

Gender and the Kingdom of God

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

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² Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. 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. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; ¹² for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. ¹³ Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, ¹⁵ but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. ¹⁶ If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

1 Corinthian 11:2-16

Here we come to another transition point in 1 Corinthians. Paul has finished his rather lengthy discussion on how to handle food offered to idols, and now he begins to discuss issues pertaining to the corporate worship of the church (chs. 11-14). The first of these issues has to do with head coverings and gender distinctions in worship.

Without question, this is one of the most difficult passages to understand in the New Testament. We don't know the Corinthian cultural practices as we might like to know them. There are significant translation questions. The flow of Paul's argument is difficult to follow. And, there are apparent contradictions. Paul, for example, gives women instruction on how to pray and prophesy here, but in chapter 14 he will say that women can't speak.

Also, our modern cultural sensitivities to discussions about gender multiply the challenges we face as we approach this passage. Many today are pushing to eliminate gender distinctions all together, promoting gay marriage, for example. So, we have our work cut out for us as we study these verses.

Because of the difficulty of this passage, we're going to approach it with some inquisitive zeal. Although many more could be asked, I have eleven basic questions to begin with, and then we'll conclude by considering several implications for us today.

Question 1: What is the head covering Paul is talking about?

There are a number of suggestions, but it seems most likely that Paul is speaking of a simple shawl that covers the top of the head. It is almost certainly not a veil, as we see in Muslim practices. Nor is Paul simply referring to the woman's hair as the covering (although he does mention in v. 15 that hair is given for a covering).

Question 2: Is the head covering merely a cultural custom, or an abiding biblical necessity?

This is a challenging question. If we say it is merely cultural, then we have to ask, where do we ultimately draw the line? Why not also say that the whole notion of male headship is merely a reflection of ancient cultural norms? But, Paul appeals to nature, not culture, in vv. 14-15. It sure sounds like Paul is not merely speaking of some sort of cultural norm. So, it is a challenging question and an important one. We certainly don't want to jettison everything we don't like in Scripture as merely an ancient cultural anomaly.

A cultural norm, or an abiding biblical necessity? I believe the answer lies somewhere between those two options. Here's how we may best say it, "The head coverings in Corinth are a cultural representation of abiding biblical truths."

So, in Corinth, nature (or creation) dictated head coverings, because head coverings were a cultural representation of gender distinctions and male headship. Today, nature (or creation) dictates that we use culturally appropriate expressions of masculinity and femininity. We may say that nature itself dictates that men not wear dresses to church, even though dresses are only a cultural expression of femininity. The big idea is that nature teaches men not to look feminine, and vice versa.

We want to be careful not to dismiss anything and everything in Scripture as merely cultural mores, but we do have to recognize that there really are cultural differences between then and now that must be taken into account. At the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul will command the church to "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Cor. 16:20). We could say, "Well, there it is, right there in Scripture, so let's get to kissing!" Or, we could say, "Well, that is a cultural expression of an abiding biblical command to greet each other warmly." I'll choose the latter.

So no, women don't have to wear head coverings today, but women must dress like women, and men like men.

Question 3: What is meant by "head of" in v. 3?

Paul says, "The head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God." Traditionally, the language of "headship" has meant, "to have authority over." In light of a strong discomfort with this meaning, some have suggested that "head of" simply means "source of." So, you could interpret v. 3 as, "The source of every man is Christ, the source of a wife is her husband, and the source of Christ is God." Eve came from Adam's rib, after all, and this interpretation nicely levels the field. No one has authority over another.

It is, however, best to retain the traditional idea that "headship" means "authority over." The overwhelming biblical evidence is that "head" is commonly used to imply

"authority over." In Ephesians 1, Paul speaks of Christ being seated at God's right hand to reign, and there he says that God "gave him as head over all things..." (1:22), clearly meaning "authority over." Most significantly Paul says in Ephesians 5:22-23, "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...." Again, "authority over" is the clear meaning. If Paul simply meant "source of," surely he would not have also then commanded wives to submit.

