Culture, Gender and Head-Coverings
1 Corinthians 11:1-16

We're looking at this passage from 1 Corinthians 11. And over the next three chapters, Paul's going to talk about how these Corinthians should behave in church. And he begins with the issue of head coverings.

And you might think, 'Come on! We're in the middle of a pandemic; and there are all these other challenges to being a Christians in the workplace, on campus, in school. Surely there's something more relevant we could talk about than head coverings?'

Sure, but if I asked you to think of just one area where historic, orthodox Christianity is out of step with modern western culture, what would you think of? At least some of you would think, 'sexual ethics'. Of who can have sex with who. Of who can get married to who. Of what marriage is.

And some people see what the Bible says on those issues and don't like it. And to get away from what it says they'll often turn to this passage, and say - 'well, the Bible says women should wear head coverings, and you don't enforce that, so why enforce this other stuff. Why can't my gay friend get married? Why can't I sleep with my boyfriend?'

But that kind of thinking doesn't just impact how you see sexual ethics, but how you see the whole Bible. Because if you can't trust it on this, how can you trust it on anything?

Or, think of one of the hallmarks of our current culture, expressive individualism. Su and I drove past a billboard advert this week, and it said, 'My Life, My Rules' - it was for the lottery of all things. But that's what our culture tells you: to really flourish, be you, live life by your rules, and no one can or should stop you. Or think of transgenderism. Maybe you saw in the press recently about a UK hospital's new, trans-friendly guidelines for its maternity unit. And instead of calling women 'mothers' they're 'birthing parents'. And 'breast feeding' has been replaced by 'chest-feeding'. Which, whatever you think of that, is at least an affront to the English language! But the idea is clear - there are no ultimate differences between the genders - sexuality is much more fluid than binary categories.

Well, this passage speaks to all that. It's about how we handle the Bible. It's about when truth and culture collide. It's about sex and gender and how you express yourself in a confused and confusing world.

Timeless Truth
When my brother and I were boys, our grandmother would take us down to the local Pick and Mix sweet shop. And you'd get a paper bag, and go from container to container and choose as many of the different sweets as you wanted. And the joy was, you got to choose. You didn't have to have any of the ones that tasted like soap, you only had to have the ones you liked.

And you can pursue religion like that. Like Thomas Jefferson, famous for cutting out of the Bible all the bits he didn't like. And you can have a pick and mix attitude to Christianity. Take the bits you like, ignore the bits you don't.

Except at the beginning and end of this passage, Paul says you can't. Verse 2, 'Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.' Verse 16, 'If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.'

In other words, the Corinthians, don't get to define Christianity for themselves - and neither do we. Rather, every new generation, every new church, is handed the traditions - the doctrines and behaviours - that make Christianity Christianity. As Jude says, it's 'the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints' (Jude 3).

And that doesn't just matter for historical continuity, it matters for society and it matters for you. In his book *Dominion*, the historian Tom Holland documents how it was Christianity that brought an end to the transatlantic slave trade and the burning of brides in India - both of which everyone would agree was good. But how could it have done either if it didn't challenge current culture? You see, a religion where you can throw out all the bits you don't like, that confront your culture, has no power to change culture, does it?

But that's also true for you. Imagine someone who said, 'you can be my friend but you must never disagree with me and certainly never challenge me.' What sort of friendship would that be? It's not a friend they're after, but a mirror. So what does it say of your relationship with God if you don't allow him to confront, challenge and change you? Such a religion wouldn't result in your flourishing but your stagnation.

You see, the power of Christianity to change life for the better lies precisely in its unchanging truths that challenge us.

But that doesn't mean it's cultural monolithic - only ever imposing its own culture. Lamin Sanneh, professor of theology at Yale was originally from the Gambia and converted to Christianity from Islam. And he argued that the reason Christianity has spread across the globe like no other religion is because of its unique power to both critique *and* adapt to different cultures. That you can be genuinely Christian and genuinely Gambian or British or Indian.

And in this passage Paul is taking an unchanging truth and applying it to the culture of Corinth.

Truth and Culture

Now Paul is going to argue that the way a woman dresses matters. In particular, when she's in church and v5, she 'prays or prophesies.' That's the context.

And just like today, in Roman culture - and Corinth was a Roman colony - what you wore made a statement. And married women wore veils, or hoods over their heads. And in that culture that sent out the message that she was respectable, that she wasn't sexually available. It was only women like the temple prostitutes of Aphrodite who would go round with their heads uncovered.

