

1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church

An Ordered Church (1 Corinthians 11:2-16)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on August 27, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ This is not the first time I've said this – and it certainly won't be the last – but if it weren't for our commitment to expository preaching through whole books of the Bible, you probably wouldn't be hearing a sermon on head coverings. If I were just preaching on topics and themes that interest me, I wouldn't gravitate to 1 Corinthians 11.
 - **But as a church, we are committed to preaching chapter by chapter through whole books of Scripture and doing it in an expository manner.** Meaning we allow the main point of the passage to determine the main point of the sermon. And that commitment is what leads us to preach a passage on head coverings.

- ❖ Now before you get offended or tune me out, let me say that I don't think any of you ladies are necessarily in violation of what's being taught in this text just because you didn't wear a head covering this morning. Don't feel ashamed or guilty because your head is uncovered.
 - **But that doesn't mean we just can disregard everything being taught in this passage as an obsolete, ancient custom or as an outdated, culturally-regressive attitude towards women.** I do believe there is a biblical principle being taught here – and reinforced later in chapter 14, as well as in Paul's other letters (c.f. Eph 5:22-33; 1 Tim 2:11-15). It's a principle that transcends any one church and any one culture. So it's a principle that still holds true for us in the present. Even as we agree that wearing a head covering at church is *not* binding for any woman today.

- ❖ **The challenge is discerning, within the text, that biblical principle generally-applicable in any age or culture and distinguishing *that* from any culturally-specific expression of that principle** – which would've made sense in first-century Corinth but not necessarily in society today. That's the difficult but necessary task of sound biblical interpretation.
 - **Now I understand if some of you do wrestle with portions of the Bible that seem to support regressive and demeaning attitudes towards women.** That's why you're hesitant to treat *all* of Scripture as authoritative and applicable for today. There are portions of it that you might consider outdated and embarrassing.

- ❖ **Now I agree that the Bible was written in a particular age to a particular culture very different than ours.** So we can't always draw a straight line between a command and its contemporary application. 1 Corinthians 11 is a prime example. **But I don't agree with wholesale ignoring portions of Scripture that we consider strange or obsolete.** 2 Timothy 3:16 says that *all* Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching. So while the head covering itself might be obsolete today – what it symbolized back then is still true and still relevant for how we conduct ourselves today and how we order our worship in the present.
 - So it's not going to be easy. But I think we can do it. **We can chew on a passage like 1 Corinthians 11 and be nourished by its generally-applicable teaching while spitting out the bones of any culturally-specific expressions that don't fit our context.** So let's consider (1) The biblical principle highlighted in the text, (2) The cultural expression of that principle disregarded by the Corinthians, and (3) The general application considered for churches in our day and age.

The Biblical Principle Highlighted

- ❖ Let's begin by identifying the biblical principle highlighted in this text. It's in v3. But before we look at it, let me set the context. Since chapter 7, Paul has been addressing issues that were raised either in a letter they wrote to him or through an oral report he received. These issues were troubling the church, dividing members into different factions. It had to do with sex and marriage (chapter 7) and the eating food offered to idols (chapters 8-10).
 - **Starting in chapter 11, the remaining issues have to do with the right ordering of their corporate worship.** He'll talk about how they conduct the Lord's Supper and the proper use of certain spiritual gifts in their worship. **But in our text, it's about how men and women dress and behave in a worship setting.**

- ❖ Now, at first glance, v2 would suggest that the Corinthians were maintaining the tradition where wives would wear head coverings to church. But, as you read on, it's apparent that at least some wives were not. **So v2 is usually understood to be Paul's way of tactfully softening the blow of the correction he's about to bring.** "*Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.*"
 - So they're not in complete rebellion to his apostleship. There are many who still respect his apostolic authority, but as we've seen, there are others who doubt it. **So it got to the point that some wives in the church were being directly encouraged to reject head coverings or at least tacitly supported to do so.**

- ❖ So in v3, Paul wants to reiterate the apostolic traditions that he had taught them that pertain to this issue. "*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.*"
 - This verse is key to understanding this entire passage. **And it comes down to how Paul is metaphorically using the word "head".** He describes three relationships. (1) Every man in relation to Christ. (2) A wife in relation to her husband. (3) Christ in relation to God. And in each relationship, one party functions as the *head* of the other.

- ❖ **Historically, the Greek word for *head*, when used metaphorically, has conveyed a sense of authority.** Like how we would speak of a head of household or a head of state. **But there have been more recent attempts to argue that, when Paul speaks of your *head* metaphorically, he doesn't have in mind your *authority* but your *source*.** Just as we speak of the head of a river. We're referring to its source or origin – not its authority.

