

## **“Men and Women in Worship”**

**1 Corinthians 11:2-16**

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### **Text Comment**

To be entirely honest with you, I did not look forward to preparing the sermon on this text. That is not so much because Paul's teaching here has become so controversial over the last thirty years, but because, due to the controversy, commentaries have lengthened their treatment of this text correspondingly. I had to wade through well more than a hundred pages of dense text in just the three commentaries that I have been primarily using in my preparation for these sermons on 1 Corinthians, and, then, there were several essays devoted to this text that had to be read as well.

I could pause here and spend several Lord's Days explaining the controversy and setting forth the arguments pro and con. But I decided that it was unnecessary. Fact is, the battle for this text is largely over and the attack made on the historic interpretation of this passage by the so-called “evangelical feminists” has spent its force. I don't say that these interpreters have repented of their effort to deny what the Bible rather plainly says, I only say that they made their case as well as clever men and women could make it and, having satisfied themselves, they went on in the confidence that they had done justice to the Bible, as evangelicals must, and could proceed to hold their feminist views in serene confidence. The fact that their arguments are unpersuasive and the stubbornness of facts that did not yield to their ideological reinterpretation of the text do not trouble them. Revolutionary movements are rarely troubled by facts, however stubborn! So, I will give you an account of what the text says and not of all the effort that has been made to make it say something else. It will take enough time just to do the former.

v.2     11:2 begins a new section of the letter. In this section, Paul will address the worship services of the Corinthians church in three particulars, three respects in which that worship has been corrupted. The first, which we take up today, is that of an improper diminishment of or indifference to the distinction between the sexes. The second, in the remainder of chapter 11 concerns the abuse of the Lord's Supper and the third, in chapters 12-14 concerns the abuse of the spiritual gifts in public worship.

Paul speaks in somewhat surprisingly complimentary terms in v. 2. He praises them for their fidelity to him and to his teaching. This is no doubt to soften the blow that is coming. For after praising them in one verse he is going to criticize them in four chapters!

v.3     As the section begins, Paul lays down the principle. There is an order in relationships. There is an order even in the relationship between the Lord Christ and his heavenly Father. The NT teaches that often enough, of course, and we learn from all of that data, both in Paul and elsewhere, that this order that exists in the relationship between Father and Son is functional or, as theologians tend to call it, economic. It is not ontological, it does not have to do with their being, but with their role. The Father and the Son are equal as to their deity, Paul makes no bones about that, but there is functional distinction

and, even, functional relationship of superior and inferior, as is, perhaps, suggested even by the terms “Father” and “Son.” Similarly there is an ordered relationship between the Son and the man and between the man and the woman. He will return to this in vv. 7-8. In any case, take the point. Nothing obviously is being said about one person being more important than another, or about the value of one person in comparison with another. As Christ and the Father are equal but distinct in place and role, so too the man and the woman. There is a distinction in unity. That is, after all, a biblical commonplace and, it is worth saying, most all human beings instinctively have always known it to be true.

You may know that much ink has been spilled on the question of the meaning of the word “head” in this text and in Ephesians 5 where, again, the man is said to be the “head” of his wife. The battle is over and left alone standing in the field, amidst the wreckage of academic warfare, is the understanding of the term that has been held in Christendom for these 2000 years. The “head” in such a metaphorical use of the term, signifies one who is over another, in position and in authority. Christ is head over the church, the husband is the head of his wife, and the man is the head of the woman. Some of you may already be seeing red, but I want to ask you to do me two favors: *First*, don’t throw stones at the messenger. It is the Bible that says that, the Word of God. If you have a problem with what I am saying, face the fact that your problem is with God’s word, not with the minister who is preaching it to you. And, *second*, hear me out. Until this very generation almost everyone in the Western world, together with almost everyone in the rest of the world, would not have found the account of human life given in v. 3 particularly controversial. As I will point out later, it is not obvious that this generation is wiser than all that have preceded it or that it knows better what authentic human life is and requires. Could it be that there is something important here, even though it flies in the face of the orthodoxy of modern Western secular culture?

- v.4 It is important, in a text that is going to distinguish the sexes and place them in a certain order, to observe that Paul does not dispute at all the right of the woman to pray or to prophesy. They were contributing to the public worship of the church and Paul does not dispute their right to do so.
- v.5 The obligation to distinguish the sexes and to behave in consistency with the calling of one’s gender is mutual, it is as much the man’s as the woman’s.

