. So the first is from a family from 1030 Church where the husband said to the wife, let me look after the kids so that you can talk with some church friends and then she says, okay, servant headship.

That's what it looks like. For another family who was leading family prayers here one Sunday, I noticed that the husband took the initiative to introduce the family, explain who was praying what and then actually let each person pray their prayer.

[31 : 09] And I thought, isn't that nice? Taking the initiative, taking responsibility, getting the family together, being responsible. That's an example. Another time, a member from Nine O'Clock Church, this one was from, she was coming up to read the Bible but she was very unsteady on her feet and the husband just kind of came out and held her elbow and just helped her get up and then sat down.

No fanfare, no fuss. But isn't that lovely? Servant headship. Or take the other way for females, whether married or single.

I remember one of the single girls from our church was moving house and instead of trying to prove that she could do it all, that she's as strong as the males, she just asked some of the guys from church to help move.

And we did. And it worked really smoothly just working together. Or another time, this is a couple from 745, the early congregation, her husband has dementia and so he cannot be a servant leader in that sense.

And yet, instead of saying, okay, let's go and dragging him away, I've heard her say several times, well dear, should we go now? Just ask the question. And he says, oh yes.

[32 : 30] She knows he's going to say yes, but she asks the question to include him and show her respect for him as her husband despite dementia.

I thought, isn't that lovely? I'll find our example. one time we're having question time here at 10.30 with the panel up the front. You'll probably remember all this. And I remember people were giving different answers.

It was during our relationship series. There was two guys and a girl. The girl was single and she just waited there until she was asked to speak.

She didn't push in even though what she had to say was really helpful and dare I say better than the two men combined. But that's an example of respecting headship even though she wasn't married to any of them.

Now these are just little examples of what it might look like to uphold our gender differences and roles here at HTD. Of course it's not easy to do and if we need encouragement then keep looking at Christ who's an example for both.

[33 : 33] He was our servant leader, servant head who laid down his life for us. So he's an example for men to follow. But he was also subordinate or he was under his headship of his father and he willingly submitted.

It's an example for both men and women to follow. So let's pray that we would. Let's pray. Gracious Father we do thank you for this hard to understand and in our world today hard to accept passage of your word.

Father we thank you that it's the way you've designed us and when we actually do it right it works. There's love and cooperation complementarity working together for your glory and our good.

And so we pray Father that you would help us to uphold our gender differences and roles in love despite what our world says. For we ask it in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.