- ❖ Commentators who favor this interpretation point to v8 for support. There Paul is reminding us that Adam was not made from Eve but Eve from Adam. In other words, woman originates (finds her source) in man. **The point behind this interpretation is to move away from the idea that a husband's headship implies authority over his wife.**
 - But this interpretation falls flat for two reasons. **First**, extensive word studies have confirmed that, when used metaphorically, *head* (in the Greek) does convey authority. **Second**, interpreting it to mean *source* leads to theological problems.

- ❖ Look at v3. Paul is highlighting a parallel between all three relationships. Suggesting Christ is the *source* of every man? That works. Man is the *source* of woman. Okay. **But God is the source of Christ?** That sounds like the ancient heresy of Arianism, which taught that the Son had a source/origin. He was the first of God's creation. But that's not right theologically.
- ❖ Now there's a lot more that could be said on this one point alone. **But bottom line, we're on more solid ground exegetically and theologically if we stick to the historic interpretation of head as a term that conveys authority.**
 - But understandably, the idea of a husband having headship has been historically problematic. It's been used to justify male chauvinism and domestic abuse. **When we hear, "A husband has authority over his wife," our instinct is to recoil.** Because we instinctively interpret that *authority* negatively. As self-serving and likely abusive.
- ❖ **That's why it's so important to understand the parallels being drawn between those three relationships in v3.** Yes, Paul is saying a husband has headship (authority) over his wife. But in the same way that Christ has headship (authority) over every man. Or how God has headship (authority) over Christ. **According to Scripture, Christ's headship over us is the exact opposite of self-serving. It's self-sacrificial.** He demonstrated his authority – not by demanding to be served – but by serving and giving his life as a ransom for many.
 - According to Scripture, God the Father has headship over the Son as seen in the fact that the Father sent the Son (not the other way around) and the Son said he came to do his Father's will (Jn 5:30; 8:28). **And yet, the Father's headship over the Son doesn't mean he is superior in any way to the Son.** The historic doctrine of the Trinity teaches that God the Father and God the Son (along with God the Spirit) are *equal* in being and worth *but different* in role and function.
- ❖ That's how Paul would understand a husband's headship over his wife. **He'd say don't look to the world and its use of authority. Look to the Godhead and how God exercises authority.** From the world's perspective, authority is merely the exercise of raw power. But God demonstrates that the right use of authority is *not* self-serving. It's self-giving. It's *not* antithetical to love and kindness. It's an expression of love (cf. Eph 5:25).
 - So in no way are we suggesting that a husband is superior to his wife. His headship doesn't make him better or wiser or godlier. **A husband and wife can be one-flesh, equal in worth – while at the same time different in role and function within their marriage.** That's what the parallels in v3 are meant to convey.
- ❖ **It's conveying the biblical principle that a husband has headship in the marriage.** And Paul's point is that a wife should dress in a culturally-appropriate manner to convey that headship. And in his day, that could be accomplished with a head covering.
 - Now you might be thinking, "Okay, I get how head coverings are culturally-rooted. But what about the concept of male headship itself? **What if that way of viewing the roles of husband and wife – what if that's also rooted in a specific cultural moment and, therefore, not applicable for marriages today?**"

- ❖ Fair question. But I'd still argue that male headship is a biblical principle generally-applicable in any age or culture – **because of how Paul roots the idea – not in a specific culture – but in the order of creation.** Look at vv7-9, “⁷*For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. ⁸For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.*”
- ❖ Notice he makes allusions to the first two chapters of Genesis. **In v7, he says a man shouldn't wear a covering because he is the image and glory of God.** That image of God language is grounded in Genesis 1. And in v8, he's alluding to the Genesis 2 creation account. Where it says Adam was created first and Eve was made from one of his ribs (2:22). And there we're told she was created to serve as a helper fit for him (2:18). **So from that account, Paul is drawing the inference that there is a *firstness* to man** (cf. 1 Tim 2:13). Man was made first, and woman was made *from* him and *for* him.
- ❖ **Now our culture would tell you that to be first means to be the best.** To be second place means you're the first loser. But that's not how the Bible understands *firstness*, especially in a family. **To be first is to be assigned a responsibility not given to the second.** That's why, in Scripture, the firstborn son has the responsibility to lead when the father passes. It's not because he's better or smarter than his siblings. But simply because he was born first.
 - **And from a biblical perspective, the idea that woman was created to function as a helper is not inherently demeaning.** Granted, from the world's perspective, it is. Helpers are considered inferior to leaders. But in multiple places in Scripture, God identifies himself as our helper (Ps 54:4; 33:20; 70:5). **By doing so, God is challenging any condescending notions we have towards the act of helping. And he's restoring the role of helper to its rightful position of dignity.**
- ❖ Sisters, if God is neither offended nor ashamed to bear the role of helper, then neither should you. **A wife is equal to her husband while performing a different role – because her worth doesn't come from the role she plays but from the image of God she bears.** Don't buy the societal lie that says your worth is tied to your role. No, it's tied to the *imago dei* in you. You are priceless because you were made, like all men, in God's image.
 - And in case any man should fail to see that, Paul includes an important qualifier in vv11-12, reminding us of the equal status between men and women. “¹¹*Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; ¹²for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.*”
 - This is so important. **Whenever we teach on male headship, we need to balance that with a reaffirmation of the mutuality and interdependence between men and women.** And, of course, we need to stress our equal and utter dependence on God and his headship over all of us.