But for whatever reason, some women in the church had abandoned that practice. Maybe they'd heard what Paul writes in Galatians 3:28, that 'there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' and were only too ready to give up a way of dressing that seemed to say otherwise. Or maybe, it was simply because these early churches met in people's homes, and if you didn't have to wear a head covering around the house, why bother in church?

But in tackling this, Paul doesn't first reach for a cultural argument. He doesn't start by saying, 'hey, you need to do what's fitting there in Corinth; how others behave should define how you behave.' Instead he takes them first to theology. He wants them to see the differences and the relationship between men and women, even down to how they dress, in the light of God the Father's relationship with Jesus. Verse 3, '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.'

Now, there's been a whole load of debate on what Paul means by 'head'. But at least part of it is to do with authority. And Paul's saying, the headship, the authority of God the Father over God the Son should ground your relationships as men and women. And think what that authority looks like. Because it doesn't look like humiliation or inferiority or inequality does it? God the Father and God the Son share the same nature and glory and worth. And for all eternity they have existed with the Spirit, in a relationship of love and adoration and self-giving. They are equal.

But they're also different. The Father sends and the Son goes.

And you need to understand that, Paul says. If you're going to understand the relationship between men and women, you need to understand that you can be absolutely equal and yet be different, with different personalities and different roles.

But Paul doesn't just take them to God, he takes them to creation. Verse 7-9: 'Man… is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.'

So, in your cultural context in Corinth, or here in Lausanne, when you're trying to work out this men and women, this gender thing, look up to God the Father and God the Son, but also look back to creation. And in Genesis 1, God said, '"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"… So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' (Gen 1:26, 27).

So God has created men and women together to image him, to represent him in the world.

But then, in Genesis 2, we see God taking a rib from Adam's side and fashioning woman from it. As Matthew Henry put it, 'The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected by him and near his heart to be loved by him.'

And before making her, God says, 'I will make a helper fit for him.' (Gen 2:18). And 'fit for' means, *comparable to, complementary to, like but unlike*. So men and woman are made to be different, but those different gifts and skills complement each other. And when it comes to authority and decision making, like God the Father is to Jesus, and Christ is to man, so a husband should be a head to his wife, he'll have a disposition to lead, and his wife, in every way his equal, will help him.

And so, whether you're looking up or back, Paul is saying, there are real, unrelated-to-culture-differences between men and women that are rooted in God and creation.' In other words, gender differences are not just social constructs.

And of course it's not just the Bible that says that. Listen to feminists like Germaine Greer, or JK Rowling, or some of the feminist academics at the University of London or Oxford who are being de-platformed by the transgender lobby, and they probably wouldn't agree with anything I've said so far, except for the fact that men and women are different, and that's not a social construct. Women are women and men are not.

And Paul's point is that that unchanging truth is going to have cultural implications.

Culture and Gender

Imagine if I turned up to church in a dress. Your first question would not be, 'why did he pick the red one?', it would be, 'why did he do that at all?' Because it'd be obvious I was trying to make some kind of statement. But what you wear, or don't wear, has always been about that. Think of the bra burning feminists of the 60s, or an actor turning up to the Oscars in a gown, or a female executive turning up to work in a man's suit. Each of them is saying something about their identity, and about wider society. But the same's true for hairstyles. Think of Nazi collaborators, or the skin heads of the 60s, or the way some lesbians shave their heads today. In each case the shaven head says something - about identity. Even the hipster beard is making a statement.

So, v4: 'Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head.'

And in Roman culture, if you were male, and a member of the social elite, you'd wear a toga. And when you went to a pagan temple, you'd cover your head with a fold of your toga when you prayed. And Paul is saying, don't do that in church - it dishonours your head. It dishonours Christ. Why? Because 1. You're importing something you'd do to a pagan idol, and Christ is no idol; and 2. Because by doing it you're drawing attention to yourself; you're flaunting the fact that you're higher up the social ladder than others - that you're wearing a toga and they're not. And Christ should be the focus of attention not you, and since when has the gospel been about social status?

But in the same culture, women would be shaming *their* heads, their husbands, by *not* praying with their heads covered. Because not to wear a veil or a covering had these sexual connotations. It was like saying you were available, on offer, because you didn't belong to anyone else. You weren't under anyone's authority. So it was an invitation to men to take a look. And if you were married that was like saying, I'm not married. Or, I'm going to behave as if my husband doesn't exist. Or worse, I'm like one of the temple prostitutes who don't wear head coverings.

