

"The Church in the World:
Studies in 1 Corinthians" No. 12

"Men and Women"

1 Cor.11:2-16

--CEFC 7/18/21; 5/10/98

As we move through our study of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians
we come this morning to a passage that most preachers would rather skip.

I say that, not because they want to avoid controversy--

though that may be true.

I say that because what Paul is saying here is so difficult to understand.

I would dare to say that anyone who claims to know with certainty and precision
exactly what Paul means in these verses
simply doesn't know what they are talking about.

The passage is full of obstacles for interpretation.

•For one thing,

we simply do not know with certainty what were the prevailing customs
regarding men and women and their hair in the city of Corinth.

This is made especially difficult because we have to deal with
at least four different cultures here.

Corinth was a Roman colony in a Greek region,
and Paul was a Jew--speaking to largely gentile Christians.

Roman customs were different from Greek customs
which were different from Jewish ones,
and we're not sure how that affected
the distinctive customs in the churches Paul planted.

Just what exactly is Paul referring to when he speaks of in v. 2 of

“the traditions I handed on to you.”

I fear that some people speak with much more confidence
on the cultural customs of that day than the evidence warrants.

- Then there is our uncertainty about the actual meaning
of some of the Greek terms Paul uses.
Is this head covering some sort of a piece of cloth, like a veil or a shawl,
or was it a particular way of styling the hair, as many argue,
in which the hair was put up in a bun, or wrapped around the head,
or was it simply long hair,
as v. 15 suggests?

The commentators argue about these things,
and this, of course, leads to some variation as to how some words are translated
in our English versions.

And even the words “man” and “woman” are ambiguous,
as the Greek words can equally mean husband and wife.

Because of that, the ESV and the RSV
sometimes translate the words as “man” and “woman,”
and sometimes as “husband” and “wife.”

And is the "authority" referred to in v. 10 actually a "sign or symbol of authority"
as most versions translate it?

In fact, my NIV Bible has five footnotes offering possible alternative translations
of the various verses in this passage.

•And then there is the "logic," the flow, of Paul's argument,
which, admittedly, seems difficult to follow at times.
He is assuming some points, that were common to him and his audience,
but at which we can only guess.

I have spent hours trying to figure it out.
I wrestled with this passage twenty-five years ago when I preached this text,
and I wrestled with it all over again in the last few weeks,
and even yesterday
and I confess I don't have great confidence that I know how it all fits together.

•Finally, how do we determine where Paul's teaching touches on a timeless principle
or merely expresses a cultural convention?

One commentator calls this passage "probably the most complex, controversial,
and opaque of any text of comparable length in the New Testament."¹

Another says that "The whole argument points to v. 10 as the crucial text,

¹Blomberg.

a text so difficult that it has defied our best scholarly guesses over centuries."²

Another describes the mention of "angels" in that verse as "completely cryptic."³

Yet another declares that there are more interpretations of these verses
than there are typos in Donald Trump's tweets.⁴ /

You might think after all this that we might as well throw up our hands in despair,
close the book and go home.

I don't think so.

I do believe that all Scripture is God-breathed,
and that it is useful for teaching, rebuking,
correcting and training in righteousness.

God has something important here for us.

But with all its difficulties, we must approach this text with humility,
and beware of dogmatism on some of its points,
and seek to apply it with great care to our present cultural context.

But there is another reason why we can't skip over this passage--

it deals with a topic that is among the most burning issues of our day--
not whether women should wear hats in church,
but more fundamentally whether there ought to be any distinction

²Fee.

³Hays.

⁴ Sprinkle, *Embodied*, p. ??.

in the social conventions governing of men and women,
or even if there is any difference between men and women at all.

In other words,

can we order the relationship between men and women any way we want to?
Our passage this morning addresses that contentious topic in a pretty direct way.

Next week, I'm going to take up the broader topic of sex and gender.

but this week, I want to focus on this passage from 1 Corinthians.

And with all its uncertainties,

the central point of this passage of Scripture in Paul's letter to the Corinthians
is that propriety in our worship is important,
and that as a part of that propriety,
we must recognize the distinction of men and women.

The precise form that may take may vary from culture to culture,
but its significance is still very real.

And that male/female distinction ought to make a difference
in how we order our relations with one another.