The Cultural Expression Disregarded

- ❖ So male headship is the generally-applicable principle. And a culturally-specific application of that principle, in Paul's day, would be for wives to wear a head covering. But in Corinth, there were some wives showing up to church with their heads uncovered.
 - Which leads to our second point: the cultural expression disregarded. **Let's see how the biblical principle of male headship was being undermined by a disregard of a culturally-accepted symbol of a husband's authority.**

- ❖ But first, let's clarify the identity of this head covering. **Because some think Paul was really just talking about hair length or hair style.** Wives were no longer putting their hair up at church but allowing it to flow freely. They'd point to what Paul says in vv13-15. "¹³*Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered?* ¹⁴*Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him,* ¹⁵*but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.*"
 - So that's why some think Paul is advocating for a culturally-appropriate hair length or hair style. But I think that's missing the point of vv14-15. Yes, he's pointing to the culturally-appropriate difference in hair length between men and women in his day – **but only as an analogy to emphasize that there are culturally-appropriate distinctions between men and women in any society. And men and women will naturally feel a sense of shame (or disgrace) to appear differently.**

- ❖ So when he says in v14 that "*nature itself*" teaches you that if a man wears long hair, it is a disgrace for him – remember Paul is speaking to first-century Greco-Roman men who all wore their hair short (just see any Roman statue). And he knew these were men who would naturally feel shame to appear publicly with a feminine hairstyle or to be wearing feminine attire. That's the natural phenomenon he has in mind.
 - **It would be like how, in most cases today, it would still be shameful if a man showed up to church wearing a dress.** The natural aversion we have towards any transgression of a cultural norm is what Paul has in mind here.

- ❖ **But I understand that some would argue that society has shifted to a new normal – to a non-binary standard.** Where the old lines between what is masculine or feminine have been blurred or altogether removed. So for some people today, there would be no shame attached to a man showing up in church wearing a dress. I grant that.
 - But even if our society has transgressed (crossed) that traditional cultural line of what kind of hair or clothes are appropriate for men and women – the line doesn't disappear altogether. It just moves. And that shame is still there. **No matter how the culture has shifted, you'll still naturally feel shame if you don't appear consistent with how you perceive yourself to be.** Just ask any non-binary person – who has rejected the concept of masculine and feminine – ask how they would feel if they were forced to dress in traditional masculine or female attire. They'd be ashamed to wear that. **The style of hair or dress – it's all cultural. But shame is natural.**

- ❖ This idea of shame underlies Paul's point in vv4-6. **He's speaking to those who live in a shame-honor society, and he employs that language.** *"⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors (shames) his head, ⁵but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors (shames) her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. ⁶For 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."*
 - **So his point is that, in the Corinthian church, a wife's refusal to wear a head covering is as shameful as if she had shown up in church with a shaved head.** Granted, in our day, a shaved head for a woman is not necessarily shameful. With chemotherapy being so common these days, we probably wouldn't shame or feel ashamed for a woman who shows up to worship with a shaved head.

- ❖ But, again, we have to take into account the cultural norms in first-century Greco-Roman society. **Well, in recent years, there's been extensive scholarship demonstrating conclusively that married women in that society commonly wore a veil in public as a sign of being married** (see Bruce Winter's *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*).
 - We're talking about a thin headscarf. Not a burka. That's what you might picture. A burka – common in Islamic cultures – that covers a woman's head and face. **But that's not what they wore in Corinth because there was nothing shameful, in the first-century church, about a woman showing her face in public.** Her feminine beauty was not viewed as a threat or temptation. It's not about covering that up.
 - **The veil over her head was intended as a positive sign – a symbol of a wife's modesty, chastity, and glad submission to her husband's headship.** That's one way she honors her husband publicly. But, as v5 says, to be in church praying or prophesying with her head uncovered would do the opposite. It would shame and dishonor her husband publicly.