Precisely what is being discussed in these verses has been the occasion of another lengthy controversy. It seems much the best, all the evidence considered, to take the issue to be that of covering the head with a shawl or a veil and that is the conclusion of most scholarship. Some have argued that the words Paul uses rather refer to hair as a covering and how the hair is to be worn. And, though that issue will be raised in vv.14-15, that is not the issue here. What is more, it needs to be remembered that this issue of covering the head in worship took its particular importance from the customs of that day in that society. A woman taking some role in public worship – praying or prophesying – with an uncovered head was violating the norms of behavior proper for a woman, she was transgressing the social boundaries between men and women. It may well be that without a covered head in Corinth in those days, a woman was indicating – as a woman would

today by not wearing a band on the third finger of her left hand – that she was available, that men were free to regard her as a possible love interest. Now, the women in the church may not have had that thought in their minds. They, no doubt, were feeling, under the impulse of a powerful flood of spiritual vitality and a sense of new freedom, that the traditional distinctions between masculine and feminine behavior did not have to be observed any longer. But, Paul argues, God made those differences and distinctions and they cannot be set aside, least of all in public worship.

Because these social distinctions are rooted in divine orders of being, rooted, that is in the intention of the Creator, Paul will now say, that self-advertising, genderless dress – that is, prayer without the head covered – amounts to the same thing as shaving the head, another powerful image of a woman who has lost a sign or mark of her femininity. She becomes like a man in the matter of her hair. It is possible, but not proven, that Paul is more sarcastic here and that by shaved hair he is referring either to a sexually immoral woman [the shaving of the head was a punishment for women caught in sexual misdemeanors] or a lesbian [Classical literature includes instances in which the blurring of gender complementarity was suggested by cropped or shaved hair. In this case, Paul would be saying that if a woman really was serious about no longer being honored *as a woman* she should go all the way and eradicate everything that is suggestive of gender distinctiveness. It is an argument very like ones Paul employs elsewhere in his writings.] [Thiselton, 878-883]

- v.8 Paul relates the relationship of men and women to their creation and the divine order of their genders as it was fixed in their creation. Paul is obviously not denying that the woman is also the image of God. But there is an order in which her character as a divine image-bearer is reflected differently than is the man's. Paul is interested in this distinction so profoundly manifested in the way in which woman was created after and from the man.
- v.10 A notorious difficulty, as you may imagine. First of all, Paul did not write “sign of” authority. That is an interpretation. He wrote, “women should have authority on their head.” That has led to much argument, but it seems clear that “sign” or “symbol” of authority is what Paul means. He is obviously concluding the argument of the previous verses as the “For this reason...” indicates. He has said that a man should not wear a head covering in v. 7, vv. 8-9 give the reason, and now he is balancing that statement with one to the effect that a woman cover her head.

But what does Paul mean by “because of the angels”? All in all, it appears that Paul is alluding to the fact that the heavenly host is represented in Christian worship and that provides another reason why believers should worry less about their “rights” and their “freedoms” and more about ordering their behavior in a way that respects and reveres the true order of things as that order is perfectly known and appreciated among the angels of God.

- v.12 Lest what he has said be taken to mean that women are not equally valuable or important or to be respected as the bearers of God's image, Paul adds this “Nevertheless...” in vv.

11-12. There is a mutuality of dependence and so must be a mutuality of respect and regard.

- v.13 That qualification made, Paul now returns to his main point.
- v.15 Nature, here, means “the ways things are because they have been created that way.” In that sense nature teaches that the natural instincts and psychological perceptions of masculinity and femininity – and the fundamental distinction that separates man from woman – will be expressed in social/cultural forms. Men instinctively and naturally shrink from appearance and behavior that is associated with femininity and women from that which is associated with masculinity. Paul’s point, in the specific case, is that how men and women wear their hair is a significant indication of whether they are abiding by the created order. Of course, in sinful society, men *and* women can come at last to reject that order, as they do in homosexuality in an extreme form. Once again, there is a creation order that men and women are to maintain.

Now, let me say at this point, that it does seem that Paul is accepting that creation norms are expressed in particular and distinct ways in human culture. Those ways will not necessarily always be the same, though the norms remain the same. A good example would be the Lord’s command in John 13 that we “wash one another’s feet.” When Seventh Day Adventists today regard that as a commandment to be kept in a strictly literal form, and so, at their communion celebrations, the women wash one another’s feet through their pantyhose, we rightly feel that something is being misunderstood. The Lord put in terms meaningful to that culture an obligation to care for one another and even to humble ourselves to the place of a servant in order to do so. But we keep that commandment today without making someone take off his socks and shoes so that we can wash his feet. In the same way of what might be called “cultural transposition,” we regard the obligation Paul is laying down here not an obligation for a woman to wear a veil – which in our culture is a symbol of nothing and would be more likely taken to be a fashion choice than a theological or ethical statement – but rather an obligation to maintain, in the ways customary in our culture, the distinction between men and women. That would have to do with the clothing we wear and, in every sense, the way we dress; it would have to do with the way one conducts oneself in public, and so on. I think Paul would be satisfied with any Christian woman who, by her carriage and her appearance, clearly intends to identify herself as a woman and willingly to accept her place in life as a woman. The proof of that is that there is no evidence that this custom of women praying with head covered were found in the original Jewish Christian congregations of Jerusalem or Judea.