Question 4: When Paul speaks of headship (v. 3), is he speaking only to married couples (husbands and wives), or to men and women in general, as if men generally are in authority over women?

This is a tough question because the Greek words for man and woman are the same words for husband and wife. So, the ESV translates this passage, "husband and wife," but almost every other Bible translation simply says, "man and woman." I think the ESV gets it right. Paul is speaking of a husband's headship over his wife. Generally, when these two words are used together (man and woman), they refer to husbands and wives, not generically to men and women. Also, in the ancient Roman world, head coverings were frequently a sign of marriage.

So, Paul is not saying that men are the head of women in general, he is saying that husbands are the head of their wives specifically. No other man is the head of my wife, and I am not the head of any other woman.

Question 5: Whose head is dishonored by how they pray (vv. 4-5)?

Paul says that a man dishonors his head when he prays with his head covered, and a wife dishonors her head if she prays with her head uncovered. Here "head" could refer to one's own physical head, or to one's authority figure, as mentioned in v. 3 (Christ over man, and man over woman). Probably both ideas are in view here.¹ When we fail to conform to the roles God intends for us, we do a double dishonor, to ourselves and to our spiritual head. If a woman dresses like a man, she brings shame upon herself, and to her husband, because she is in rebellion against God's created order.

Question 6: Aren't gender distinctions, such as a husband's headship over his wife, rooted in the Fall, and therefore a distortion of God's intended design?

When God brought his curse to creation after the Fall, he said to Eve, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth your children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). Many think this passage, this curse, is what dictates male headship, male leadership, and the necessity of wives submitting to their husbands. Some say, "Surely this is not the way God intended it to be!"

However, when Paul speaks of male headship in the New Testament, he consistently grounds his argument in the original created order, and never in the Fall. So in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul says, "For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man" (vv. 8-9). Likewise, in 1

Timothy 2 we read, “Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve...” (vv. 11-13).

The curse in Genesis 3 brings a distortion into the God-established order of the male/female relationship. Instead of the complementary roles of leader and helper, as God designed, now sin has distorted these relationships in such a way that women will now try to usurp man’s authority, and men will sinfully domineer over women.

The language of the curse, “your desire will be for your husband,” does not mean that woman will want a husband, or that woman will sexually desire her husband. Instead it means that now a woman’s natural, sinful inclination is going to be to rule over her husband. God tells Cain in Genesis 4 that sin is crouching at his door, and “its desire is for you” (v. 7). Here the meaning of “desire” implies sin’s desire to overcome Cain, just as a woman’s “desire” for her husband is to overcome him and rule over him.

Likewise, the statement in Genesis 3 about the husband, “he shall rule over you,” is not a statement about male headship, but a statement about the distortion of male headship in light of the Fall. Post-Fall men, who are called to love their wives as Christ loved the church, will instead rule and domineer over their wives.

So, in the original created order, God gave man and woman distinct roles, man as head, woman as helper, and that forms the basis of Paul’s instruction here, not the Fall.

Question 7: But aren’t gender distinctions abrogated by Christ’s reign in the New Testament?

We think, of course, of Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Out of context, this passage is frequently distorted to imply that in the kingdom of God there is no such thing as gender distinctions. However, read and understood within its context, we are forced to see that Paul’s emphasis here is not to nullify gender distinctions altogether, but instead simply to show us that men and women are equally justified by faith and heirs to the promises to Abraham.

In Galatians 3, the basic thrust of what Paul says is, “Whether you are Jew or Greek, male or female, there is now no longer any distinction when it comes to the promises given to Abraham (Gal. 3:29). Paul’s statement is quite significant for the Gentile Romans, because they can now truly say that the special promises of God to Abraham and the Jewish people are now equally their promises. And, this is quite significant for women who have become full heirs to God’s covenant promises, along with the men. At the end of the day, though, the fundamental distinctions and roles between men and women remain, as the New Testament consistently maintains.

Question 8: If the head of a wife is her husband, does this mean that women are inferior to men?