- ❖ **Now why were some Corinthians wives refusing to wear a veil?** Was it simply out of spite? Maybe. But it's possible that the same underlying issue in chapters 7-10 was at play. **New Christians were embracing their newfound freedom in Christ but taking it too far.** They were claiming freedom from any societal obligations and championing that freedom. Giving no regard to the impact it had on others.
 - So some Christian spouses assumed they were now free from any conjugal duties (chapter 7). Some Christians with strong consciences assumed they were free to eat food offered to idols in any context (chapters 8-10). **And apparently some Christian wives assumed they were free of their husband's headship or at least free from the cultural norms that symbolized that headship.**

- ❖ **But Paul's point has been to argue that – though we are free in Christ – we can't ignore the public perception of our deeds and decisions.** The attitude that says "I don't care what people think. I'm free in Christ," is not an attitude motivated by Christian love and mission.

- ❖ **Church, we can't just disregard public perception.** We're being watched. That's what I think v10 is trying to say. *"That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels."* The world is watching. Even angels are watching. So we have to give careful consideration to how our actions are publicly perceived. And that means being well versed with the culture you're in. **So that you can express the biblical principle of male headship in ways that are culturally-understandable today.**

The General Application Considered

- ❖ Which leads to our third point. Let's think about our culture, and let's consider how the principle of male headship can be generally applied in our church today. How can men and women express and honor this biblical principle in culturally-understandable ways?
 - **It's safe to say that a head covering is not going to send the intended message.** At best, people today would interpret whatever she has on her head as a fashion statement. At worst, like with a burka, a wife's head covering would be viewed as a demeaning sign of her subservience. **Most people won't interpret that as a positive symbol of her husband's self-giving, Christlike headship.**
- ❖ **Now when trying to identify a modern-day equivalent, some would point to the age-old custom of a wife taking her husband's surname.** That practice had enough cultural traction for so many generations in Western society that to have refused to take his last name would've dishonored and shamed her husband.
 - But that's more of a historic example. **Because that custom is not as universally practiced anymore, and it never really was in more Eastern cultures.** For example, in Chinese, the characters in a woman's name do not change when she gets married. She doesn't adopt her husband's surname. That's a Western tradition. And nowadays many disregard the custom, viewing it as a legacy of historic patriarchy.
 - **I'm sure many wives today still gladly take their husband's last name – wanting to honor him and signal his headship.** But I'm sure many wives today keep their last name for all sorts of reasons with no intent to dishonor her husband. It's a good historic example but not generally applicable today.
- ❖ **So then is there any modern-day equivalent of a head covering?** Is there something a wife can wear that would serve as a culturally-recognizable sign of her husband's headship? To be honest, I don't know if there is. **In a highly pluralistic, multicultural society like ours, I'm not sure if there are still any widely-recognizable symbols that clearly convey male headship.** At least I can't think of anything.
 - But that's only if you're asking what a woman can *physically* put on and wear. If you're talking about some physical adornment. **But she can always *spiritually* adorn her inner person in a way that affirms her husband's headship.** That speaks to every age and culture. That's what **1 Peter 3:4** says. A wife can always adorn the *"hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious."*

- ❖ So I'm hesitant to suggest any modern-day equivalent to a head covering. **But I have no reservation in exhorting wives in our church to carry yourself – at church or at home or wherever you go – in a way that honors and affirms your husband's headship.** Think about your demeanor towards him; the way you speak to him or about him; the way you pray for him – for him to grow as a leader in your marriage and for your family – all of that comes from the heart. And it transcends any particular age or culture. Sisters, that's what you can put on when you come to church.

- ❖ **And, brothers, I hope you realize this passage applies to us as much as it does to our sisters.** Don't think you're in the clear because you managed to keep your head uncovered.
 - **You can do your part to honor and preserve the principle of male headship by embodying the inner qualities of courage and compassion, kindness and conviction, strength and selflessness.** These are the very qualities that characterize Christ and his love for his Bride. For the Church. Christ died for us and for our salvation. That's what headship looked like for him.
 - Brothers, if your headship looks like dying to self for the spiritual good of others, then that makes it a joy and blessing for your wife and children to live under your headship.