So let's dig in—1 Cor. 11, beginning at v. 2--

At this point in the letter,

Paul turns from discussing eating meat sacrificed to idols in chaps. 8-10
and begins a section in chaps. 11-14
addressing issues related to the conduct of the church

in its corporate worship.

At 11:2, he first praises the Corinthians for remembering him in everything

and for holding to the traditions he had received,
which he had passed on to them.

And it may be that in our passage he is simply reinforcing one of those traditions
regarding the proper appearance of men and women
while they are engaging in praying or prophesying.

Perhaps Paul had heard that there were some who were contesting
the way he had instructed them in this matter,
and he wanted to explain why this is important.

Now, we'll address in a few weeks what Paul means by prophesying,
but it was obviously something done in the context
of the corporate gathering of the church for the edification of the other members.
But his concern here is with men and women speaking to God and for God—
through prayer and prophecy—
in the gathered assembly of the church.

Then, in the second half of chap. 11 Paul will explicitly rebuke the Corinthians
for their conduct regarding their practice of the Lord's Supper.

Chapter 12 begins a long discussion of the gifts of the Spirit,
interrupted in chap. 13 with an emphasis on the supremacy of love,
followed in chap. 14 by the proper use of those gifts when they gathered,
with special emphasis on the gifts of tongues and prophecy.

The way that Paul ends this long section (chaps. 11-14) is significant—

14:32, 33—"The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace"

and then in 14:40—"everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."

This is the big idea in Paul's mind—

What we do in Christian worship should be fitting—

fitting to who God is—he is not a God of disorder or confusion;

he is a God of peace—of *shalom*—

a God who desires a rightly ordered community.

And our worship should be fitting to who we are as his people,

men and women in the family of God,

the body of Christ—

We gather to edify one another,

in a way that honors one another,

and which, supremely, brings honor and glory to God.

There is a strong emphasis, especially in our passage this morning,

on what is proper,

what is appropriate and fitting—

what is honorable and not disgraceful.

And in Paul's mind, this propriety has a theological basis,

found in the creation account in Genesis 2,

and is grounded in what we would call "natural law,"—

that is, what "nature teaches us."

But this propriety is also expressed in cultural practices and conventions—

related to decency and decorum.

In other words, “**everything done in a fitting and orderly way**”

can take many forms in different cultural contexts.

“Fitting and orderly” worship will not look the same

in New England as it does in New Delhi and as it does in New Guinea.

So we need to respect the abiding principles Paul sets forth,

while at the same time being careful about imposing strict rules in our worship

that will always apply across the board in all the world.

This is not easy.

So what is “fitting and orderly worship”?

We come to worship God,

so there ought to be a sense of reverence in our worship.

We do not come as a spectators to be entertained,

but as participants in the adoration of an awesome God.

So what does that look like?

What about applause in our worship?

Rightly understood, there’s nothing wrong with applause in worship,

but I’ve discouraged it,

simply because in our culture it is so closely associated with a performance

and it can send the wrong message about what we are doing.

But people can disagree with that cultural application. /

In our worship, we come to humble ourselves before God’s holiness.

What should that look like?

There ought to be a sober spirit that includes times of repentance or even lament

as we grieve for our sin.

But in our worship, we also come to celebrate the good news of the gospel—

we joyfully praise him for his love and grace

in sending his Son Jesus Christ

to rescue us from our sin and recreate us in his image.

So what does that look like?

How should we express that joy?

Shouldn't our singing be vibrant and vigorous?

Isn't that why some people want to clap and dance?

And what about the way we dress?

When I first started here as pastor, I wore a suit and tie every Sunday.

Then it was just a coat and tie,

now it's just a coat.

What has changed?

What is fitting in this cultural context?

For me, it's about showing a proper respect for what we are doing here,

without drawing attention to myself in the way I dress.

But that's a judgment—there is no rule.

It is seeking to conduct myself in **“in a fitting and orderly way.”**

That's the first challenge that Paul puts before us in this passage—

Are we worshipping God in a way that is fitting and appropriate?

That is a theme we will be pursuing

as we go through the next four chapters of his letter. /

But in our text this morning,
regarding the conduct of worship in the Corinthian church,
Paul is particularly concerned with the propriety
of the distinction between men and women.

Paul assumes that both men and women can pray and prophecy in the church gathering,
but when they do so,
they should not act in ways that obscures their gender.

