

Gender for His Glory - 1 Corinthians 11:1-16

Introduction

- Can I start with asking you a question? What's on your mind when you come to church on a Sunday evening? What are you thinking about?
- Or even while you're getting ready for church. What are you thinking about? Are you thinking about what you're going to wear? Are you thinking about where you're going to sit? This or that...
- What's on your mind when you come to church?
- Well you probably have a lot of questions after hearing the passage that was just read for us, one commentator that I was reading this week pointed out that, in his view, this passage was probably one of, if not *the* most difficult passage to interpret in the entire New Testament. So if you have questions about what we just read, you're not alone.
- There are some of you who may not have known a passage like this was in the Bible, maybe some of you have heard this before but have never understood what it meant, and maybe there are some of you who, after hearing that passage, are about ready to get up and walk right out of here.
- In this passage, Paul deals a lot with the idea of genders, and the differences between them. And he deals with all of this in a way that would be considered pretty crazy in our culture today, to put it gently.
- This is a passage that has been the source of a lot of discussion over the years, with people taking it and applying it in all kinds of different ways, and as we look through these verses together, we may not be able to answer every little question about what Paul has written here, but our goal by the end will be to understand why Paul wrote a passage like this, what it may have meant to the church in Corinth, and what it means for us today.

Context

- Now, as we look at a passage like this, there's some important things we need to remember, and questions we need to be asking as we read. We have to consider the context of this passage if we're going to have any hope of understanding what it means.
- First, it's important to remember that Paul is writing the letter of 1 Corinthians for a reason. Each passage we've looked at so far in the book have been Paul's way of addressing very specific issues and situations that the church was facing.

- So we have to ask ourselves, why did Paul write *this*? It seems like he's moved on from the rights issue that we've been looking at for the past three weeks and is addressing something new, so what specific situation is Paul writing this passage to address?
- Another thing that we have to consider is that Paul wrote these words to a church that existed in a very specific cultural context, that is not exactly the same as the culture that we live in today. So while there is truth in this passage that applies to us no matter our context or situation, there are also elements that are specific to the culture Paul wrote to.
- That being said, we can't just dismiss every counter cultural idea in this passage on the basis of Paul writing for a specific time and place. That's what makes this such a difficult passage of Scripture for so many people. To understand this passage, we need to ask what timeless principles Paul is teaching to the church that we should learn from and be applying to our lives, and what elements of this passage are meant for a specific time and culture.
- So let's start with looking at V. 2-3:

“Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. 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.” - 1 Cor. 11:2-3 (ESV)

- So Paul begins, kind of unusually for this letter, commending the church because they are upholding the traditions that he taught them, but then V.3 begins with an incredibly important word: **BUT I want you to understand**
- So while the church is being faithful in upholding certain traditions that Paul taught them, they seem to have gotten off track in certain areas, so Paul is trying to clarify here.
- Throughout the passage, our biggest question should not as much be “should women be wearing head coverings in church today?”, but rather **“What underlying biblical truth is prompting Paul to write to the Corinthians on this issue, and how does that truth impact how we worship God today?”**
- So that's the question we're going to have in our minds as we read here.
- And at the heart of this, it's important to realize that while Paul's words here deal a lot with the issue of gender, his goal isn't to explain every little thing about genders. There are a lot of passages that talk about genders, and it should be understood in the context of the other things that the Bible has to say about it. Paul is assuming that the church already knows the different things that he's taught them about gender, so he's not trying to re-teach them everything in that area.
- Rather, Paul is dealing specifically with how the church is called to conduct themselves in a worship setting. It's the main topic that he focuses on for the next couple of chapters, and he starts here by talking about how our gender plays into our worship, and as we look at the way

that Paul talks here, it seems that he's talking primarily about the relationship between a husband and wife.

- And in his response to this issue that the Corinthians were having, Paul teaches us two very important things about the ways that our genders impact how we worship our creator.