- v.16 To those whom Paul fears will stick to their guns on this point, he advises them that what he has just said is hardly his own private opinion. It is the universal practice of the Christian churches of the Greco-Roman world. The Corinthian church should not pride itself on its independent thought and action; it is part of the entire body of Christ.

Now I have taken an unusually long time to set our text before you. I felt that was necessary both because of the controversial character of this text in our day and because of the inherent

difficulty of some of its thought. Both factors make it more necessary that we understand Paul's meaning correctly.

But you see the main point clearly enough. God made men and women different. He did that on purpose. He expects that the difference will be embraced and practiced, not rebelled against and suppressed. God made woman to be different from man and the differences between them are very good, beautiful, and wise. They are also important to the happiness and welfare of mankind. Rebels against God, as man in sin has always been, are always tempted to chafe under the order of things that God has appointed. They find his will, whether in creation or in his Law, restrictive, unwelcome, limiting, and unfair. The Devil is always at work encouraging such thoughts and making them seem not only reasonable but liberating. Still today he says to us, "Did God *really* say...?"

It is, of course, no surprise that in our day, a day that has made the denial of creation and the Creator a first principle of its orthodoxy, it should be no surprise that in the day of evolution and the notion that nature is nothing but an accident, the mindless collision of time, matter, and chance, the temptation to reject the created order has gathered an unusual strength. It is absolutely no surprise, it is, in fact, entirely predictable, that a culture that throws off gender distinctions, as our culture has done with a vengeance, should have quickly passed to not only the approval but the celebration of homosexuality. You may wonder, from time to time, why there is such a passion in our society, especially among its elite, to liberate homosexuality from the moral disapproval that has attached to it from the beginnings of the Christian West. But the reason, surely, in largest part, is because that liberation represents in its purest form, in a terminal form, the rebellion of this culture against all notions that there is a Creator, who has built his will into his creation, that we are, as human beings and as creatures, subject to that will, and that our lives will be measured according to our submission to the will of our Creator.

Our culture has gone beyond saying that it does not intend to *do* what God says. Its rebellion has now reached its maturity and its perfection: it will not *be* what God has made it to be. That is the point that Paul himself makes in Romans 1 when he views homosexuality not only as a rejection of nature as God created it, but as a terminal form, a final form of that rejection. Well, the suppression of gender distinctions is a form of the same rebellion.

But Paul will have nothing of this. In all his concern to preach redemption he does not forget creation. In all his interest in proclaiming that God, in Christ, has become the father of all who trust in his Son, he does not forget that Christians remain God's creatures. In all his teaching of the Christian life as a response to God's grace and Christ's sacrifice, he does not forget that the true Christian life will always be a life that is lived in consistency with the purposes that God has enshrined in the creation itself. There is a way of life in this world that is right and proper. It is a way that God has been built into nature and into our natures. It is indelible in that nature, even when nature is marred and blurred by sin. It reveals the divine intention.

That human life should consist in a rhythm of work and rest; that marriage should be an exclusive and permanent relationship of love; that parents should bear children and raise them in a family; that parents should love their children deeply and that children should love and respect their parents; that human beings are responsible for one another; and so on. It is these things that

are God's will enshrined in nature and in man's instinctive grasp of the meaning of human life. And, among all of that duty and obligation, all of that meaning and purpose that is enshrined in nature – and then, of course, confirmed in the Word of God – is the distinction in unity of the two sexes: both the true humanity of man and woman *and* the distinct orders of being that each inhabits. God has made masculinity and femininity a calling and it is the charge of men and women to embrace that calling, sure that all that God has ordained is good and right and holds promise of their own blessing. Christians should be the first people whose speech and behavior manifest a cheerful, a delighted acceptance of their gender and its distinct role and calling, and the last people who appear to be chafing under that calling and wishing to be free from it. This acceptance and this practice of God's intention as it is enshrined in nature is part of the reverence we owe to our Maker, it is part of the faith by which we believe his will to be good and right, and it is part of the service we feel we owe to him to “take his easy yoke and wear it and to prove his burden light.”

Now, for all of those reasons, it should come as no surprise to us that our culture is throwing off all of these divine laws and divine intentions and all of this divine wisdom and goodness. It is a culture living in ever deepening rebellion against God. It has come to the place in its history when its rebellion is reaching a mature and complete state.

If the sanctity of human life is enshrined in nature, in the instinctive recognition of man and woman made in the image of God, and taught in several different ways in the law of God written on the human heart, then this culture's rebellion has reached a critical mass and not only is abortion now a commonplace, but euthanasia is taking on more and more the trappings of a sacrament.