Again, we don't know if this was a real or just a potential problem in the church,
but either way, Paul thinks it is important to address,
and maintaining this gender distinction
seems to have been a uniform practice in the churches.

Paul believed it was entirely inappropriate for women
(and I think his focus is on the women here),
it was inappropriate for women to pray or prophesy with uncovered heads.

Now we mustn't skip over the assumed involvement of the women in this way.
They had speaking parts in the corporate gathering—they prayed and prophesied.

This is significant, because in two other places,
Paul says that women should be silent in the church's worship.

In 1 Tim. 2 he says,

“A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.

**I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man;
she must be quiet” (2:11-12).**

And then later in this letter, chap. 14--

perhaps even more provocatively, Paul writes,

“Women should remain silent in the churches.

They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.

If they want to inquire about something,

they should ask their own husbands at home;

for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (14:34-35).

What are we to make of this?

I don't think that Paul was simply inconsistent and contradictory.

So I would suggest that the “speaking” in that passage

must be understood in the immediate context

of the authoritative judging of prophetic utterances.

The wives were not to engaged in activity that might put them in a position

in judgement of their own husbands.

For in our passage this morning,

Paul clearly allows women to speak in church,

but it must be done in a fitting way.

Contrary to the practice in the Jewish synagogue,

as a result of the new covenant work of Christ

bringing men and women into union with himself,

women had a right, one might say, an “authority” to speak

so long as they did it in a way

that respected other “authority” in the church.

Now, again, there is dispute about exactly what "uncovered heads" means--

Does it mean that they were not wearing

some external cloth covering of some kind?

Or did they have short, cropped hair?

Or were they letting their long hair down,

not having it pulled up onto their head?

All of these are possible, and all can find some support in the passage,

and all are related in some way to various cultural practices evidenced

in Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures during this period.

I suspect that Paul probably has in mind some kind of external head covering,

but it also may relate to the style of the hair as well--

a hair covering that helps to hold the hair up

in the usual public manner.

Since the hair was a significant dimension of a woman's outward beauty,

a head covering of some sort had the effect

of diminishing the impact of a woman's hair on her appearance.

I say this because of Paul's statement in 1 Tim. 2:9--

also in the context of behavior in public worship--

where he urges women "to dress modestly, with decency and propriety,

not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes,

but with good deeds,

appropriate for women who profess to worship God."

The “braided hair” would refer to an “**elaborate hairstyle**,”
which is just how the NIV11 translates that expression.

Paul is concerned with modesty, propriety,
that which is honorable and fitting.
And I'll suggest in a moment why that is particularly important in worship,
but more than that, Paul is concerned about the way this breach of convention
reflected on the male/female,
and more specifically, the husband/wife relationship.

Evidently, some were contending that the women could speak to or for God
in the gathered assembly,
having their heads uncovered or their hair unloosed,
and that opinion may well reflect a theological perspective
that we saw earlier in the letter.

Remember back in chapter 7 when we talked about a segment in Corinth
who disparaged all sexual relationships--even within marriage.
We suggested then that such a view reflected the notion that Christians
have already entered into the heavenly realm--
a realm in which we become like the angels
who, as Jesus said, neither marry nor are given in marriage.

Perhaps some of the Corinthian women
saw in worship a time when they enter into this sexless existence--
an existence in which sexual distinctions no longer matter,
where there is "**neither male nor female**," as Paul himself had said.

With this misunderstanding of his words, Paul strongly disagrees.

And that's why he begins his argument with a strongly theological statement--
v.3--

**"Now I want you to realize that the head of every man [or husband] is Christ,
and the head of the woman [or wife] is man [or her husband],
and the head of Christ is God."**

Now in our day,

it is widely believed that this world is simply a collection of cosmic gasses
brought together by random physical forces
that, through blind evolutionary processes, have resulted in what we now see.

The only order in the cosmos is a material one--

there is no purpose at work,
there is no design to be found.

We are simply here,
and we can make of ourselves whatever we wish.

But in contrast, Paul was a creationist--

he believed that God is the source of all that is
and that he had a divine intention in creation;
he had a purpose in making men and women the way they are.

Men and women are different by design--

and that design is reflected in the creation story itself--

Man was made first,
as the firstborn with his privileges and responsibilities,
and then Eve was made, from his side,
to be his complementary helper
in the God-given mandate of procreation

and of stewarding God's creation.