God created males and females with different qualities to function differently

- And I want to be clear right off the bat, that one of the things Paul is teaching us today is *not* that woman should come to church with their heads covered. There are people who interpret the passage that way, but you'll notice that Elaine doesn't come to church with any kind of head covering, unless of course she's cold and brings herself a hat. I don't think that's what Paul is teaching in this passage.
- But the first lesson that Paul *does* teach for us in this passage is that God created both males and females with different qualities to function differently from one another. And honestly, for some of us, even that idea can be a challenging one.
- We live in a culture that is constantly seeking after equality. Equality between races, equality between men and women, etc. **And that is a good thing.** We believe that everyone is made equally in the image of God, and seeking after that equality is a good thing.
- But specifically when it comes to men and women, our culture can tend to take that quest for equality as the need to remove any sense of distinction or uniqueness from either gender. That's not so good.
- To try to destroy any sense of distinction from one gender to another actually keeps us from appreciating the beautiful ways that God made us distinct from one another.
- V. 4-5 make it quite clear that in Paul's view, there was very much a difference between men and women, and that difference was meant to be shown in the ways that they worshipped within the church.

“Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head, but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.” - 1 Cor. 11:4-5 (ESV)

- So while men were not meant to worship *with* their heads covered, and it would actually bring dishonour if they did, for the woman, the dishonour would come if they were to come into a public worship setting *without* some kind of a head covering. There's a clear distinction between the two that is being taught here.

- And like I said, there are certain elements of this passage that Paul wrote for a specific time and cultural context, but the distinction that exists between men and women, and the different functions that genders have *is not one of them*. That difference is not up for cultural debate.
- As he's talking about these distinctions, Paul specifically bases his comments on the way God created things to be in the beginning, and he does this on a number of occasions.
- V. 8-9, V. 12, V. 14 all refer to the way that men and women were "made". We were made with these differences in mind, and that's not something that changes based on our culture.
- In Genesis 1:27 we read:

*"So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them."* - Gen. 1:27 (ESV)

- We were made differently from the very beginning.
- But there is such a beauty in these differences, and the way that God created us to function. We'll go into this a little more in a minute, but I want to draw your attention specifically to V. 3 where Paul says:

"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." - 1 Cor. 11:3 (ESV)

- Again, that is initially a verse that might frustrate us, thinking "What does Paul mean that the head of the man is Christ, but the head of the wife is her husband?". Well we see this is actually such a beautiful verse when you consider the last part, *"the head of Christ is God"*. The relationship between man and woman, specifically husband and wife, is compared to the relationship that Christ enjoys with the Father in the Trinity, and that's a theme that we see throughout this passage, as well as other passages where marriage and gender roles are discussed in Scripture.
- One commentator, Stephen Um writes:
 - *"The relationship that Christ has to the Father is the ultimately enviable/desirable relationship, and it takes the shape of willing submission. This allows one to see that submission is not a denigration but a beautiful expression of love."* - Stephen Um
- So while the marriage relationship is always talked about in terms of leadership and submission, it's *never* one that is meant to be understood as one person is better, while the

other is lesser. The relationship that we have in marriage is not meant to be degrading or oppressive, but a beautiful reflection of the love that Jesus shares with the Father.

- And God calls us to worship him in a way that these beautiful distinctions between genders are preserved and seen as the beautiful reflection of his love that they are.
- So these distinctions are not cultural, and we are called to worship in a way that reflects that, but what is more flexible based on culture is the exact way that these differences are expressed in our worship.
- For the church in Corinth, it came in the form of head coverings for the women. For that culture, if a woman were to come to a public gathering without a head covering, specifically a married woman, it would be seen as the equivalent of Elaine taking off her wedding rings before coming to church. It would have been scandalous, and served as a huge distraction in worship, and Paul even goes so far as to say in V. 5-6 that it would bring dishonour and shame.
- In our culture today, this issue of head coverings is not one that we face as much. Head coverings, like Paul is describing here, are not a part of our culture where we are. Like I said earlier, Paul is not just teaching that we have to follow this example of head coverings regardless.
- But, we do have in our culture things that show the distinctions between our genders, and the way that we dress can at times be a part of that.
- While those differences may not be as pronounced as head coverings, I want to offer you a guiding principle to keep in mind as we think about how this passage applies to us today.
- David Prior writes:
 - *“The fullness of Christian worship can be experienced only as each man and each woman, created for God and redeemed by God, allow their humanness to be expressed according to God’s pattern.” - David Prior*
- Ask yourself, is the way that I express myself in the church something that will actively distract from the goal of our service, which is ultimately worshiping our Lord?
- Whether you are a man *or* woman, do you dress, or talk, or act in a way that is designed to pull attention to yourself, rather than to God? Do we act in a way that is distracting from our own worship or the worship of others? If we do, we may need to consider why.
- Because what Paul is calling us to here, beneath the cultural discussion on head coverings specifically, is to express our gender in worship in a way that will not cause distraction, but will rather give a beautiful picture of the loving relationship our genders were created to reflect.