You see, imagine a married woman today going on a business trip. And when she arrives at the hotel, before going down to dinner and meeting the new clients, she deliberately takes off her wedding ring and changes into a shorter skirt. Or imagine a married man who, before his new secretary comes into his office, removes his wedding ring and hides the photos of his wife and kids. In our culture, those behaviours say something, don't they. I'm available. And in Corinth, a woman removing her head covering said the same.

And that shames you and it shames your husband, Paul says. Verses 5-6, 'It is the same as if her head were shaven. 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.' I mean, says Paul, if you won't honour your husband in this way that's appropriate for your culture, why not go the whole hog and shave your head. Why not just do away with all gender distinctions and do your

hair like a man. But you'd never do that, because you know that'd be disgraceful, so why go uncovered?

So, Paul says, v10, 'That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head', that she's saying in her culture, I'm spoken for, I'm my husband's, I'm under his and Christ's loving leadership. And, Paul adds, 'because of the angels.' Because even the incandescently burning seraphim around the throne of God cover their heads with their wings in worship, because standing before God, they know their place in creation.

But maybe you hear stuff about gender differences, and men seeking to reflect God's loving leadership, and women finding cultural appropriate ways to honour that, and think, 'Paul's just a misogynist. He's sexist.' But that charge doesn't really stick, does it? You see, the whole basis of this passage is that Paul's expecting women to be praying and prophesying in church, which would have been unthinkable in his previous Jewish context. And remember, back in chapter 7, how Paul wrote that wives have as much right to sexual pleasure as their husbands, and have an authority over their husband's body equal to his over hers. Plus, Paul is the man, who publicly recognised women as his co-workers. So these are hardly the writings, or life, of a sexist misogynist intent on oppressing women.

And just in case anyone in Corinth was thinking that, Paul says, v11, '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*.' In other words, the first woman may have come from man but every subsequent man has come through a woman, his mother. So this is not about one being inferior to the other. This is about a mutual inter-dependence with both totally dependent on God.

And common sense tells you there are gender differences we should honour, not blur, Paul says: v14, 'Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?' Now, Paul hasn't got his tape measure out, has he. He's not going round the church saying 'man, your hair is 2cm too long, and woman yours is 3cm too short.' He's saying, look at your bodies. Common sense, nature, tells you men and women are not the same. So men don't wear your hair to look like a woman, and women don't wear your hair to look like a man, don't shave your head, your hair is your glory. It communicates you're different. Don't blur those differences. Honour them. Within your culture, men should look like men, and women should look like women.

Now, in our culture, covering or not covering your head doesn't send out the message it sent in Corinth. But, there's still the danger of drawing attention to yourself by what you wear or how you behave, like pulling your toga over your head did in Corinth. And that dishonours Christ because Christ should be our attention.

And there's still the danger of blurring or effacing differences between men and women, whether by dress, or hairstyles, or behaviour, or social policy. In a recent article in First Things, titled *'The Fury of the Fatherless'*, Mary Eberstadt quotes from one section of the Black Lives Matter's website, where they say, "We disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement by supporting each other as extended families and 'villages' that collectively care for one another, especially our children, to the degree that mothers, parents, and children are comfortable." And

Eberstadt writes, 'Note the missing noun: *fathers*. It is as if fathers—as distinct from "parents"—had ceased to exist.' Which, as she says, for some of these communities, is tragically the case.

Now, she is not taking a cheap shot at Black Lives Matter. She's saying that across the political spectrum there is this pressure to efface gender differences. And Paul is saying, don't be a part of that. Instead, honour those differences. Because they're saying something incredible about God and about Christ and about you. And when you see it, it can give you both the desire and the power to embrace it.

Christ Our Example

Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 5, 'Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church… Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.' (Eph 5:22-25).

You see, when the Father sent Jesus to rescue us, and Jesus came, did that demean him, or destroy his dignity? For Jesus to submit to the headship of his Father, did that undermine his value or suffocate his character? It's the opposite, isn't it? That Jesus came for us was a measure of his greatness, not his weakness. That he humbled himself and gave himself for us was not to his shame but to his eternal glory. And it's Jesus who defines for all of us what headship and submission look like.

So, men, look to Christ sacrificing himself and you'll find a model and inner power for how to treat women. Women, look to Christ giving himself willingly, and us worshipping him in response, and you'll find a model and power for how to honour men generally, and, if you're married, your husband in particular.

Will either men or women be diminished as we do? No, we'll be growing more like Christ. Image bearers becoming more like *the* image of God. And both enfolded in the Father's love.