So Paul writes in v. 7--

**"A man ought not to cover his head,
since he is the image and glory of God;
but the 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."**

There is a divine order of creation that established a male/female relationship—
which, as that Genesis story suggests,
is displayed supremely in marriage.
Gender distinction is not something human beings created--
it is a good gift of God.

And in some form or fashion,
Paul affirms this distinction ought to be reflected in what goes on
in the family of God in Christian worship.

And Paul argues further on
that this fundamental distinction between men and women
is so deeply ingrained in us that we have an instinctive sense of right and wrong
when it comes to masculinity and femininity.

v. 14--"**Does not the very nature of things (ESV: nature itself)
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?"**

Now this is not to say that men never have long hair.

There are exceptions in the Bible-- Samson and Absalom immediately come to mind.

Even Paul let his hair grow long at times as a symbol of a vow to the Lord.

And women sometimes have their hair cut short.

But these are exceptions.

The broad cultural pattern still stands.

And Paul is arguing here that

men naturally shrink away from doing anything

that is perceived culturally as feminine, and likewise for women.

Let's be clear--there is no rule that men wear pants and women don't.

In Paul's day, neither men nor women wore pants!

What is appropriate in dress for men and women is largely a matter of cultural convention,

but cultural norms still apply.

Unless you live in Scotland,

here in the West, men dressing in skirts is shameful--

precisely because it breaks down the line of sexual identity.

And dressing with the purpose of breaking down that distinction—

that is, by crossdressing,

was explicitly prohibited in the Old Testament law as an abomination.

Deut. 22:5—"A woman must not wear men's clothing,

nor a man wear women's clothing,

for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this."

This is not to say that all of the manifestations

of this distinction between men and women

created by human beings in the course of history in this fallen world are good.

Some, that do not respect human dignity,
are clearly wrong and need to be changed.

But the central notion that we are all either male or female--
that we all are to have a recognizable sexual identity—
this is very important.
And this is clearly Paul's concern in this passage.

Yes, in Christ there is neither male nor female;
we are equally united to Christ and we are equally saved by his grace.
But the categories of male and female do not disappear—
they are a part of the created order—
they reflect God's good design.
There are still differences between mothers and fathers.
Nature itself teaches us these things.

We'll talk more about this next week.

But here, regardless of how you understand the exact nature of the head coverings
and what they might signify,
almost everyone agrees that Paul is affirming
the propriety of gender distinctions in this passage.

But let's dig further in this passage.

What are we to make of Paul's argument here?

What is all this about honoring or dishonoring his or her head?

And how do head coverings, whatever they might be, relate to that?

Frankly, we have to admit that Paul does not give us a lot to go on.

He simply does not tell us why in v. 4--

**"Every man who prays or prophesies with his [literal] head covered
dishonors his [metaphorical] head [Christ]."**

Some have speculated that it is meant to form a contrast with the practice
of men covering their heads in the worship of some of the Roman mystery cults.

Others suggest it is a sign of mourning,

which would be inappropriate for Christian worship.

My best guess, based on v. 7,

is the notion that God manifests his image and glory in man,

and that a head covering might signify that that glory would be hidden.

We think of Moses on Mount Sinai

whose face reflected the glory of God after being in God's presence.

So, for whatever reason, Paul deems it inappropriate

for a man's head to be covered while praying or worshiping,

and this inappropriate behavior brings dishonor to Christ.

As an example of propriety in dress,

in our culture for a man to show up at a formal dinner

with sandals on his feet

would be considered dishonoring to the host--

it would be perceived as rude or irreverent.

In an ancient culture, such a breach of etiquette brings disgrace

not only on the perpetrator of the act
but also on the "head" to whom the person is responsible,⁵
just as a rude and rebellious child brings dishonor to his parents.
You may recall that Jesus told a parable that ended with some very harsh consequences
for some folks who weren't properly dress for a wedding banquet (Mt. 22:11-13).
That host was not pleased.

So for a man to come before God in worship in an inappropriate manner,
is to bring dishonor to Christ who is his head.
But precisely what makes something inappropriate is hard to know.
We can only guess.