God created males and females equally with a common purpose

- So we're different. Men and women are different from one another. And there is a reason for those differences, as well as incredible beauty in the way that God made us.
- But V. 11-12 says:

“Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.” - 1 Cor. 11:11-12 (ESV)

- When God created Adam, he was lonely and incomplete until God created Eve to be a companion for him. Without the woman, the man was incomplete. And in the same way, Eve was created by God from one of Adam's ribs. Without man being created first, there would be no woman.
- So while there is a specific and important difference in how men and women were created, there is also a commonality in the way that we were created, and the purpose we were given. What Paul teaches in the second half of this passage is that even in their differences, men and women were created equally in the eyes of God, to complement and complete one another. We don't function independently of one another.
- Whether male or female, we all have a common purpose together, which we fulfil by functioning together. Note in V. 11 ***“In the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman.”***
- Then at the end of V. 12, *“All things are from God”*. We all were created differently, but are completely equal in the fact that we were created by God, given life by him, to live for his glory.
- This whole passage is talking about how men and women are meant to function in the context of public worship, and we've talked about how the beautiful distinctions in our genders should be reflected in our worship, but there's another element to all of this, and it's the *“why”* of it all. Why do we worship in such a way that we reflect the beautifully unique way that God created us?
- We do it in order to bring God glory in the way that we worship him. That's the common purpose that we all have together, to worship the one who created us.
- Think about what Paul had already said in 1 Corinthians 10:31

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” - 1 Cor. 10:31 (ESV)

- This was the conclusion of Paul's discussion on our willingness to give up our rights, that we do it for the glory of God. But as much as it was the conclusion for that section of the letter, it's also such a great introduction to the next few chapters as we talk about how we worship and function in the church. Whatever we do, we do it in order to bring God glory, and the same is true in our genders.
- Paul teaches us that God created man and woman equally with a common purpose, to bring him glory in the way that we worship him, and he designed us to complement and complete one another un fulfilling that purpose.
- Like I said, there's a lot of questions about a lot of the different elements of this passage, especially concerning the cultural elements, but if I were to try to sum up what Paul teaches in these 16 verses in one statement, this is what I would say.
- **Men and women were created with specifically unique qualities and roles, which were meant to complement and complete one another for the glory of God.**

Conclusion

- In this passage, Paul advocates for a careful balance throughout, knowing that the Corinthians were prone to easily run to one extreme or the other.
- He is careful to clearly communicate at the beginning of the passage that men and women are distinct, and that those distinctions are significant and affect the way that each functions and relates to one another, but in the second half of the passage, he makes sure that the church understands the equality that exists between men and women. That, even though we were created differently, we were created equally with the common goal of bringing glory to our Creator.
- He then ends off this passage with a verse that seems on first read to be completely out of place. V. 16:

*"If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God."
- 1 Cor. 11:16 (ESV)*

- He acknowledges here that this is a difficult topic, and there would be potential for people to try to dissect and tear apart what he's said, and essentially what he's saying to them is "don't try to go looking for all the little loopholes or explanations for why you don't have to do this". Don't be contentious.
- Now whenever Paul taught or spoke to the churches, he would always encourage them to go back to the Scriptures to see if what he was saying lined up with God's Word. So what he's saying here is not that the people should just take his word for it no questions asked. And the

same is true for you. For everything that Paul says, for everything that I've said, I would encourage you to search the Scriptures for yourself and see what God's Word has to say about our genders and how that's expressed. There are many places that God's Word deals with this issue.

- What he's talking about in referring to those who are "contentious", are those who would decide they didn't like what Paul was teaching, and fight against it regardless of what they would find in Scripture. That's the kind of "contentious" attitude that he's talking about.
- As he says, "*We have no such practice, nor do the churches of God*".
- So instead of this "contentious" kind of attitude that he's referring to here, I would again encourage you to remember the last few words of 1 Corinthians 10, "*Do all for the glory of God*", including the way that you express the uniqueness of your gender in worship.
- Returning to the question I asked you at the very beginning "What's on your mind when you come to church", from what Paul teaches us here, the primary thought that should be going through our heads as we gather together on a Sunday evening should be this: How can I glorify God. How can I act in such a way that I am bringing glory to God?
- Because as Paul teaches us here:
- **Men and women were created with specifically unique qualities and roles, which were meant to complement and complete one another for the glory of God.**