If the extraordinary intimacy and union of sexual lovemaking belongs to the deep and permanent bond of marriage alone, then this culture's rebellion has reached a critical mass and not only is divorce a commonplace, but promiscuity before, during, and after marriage is now so completely accepted that the notion of “sexual purity” strikes our culture as sheer nonsense at best and psychological abuse at worst.

If the sanctity of the family is enshrined in nature as God has created it and given us eyes to see it, then this culture's rebellion has reached a critical mass. According to the 2000 census, now 33% of American children are born out of wedlock and the percentage of American children who do not grow up in a home with their biological mother and father is much larger still.

If honesty in dealings with others is a fundamental obligation of human life, as men and women instinctively recognize and as they confess countless times in their own judgments of the behavior of others, then this culture's rebellion against nature and the God of nature has reached a critical mass. I read this in a short piece by Phillip Johnson, emeritus professor of law at the University of California at Berkeley. He was pointing out that classes in legal ethics are now required at Law Schools, have been since so many lawyers turned up guilty in the Watergate affair, but, since no one in those schools believes any longer in absolute standards of right and wrong, ethics becomes nothing more than playing by the rules, whatever the rules may be.

“The latest flash of light comes from the debacle in business

ethics that led to the spectacular scandals involving Enron and Arthur Anderson & Co. What did the corporate executives and the independent accounting firms do wrong? Stated without cant, they took big risks when that seemed the way to get stinking rich, and then they got caught when the market turned sour. If their luck had held, they would still be being praised as creative improvisers who knew how to bend the rules just enough. We cannot truly say more than that, unless the purpose of the energy business and public accounting firms is something other than making as much money as possible without getting into trouble and losing everything. Perhaps ethics means no more than knowing when to take a risk and when to play it safe. If you were asked to explain to a business or law school class why ethics *does* mean more than that, and hoped to be taken seriously, where would you begin?

I can [as a Christian] imagine defining accounting as a sacred calling, dedicated above all else to maintaining honesty. In that case, the best accountant would be the one who did the most in his professional lifetime to increase the amount of honesty in business, rather than the one who made the most money or helped his firm grow to colossal proportions. But who [nowadays] wants to miss out on lots of money just to pursue a goal like that? [And, we might add, who in the American university would be willing to argue that such a goal was absolutely right.]”

Well, in a culture like ours, in near total rebellion against the will of God as it is enshrined in nature and in human nature, and as it is repeated in greater clarity in Holy Scripture, we should not be at all surprised that our society is also chafing against the divine will as it is expressed in the distinction of genders. It was, in fact, inevitable. It is the most predictable outcome of all.

And, at the same time, it should not surprise any serious Christian that the evidence is mounting on all sides that a culture built on defiance of God’s creation and the intentions of the Creator will not prove a culture congenial to human freedom and prosperity, but, to the contrary, a culture that is ultimately intolerable, in which all that is good and worthy in human life is slowly strangled and in which the competitive, sour, selfish, and self-destructive spirit of human sin and of human rebellion against God more and more prevails. Christians have nothing to fear in all that is happening around them. They know the truth will win out, even if only in the misery that eventuates when it is denied and disobeyed.

I love the idea, brothers and sisters, and want you to love it too; I love the idea that it will be the church, the Bible-believing church, the church of historic Christianity that more and more in our day will represent and proclaim what is sane and good and beautiful and pure and life-giving and soul-enriching and that this unbelieving culture will more and more trumpet a view of human life that is low and bestial and small and selfish and limiting and unattractive. On the plane the other day I read an article in the newspaper devoted to a spate of new books, bestsellers indeed, whose theme is the unhappiness of the modern woman. Such signs are only the beginnings of birthpangs for the disintegration of this culture.

Tamper with God’s intention in nature and the life of those creatures who have been made in his image and likeness and things go wrong. They inevitably go wrong. Life was not meant to work that way. The Bible is not first a book of moral truth, a book of commandments and laws. It is

first a book of truth about the way life is. Those ancient Scriptures present life as having been ordered in a certain way, with certain laws as inextricably built into it as the law of gravity is built into the physical universe. When the Bible talks about the human genders as an important distinction in profound unity it is not talking about what *ought* to be, but about what *is*.

That is what Paul is saying here. And he is saying that Christians should welcome this truth as the intention and purpose of their all-wise Heavenly Father; not chafe against it. If we want our lives to enjoy prosperity and happiness we will align them with God's intention. In your hearts submit yourselves to the Lord and pledge your willing obedience to him. And tell him you will do so no matter if the world around you regard your submission with scorn and disbelief. After all, this is the world that does not even believe that our Heavenly Father created the world and us and does not believe that Jesus died for our sin. Are we going to let that world call the tune for us? I think not.