But what about the woman,
what significance would a head covering have?
It is commonly held that not having the head covering or having the hair let down
was a sign of a prostitute,
but there is actually little evidence for that.
Though it may be that having a woman's head shaved may have had that connotation,
which would give force to Paul's statement in v. 5—
that for a woman to have her head uncovered
is as dishonorable as **"having her head shaved."**

Others hold that since some of the frenzied women prophets in the Greek temple rites
had disheveled hair as one of their trademarks,

⁵So Hays.

this appearance was inappropriate for Christian worship.

I think Paul's argument seems to require the assumption that in that culture
a woman having her head covered in public
showed respect toward her husband.

She was not to flaunt her beauty before the world.

It was to be reserved for her husband.

Paul says in v. 15 that the long hair of the woman is her glory.

That's why Paul says that for a woman's head to be shorn or shaved is to her shame.

A woman's long hair is perceived by Paul to be the symbol of her feminine beauty--
a beauty which, in the order of creation,
is a reflection on, and a glory to, her husband.

Her beauty may be expressed by her long hair,
but in the Bible, her beauty, of course, is to be much deeper than that.

And Peter tells Christian wives that

"your beauty should not come from outward adornment,

such as elaborate hairstyles

and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. . . .

but it should be that of the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Pet. 3:3,4).

A wife with that kind of beauty not only pleases God;

it also brings honor to her husband,

as when the Proverbs gets says

that **"a wife of noble character is her husband's crown" (12:4).**

That wife of noble character is highlighted in Prov. 31—

Prov. 31:11-12 —"Her husband has full confidence in her
and lacks nothing of value.

She brings him good, not harm,
all the days of her life."

And partly as a result of her character,

v. 23—"Her husband is respected at the city gate,
where he takes his seat among the elders of the land."

v. 30—"Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised."

Godly beauty, Peter says, is to be found in one's character

in "the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit."

But it is interesting that hair is the first thing he mentions

with regard to outward feminine beauty.

And Paul's point in this passage, I suspect,

is that showing off her beautiful feminine hair

is precisely what women ought not to do in the context of worship.

For her beauty brings attention to herself—

it is her "glory" Paul says in v.15,

and it may bring glory to her husband --who is her head,

but that beauty is not to be flaunted publicly,

and especially in worship,

for in worship, all glory is to go to God.

A covering of some sort expresses her desire to rightly order her glory

toward her husband,
and not to act in an inappropriate manner
that brings dishonor on God
or, I would add, distracts the men of the congregation.

For this reason, Paul says in v. 10--

"the woman ought to have"--the ESV says "**a symbol of authority on her head.**"
the RSV actually speaks of "**a veil**" on her head.

This is the common way of translating this verse,
and it may be right.

The problem with these translations is that that is not what the Greek words actually say.
More literally in the NIV11,

Paul says "**the woman ought to have authority over her own head"**--
that is, she ought to take control, to take responsibility for the way she dresses
in the context of worship.

But some object that since Paul uses "head" in a metaphorical way, as we'll see,
to refer to one in authority,
this would be a confusing way of speaking—
Would Paul really say that the woman should take authority
over the one in authority over her?

Or it could be translated,

"the woman ought to have authority on her own head"--
In other words, covering her head actually gives her the authority—
that is, the right, to participate in worship in an appropriate manner.

In favor of this view

is that Paul has used the same word (e'xousi÷a) six times in chap. 8-9

to talk about the proper use of one's "rights."⁶

It could be that, just as with the word "head,"

Paul is using this word "authority" in two ways—

to speak of the head covering as a symbol of her respect

for the authority of her husband,

and as what then gives her the right, or authority,

to speak in the assembly of worship.⁷

I confess, I am speculating here.

Why does Paul say, "**because of the angels**"?

Nobody knows for sure,

but the most common guess is that angels assist in maintaining

God's ordering of creation

and are somehow present as participants in the church's worship.

I think we can say that there is nothing inherently moral or immoral

about head coverings, shawls, veils, hats, hairstyles, or whatever.

And if we are looking for the proper application

of this specific element of Paul's instruction

we are on safe ground that it means at least what Paul says in 1 Tim. 2--

Women in Christian worship ought "**to dress modestly, with decency and propriety,**

not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes,

but with good deeds,

⁶ 1 Cor. 8:9; 9:4,5,6 (2X),18

⁷ This second aspect of $\epsilon\chi\omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota\acute{\alpha}$ is what is argued for by Hooker.

appropriate for women who profess to worship God."

