

1 Corinthians 11:2-16 AM

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Date: 11 February 2024

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] So if you turn back to 1 Corinthians 11 that Martin read for us, Martin read more than our passage. We're only going to get to verse 16 today and this is our last in 1 Corinthians until after Easter.

The season of Lent starts on Wednesday and we're going to celebrate Lent together with a special series on Leviticus and Hebrews.

So from one easy section of the Bible to another. But this morning it's 1 Corinthians 11, 2 to 16 and we need to begin with confessing that there's a great deal in this passage that we just cannot be sure about.

We know that from 11, 2 to the end of chapter 14, we are talking, the Apostle is talking about what we do in church together. But we don't know exactly what's going on in Corinth.

We don't know exactly what the head coverings are and what they mean. And though some of the principles are very clear, it's not always easy to know how to apply it to us today.

[1 : 12] And just when we think we might have got a hold of something, in verse 10 he throws in the angels. And it's led a lot of people to put it into the too hard basket and just skip over it or to be embarrassed about it, which is a pity really.

The more I've studied it this week, the more I've seen some of the thrilling principles and insights that are liberating in this passage. Particularly for us who live in Western Canada where there's so much confusion about sex and gender.

So let me make two comments by way of introduction and then we will look at the text. And the first thing to say by way of introduction is that this passage has been badly misused and misapplied in the past.

And it's been the source of great pain for many Christian women. Parts of this passage have been weaponised to abuse and even persecute Christian women by preachers and by theologians and by men who are acting like idiots.

Let me give you just two illustrations. In verse 9, if you look down, it says that woman was created for man. And some men have taken that as a blank check for the worst forms of entitlement and even violence towards women and their wives.

[2 : 38] Or in verse 3 where it says the head of woman is man. To our ears today that just sounds regressive and repressive. And some have imported all sorts of male insecurities in this and used these texts to disempower women and justify a range of abuses.

But I want us to see this morning that this is the opposite of what the Apostle means here. Since chapter 1, the Apostle Paul has been applying the cross of Jesus Christ to issue after issue after issue.

And we've seen it overthrows all those questions of what are my rights and what are my freedoms. What can I use other people for for my own gratification.

And we came last week to the question what can I do that will maximise the glory of God. How can I love my brothers and sisters more like Jesus.

What can I do for the good of my neighbour. How can I treat others as more significant than myself. How can I restrict or restrain my rights and freedoms for the good of the other.

[3 : 52] And I say this and you know this. There's never any excuse for the abuse of anyone in the Church of Jesus Christ. Or in the Christian home. And when we come to this passage which is about how to best love and care for one another in our sexual differences.

And to best reflect the glory of God. I want us to glimpse the astonishing reality of the Church as the holy temple of the living God. This is very important.

Just look down at verse 16. The last verse in our section. If anyone is inclined to be contentious. We have no such practice nor do the Churches of God.

Do you know the word contentious means you love winning. Back to chapter 1 again. This is the attitude that Paul is going after in this passage.

It's actually what's going on inside the head that's more important than what's on the outside of the head. Contentious is the word for quarrelling and fighting and enjoying being argumentative.

[4 : 53] Showing your superior knowledge and that you're right. And the way some men in Corinth were doing this was by drawing attention to themselves by covering their heads.

In prayer and prophesying. And the way some women in Corinth were doing this was by drawing attention to themselves by covering their heads. Sorry, not covering their heads.

And drawing attention to themselves. And woe to anyone who tried to stop them. So as the Apostle contends for sexual distinctiveness in the Churches of God for both men and women.

He's seeking to show us how love takes priority over competitiveness. That's the first thing to say by way of introduction. The second is that we should not be surprised by sexual confusion outside the Church.

Whenever the Gospel first comes into a culture, one of the first things that it corrects or comes into conflict with is the way that culture thinks and behaves about sexuality and family and marriage.

[5 : 59] We've seen this in our day when the Gospel first strikes a culture. In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, it was a time of radical change in sexual roles.

For a long time, if you were a man of high standing and high status, it would be accepted that you were sexually promiscuous.