A very common argument is that if a husband has authority over his wife, then this means that the wife is in some way inferior to the man. But, look again at v. 3. Paul says that God is the head of Christ. And certainly, God is in authority over Christ. This is what the Bible teaches. Jesus says, “I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father

taught me” (John 8:28). And Paul writes, “When all things are subjected to him [that is, God the Father], then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjections under him, that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

So, Jesus is subordinate to and subject to the Father in his role as the second person of the Trinity, but he is equal to the Father in essence and being. Jesus says, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). The church fathers, wrestling with this distinction between Christ’s role within the Trinity and the essence of his being, describe Jesus in the Nicene Creed as, “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.”

Jesus is equal to God, but with a distinct functional role of subordination to God. And in 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul parallels that relationship within the Godhead to that between husband and wife, so we may rightly affirm that men and women are equal, but have distinct roles.

Question 9: Why is man the image and glory of God, and woman the glory of man (v. 7)? Aren’t all made in the image of God?

Here Paul does not deny that women are also made in God’s image. Paul knows that Genesis 1:27 clearly says that both male and female were created after the image of God. Instead, we ought to understand Paul as simply saying that we should “honor” the source from which we came.² So, man is the glory of God in the sense that he was created for God, to honor God. And, woman is the glory of man in the sense that she was created for man, to honor man. Thus Paul says in v. 8 that man was not made from woman, but woman from man, and then in v. 9, “neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” In other words, Eve was created from Adam, for Adam, and therefore woman is the glory of man.

Question 10: I thought Paul said women should not speak in church (1 Cor. 14: 34). Why the apparent contradiction?

In 1 Corinthians 14:34, Paul says, “the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says.” The answer to the apparent contradiction lies in the different context of both passages. Without question, Paul allows women to pray and prophesy, but he does not allow them to teach, to hold authority over men, nor to contribute to the disorder that was so prevalent in the Corinthian’s worship.

Question 11: In v. 10, Paul says that a wife ought not have a symbol of authority on her head. What does this mean?

Again, there is a lot of debate here, but based on what we’ve seen already it is best to understand this to mean that in the cultural context of Corinth, wives ought to wear a head-covering as a means of honoring her husbands authority. One thing that may have been happening in Corinth was that in the midst of their excessive “freedoms in Christ” that they were so emphatic about, they were also jettisoning gender distinctions, male

headship, and female subordination. So Paul reminds them that they ought to dress appropriately in order to maintain those distinctions.

A Summary of the Passage

This is a difficult passage, but the central thrust is clear. In worship (and, in all of life), men and women should respect the created order and maintain the gender distinctions that highlight male headship and female subordination.

Implications for today

First, gender distinctions are absolutely essential to the good order of church, family, and society. Men should look, dress, and act like men. Women should look, dress, and act like women. Sure, this sounds old-fashioned, but it is without question part of the central thrust of Paul's message.

Second, we need to maintain a robust, biblical view of headship and submission within marriage. Husbands, as the spiritual head of your wife, you absolutely need to take your calling to lead seriously. This means that the responsibility for the spiritual growth of your spouse and your family primarily falls upon your shoulders. God has made you the head of your wife, and the head of your family, not to sit on the couch, watch hockey, eat Cheetos, and grunt every once in a while. He has made you the head over your spouse so that you may love her as Christ has loved his church. Consider Paul's words in Ephesians:

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body (Eph. 5:25-30).

This passage plainly teaches that we are to love our wives, after the manner Christ has loved his church, in such a way that they are sanctified and growing more and more each day. Paul says we ought to nourish and cherish our wives. And wives, you need to make it easy for your husband to lead and to be the head of your marriage and household. John Piper, commenting on male headship and female submission, says, "Biblical headship for the husband is the divine calling to take primary responsibility for Christlike leadership, protection, and provision... submission refers to a wife's divine calling to honor and affirm her husband's leadership and helps carry it through according to her gifts."³

Third, we need to remember that gender distinctions, such as male headship and female submission, do not nullify equality. Part of the glory of the Trinity is the fact that the members faithfully carry out their distinct roles as they inter-relate with one another. Jesus submits to the Father in his role as the Second Person of the Trinity, but there is nonetheless no sense of inequality within the godhead. Jesus says, "I and the Father are

one” (John 10:30). The same basic idea of a complimentary “oneness” or equality is true within marriage, in which the husband and wife become “one flesh,” equal in every way, but with distinct roles. Surely, if the doctrine of the Trinity is glorious and good, then this complimentary picture of marriage is glorious and good as well.