And part of that modesty comes in not drawing attention to yourself in worship
by dressing to the nines in all the finest fashions,
but it also comes in respecting the male/female distinctions
that operate within the culture.

These may change over time.

A woman wearing a head covering is not
a cultural gender marker in our society.

A man wearing a dress--now that would certainly cross that line.

The most important thing to remember is

that God has not simply created human beings--

he has created human beings as his image in the world

as male and female.

Paul is clearly concerned with the propriety of gender distinctions.

But what about the propriety of gender roles?

For clearly, Paul assumes some sort of hierarchy or priority in this passage.

Here we come to Paul's reference to the concept of "headship"—

**v. 3—" I want you to realize that the head of every man (or husband) is Christ,
and the head of the woman (or wife) is man (or her husband),
and the head of Christ is God."**

Some argue that the word "head" here should be understood as "source,"
as in the "head" of a river,
and it has no connotation of authority at all.

I think that unlikely,
simply because "head" is very clearly used with the connotation of authority
in the Old Testament and in other Greek literature of the period,
and, even more decisively, that is how Paul uses the term elsewhere.

In Ephesians 1 Paul speaks of God placing all things under Christ's feet
and appointing him to be head
over all rule and authority, power and dominion (1:22).

Clearly, in this context "head" has the sense of "authority" and not merely "source."

Then again in Ephesians 5--

"Wives submit to your own husbands as you do to the Lord.

**For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church,
his body, of which he is the Savior.**

**Now as the church submits to Christ,
so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (5:22-24).**

As "**head**," the husband bears a special authority
and, with that authority, a responsibility
for the well-being of his wife and family,
just as Christ does for his beloved bride,
his body, the church.

A wife's submission to that loving leadership is the appropriate response.

Now there are two things that Paul says in our passage

that clarify what this "headship" entails.

The first is that the priority in creation—

that Eve was created from Adam and for Adam--

that priority in creation is qualified by

a mutual dependence in life.

v.11--"**Nevertheless**," he says, using a strong contrast—

as if he is saying, "don't get the wrong impression,"

"in the Lord" that is, in our common union with Christ,

"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."

As Christians, we as men and women are a part of the same family

with the same heavenly Father--

we are mutually dependent,

and man can't exist without woman--

as the Lord had said, **"It is not good for man (Adam) to be alone."**

In Christian society especially, women must never be disparaged or dishonored--

for Christ himself came from a woman—

he dwelt in a particular woman's womb--

and **"all generations shall call her blessed."**

So, first of all, male headship must be understood in the light of

male and female mutual dependence,
and their equal value in God's purposes.

And secondly, male headship is clarified by what Paul says about Jesus Christ--
v.3--**"the head of every man is Christ"**--

How did Jesus Christ act as the head?

He was never harsh or oppressive—quite the opposite!

He laid down his own life for us.

In love, he sacrificed his desires for our benefit, for our good.

That's the kind of headship that Paul is calling men to--

"Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church--

as he gave up his life for us."

Then Paul says,

"the head of Christ is God."--

In other words, Jesus himself was under authority.

Jesus was submissive to his Father's will,

and he was even submissive to the authority

of the Roman Governor Pilate,

who was God's instrument of authority in his life.

Was that demeaning to him—to be under God's authority?

Did Paul have a low view of Jesus Christ?

It seems that in Paul's mind—and in line with the practice of the churches—

the blurring of any distinction between men and women in their worship

was undermining something of the creation design of God

in the way men and women—

and more especially, husbands and wives—

were to relate to one another.

In some way, in that culture,

something on the head was related to headship.

And he believed that the headship relationship was significant

and should be maintained.

I think it is significant that Paul speaks of women praying and prophesying in worship,

but he doesn't include teaching.

I think this is consistent with what Paul says in 1 Timothy 2

where Paul does not permit women to be engaged

in the authoritative teaching of men in the gathered worship of the church.

And it is interesting that that prohibition occurs

right after his admonition to women to dress modestly,

with decency and propriety,

not adorning themselves with elaborate hairstyles (2:9).

That authoritative passing on of apostolic doctrine

in the corporate gathering of the church was reserved for men,

who are given the fatherly the role of pastor and elder in the church family.

And in our church, that authoritative teaching is what takes place

when we gather for worship and the word of God is expounded in preaching.