Encouraged even. The higher your status, the greater your immunity from anyone's judgment. We have records, and there's records in Corinth, of the wedding charge given to a new couple at the wedding bed where the wife would be encouraged to be chased and to accept her husband's sexual dalliances.

And in the first century, there was a rebellion by women in high positions against this sexual double standard, which is completely understandable, I think. But instead of moving their husbands to sexual faithfulness, they demanded the right for sexual indulgence for themselves.

So there was a movement within the Roman Empire, which scholars called the New Roman Woman, where high-born women would bring casual sexual companions to meals.

[7 : 18] And after the meals, they would indulge in what is called after dinners with men who are not their husbands. And we have record of this in Corinth as well.

The Emperor Augustus was so worried that he passed laws regarding marriage, which made adultery a crime. But you know who hated that? The men.

And the wealthy Roman men, at every public occasion where the Emperor was present, called publicly for the repeal of these laws. It was an early protest movement.

And one of the signs in the Greco-Roman world that your intent was for casual sex if you were a woman was to not wear a head covering.

It was a way of showing you were sexually available. And for a young man, if you wore a head covering, it was often allied with sexual availability and particularly homosexual activity.

[8 : 18] So there was a terrible confusion about sex and sexuality in the Greco-Roman culture. And you do not need me to tell you that this is an area of great confusion and great pain and suffering in our culture today.

We have removed gender from biology and located it in my feelings. So that gender is now a matter of personal choice.

And any distinction between male and female is part of the old patriarchy that has to be cancelled and unlearned. And the idea in our culture today is that we need to pull the freedom lever harder and harder and harder, only it's just not working.

Still, in British Columbia, when our children begin class in first grade, they'll be taught from a curriculum, the SOGI curriculum, sexual orientation and gender identity.

And the idea is to undermine the binary male-female categories and to affirm every move that the child has toward discovering their true identity.

[9 : 30] So in first grade, some of the books the kids will be given to read are Pride Puppy, Two Grooms on a Cake, and the first lesson I had a look at yesterday in the BC Department of Education.

The recommendation for the first lesson is on the queer unicorn. And I think the most charitable thing that we can say is that it comes from a misdirected compassion toward children who are different.

And it's so important, I think, as we look at this passage this morning to see that the Church of Jesus Christ as a community, we're meant to be a community of contrast.

We always have been and we always will be. We're meant to be a light on a hill, a place of grace and understanding, not of judgmental writing people off, but a place where people can come, ask questions and come to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

And I think that's the point of the angels. If you looked out at verse 10, Paul says, that is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head because of the angels.

[10 : 40] Throughout 1 Corinthians, the angels have appeared again and again as invisible onlookers, witnesses to the supernatural reality of the Church.

The ordinary local Church is a window into the spiritual supernatural realities of the future, which displays the glory and wisdom of God to the heavenly powers.

And in this matter of demonstrating sexual differences in worship, we as a Church, at every local Church, are meant to be an outpost of heaven, not conformed to this world, but shaped by the very person of God himself and how we show that in our gender differences.

We're meant to be revealing the love of God for each other and to the powers, the spiritual powers. Here endeth the introduction. I feel like I've raised more questions than I should.

However, let's go to the text, shall we? And I've got three points. And if you do have questions about this, after the service, Jordan is very... LAUGHTER ..helpfully willing to answer them.

[11 : 52] LAUGHTER So I've just got three points. The first is the order of God. The order of God. And this is in verse 3. This is the key verse of the passage.

If we get to some understanding of verse 3, the rest of the passage is much simpler and clearer. So this is where Paul starts. If you look down at the verse, this is what he says. I want you to understand that...

And then he gives three pairs. The head of every man is Christ. The head of every woman is man. It's not husband here. Not concerned about marriage, but about creation and redemption.

So the head of every man is Christ. The head of every woman is man. And the head of Christ is God. Which tells us that this is more than a cultural issue to do with what's going on in Corinth.

Paul is trying to say to us that the world we live in reflects the order of God in creation and in the nature of God himself. There is an order in creation.

[12 : 53] Everyone on the list except God has a head. Man has a head. Woman has a head. Christ has a head. Well, what does the apostle mean by head?