Fourth, we need to remember that husbands and wives are interdependent. In vv. 11-12, Paul plainly shows that both men and women are interdependent of one another. Woman was made from man, and man is born of woman.

The interdependence of husbands and wives is one of the reasons we recognize that homosexual marriage is ultimately damaging to the good order of family and society. Husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, have distinct, yet interdependent roles. Often times I need to act like a man, husband, and father as I love and discipline my children. This looks profoundly different than how my wife acts like a woman, wife, and mother around our children. Both roles are vital in family life.

The interdependence of a husband and wife extends also to ministry,⁴ as Paul’s guidelines for deacons (which we may apply to all church officers) show us how, “Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things” (1 Tim. 3:11). We may say it this way, behind every good and faithful officer in Christ’s church ought to stand a good and faithful wife.

Fifth, women can speak in church. Paul is abundantly clear that women may pray and prophesy, but, gender distinctions must nonetheless be maintained. In our own church context, we value the prayers of our women on Sunday evenings as we pray corporately. To refuse women to speak in church altogether is to abuse the plain teaching of passages such as this.

Sixth, women ought to be included in ministry in many, many different ways. As Paul affirms the participation of women in the vital ministries of the church, we want to do the same, with but a few restrictions. Women may not teach or hold authority over a man, but they can pray and serve and teach children and teach women and visit the sick and do works of mercy and become missionaries and share the gospel... the list could go on and on.

Seventh, we need to guard against the feminization of the church. Or, to put it another way, we need to remember that Christianity is just as much for men as it is for women. There is a strong tendency, rooted in the last several hundred years of Western history, to think of Christian worship, practice, and true piety, as being an almost exclusively feminine endeavor. It is common today to have conservative churches, with male leadership, but very few other men attending. Wives often time have a hard time "dragging" their husbands to church. The impression often given is that Christianity is for the girls, but not the boys. For the sake of our men and boys, we need to recover a manly version of Christianity, in which men truly are the leaders in faith, worship, piety, and practice. At the end of 1 Corinthians, some of Paul's final words are filled with manly application, "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong" (16:13).

Eighth, we need to remember the liberating way Jesus treated women, and the boundaries Jesus maintained. Jesus affirmed women. He spoke freely to women. He took time to care for the needs of women. He allowed women to minister to him, at times anointing him with oil and assisting his ministry with financial aid.⁵ Most significantly, women were the first witnesses of the resurrection.

But, Jesus chose only male disciples. In every possible way, Jesus affirmed the value and significance of women, but he nonetheless maintained gender boundaries and distinctions. We should follow his pattern today.

Finally, we need to see and experience the biblical vision of manhood and womanhood as beautiful, satisfying, and fulfilling.⁶ Men are called to headship, and women to submission, not so that we can begrudgingly accept these roles until the Lord returns. We're called to these roles because they really are good and satisfying when carried out properly. This vision is not oppressive. It is not restrictive for women. Instead it liberates women to be who God created them to be, and it liberates men to lead at home and the church, as God intended.

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, "Head Coverings, Prophecies and the Trinity," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, eds. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1991), 132.

² Schreiner, "Head Coverings," 133.

³ John Piper and Wayne Grudem, "An Overview of Central Concerns: Questions and Answers," in *Recovering*, 61.

⁴ Richard L. Ganz, *20 Controversies that Almost Killed a Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 158.

⁵ See Luke 8:2-3 for an example of women helping with financial support.

⁶ John Piper, "A Vision of Biblical Complementarity," in *Recovering*, 33.