Since head coverings no longer have any clear cultural significance,

one application of this passage would be not an outward adornment,

but an inward disposition—

in the form of a respectful recognition of male headship

in the home and in the extended family of the church.

And that loving male headship
must understood and lived out
through our mutual dependence as men and women,
husband and wife,
and in the manner that headship is displayed in Jesus Christ himself. /

I recognize that my talk of male headship, and different roles for men and women,
is countercultural, and is offensive to many,
and could get me cancelled in many contexts.

In our society, whenever anyone talks about authority
the focus is almost entirely on abuse and oppression--
whether it is with regard to government or with the police.

We are taught to question all authority.

Even parental authority over our own children
is questioned today because of abuses.

I suspect one's reaction to this idea of male headship may depend on your own experience.

Men, with their superior physical strength,
can easily abuse their God-given authority in a marriage—
It is wrong and it deserves rebuke,
but unfortunately, it happens all the time.

And parents can do the same thing with their children.

And some of you may have experienced such abuse.

But that's not my experience—

I came from a loving home with parents in a loving marriage
where authority was respected, and honor was given.

and I can testify, by the grace of God, that that is what my children and my wife
have experienced in our home.

And most of my experience with the families of this church is just the same.

God's design is good, and it leads to human flourishing.

And yes, we need to be aware of cases of abuse, and deal with them appropriately,
but cases of abuse ought not to define what is proper in God's design.

Submission to one's head is not demeaning, but liberating.

It is fitting, according to God's design for our well being.

Differing roles in our lives together can provide a beautiful harmony
in a way that pure uniformity cannot.

I think of a column I read in the *Washington Post* by a woman

trying to come to grips with her assertive self,
that had made her successful in her career
but a failure in relationships with men.

"About a year ago," she writes, "I was at an oldies-but-goodies club.

As a native Washingtonian, I love to do the bop and to hand-dance—
styles that were popular when I was a teen.

In those dances, the man has his set of steps and the woman has hers,
but the couple are still partners and must move together.

On this evening, I was sitting out a record when a thought came to me.

If a man were to say 'I'm going to be in charge and you're going to follow.

I want you to adjust your ways to fit in with mine'—

I'd dismiss him as a Neanderthal.

With my hand on my hip, I'd tell him that I have
just as much sense as he does and that he can't tell me what to do.
Yet, on the dance floor, I love following a man's lead.
I don't feel inferior because my part is different from his,
and I don't feel I have to prove that I'm just as able to lead as he is.
I simply allow him to take my hand,
and I go with the flow."⁸

That's freedom--
only by operating within God-given constraints and responsibilities
do we discover our true freedom and join in the dance of life.

God is good—we know that through the gospel of Jesus Christ.
May he guide us as we seek to live in his goodness. //

Prayer—

Closing Song as our benediction: *Now Unto the King Eternal*

⁸9/1/91, Outlook section.

"The Church in the World:
Studies in 1 Corinthians" No. 12
July 18, 2021

"Men and Women"

1 Cor. 11:2-16

In a long section dealing with propriety in worship, in a challenging passage, Paul focusses the critical distinction between men and women in God's created order.

I. Propriety in Worship

*"everything should be done
in a fitting and orderly way" (14:40).*

II. Propriety in Gender Distinctions

A. They are a part of the created order.

B. They ought to be reflected
in appropriate social conventions.

III. Propriety in Gender Roles

The concept of “headship” as authority
understood through
our mutual dependence
and as exemplified in Christ.

*May we display the beauty of God's design,
living in a way that is fitting.*

Sermon Response:

"Men and Women"

1 Cor. 11:2-16

- Often our perceptions of the relationship between men and women is related to our own experiences. How is that true in your life?
- This passage has much that is contested, but what are some points in it that seem pretty clear to you?
- What are ways that we can rightly order our male/female and husband/wife relationships?
- How do vv. 8,9 and vv. 11,12 provide a balance in our understanding of the relationship between men and women?
- In Paul's day head coverings had great significance in distinguishing between men and women. To disregard that convention would be considered shameful. What would be considered of similar significance in our day? Why is this important to us?
- What effect does "gender-blending," that is, breaking down any distinction between sexes, have on society? Why is it important for us in the church to maintain male/female distinctives? What should those distinctives be?
- Read v.16. Cf. 1Cor. 4:7 and 7:17. Why should what is taught and practiced in other churches be significant to us?