And there are three views that are popular today. The first is that head means source, like head of a river. Now, apart from the fact that the word head is never found in any Greek manuscripts to mean source, it cannot mean it here.

Otherwise, God the Father would be the source of Jesus. And that's an ancient heresy. So it's not source. Secondly, a lot of conservative scholars say head here means authority, ruler, supreme, power.

But I don't think that's what it means. We have to be very careful not to import into this passage our own biases or what Paul says in other passages. There are other passages that speak of head in terms of authority, setting limits on what both men and women are able to do in the church.

But that is nowhere here in this passage. There's nothing of hierarchy. There's nothing of subordination. We are in the context of the voluntary renunciation of our rights, not doing anything for our own self-glory, not affirming anything about me and my position over others, but sharing the love of the Father and the Son.

[14 : 25] And if the Apostle Paul had wanted to indicate that this was about authority and hierarchy, he would have put the list in this order, God, Christ, man, woman.

But he doesn't. We need to be sensitive to the way Paul structured this verse. He goes, man, Christ, woman, man, Christ, God.

In other words, he sandwiches the man-woman relationship between two other pairs, man and Christ and Christ and God. So that we have to understand the relationship between man and woman in terms of the other two relationships.

And the point is that wherever we are in this order, Jesus has been there before us in the gospel. He knows what it is to be ahead and he knows what it is to have a head.

So if it's not source and it's not authority, what is it? And this is the third option. Head can mean prominent, like the head of the line, someone taking responsibility.

[15 : 36] And I think this gets closer to it. It's not rule and subjection, but representation and responsibility. And Paul is saying that this order is built into creation and is permanent.

It doesn't pass away when Jesus comes. It doesn't pass away when the Holy Spirit comes. It's clearly for the gospel age. But the order is not simple symmetry. Jesus and the Father, though they are completely equal, they fulfil different roles in the work of salvation.

So just as man and woman are completely equal, we fulfil different roles in the church of God. And each of these relationships, each of these three pairs of relationships is other person-centred.

And the other person-centredness only comes out of the grace of God and the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Because only there do we learn how to truly honour each other.

So that's the first point. This is God's order. And the question we have now is why does the apostle teach us about this order here? What is so important about this? What's going on in Corinth? Point two.

[16 : 46] Disorder in Corinth. And this is verses four to six. Do you notice in verse four how the apostle moves very simply from these high and heavenly truths about the nature of God and Christ in creation to very practical, ordinary details of what we wear on Sundays?

And why is that so important? It is because the order of God was somehow being subverted by what was going on in Corinth. Notice also, please, this is not just about women and head coverings.

Both men and women are praying and prophesying in the Christian gathering. And in verse four, who does Paul speak to first? He speaks to men before he speaks to the women.

So it's a problem for both sexes. Not about subjection to authority, but somehow by what they were doing, they were subverting the gender distinctions that God had created.

Verse four. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered, dishonours his head, but every woman who prays or prophesies with her head covered, uncovered, dishonours her head.

[18 : 01] Now, there's a vast literature written on what the head coverings are. And I haven't read it all. But we're not quite sure what they were. But we do know the way clothing works, don't we?

Our clothing signals all sorts of things. Clothing shows our attitude to the people around us. I mean, if I got up on Sunday wearing my swimmers and a beach towel to preach, I'd be signalling something.

I don't know what I'd be signalling, but I'd be... LAUGHTER Or if I wear a clown suit with a big red nose, I'd be communicating something else. I might be communicating that I'm trying to impersonate Mark Ashworth, but that's not his name.

It seems that in Corinth, both men and women were cross-dressing. That is, they were clothing themselves in a way that blurred the cultural boundaries between male and female.

And it could be that they were doing this in a way to be sexually provocative, likely based on their newfound freedom in Christ, and they were using the church as an opportunity for self-display, drawing attention away from the Lord and to themselves.

[19 : 14] Interestingly, at the beginning of chapter 12, which is just the next chapter, which we're not going to get to until after Easter, we learned that the church gatherings were frenzied, un-Anglican, chaotic, ecstatic.

And the Corinthians thought that the mark of the Holy Spirit and great giftedness was the more ecstatic and frenzied they could be. And that was exactly what happened in the pagan cults around them, particularly the Sibeli cult at Corinth.

In the Sibeli cult, the priests and priestesses would literally let their hair down, and they would try and blur all sexual boundaries and lose themselves in violent dancing.

And it might be that some of this was being brought into the church at Corinth. It may be that the Corinthians were copying the culture around about them. We're not sure. However, the principle is this.

The apostle is against cross-dressing. Men and women, we occupy, we're different in God's order. We're fully equal, but we're different.

[20 : 23] And that will be indicated differently in different cultures. But in worship, in some way, we are to be recognizably different. We want a clear line.

Paul, give us 12 rules about what to do here. But there's such wisdom that he doesn't do that. Because if he did do that, it would be possible to wear the right things, but still have the wrong attitude to the church of God.

But in our ministries, in our serving, we are to hold ourselves with a kind of gender dignity that comes out of the order of God. Otherwise, we bring dishonour and shame, not dishonour in the eyes of the world, but shame in the eyes of God.

If I could put it this way, sexual distinctiveness without sexual provocation, uniqueness without drawing attention to ourselves, focusing on the Lord and what's best for others.

So that's disorder in Corinth, secondly. And thirdly, what does that all mean? And my third point is restoring order, verses 7 to 16.

[21 : 32] If you look down to verse 7, you'll see, by the way, is everyone with me so far? Look down at verse 7.

The apostle points us back to Genesis 1 where God made man and woman in his image. 1.27 in Genesis says, God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created him male and female.

He created them. It is our maleness and femaleness together that images God. Our very identity and personhood in God's image involves not living my life centred on myself, but for the other, in relation to the other who is different from me.

And it is together in that difference that we reflect God. And then in verses 8 and 9, Paul then goes to Genesis chapter 2. You remember? In Genesis 2, God creates man first and then he creates woman out of the rib and gives her to man.

And when Adam first sees her, it's the first song, he sings and dances. He says, look, the animals are one thing, but this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.

[22 : 52] She shall be called woman. Ishah, for she was taken out of man. Ish. She's fully equal, bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, but she's different.

And he looks at her and he sees in her himself, but in a different way. He recognises himself in the face of another.

Not two humanities, but one humanity in the image of God, not as sexual, asexual non-entities, sexless non-entities, but reflecting God in our sexual differences.

And I think that's what he means when he says in verse 11, this is in the Lord. Because in the Lord and in his cross, all of us live for the glory of another. Christ has opened the door for the restoration of this glory by giving away his glory to us on the cross.

And it is as we seek to glorify God and glorify others and what is good for others, not trying to pretend there's no differences, God is glorified. So, I don't think this is easy to apply.

[24 : 05] And our cultural situation is very different, but the principles remain the same. In my last church in Sydney, it was a beachside church and the dress code was very different than it's been in the churches I've been here in Canada.

And I think every culture has differences and different applications. Let me say two things to finish with. The first is this, as we leave 1 Corinthians, that the book of 1 Corinthians, one of the things it does for us is it turns our questions upside down.

We've seen this again and again, haven't we? Instead of asking what's in this for me, I need to ask the question what can I do to build up the faith of you, of others?

Instead of worrying about do others really love me and accept me, I'm asking the question how can I love you and show that I accept you? Instead of life being about my body and my rights and my freedoms, the question is how can I glorify God in my body because I've been born with such a price?

And this is what the book does for us, it turns our questions on its head. And the second thing 1 Corinthians does is it shows us that the gospel of Jesus Christ turns the world on its head.

[25 : 25] That we as a church and every local church are meant to be a constant statement of the glory of God and we will always stand against the current wisdom and conventional opinion of the day.

Do you remember in chapter 1 the purpose of the church? In chapter 127 the apostle says that God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. So we'll always look a little bit foolish and weak to the world around us but it is precisely as we trace the cross of Jesus onto our lives it is precisely in that weakness and foolishness that God is able to reveal his glory to the spiritual powers and to the world around about us.

Let's pray. Amen.